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**VANGUARD OF A WHITE EMPIRE:  
RUSICH, THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL MOVEMENT,  
AND RUSSIA'S WAR OF TERROR**

by

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June 2023

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**VANGUARD OF A WHITE EMPIRE: RUSICH, THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL  
MOVEMENT, AND RUSSIA'S WAR OF TERROR**

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## ABSTRACT

Russian politics have steadily drifted toward the far-right since the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise of Vladimir Putin. Under Putin, far-right ideologies such as Eurasianism and Orthodox neo-fascism have been embraced as alternatives to the liberal international order and means of steering Russia back toward national greatness. Beginning with the 2014 seizure of Crimea, the Russian state has made instrumental use of far-right extremists with whom it shares a common cause in leveraging hard power abroad. The two most notable far-right extremist groups embraced by the Russian state are Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement. Both groups have conducted transnational security and combat operations in service to the Russian state through powerful political intermediaries. This relationship, once of convenience, is increasingly turning to one of mutual necessity as the Russian military has faltered in its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DShRG	Guerrilla Assault Reconnaissance Group
FSB	Federal Security Service
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation
IASD	International Agency of Sovereign Development
KHPG	Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRA	National Rifle Association
NWO	Special Military Operation (in Ukraine)
RIM	Russian Imperial Movement
RNU	Russian National Unity
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian politics have steadily drifted toward the far-right since the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent rise of Vladimir Putin.<sup>1</sup> Under Putin, the Russian state has incorporated tenets of two traditionalist far-right ideologies—Eurasianism and a form of neo-fascism inspired by hardline Orthodox Christianity—as guiding principles for both domestic and foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> These reactionary beliefs have been embraced as alternatives to the U.S.-led liberal international order and a means of restoring Russian exceptionalism.<sup>3</sup> Beginning with the 2014 seizure of Crimea, the Russian state has made instrumental use of far-right extremists with whom it shares common cause in leveraging hard power abroad.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis follows two notable Russian far-right extremist groups that have gained prominence since the 2014 seizure of Crimea: the neo-Nazi paramilitary Task Force Rusich and the Orthodox neo-fascist Russian Imperial Movement. These groups comprise hundreds of members and have conducted operations in Ukraine and Syria in support of

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<sup>1</sup> Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, “The Remasculinization of Russia?: Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power under Vladimir Putin,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 2 (March 2014): 23–35, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216610202>; Marcin Skladanowski, “The Myth of Russian Exceptionalism: Russia as a Civilization and Its Uniqueness in Aleksandr G. Dugin’s Thought,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 4 (2019): 423–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2019.1697870>.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (July 2009): 697–716, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00158.x>; Marcel H. Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137282811>.

<sup>3</sup> Melik Kaylan, “Kremlin Values: Putin’s Strategic Conservatism,” *World Affairs* 177, no. 1 (2014): 9–17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43555061>; Kari Roberts, “Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse,” *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (2017): 28–55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26414074>.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Umland, “Alexander Dugin and Moscow’s New Right Radical Intellectual Circles at the Start of Putin’s Third Presidential Term 2012–2013: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Izbornik Club and the Florian Geyer Club in Their Political Context,” *Europolity* 10, no. 2 (2016): 7–32; Marlene Laruelle, “The Izbornik Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia,” *Russian Review* 75, no. 4 (October 2016): 626–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12106>; Marlene Laruelle, “The Three Colors of Novorossiia, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016): 55–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>.

Russian state policy.<sup>5</sup> Their activities include combat operations, mass murder, torture, rape, extortion, and the industrial-scale theft of natural resources.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian state, while wary of the destabilizing influence of extremist groups domestically, has shown a willingness to make use of Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement as armed proxies. This coordination is disguised through layers of different organizations and political power brokers. Such deception provides plausible deniability to the Russian government in offering direct assistance to extremist organizations. The Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor; Rodina, a fringe political party; and a network of political power brokers organized by Russian Duma Deputy Alexander Borodai and Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev are the primary intermediaries for interfacing with Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement. This coordination appears to have ramped up because of Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> The Wagner Group, Russia's premier private military company and irregular army, appears to be openly embracing extremists and criminal elements to generate combat power.<sup>8</sup>

The war in Ukraine is still extremely dynamic, but this thesis identifies the growing influence of Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement as the Russian army has faltered on the battlefield. This increasing influence is exhibited in leadership roles assumed by Rusich leaders in the state-sponsored Union of Donbas Volunteers and the Russian Imperial Movement's role in fighting and training conscripts as a reserve component of the

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<sup>5</sup> Candace Rondeaux, Ben Dalton, and Jonathan Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again," *New America*, January 26, 2022, <http://newamerica.org/future-frontlines/blogs/wagner-group-contingent-rusich-on-the-move-again/>; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and Its Links to the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 24, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-russian-imperial-movement-rim-and-its-links-to-the-transnational-white-supremacist-extremist-movement/>.

<sup>6</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again"; Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>7</sup> Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, and Eric Schmitt, "Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group to Mail Bombs in Spain," *New York Times*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/22/us/politics/russia-spain-letter-bombs.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "Wagner PMC Recruits Russian Criminals and Convicts for War in Ukraine," *Jamestown Foundation*, August 18, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/wagner-pmc-recruits-russian-criminals-and-convicts-for-war-in-ukraine/>.



Russian army.<sup>9</sup> Such mounting authority on the battlefield in Ukraine presents a growing transnational security threat that may impact homeland security in unpredictable ways.

It is unclear whether Russia intends to deploy armed proxies against the U.S. homeland, but indicators suggest a willingness to use extremist groups to threaten European security. Both Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement have expressed an interest in attacking members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The Russian Imperial Movement is also suspected in a series of letter bombings in November and December 2022 of government targets in Spain.<sup>10</sup> If Russia does decide to greenlight operations against the U.S. homeland, they will likely result from collaboration between Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement and U.S. nationals sympathetic to their cause. The Russian Imperial Movement has historical connections with far-right organizer Matthew Heimbach and U.S. cells of the extremist Atomwaffen Division.<sup>11</sup> Heimbach and suspected former members of the Atomwaffen Division have returned to political activism as of February 2023 under the banner of the Patriotic Socialist Front.<sup>12</sup> While the nature

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<sup>9</sup> Dmitry Bobrov and Denis Gariev, “Интервью с добровольцем: ‘Все успехи СВО держатся исключительно на героизме русского солдата’” [Interview with a Volunteer: “All the Successes of the SVO Are Based Solely on the Heroism of the Russian Soldier”], *Telegraph*, July 9, 2022, <https://telegra.ph/Intervyu-s-dobrovolcem-Vse-uspehi-SVO-derzhatsya-isklyuchitelno-na-geroizme-russkogo-soldata-07-09>; Union of Donbas Volunteers, “Славян, руководитель Питерского отделения Союза добровольцев Донбасса” [Slavyan, head of the St. Petersburg branch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers], *Telegram*, May 24, 2022, 10:24, <https://t.me/sddonbassa/15712>; “Interregional Social Organization Union of Donbas Volunteers,” *War & Sanctions*, accessed February 6, 2023, <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/sanction-company/5948/>.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes, and Eric Schmitt, “Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group to Mail Bombs in Spain,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/22/us/politics/russia-spain-letter-bombs.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and Its Links to the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, April 24, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-russian-imperial-movement-rim-and-its-links-to-the-transnational-white-supremacist-extremist-movement/>.

<sup>12</sup> Idavox (@IdavoxOPP), “Today in DC, Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front Was at the So-Called ‘Rage against the War Machine’ Rally—Which Either Ignored and/or Defended Putin’s War Machine, but Okay,” *Twitter*, February 19, 2023, 2:23 p.m., <https://twitter.com/IdavoxOPP/status/1627403452287426560>; Zeb Habash (@Habash\_Zebulon), “Matthew Heimbach Has a New Crew Attending the Libertarian Rally, Calling Itself ‘Patriotic Socialist Front,’” *Twitter*, February 19, 2023, 3:41 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Habash\\_Zebulon/status/1627423177046388736](https://twitter.com/Habash_Zebulon/status/1627423177046388736).

of these connections is yet unclear, the renewed activism is concerning given its apparent pro-Russian sympathies.<sup>13</sup>

This thesis recommends several actions to track and understand the intensifying threat to international security posed by the increasing prominence of Rusich, the Russian Imperial Movement, and far-right ideologues like Konstantin Malofeev in Russian military action. These recommendations include additional punitive actions against Rusich members as well as investigations into Rusich involvement in crimes against humanity based on evidence collected during this research. Further investigations into the potential involvement of Konstantin Malofeev in human trafficking, attempted assassinations, and transnational terrorism are also strongly encouraged.

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<sup>13</sup> Idavox, “Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front.”

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, pushed U.S.–Russian relations to their lowest point since the Soviet Union dissolved.<sup>1</sup> The attack prompted broadly global condemnation, unprecedented waves of sanctions on the Russian state, and economic divestment by major corporations and private institutions, led by the United States.<sup>2</sup> Russia has demonstrated its willingness to use such measures as assassinations, disinformation, and cyberattacks against North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations with little concern for consequences.<sup>3</sup> As the conflict in and around Ukraine persists, Russia may cultivate proxy forces within NATO nations as a means of reprisal and escalation without seriously risking war with the West.<sup>4</sup> The likeliest fifth column in Europe and the West comes from the extreme right wing, which, in its illiberal and authoritarian cant, demonstrates a high regard for Putin as a strong-man leader in the charge against multiculturalism, diversity, pluralism, and even democracy.

The far-right does not merely represent an aggrieved counter-cultural group that can be exploited in the United States; it is arguably the most dangerous collection of extremist groups in the country.<sup>5</sup> A 2022 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that groups and individuals affiliated with the political far-right conducted

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<sup>1</sup> Brett Samuels, “Biden: No Plans to Speak with Putin amid ‘Rupture’ in US–Russia Ties,” *Hill*, February 24, 2022, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/595716-biden-no-plans-to-speak-with-putin-amid-rupture-in-us-russia-ties>.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Lander and Katrin Bennhold, “How the West Marshaled a Stunning Show of Unity against Russia,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/europe/russia-ukraine-invasion-sanctions.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Doug Klain, “Russian Assassinations Send Chilling Message of Impunity,” *UkraineAlert* (blog), March 12, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-assassinations-send-chilling-message-of-impunity/>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew S. Weiss, *With Friends Like These: The Kremlin’s Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/27/with-friends-like-these-kremlin-s-far-right-and-populist-connections-in-italy-and-austria-pub-81100>.

<sup>5</sup> Catrina Doxsee et al., “Pushed to Extremes: Domestic Terrorism amid Polarization and Protest,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 17, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pushed-extremes-domestic-terrorism-amid-polarization-and-protest>.

49 percent of all violent extremist attacks in the United States in 2021.<sup>6</sup> It also found that attacks by far-right extremists tended to be more deadly than those of other ideologically motivated groups, accounting for 28 of the 30 deaths resulting from violent extremist attacks in 2021.<sup>7</sup> While far-right groups are often fragmented, the events of January 6, 2021, cast a spotlight on the ability of the far-right to mobilize and threaten the integrity of institutions central to American democracy.<sup>8</sup> On June 1, 2021, President Biden recognized far-right extremists as the most heavily armed and consistently lethal domestic threat facing the United States.<sup>9</sup>

Many Americans active in far-right circles are sympathetic toward the militant, white ethnonationalism espoused by Russia’s Vladimir Putin and his diverse band of acolytes.<sup>10</sup> Both the far-right and Putin’s Russia share a general hostility toward the liberal universalism of Western Europe and the American political establishment.<sup>11</sup> Far-right groups in the United States often share polemics rooted in Russian disinformation and voice support for Russia over the liberal cosmopolitan West; however, the full extent of their relationship with Russia and Russian far-right extremists is relatively unknown.<sup>12</sup> This combination of lethality, sympathy toward Russian conservative politics, and hostility to democracy makes far-right extremists a potential fifth column that Russia may use to destabilize the United States from within.

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<sup>6</sup> Doxsee et al.

<sup>7</sup> Doxsee et al.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Pitcavage and Daniel L. Byman, *Identifying and Exploiting the Weaknesses of the White Supremacist Movement* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/identifying-and-exploiting-the-weaknesses-of-the-white-supremacist-movement/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Remarks by President Biden Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre,” White House, June 2, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/02/remarks-by-president-biden-commemorating-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-tulsa-race-massacre/>.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Porter, “Charlottesville’s Alt-Right Leaders Have a Passion for Vladimir Putin,” *Newsweek*, August 6, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/leaders-charlottesvilles-alt-right-protest-all-have-ties-russian-fascist-651384>.

<sup>11</sup> Sergio Olmos, “‘Key to White Survival’: How Putin Has Morphed into a Far-Right Savior,” *Guardian*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/05/putin-ukraine-invasion-white-nationalists-far-right>.

<sup>12</sup> George Michael, “Useful Idiots or Fellow Travelers? The Relationship between the American Far Right and Russia,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 1 (2019): 64–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1555996>.

These sympathies may also allow far-right Russian-affiliated extremists to find sufficient support to operate within the United States and either direct Americans to conduct acts of disruption and terrorism or carry them out themselves. Russia has used violent far-right paramilitaries to conduct a range of overt and plausibly deniable operations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa since at least 2014.<sup>13</sup> A range of government, professional, academic, and journalistic sources frequently cite Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement among the most active and dangerous of Russia's paramilitary groups.<sup>14</sup> While the activities of these groups and their ideologies are known to researchers, the extent of their ties to and nature of their relationship with the Russian state are relatively unexplored.

Given the heightened threat to homeland security posed by both Russia and far-right extremists, this knowledge gap is alarming. Addressing this knowledge gap is both timely and urgent as Russia has mobilized large numbers of far-right extremists for combat in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> These groups including Rusich and the

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<sup>13</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-state Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019): 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142>; Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Private Military Contractors in the Donbas: Rehearsing Future Voyages," in *The War in Ukraine's Donbas*, ed. David R. Marples (New York: Central European University Press, 2022), 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.7829/j.ctv26jp68t.13>; Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016): 55–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>; Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)"; Natalia Yudina and Alexander Verkhovsky, "Russian Nationalist Veterans of the Donbas War," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 734–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.63>.

<sup>14</sup> Candace Rondeaux, Ben Dalton, and Jonathan Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again," *New America*, January 26, 2022, <http://newamerica.org/future-frontlines/blogs/wagner-group-contingent-rusich-on-the-move-again/>; Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement"; Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement: Practical Implications of U.S. Sanctions* (New York: Soufan Center, 2020), <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/inside-the-russian-imperial-movement-practical-implications-of-u-s-sanctions/>; Michael Sheldon, "An Untimely Death Reveals the Nature of a Russian Neo-Nazi Unit That Fought in Syria," *DFRLab* (blog), October 7, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/an-untimely-death-reveals-the-nature-of-a-russian-neo-nazi-unit-that-fought-in-syria-5398a7d28e0a>; Dmitry Kozhurin, "Who Are the Neo-Nazis Fighting for Russia in Ukraine?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 27, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-neo-nazis-fighting-ukraine/31871760.html>; "Combat Training for European Neo-Nazis in Russia," *Robert Lansing Institute*, June 9, 2020, <https://lansinginstitute.org/2020/06/09/combat-training-for-european-neo-nazis-in-russia/>.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Carpenter, "The Russian Federation's Ongoing Aggression against Ukraine," U.S. Mission to the OSCE, June 23, 2022, <https://osce.usmission.gov/the-russian-federations-ongoing-aggression-against-ukraine-15/>.

Russian Imperial Movement.<sup>16</sup> Months into the war, the extent of instrumental use of these far-right extremists by Russia is still unclear.<sup>17</sup>

## A. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the nature of ties between the Russian state and Russian far-right extremist groups Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement? How has the 2022 invasion of Ukraine influenced this relationship? Do these groups have ties to extremists within the U.S. homeland?

## B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly sources were reviewed to better understand Russian politics and their appeal to Western conservatives after the fall of the Soviet Union. Articles by a mix of American, Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian scholars were consulted to capture a variety of different viewpoints.

### 1. Far-Right Drift of Russian Politics

Works by Anton Shekhovtsov, Marcin Skladanowski, Valerie Sperling, Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, and Marlene Laruelle agree that far-right ideology began playing a major role in both Russian civil society and politics starting in the late 1990s, as democracy faltered in the country, and accelerated in the 2000s under Vladimir Putin.<sup>18</sup> Vera Tolz also observes this rightward shift in Russian politics but goes further, arguing

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<sup>16</sup> Don Rassler, “External Impacts and the Extremism Question in the War in Ukraine: Considerations for Practitioners,” *CTC Sentinel* 15, no. 6 (2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/external-impacts-and-the-extremism-question-in-the-war-in-ukraine-considerations-for-practitioners/>; Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again.”

<sup>17</sup> Rassler, “External Impacts and the Extremism Question in the War in Ukraine.”

<sup>18</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe,” *Religion Compass* 3, no. 4 (July 2009): 697–716, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00158.x>; Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, “The Remasculinization of Russia?: Gender, Nationalism, and the Legitimation of Power under Vladimir Putin,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 2 (March 2014): 23–35, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216610202>; Marcin Skladanowski, “The Myth of Russian Exceptionalism: Russia as a Civilization and Its Uniqueness in Aleksandr G. Dugin’s Thought,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 4 (2019): 423–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2019.1697870>; Valerie Sperling, “Putin’s Macho Personality Cult,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 13–23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610430>; Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), ProQuest.



that the resurgence of far-right politics in Russia arose even earlier, during the Soviet Union's period of *perestroika* under Gorbachev.<sup>19</sup> According to Tolz, Russian far-right groups during this period, such as the Black Hundreds, took advantage of increasing openness in public discourse to peddle narratives that explained the failures of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> These stories framed Russia's decline as the result of Western, Judeo-Masonic conspiracies that toppled the Romanov dynasty and led the country into atheism.<sup>21</sup>

Some literature on the nature of post-Soviet politics suggests these characterizations of left-right ideologies in Russia might be misleading. In 1998, Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield contested the notion that the left and right political poles in Russia were analogous to those in the West, to which they were compared.<sup>22</sup> Evans and Whitefield argue that Western left-right politics center on differing interpretations of liberal conceptions of freedom and economic rights while the divide in Russia is between those sympathetic to liberal or illiberal ideas.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the political right in Russia is strongly associated with anti-democratic and anti-Western sentiment whereas the Western right fixates on small government and limited economic redistribution.<sup>24</sup> These differences in the ideological foundations of the Russian and Western far-right movements are important considerations for future research as they may explain how these groups see the world and relate to one another.

## **2. Far-Right Extremism as a Product of State Policy**

Discontent with the collapse of Russian power in the 1990s led to ideologues sympathetic to fascism, such as Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov, gaining an

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Merkl and Weinberg Leonard, *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 243–61, ProQuest.

<sup>20</sup> Merkl and Leonard, 243–61.

<sup>21</sup> Merkl and Leonard, 243–61.

<sup>22</sup> Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield, "The Evolution of Left and Right in Post-Soviet Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 6 (1998): 1023–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/154054>.

<sup>23</sup> Evans and Whitefield.

<sup>24</sup> Evans and Whitefield.

audience among circles of hardline policymakers.<sup>25</sup> Alexander Dugin, a radical far-right political philosopher, is cited by many scholars, such as Andrew Stafford, Mikhail Tsympkin, and Victoria Clement of the Naval Postgraduate School, for developing a new Russian state ideology, Eurasianism, to replace Soviet communism.<sup>26</sup> Dugin's conception of Eurasianism advocates a return of Russian power through the development of a Eurasian political bloc based on historic and cultural ties to Russia.<sup>27</sup> This bloc would then be the center of a new system of alliances between countries disaffected by Western liberalism and use its combined power to split the international system.<sup>28</sup>

Dugin's influence over the Kremlin is contested by some scholars. Kirill Kalinin's analysis of surveys by Russian political and social elites between 1993 and 2016 found that Dugin's Eurasianist ideas were no more influential in Russia than a number of other foreign policy stances.<sup>29</sup> Still, Dugin's ideas of a multipolar world order and the subjugation of Ukraine are widely parroted by Russian policymakers and far-right extremists.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that the surveys analyzed by Kalinin did not quite capture the inflection point at which Eurasianism became a major driving force in state policy. Andreas Umland, publishing in 2016, argues that Eurasianist ideas and the right-wing extremists like Dugin advocating them began infiltrating institutions around the beginning of Putin's third presidential term, between 2012 and 2013.<sup>31</sup> This period coincided with the founding of

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<sup>25</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism"; Skladanowski, "The Myth of Russian Exceptionalism"; Andrey Tolstoy and Edmund McCaffray, "Mind Games: Alexander Dugin and Russia's War of Ideas," *World Affairs* 177, no. 6 (Spring 2015): 25–30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43555266>; John B. Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*," Stanford Europe Center, January 31, 2004, <https://tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics>.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew T. Stafford, "Eurasianism: A Historical and Contemporary Context" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Stafford.

<sup>28</sup> Stafford.

<sup>29</sup> Kirill Kalinin, "Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian Elite: The Irrelevance of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (2019): 461–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1663050>.

<sup>30</sup> Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*."

<sup>31</sup> Andreas Umland, "Alexander Dugin and Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles at the Start of Putin's Third Presidential Term 2012–2013: The Anti-Orange Committee, the Izborsk Club and the Florian Geyer Club in Their Political Context," *Europolity* 10, no. 2 (2016): 7–32.

the Izborsk Club, a think tank tied to the Kremlin, featuring some of Putin’s close advisors and propagating far-right policies.<sup>32</sup> This period saw the growth of far-right extremist clubs and political parties such as Rodina and Great Russia as well.<sup>33</sup>

The overt embrace of far-right extremists by the Kremlin is contested by scholars such as Mihai Varga. Varga argues that far-right organizations in general and neo-Nazis and white supremacists in particular were a serious internal security threat that needed to be managed by the Russian government from the 1990s through the early 2000s.<sup>34</sup> While these groups attracted some support from radical politicians, they conducted widespread attacks on civilians in major Russian cities like Moscow and Saint Petersburg, making them a significant destabilizing force.<sup>35</sup> Thus, far-right ideology and certain ideologues might have been encouraged to amplify nationalist sentiments in the country, but the Kremlin would have been wary about any extremist group’s becoming too influential.

### **3. Western Affinity for the Russian Far-Right**

After the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014, the resurgence of Russian power became an issue folded into a growing culture war in American politics.<sup>36</sup> American partisan political commentary painted Vladimir Putin as the antithesis of President Obama.<sup>37</sup> Putin was elevated as a strong and daring leader by pundits on the American political right while President Obama was imagined as weak and indecisive.<sup>38</sup> The appeal of Putin as an authentically strong leader, which resonated with American social conservatives, was the product of years of social policy under the Putin regime.<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Umland.

<sup>33</sup> Umland.

<sup>34</sup> Mihai Varga, “Russia’s Far-Right Violence Wave,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 66, no. 3 (2019): 200–210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1389613>.

<sup>35</sup> Varga.

<sup>36</sup> Kari Roberts, “Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse,” *International Journal* 72, no. 1 (2017): 28–55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26414074>.

<sup>37</sup> Sperling, “Putin’s Macho Personality Cult.”

<sup>38</sup> Sperling.

<sup>39</sup> Riabov and Riabova, “The Remasculinization of Russia?”

Putin regime utilized state media to cultivate an image of Russians as masculine and strong and liberal Westerners as effeminate and weak.<sup>40</sup> A significant part of this narrative was crafted on critiques of homosexuality in the West as a sign of societal degradation.<sup>41</sup> In June 2013, the Russian government, at the behest of the Russian Orthodox Church, passed an anti-gay “propaganda” law that criminalized depictions of non-traditional sexual or familial relationships to children.<sup>42</sup> The law was vague enough to effectively criminalize the acknowledgment of homosexuality in public.<sup>43</sup> This law was one of several steps by the Russian president to push back on progressive political causes.

These Russian social policies resonated with influential American social conservatives, such as Patrick Buchanan, who praised Putin for “moral clarity” on issues of same-sex marriage, gender equality, and traditional values.<sup>44</sup> Buchanan even flirted with questions of whether Russia was more culturally aligned than American progressive elites with conservative Americans, noting how closely Putin’s speeches echoed American conservative frustrations.<sup>45</sup>

Alexander Dugin’s radical politics and perceived role in shaping Russian policies also made him a minor celebrity among the American far-right.<sup>46</sup> In April 2015, white nationalist activist Preston Wigginton invited Dugin to appear online to discuss his book *American Liberalism Must Be Destroyed* at a lecture at Texas A&M.<sup>47</sup> Dugin was heavily courted by leaders of the American far-right, including Richard Spencer and Steve

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<sup>40</sup> Riabov and Riabova.

<sup>41</sup> Riabov and Riabova.

<sup>42</sup> “Russia: Anti-LGBT Law a Tool for Discrimination,” Human Rights Watch, June 29, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/29/russia-anti-lgbt-law-tool-discrimination>.

<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, “Putin’s Paleoconservative Moment,” *American Conservative*, December 17, 2013, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/putins-paleoconservative-moment/>; Melik Kaylan, “Kremlin Values: Putin’s Strategic Conservatism,” *World Affairs* 177, no. 1 (2014): 9–17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43555061>.

<sup>45</sup> Buchanan, “Putin’s Paleoconservative Moment”; Kaylan, “Kremlin Values.”

<sup>46</sup> Michael, “Useful Idiots or Fellow Travelers?”

<sup>47</sup> Carl Schreck, “Russian Ultranationalist Takes Venom to Lone Star State,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/dugin-texas-lecture-white-supremacist-ukraine-russia/26975427.html>.

Bannon.<sup>48</sup> Spencer, formerly married to Nina Kupriyanov, a translator of Dugin’s works into English, exchanged articles with Dugin himself for publication on their respective websites.<sup>49</sup> Bannon, himself a traditionalist who long admired Dugin’s radical politics, would go on to hold an eight-hour meeting with Dugin in Rome in November 2018.<sup>50</sup>

### C. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis employed two different and complementary research methods: grounded theory and social network analysis. These methods were used analyze Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). Developing a grounded theory of the relationship between Rusich and RIM and the Russian state and analyzing the social networks of both groups addressed the first goal of the Department of Homeland Security’s *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*: “Understand the evolving terrorism and targeted violence threat environment, and support partners in the homeland security enterprise through this specialized knowledge.”<sup>51</sup> These research methods specifically addressed the following lines of effort for this objective: “pursue terrorist threats to their source”; “isolate terrorists from financial, material, and logistical sources of support” by analyzing the composition, relationships, and support structures of Russian-affiliated far-right extremist groups; and “counter terrorist radicalization and recruitment.”<sup>52</sup>

#### 1. Grounded Theory—Assessing Russian State Ties with Far-Right Extremists

Inferences made from the social network model and each group’s current activities in Ukraine were used to develop an understanding of the nature of ties between the Russian

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<sup>48</sup> Michael, “Useful Idiots or Fellow Travelers?”

<sup>49</sup> Michael.

<sup>50</sup> Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: Inside Bannon’s Far-Right Circle of Global Power Brokers* (Dey Street Books, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *Security Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2019), 2, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19\\_0920\\_plcy\\_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Department of Homeland Security, 2.

state and far-right extremist groups Rusich and RIM. This analysis inferred potential threats this relationship poses to U.S. homeland security. This theory was derived from information obtained through open sources on social media to establish the activities of both groups and their connections with the Russian state. Recruitment and financing tactics were special foci of analysis.

## **2. Social Network Analysis**

Having established the broader themes regarding the connections binding Russia and the global far-right, I employed social network analysis of both RIM and Rusich to describe their relationship with the Russian state. For this analysis, I used open-source information on far-right groups gathered primarily from social media. I surveyed Telegram, Twitter, and VK as the primary social media platforms since far-right groups use these channels heavily. I identified group structures, individual members and leaders, key actors and organizational nodes, group planning, the nature of communication between groups, and evidence of Russian state influence on group operations. This original research complemented assessments by governments and professional research organizations.

## **D. CHAPTER OUTLINE**

The research presented in this thesis is laid out in the following four chapters. Chapter II addresses the history and consequences of Russia's drift to the political far-right, setting the stage for the emergence of Rusich and RIM. Chapter III analyzes the networks and behavior of both groups and their connections with the Russian state. Chapter IV analyzes new information on Rusich's and RIM's activities during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Chapter V concludes with an analysis of the present threat posed by both groups and provides recommendations for policymakers.

## II. RUSSIA AS THE IDOL OF THE GLOBAL FAR-RIGHT

This war is not about Ukraine, it is not about natural gas, oil, NATO, or even Crimea or other s\*\*\*. This war is about the future of the white race, white civilization, the future of white Russia. If we f\*\*\* it up, that'll be all. Our white race will be no more. It'll be the end of the white civilization on the planet as all that's left is here. . . . What of the countries that we thought that are white? White Europe, white America? What are they now? Slaves. [racial slur], [racial slur] crawling out of all holes. Every single one of them is a [anti-gay slur] on top of that. Men in dresses, everyone is sucking d\*\*\*. So where do you see a white nation there? Where is that pure white blood? There is none, we are all that's left. That's why the entire world is against us. That's why this is happening. We are the last bastion of the white man. This war is for blood, for genetics. This war is for the existence of our great white nation so that our great white Russia could continue to live. So that the white man could have a future. That's what we are fighting for. And only so the great white Russian man, a great warrior, can build a great Russian empire and save the white race's future on this planet. That's our purpose. That's why we are here.

—Unidentified Russian fighter, Ukraine, May 2022<sup>53</sup>

As the Russian war in Ukraine enters its second year, Vladimir Putin is doubling down on Russia's faltering war effort and framing the war in existential terms.<sup>54</sup> This posture raises the risk of direct confrontation with the United States and NATO member countries in Europe, whose support has been critical to the Ukrainian war effort.<sup>55</sup> There are worrying signs that Russia is contemplating the use of extremist proxies as a means of striking back at the United States and the Western allies.<sup>56</sup> The most battle-hardened and enthusiastic extremist proxies that may be called upon to carry out future attacks in Europe

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<sup>53</sup> Madi Kapparov (@MuKappa), "A Wagner contractor explains what he thinks they are fighting for," Twitter, May 22, 2022, 1:17 p.m., <https://twitter.com/MuKappa/status/1528439925661519872>.

<sup>54</sup> Dan De Luce, "Putin Thinks He Can Win Because Ukraine Matters More to Him than Us, Says CIA Chief," NBC News, March 9, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/putin-thinks-he-can-win-ukraine-war-says-cia-chief-rcna74221>.

<sup>55</sup> Yaroslav Lukov, "Ukraine War: Russia Warns U.S. of Direct Military Clash Risk," BBC News, October 5, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63140098>.

<sup>56</sup> Katie Bo Lillis, Kylie Atwood, and Alex Marquardt, "Russian Intelligence Agents Believed to Have Directed White Supremacists to Carry Out Bombing Campaign in Spain, U.S. Officials Say," CNN, January 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/politics/russia-intelligence-spain-bombing-ukraine/index.html>.

and beyond are the neo-Nazi group Rusich and the Christian monarchist RIM. Both these groups have a complex but increasingly close relationship with the Russian state due to pressures emerging from the war in Ukraine.

The emergence of RIM and Rusich as powerful and influential paramilitaries is part of a three-decade drift from leftist Soviet politics to the far-right under Vladimir Putin, culminating in the 2022–2023 war in Ukraine. The far-right political environment fostered under Putin is distinct from Western conceptions of right-wing politics. The historical, cultural, and geopolitical influences under which this ideology formed present unique considerations for assessing the threat posed by Russian far-right extremists and their relationship with the Russian state. This chapter analyzes the entrance of far-right ideology in Russia, from the radical fringe to the halls of the Kremlin, and how it fostered the rise of Rusich and RIM.<sup>57</sup> Understanding that foundational ideology is an essential first step in comprehending the shared aggressive and increasingly expansionist aims that both groups share with the Russian state.

#### **A. RUSSIA’S SHIFT FROM THE FAR-LEFT TO THE FAR-RIGHT**

Until the early 1990s, the Soviet Union, with Russia at the helm, was the leader of global socialism, so it is hardly intuitive that Russia would become the model state for the political far-right. This shift to the political right took place slowly and in distinct phases. The first phase was largely grassroots driven during the 1990s. The drift to the right continued into the early 2000s under Putin’s early leadership of the country and accelerated after Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, when the Kremlin’s confrontational foreign policy resulted in strained relations with the United States and Europe.<sup>58</sup>

The first phase of Russia’s drift to the far-right began with the reconstitution of pro-fascist political parties shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> The foremost of these

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<sup>57</sup> Umland, “Moscow’s New Right Radical Intellectual Circles”; Marcel H. Herpen, *Putinism: The Slow Rise of a Radical Right Regime in Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137282811>; Jonathan Marcus, “Putin: Russian President Says Liberalism ‘Obsolete,’” BBC News, June 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48795764>.

<sup>58</sup> Umland, “Moscow’s New Right Radical Intellectual Circles.”

<sup>59</sup> Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?*



emergent far-right parties was Russian National Unity (RNU).<sup>60</sup> RNU was a paramilitary group that gained notoriety for defending the Russian Parliament against the Russian armed forces led by Boris Yeltsin, amid the Russia's 1993 constitutional crisis.<sup>61</sup> RNU distinguished itself with its black shirts and public embrace of the symbols and ideology of neo-Nazism.<sup>62</sup> Unique among the members' fascist creed was a core belief in Russian exceptionalism, defined not only by historical and cultural achievements but by genetic heritage as ethnic Russians.<sup>63</sup> These extreme convictions in the greatness of the Russian people apparently struck a nerve with many Russians, despite the connotations with Nazism. By 1997, the group counted as many as 15,000 active members and up to 100,000 supporters.<sup>64</sup>

Despite this early popularity and participation in pro-Russian separatist wars in Moldova and the Republic of Georgia, the group largely became defunct by the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>65</sup> This disbandment was in part the result of the outlawing of the group by Moscow in 1999, but it was part of a larger trend of changing national politics.<sup>66</sup> At the start of the new millennium, the successor to Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, began a consolidation of power that would take far-right ideology from the fringe to the political mainstream and provided fertile ground for the emergence of Rusich and RIM.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Human Rights in Russia* (Washington, DC: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1999), 29, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinki.commission.house.gov/files/1999.09.08%20Human%20Rights%20in%20Russia.pdf>.

<sup>61</sup> Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?*, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>63</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>64</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>65</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>66</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Human Rights in Russia*, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Ortung and Anthony Latta, eds., *Russia's Battle with Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

## **B. FOUNDATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FAR-RIGHT: TRADITION, GEOGRAPHY, AND RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY**

Parts of the far-right ideology espoused by the Russian state do indeed mirror familiar tenets of fascism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism. The full package of beliefs, however, is a much less easily categorized mix of traditionalism—a nationalism rooted in Russian monarchy and Orthodox Christianity—and a uniquely Russian philosophy of Eurasianism.<sup>68</sup> An understanding of these belief systems is necessary to appreciate the ideological distinctions that separate the Russian far-right from its Western counterparts. This context also helps clarify what seem like apparent contradictions of beliefs by the Russian far-right, in its associations, alliances, and behavior.

### **1. Traditionalism**

Traditionalism is an esoteric philosophy that is not widely understood in the United States and is often confused with other forms of conservatism.<sup>69</sup> Traditionalism is more than just a practice of adhering to traditional values; it is an identitarian ideology rooted in mysticism and superstition that posits cultural heritage as a connection to eternal truths.<sup>70</sup> While the history, beliefs, and influence of traditionalism are too big a subject to cover in the course of this research, some background on the ideology illuminates the motivation of Russian far-right extremists.

Traditionalism is a belief system that rejects modernity as a force that destroys higher virtues found in historical communities and cultures.<sup>71</sup> Traditionalists assert that the modern notion of progress is an illusion obscuring the greater spiritual truths that govern the world.<sup>72</sup> One of these truths is the cyclical nature of time—the belief that

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<sup>68</sup> Kristina Stoeckl and Kseniya Medvedeva, “Double Bind at the UN: Western Actors, Russia, and the Traditionalist Agenda,” *Global Constitutionalism* 7, no. 3 (November 2018): 383–421, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381718000163>.

<sup>69</sup> Colin Dueck, “The New Traditionalists,” American Enterprise Institute, May 29, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-new-traditionalists/>.

<sup>70</sup> Christopher J. Adameczyk, “Gods versus Titans: Ideological Indicators of Identitarian Violence” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2020), 129, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/66032>.

<sup>71</sup> Stafford, “Eurasianism.”

<sup>72</sup> Stafford.

historical ages cycle through periods of rise and decline, from golden ages to dark ages and back.<sup>73</sup> In this view, material human achievements wax and wane, and true human progress is only possible by stepping outside the cycle through spiritual revelation and purification.<sup>74</sup> In this view, scientific knowledge and material improvements in living standards are not only meaningless but often hidden sources of insidious erosion of the human spirit.<sup>75</sup> This time cycle of history originated with an obscure French philosopher named René Guénon, who borrowed the concept of Kali Yuga from Hinduism.<sup>76</sup> Ages of darkness and enlightenment are familiar concepts in many cultures but seem to resonate especially deeply in a Russian cultural mythology filled with the memories of catastrophic wars and occupations.<sup>77</sup>

Traditionalists like Guénon fixated on the idea of supra-rational spiritual knowledge, the only true source of knowledge about the world, which could only be found by pursuing established traditional religions. Guénon was drawn to Hinduism but ultimately converted to Islam because he believed that the latter represented the purest traditions of the Indo-Aryan people.<sup>78</sup> Here, the contradictions and insidious underpinnings of the ideology become more apparent and blur with Russian conceptions of ethnic exceptionalism.

Traditionalists liked the Hindu ideas of spiritual caste and a time cycle of history because they helped explain the apparent rise and fall of empires and differences in development across regions.<sup>79</sup> These concepts were interpreted in racial terms, with

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<sup>73</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28, ProQuest.

<sup>74</sup> Sedgwick, 213.

<sup>75</sup> Sedgwick, 213.

<sup>76</sup> Mark Sedgwick, “René Guénon and Traditionalism,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. Glenn Alexander Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 308–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139027649.027>.

<sup>77</sup> Pierre Labrunie, “Gregory Carleton, Russia: The Story of War,” *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 20/21 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.5646>.

<sup>78</sup> Gregory A. Lipton, “De-semitizing Ibn ‘Arabī: Aryanism and the Schuonian Discourse of Religious Authenticity,” *Numen* 64, no. 2/3 (2017): 258–93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44505337>.

<sup>79</sup> Lipton.

traditionalists linking the development of Europe with the migration of the Indo-Aryan people across northern Europe, the Mediterranean, Persia, and India.<sup>80</sup> Part of this ideology inspired 20th century Nazi racial theory, which interpreted cultural achievements left behind by Indo-Aryan people as a sign of innate racial superiority.<sup>81</sup> A strain of this ideology is kept alive today by Russian traditionalists who believe that Russia, by virtue of spiritual and ethnic ties, is the rightful heir to the Roman empire (itself a legacy of Indo-Aryan civilization) after the fall of Constantinople.<sup>82</sup>

Traditionalist ideology today has evolved into divergent schools of thought that have come to inspire global far-right movements. One school is a Christian nationalist version of traditionalism, championed by Steve Bannon of the United States and Olavo de Carvalho of Brazil, each former strategic advisors to their respective presidents.<sup>83</sup> This nationalist school of traditionalism seeks to create a united front of sovereign states rooted in Judeo-Christian values and the spirit of the working classes to combat globalism and threats posed by expansionist China.<sup>84</sup> Closer relations with Russia are a major goal for these nationalist-minded traditionalist strategists, as Russia is believed to share the same values.<sup>85</sup>

Russian traditionalists do not subscribe to these Western conceptions of traditionalism. Instead, two other forms of traditionalism rooted in a Russian historical context inform Russian far-right ideology. These offshoots include Russian Orthodox neo-fascism, a reactionary ideology developed in the wake of the Russian Revolution, and Eurasianism, a form of traditionalism rooted in Russian geography and indigenous traditions. This distinction between the Western and Russian concepts of traditionalism is

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<sup>80</sup> Gabriel Fernandes Rocha Guimarães, “Missionary Populism against Nativist Populism: The Debate between Olavo de Carvalho and Alexander Dugin,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2022): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2022.2107253>.

<sup>81</sup> Holocaust Encyclopedia, s.v. “Aryan,” September 29, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/aryan-1>.

<sup>82</sup> Cyrus Hamlin, “The Dream of Russia,” *Atlantic*, December 1, 1886, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1886/12/the-dream-of-russia/522855/>.

<sup>83</sup> Fernandes Rocha Guimarães, “Missionary Populism against Nativist Populism.”

<sup>84</sup> Fernandes Rocha Guimarães.

<sup>85</sup> Fernandes Rocha Guimarães.

crucial to understanding why, despite sharing some ideals, the far-right of Russia has irreconcilable differences with its Western counterparts that preclude long-term cooperation.

## 2. Russian Orthodox Neo-fascism

The roots of Russian far-right ideology first surfaced in the early 20th century during the waning days of the Romanov dynasty. Expelled from Russia by the Bolsheviks, Russian religious philosopher Ivan Ilyin sought to develop an alternative set of revolutionary ideas to contest atheist socialism.<sup>86</sup> Ilyin meshed historical ideas of Russian cultural exceptionalism with popular Western European ideas emerging from the Industrial Revolution, including Freud's psychoanalysis and Hegel's concept of historical progress.<sup>87</sup> Ilyin saw a model for his reactionary ideology in Mussolini's fascist Italy.<sup>88</sup>

Ilyin embraced fascism as a means of asserting the primacy of tradition and spirituality over false concepts of historical progress under socialism.<sup>89</sup> The agents of socialism included the Jews, whose influential international diaspora threatened the pure spiritual essence of the Russian people.<sup>90</sup> The stress of the times gave these extreme beliefs a receptive audience in the large community of white Russian émigrés in Western Europe.<sup>91</sup> Ilyin's otherwise radical ideas gained legitimacy as they seemed a positively mild alternative to those of Stalin, whose repression produced incomprehensible levels of human suffering.

As Russian thinkers contemplated freedom from the Soviet regime, they looked to their glorious past rooted in ideals of tradition and spiritualism. Proponents of this utopian

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<sup>86</sup> Timothy Snyder, "God Is a Russian," Yale MacMillan Center, April 5, 2018, <https://reees.macmillan.yale.edu/news/timothy-snyder-god-russian>.

<sup>87</sup> Snyder.

<sup>88</sup> Snyder.

<sup>89</sup> Timothy Snyder, "God Is a Russian," *New York Review* 65, no. 6 (2018): 50.

<sup>90</sup> Snyder.

<sup>91</sup> Snyder.

nationalism included the Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn.<sup>92</sup> Solzhenitsyn, like Ilyin, saw the need for a strong leader to restore national greatness.<sup>93</sup> As such, Solzhenitsyn welcomed Putin's rise to power as a matter of restoring Russian pride and reuniting the Russian diaspora, which remained divided by modern borders but still united in spirit and tradition.<sup>94</sup>

In 2007, as individual freedoms across Russia were suppressed and independent journalists were openly killed in Moscow, Putin honored Solzhenitsyn for his lifetime of service to the Russian people with a state award for humanitarian achievement.<sup>95</sup> The embrace of a dying Solzhenitsyn may be seen as a symbolic moment of triumph of reactionary ideology over reform. Putin declared that "millions of people across the world associate the name and work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn with the destiny of Russia itself. . . His scientific research and outstanding literary works, in fact all his life, are dedicated to the fatherland."<sup>96</sup> With such a pronouncement, Putin claimed the assertions of undeniable human rights and individual dignity in Solzhenitsyn's classics, *The Gulag Archipelago* and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, as Russian property, thereby blurring the distinction between liberal and illiberal ideology and defining virtue as something innately Russian.

### 3. Eurasianism

Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin popularized a form of traditionalism exclusive to Russia, based on the concept of Eurasianism created by Russian historian Lev

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<sup>92</sup> David G. Rowley, "Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Russian Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 3 (1997): 321–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260964>.

<sup>93</sup> Rowley.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Coalson, "Is Putin 'Rebuilding Russia' According to Solzhenitsyn's Design?," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 1, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-solzhenitsyn-1990-essay/26561244.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Graham Jones, "Repression in Russia," *Guardian*, March 10, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/10/russia.leadersandreply>.

<sup>96</sup> "Putin Says Solzhenitsyn's Life Dedicated to Russia," Reuters, June 12, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-solzhenitsyn-idUKL1220950120070612>.

Gumilyov.<sup>97</sup> Gumilyov posited that Russia is the historical home of a unique civilization and super-ethnic group of Eurasians whose development has been shaped by the vast Russian steppe.<sup>98</sup> Dugin blended these beliefs with other traditionalist ideas of spiritual and cultural exceptionalism into a geopolitical doctrine for Russia to regain a sense of direction and strategic advantage after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>99</sup> His essential writings, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*, and *The Fourth Political Theory*, espouse an illiberal alternative to the post–Cold War liberal international order led by the United States.<sup>100</sup> Dugin’s ideology is popular among Western far-right thinkers who despise liberalism, but it is incompatible with any permutation of Western far-right ideology.<sup>101</sup> At its core, Dugin’s Eurasia is a geopolitical project rooted in the geography of the Russian steppe and the customs and traditions indigenous to that area.<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, Dugin views Eurasia as perpetually in conflict with the United States and the United Kingdom, which he calls the “Atlanticist” powers. According to Dugin, the Atlanticists have their own unique civilizational character derived from a tradition of seafaring, which drives them toward trade.<sup>103</sup> This supposed civilizational impulse for

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<sup>97</sup> Alexander G. Dugin, “Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities: Interview with Alexander G. Dugin, Dr. of Sc. (Political Sciences, Social Sciences), Professor, Leader of the International Eurasian Movement,” *Vestnik RUDN International Relations* 22, no. 1 (2022): 142–52, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2022-22-1-142-152>.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander Sergeevich Titov, “Lev Gumilev, Ethnogenesis and Eurasianism” (PhD diss., University College London, 2005), <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1446515/1/U602440.pdf>.

<sup>99</sup> Dugin, “Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities.” In this interview, Dugin explicitly states, “I myself have repeatedly demonstrated how ideologies can be introduced into Russian reality, precisely to deploy Eurasian principles, but this process is still going on gradually. I am for the theory of a multipolar world, I am absolutely convinced that almost all the theory of international relations, the ethno-post-Soviet space will be an integri-sociological concept or presented (sooner or later) in a single Eurasianization of the sociology of Russian society, and alliance on different terms, also in different anthropology, military strategy or forms and at different times, that is, within the framework of geopolitics.”

<sup>100</sup> Tolstoy and McCaffray, “Mind Games”; Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia* [English translation] (self-pub., 2017), Google Books; Alexander Dugin, *Fourth Political Theory* [English translation] (Arktos Media, 2012), <https://arktos.com/product/the-fourth-political-theory/>.

<sup>101</sup> Gideon Rachman, “The Global Reach of Alexander Dugin,” *Financial Times*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7184ab8c-c155-4198-a844-87b9a98d8b9b>.

<sup>102</sup> Titov, “Lev Gumilev, Ethnogenesis and Eurasianism”; Dugin, “Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities.”

<sup>103</sup> Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity*, 46.

capitalism leads the United States and the United Kingdom to promote a liberal ideology of multiculturalism as a means of homogenizing global culture over time to maximize trade opportunities.<sup>104</sup>

Dugin’s vision for Russia includes a future free from liberal Atlanticist dominance, with Eurasia as a dominant center of world power in a multipolar world with differing civilizational ordering concepts.<sup>105</sup> This new world order would be structured around generous interpretations of cultural and civilizational distinctiveness that would forestall the disintegration of culture and tradition under the existing world order. In this multipolar world, Russia would serve as the leader of Eurasia, essentially defined by spiritual and historical ties to Russia.<sup>106</sup> Russian hegemony in Eurasia would then extend to Slavic and Orthodox peoples of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, former subject peoples of the Baltic states, and Turkic and Persian peoples of Central Asia who share Russian heritage through the Mongol conquests.<sup>107</sup>

Dugin envisions the geopolitical primacy of Eurasia secured through the fragmentation of the Atlanticist powers, the United States and United Kingdom, which lead the political West.<sup>108</sup> This fragmentation would be achieved by exploiting political and cultural friction points. In *Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin clearly expresses this imperative:

It is especially important to introduce geopolitical disorder into internal American activity, encouraging all kinds of separatism and ethnic, social and racial conflicts, actively supporting all dissident movements—extremist, racist, and sectarian groups, thus destabilizing internal political processes in the United States. It would also make sense simultaneously to support isolationist tendencies in American politics.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Teitelbaum, 46.

<sup>105</sup> Dugin, “Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities.”

<sup>106</sup> Stafford, “Eurasianism.”

<sup>107</sup> Stafford, “Eurasianism”; Titov, “Lev Gumilev, Ethnogenesis and Eurasianism”; Dugin, “Eurasianism as a Non-Western Episteme for Russian Humanities.”

<sup>108</sup> Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, 367.

<sup>109</sup> Dugin, 367.



Dugin advocates using a full court press of social and political disruption to separate the United States and the United Kingdom—which he considers a de facto part of America—from the rest of Europe.<sup>110</sup> Free from Atlanticist influence, the orientation of continental Europe would naturally drift toward Russia.<sup>111</sup> This world of divided Western allies would benefit a much larger Russia and provide a viable foundation for a multipolar world in which Russia could safely build its unique civilization. Dugin further advocates Russia’s maintaining dominance of Eurasia primarily through subversion and information operations, the threat of military force, and access or denial to its natural resources.<sup>112</sup>

#### **4. Ideological Integration with the Russian State: The Izborsk Club**

Further evidence that both schools of thought not only are influential within Russia but also form essential parts of the Russian grand strategy is seen in the 2012 formation of the Izborsk Club.<sup>113</sup> The Izborsk Club is a Kremlin-linked ultraconservative think tank whose members include active policymakers as well as thought and culture leaders across Russian public and private sectors. Members of the Izborsk Club include philosophers like Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov; state officials like Sergey Glazyev and Mikhail Delyagin; religious leaders like Metropolitan Tikhon and Bishop Augustine; and members of Russian state media, private industry, and academic institutions.<sup>114</sup> The club’s publications include commentaries on Russian history and politics, which draw significant influence from Eurasianism, Ivan Ilyin, and other neo-fascist thinkers like the German

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<sup>110</sup> Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s *Foundations of Geopolitics*.”

<sup>111</sup> Dunlop.

<sup>112</sup> Dunlop.

<sup>113</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The Izborsky Club, or the New Conservative Avant-Garde in Russia,” *Russian Review* 75, no. 4 (October 2016): 626–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12106>.

<sup>114</sup> “Permanent Members of the Izborsk Club,” Izborsk Club, accessed January 16, 2023, <https://izborsk-club.ru/members>.

philosopher Carl Schmitt.<sup>115</sup> These ideas are thought to have significant influence on Vladimir Putin.<sup>116</sup>

### C. **TSAR PUTIN—CHAMPION OF MULTIPOLARITY, ILLIBERALISM, AND THE RUSSIAN FAR-RIGHT**

At significant cost to the principles and ideas that free nations prize, he has performed an extraordinary feat of leadership in imposing stability on a nation that has rarely known it and brought Russia back to the table of world power. For that reason, Vladimir Putin is *TIME*'s 2007 Person of the Year.

—*Time* magazine's 2007 Person of the Year announcement<sup>117</sup>

Putin had already marked seven years as head of the Russian state, but the *Time* magazine announcement may have astutely captured the moment at which Putin emerged as the new far-right tsar of Russia. Putin had successfully consolidated political power within Russia, silenced critics, and co-opted Russian dissidents and was beginning to project power abroad.

The first indications of Putin's growing assertiveness were seen in April 2007, when Russia launched a wave of cyberattacks and disinformation against Estonia.<sup>118</sup> Russia's attacks on its much smaller neighbor were launched shortly after the Estonian government announced the removal and relocation of a Soviet-era bronze soldier statue from its capital, Tallinn.<sup>119</sup> The monument's relocation was seen as an affront to Russia and the pride of the large Russian ethnic minority in Estonia.<sup>120</sup> In response to the insult, Russia launched a combined cyber and information campaign that triggered riots and a

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<sup>115</sup> Umland, "Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles"; David G. Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 62, [https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/45793/external\\_content.pdf;jsessionid=9D516E7573B3600E79BFD97E0AF3ACA4?sequence=1](https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/45793/external_content.pdf;jsessionid=9D516E7573B3600E79BFD97E0AF3ACA4?sequence=1).

<sup>116</sup> Umland, "Moscow's New Right Radical Intellectual Circles."

<sup>117</sup> Richard Stengel, "Person of the Year 2007: Choosing Order before Freedom," *Time*, December 19, 2007, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753\\_1690757,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1690757,00.html).

<sup>118</sup> Kaspars Galkins, "NATO and Hybrid Conflict: Unresolved Issues from the Past or Unresolvable Threats of the Present" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2012), 82.

<sup>119</sup> Galkins, 82.

<sup>120</sup> Galkins, 82.

breakdown of some critical infrastructure.<sup>121</sup> This destabilization campaign resulted in millions of dollars in economic losses to Estonia, primarily from banking interruptions. Similarly, 100 injuries and one death resulted from the rioting, which prompted 1,300 arrests.<sup>122</sup> It was a stunning proof of concept of Dugin’s geopolitical strategy of power through subversion and disinformation. This strategy of destabilization through domination of the information space was again utilized a year later in Georgia.

### **1. Georgia 2008—Proxies as a Cornerstone of Russian Influence in Eurasia**

Russian hostility toward the Republic of Georgia had been building since November 2003, when a nonviolent political movement overthrew the corrupt, authoritarian government of Eduard Shevardnadze to secure greater democratic governance.<sup>123</sup> Mikheil Saakashvili, elected Georgia’s president in 2004 following the “Rose Revolution,” provoked Russian ire by reorienting Georgian foreign policy away from Russia and toward Western Europe. The final straw for Russia over this attempt by Georgia to secede from its Eurasian sphere of influence was the April 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, which extended offers of future membership to both Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>124</sup> The move was especially unsettling to Russia as it had de facto control over two ethnic Russian enclaves in Georgia—South Ossetia and Abkhazia—which Georgia recognized as breakaway provinces.<sup>125</sup> Georgia’s independent action was a direct challenge to Russia’s primacy in Eurasia and threatened to further institutionalize the liberal concepts of national sovereignty and democracy as ordering principles over those

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<sup>121</sup> Stephen Herzog, “Ten Years after the Estonian Cyberattacks: Defense and Adaptation in the Age of Digital Insecurity,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2017): 67–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26395925>.

<sup>122</sup> Herzog.

<sup>123</sup> Giorgi Kandelaki, *Georgia’s Rose Revolution: A Participant’s Perspective*, Special Report 167 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2006).

<sup>124</sup> “NATO Decision on Open-Door Policy,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 3, 2008, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2008/04-april/e0403h.html>; Roy Allison, “Russia Resurgent? Moscow’s Campaign to ‘Coerce Georgia to Peace,’” *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008): 1145–71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25144986>.

<sup>125</sup> Allison, “Russia Resurgent?,” 1146.

of culture and tradition within Russia's sphere of influence. The strategic challenge resonated strongly with far-right extremists, who eventually played a significant role in shaping Russia's pretext for war.

Alexander Dugin was one such far-right leader who answered the call to defend Russian suzerainty in Georgia.<sup>126</sup> In June 2008, Alexander Dugin was photographed holding an AK-47 in front of a South Ossetian infantry fighting vehicle.<sup>127</sup> While in South Ossetia, Dugin along with other far-right paramilitary volunteers oversaw the preparation of South Ossetian armed forces for a coming war.<sup>128</sup> In the war that followed, South Ossetian forces were used to incite an attack by the Georgian military to create a plausible justification for a Russian invasion under international law.<sup>129</sup> When this invasion happened, Dugin popularized the action as an assertion of Russian revival and advocated expanding the war, famously proclaiming "Tanks to Tbilisi!"<sup>130</sup>

Tanks did not reach the Georgian capital. The military operation halted after the routed Georgian army regrouped around Tbilisi, thus promising a stiff resistance, and the European Union brokered a peace settlement.<sup>131</sup> Russia need not seize all of the country to pull off a strategic win according to its Eurasianist doctrine. The brief military operation decisively defeated Georgia's drift toward Western Europe. The war also made the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia permanent obstacles to Georgia's consideration for NATO membership and provided an avenue for continued Russian influence within the

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<sup>126</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism."

<sup>127</sup> Shekhovtsov.

<sup>128</sup> Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity*, 39–45.

<sup>129</sup> Allison, "Russia Resurgent?"

<sup>130</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism."

<sup>131</sup> Deutsche Presse Agentur, "Background: Six-Point Peace Plan for the Georgia–Russia Conflict," Relief Web, August 15, 2008, <https://reliefweb.int/report/georgia/background-six-point-peace-plan-georgia-russia-conflict>; Peter Dickinson, "The 2008 Russo–Georgian War: Putin's Green Light," *Ukraine Alert* (blog), August 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>.

country.<sup>132</sup> The war also made Putin wildly popular in Russia.<sup>133</sup> Putin’s renown went global after a series of foreign policy successes between 2014 and 2015 elevated Russia’s stature on the world stage.

In March 2014, just a month after hosting the Winter Olympics, Russia seized the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in a series of events that mirrored previous operations in Estonia and Georgia.<sup>134</sup> The invasion of Ukraine followed the February 2014 Maidan Revolution of Dignity in which Ukrainian protesters ousted the Russia-friendly Viktor Yanukovich from power to pursue a policy of greater democratization and closer ties with Europe.<sup>135</sup> It was another demonstration of Russia’s willingness to enforce its concept of Eurasian hegemony by attacking its neighbors attempts to escape its sphere of influence. In April, the war between Ukraine and Russia expanded into the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>136</sup> The hybrid war that formed in that region between 2014 and 2015 was thoroughly imperial, Orthodox, and fascist in character.<sup>137</sup> This war was ultimately the birthplace of Rusich and the paramilitary Imperial Legion of RIM, and it continues to serve as important part of each group’s mythology.

## 2. New Russia 2014—The Violent Far-Right Emerges as Top Russian Proxies

The 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine featured the emergence of a Russian far-right political project called Novorossiia, named after the historical region of imperial Russia stretching from Eastern Ukraine along the Black Sea to Crimea. The reclaiming of

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<sup>132</sup> Erik J. Grossman, “Russia’s Frozen Conflicts and the Donbas,” *Parameters* 48, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2944>.

<sup>133</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 281.

<sup>134</sup> Steven Pifer, “Crimea: Six Years after Illegal Annexation,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), March 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/>.

<sup>135</sup> Steven Pifer, “Ukraine: Looking Forward, Five Years after the Maidan Revolution,” *Order from Chaos* (blog), February 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/02/22/ukraine-looking-forward-five-years-after-the-maidan-revolution/>.

<sup>136</sup> Pifer.

<sup>137</sup> Laruelle, “The Three Colors of Novorossiia.”

this region for the Russian state had long been a dream of the Russian far-right, especially Alexander Dugin and the Izborsk Club. After the seizure of Crimea, a hybrid war was waged in the Ukrainian provinces to destabilize and reclaim the rest of the Novorossiia under the guise of a counterrevolution to Maidan.

The hybrid war in Donbas was primarily waged by a coalition of Russian-sponsored paramilitaries supported by the Russian military.<sup>138</sup> These paramilitaries were led by a network of influential far-right power brokers with the Russian state.<sup>139</sup> This cadre of far-right leaders included ultra-Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev and associates Igor Girkin, a Russian black operative, and Alexander Borodai, a Russian radical politician.<sup>140</sup> While Malofeev and Borodai provided funding and administration for the new territories, Igor Girkin became the architect for the hybrid war in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine.<sup>141</sup>

After initial gains in Eastern Ukraine by Girkin's formidable coalition of irregular fighters, Russian combat operations bogged down in late 2014.<sup>142</sup> In the winter of that year, the war's front became largely static, and the effort to fully seize the territory began to pose a greater liability than benefit to Russia. Chief of the liabilities was the out-of-control behavior of Girkin's paramilitaries. In July 2014, forces commanded by Girkin shot down the civilian airliner Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 flying over Ukraine.<sup>143</sup> Girkin

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<sup>138</sup> Courtney Weaver, "Malofeev: The Russian Billionaire Linking Moscow to the Rebels," *Financial Times*, July 24, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/84481538-1103-11e4-94f3-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>139</sup> Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia."

<sup>140</sup> Weaver, "Malofeev."

<sup>141</sup> John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiia': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2017): 124–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1146452>.

<sup>142</sup> "Igor Strelkov: Od krvavog Višegrada i Dodikovog prijatelja do pakla Ukrajine" [From bloody Visegrad and Dodik's friend to the hell of Ukraine], Radio Sarajevo, March 7, 2022, <https://radiosarajevo.ba/metromahala teme/igor-strelkov-od-krvavog-visegrada-i-dodikovog-prijatelja-do-pakla-ukrajine/449466>.

<sup>143</sup> "Identifying the Separatists Linked to the Downing of MH17," Bellingcat, June 19, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/06/19/identifying-the-separatists-linked-to-the-downing-of-mh17/>; "MH17: Seven Years of Lying and Denying," EU vs. Disinfo, July 12, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/mh17-seven-years-of-lying-and-denying/>.

followed the incident with a disinformation campaign that ignited international outrage.<sup>144</sup> Alexander Dugin, the architect of the war's intellectual foundation, further provoked the international community's ire by publicly calling for Ukrainian genocide to finish the war.<sup>145</sup>

The combination of difficulties in managing the war and behavior of the warriors ultimately led Russia to abandon the Novorossiia experiment in May 2015.<sup>146</sup> From that point on, the war in Eastern Ukraine transitioned to a frozen conflict with periodic flare-ups of violence but no significant advances made by either side. Despite being officially abandoned, the Novorossiia political experiment gained new life in the imagination of the Russian far-right. The project provided a proof of concept for Eurasianist ideas, along with a network of combat veterans and political supporters who became influential voices on Russian foreign policy.<sup>147</sup> This constituency, led by Girkin and Borodai, turned its disillusionment with the end of Novorossiia into a lost-cause mythology. That lost cause has animated the Russian far-right in the years since the freezing of the hybrid war and has elevated Rusich and RIM, which are featured in Saint Petersburg's Museum of Novorossiia, to its pantheon of heroes.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> EU vs. Disinfo, "MH17."

<sup>145</sup> Mykola Riabchuk, "A Long Ongoing War: Putin's Imaginary Ukrainians and a Mythic Russian Identity," *SciencesPo*, April 2022, <http://sciencespo.fr/ceeri/fr/content/dossiersduceri/long-ongoing-war-putin-s-imaginary-ukrainians-and-mythic-russian-identity>.

<sup>146</sup> Vladimir Dergachev and Dmitry Kirillov, "The Self-Proclaimed Republics Announced the Closure of the Project 'Novorossiia,'" *Gazeta*, May 20, 2015, [https://m.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/05/19\\_a\\_6694441.shtml](https://m.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/05/19_a_6694441.shtml).

<sup>147</sup> Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia"; Marlene Laruelle, "Back From Utopia: How Donbas Fighters Reinvent Themselves in a Post-Novorossiia Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 719–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.18>.

<sup>148</sup> Alexei Danichev, "St. Petersburg Mourns Death of DPR Separatists' Commander Arsen Pavlov," *Sputnik Mediabank*, October 19, 2016, <https://sputnikmediabank.com/media/2959278.html>. Rusich and RIM paraphernalia has been depicted in photographs taken inside the museum.

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### III. OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN MILITANT FAR-RIGHT NETWORK

At present, two prominent far-right extremist groups have direct ties to Russia: RIM and Rusich. These groups share common resentments toward Western liberalism, admiration for Russian ethnonationalism, and commitments to political violence. Despite their commonalities, these groups have considerable organizational and political differences and unique characteristics. This chapter highlights the essential history and characteristics of these groups in the lead up to the 2022 war in Ukraine. Such an understanding of their disposition at the start of the war is necessary to appreciate the ideological diversity within the Russian far-right, as well as how these groups utilize their relationship with Russia to achieve their ideological goals and how Russian has increasingly exploited them to accomplish its war aims. It also provides an essential starting point to track Russia's increasing reliance on far-right paramilitaries to compensate for its conventional military failings in Ukraine.

#### A. RUSICH

Rusich, sometimes called Task Force Rusich or Guerrilla Assault Reconnaissance Group (DShRG) Rusich, is a Russian ultranationalist paramilitary group. Rusich was founded in the summer of 2014 by former Russian paratroopers Aleksei Milchakov and Yan Petrovsky.<sup>149</sup> Some analysts suggest the group was formed when the two founders attended the Russian Imperial Legion's "Partizan" Training Center.<sup>150</sup> Milchakov's own account of the group's founding suggests Rusich's formation began during the Donbas campaign when he met Peterovsky at an "aid coordination center" affiliated with the Russian Imperial Legion.<sup>151</sup> The latter founding suggests a less direct association with RIM. Figure 1 depicts a photograph of Rusich and its insignia.

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<sup>149</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again."

<sup>150</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer.

<sup>151</sup> Candace Rondeaux, "Inquiry into the Murder of Hamdi Bouta and Wagner Group Operations at the Al-Shaer Gas Plant, Homs, Syria 2017," *New America*, June 8, 2020, <http://newamerica.org/international-security/reports/inquiry-murder-hamdi-bouta/>.



Figure 1. Rusich Group Photograph and Insignia.<sup>152</sup>

While nominally dedicated to advancing Russian nationalist aims, Rusich’s founding members were drawn from the neo-Nazi underground of Saint Petersburg. This founding ideology is highlighted in the group’s insignia, the Kolovrat, recognized as the Slavic swastika, and its operations, which are characterized by indiscriminate violence.<sup>153</sup> The group’s leaders, Milchakov and Petrovsky, are avowed neo-Nazis and violent psychopaths.<sup>154</sup> Milchakov is especially infamous for social media posts filming the torture of animals.<sup>155</sup>

Rusich’s name itself is indicative of transnational ambitions. “Rusich” translates roughly as “fortress” of the “Rus” people.<sup>156</sup> The Rus were a union of medieval Slavic peoples in modern day Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.<sup>157</sup> Some historical interpretations connect the Rus with Varangians, Vikings from Scandinavia who ranged between the

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<sup>152</sup> Source: Rusich, “Тренировки ВПК Русич. Отработка взаимодействия малых диверсионных групп Осень 2022” [Rusich training: Working out the interaction of small sabotage groups, Fall 2022], Telegram, September 24, 2022, 02:20, <https://t.me/dshrg2/16>; Rusich, “Channel Page,” Telegram, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://t.me/dshrg2>.

<sup>153</sup> Giovanni Pigni, “Enemy of the State or Its Founding Element? Yan Petrovsky, Russian Nationalist Accused of War Crimes in Ukraine, Was Deported from Norway,” Meduza, January 20, 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/01/20/enemy-of-the-state-or-its-founding-element>; Yudina and Verkhovsky, “Russian Nationalist Veterans of the Donbas War”; Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again.”

<sup>154</sup> Yudina and Verkhovsky, “Russian Nationalist Veterans of the Donbas War.”

<sup>155</sup> Yudina and Verkhovsky.

<sup>156</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again.”

<sup>157</sup> *Britannica*, s.v. “Rus,” accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rus>.

Baltic and Black Seas and came to serve the Byzantine Emperor.<sup>158</sup> While this relation is still debated by scholars, Rusich appears to subscribe to this expansive view of the historical dominion of the Rus people. In 2016, Rusich co-founder Yan Petrovsky was arrested in Norway where he was living with a member of the Norwegian far-right group Sons of Odin.<sup>159</sup> Petrovsky has also stated that Norwegians share a common history with the Rus people, including a joint proto-Slavic trading language called “Russnorsk,” suggesting an interest in future collaboration with the Scandinavian far-right.<sup>160</sup>

### **1. Transnational Activities and Associations**

Rusich is one of the most globally active Russian extremist groups, having been engaged in Russian combat operations periodically since 2014. That year, the newly formed Rusich joined the separatist war in the Donbas region of Ukraine to aid Russian forces.<sup>161</sup> While there, Rusich militants supplemented Alexander Bednov’s “Batman” battalion, a powerful militia of the self-declared Luhansk People’s Republic.<sup>162</sup> There, they engaged in decisive battles in the region at the Luhansk and Donetsk airports in the summer of 2014.<sup>163</sup> Rusich earned distinction as a capable fighting force after it destroyed a Ukrainian military convoy near the city of Metalist in September 2014.<sup>164</sup> This battle and the ensuing combat operations in the area also firmly established Rusich as a violent extremist group. An investigation by Ukrainian human rights group Zmina found evidence that Rusich militants participated in the murder of 95 Ukrainians following the convoy ambush, including 18 deaths involving torture.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> *Britannica*.

<sup>159</sup> “Russian Warrior Arrested, Faces Deportation,” Norway’s News in English, October 19, 2016, <https://www.newsinenglish.no/2016/10/19/russian-warrior-arrested-faces-deportation/>.

<sup>160</sup> Pigni, “Enemy of the State or Its Founding Element?”

<sup>161</sup> Yudina and Verkhovsky, “Russian Nationalist Veterans of the Donbas War.”

<sup>162</sup> Pigni, “Enemy of the State or Its Founding Element?”

<sup>163</sup> Pigni.

<sup>164</sup> Pigni.

<sup>165</sup> Sergiy Kochmarskiy, “95 Executions in Donbas,” Zmina, June 6, 2017, [https://zmina.info/en/articles-en/pravozahisniki\\_rozpovili\\_pro\\_95\\_strat\\_na\\_donbasi-3/](https://zmina.info/en/articles-en/pravozahisniki_rozpovili_pro_95_strat_na_donbasi-3/).

Rusich continued to fight in Donbas until July 2015. The January 2015 assassination of Alexander Bednov, the commander of the Rusich-aligned Batman battalion and close associate of Rusich leaders, was a catalyst for its withdrawal.<sup>166</sup> Further assessments have suggested that the assassination, nominally carried out by a rival militant group, were coordinated by the Wagner Group in an effort to consolidate Russian control over militias.<sup>167</sup> Bednov's death did not result in permanent Rusich hostility toward the Wagner Group, as Rusich members later operated as elements of the Wagner Group in Syria in 2017.<sup>168</sup> Geolocated photographs and video during this time place Rusich members near Palmyra, where the Wagner Group conducted security operations.<sup>169</sup> During its tenure in Syria, Rusich was implicated in more atrocities, including the infamous torture-murder of Syrian soldier Hamdi Bouta.<sup>170</sup>

Rusich members may have also participated in additional Russian private military contracts outside Syria. A heavily redacted photograph shows a Rusich member with physique resembling Petrovsky's, interacting with security officials from Sierra Leone. The date of this photo is unknown, but the image likely followed an August 2018 agreement by Russia to provide Sierra Leone with military equipment and technical assistance.<sup>171</sup>

Much of what is known about the atrocities committed by Rusich is the result of the group's own admissions on social media. Rusich has extensively documented its presence fighting in both Eastern Ukraine and Syria on social media. Rusich is extremely open about its activities on social media, where it depicts neo-Nazi propaganda and acts of violence and advocates the torture and murder of its enemies. Rusich posts updates on its

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<sup>166</sup> Oleg Sukhov, "Rebel's Killing Spurs War between Luhansk Insurgent Groups," *Kyiv Post*, January 7, 2015, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/war-against-ukraine/rebels-killing-spurs-war-between-luhansk-insurgent-groups-376893.html>.

<sup>167</sup> Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-state Security Forces."

<sup>168</sup> Rondeaux, "Inquiry into the Murder of Hamdi Bouta."

<sup>169</sup> Rondeaux.

<sup>170</sup> Rondeaux.

<sup>171</sup> Aaron Ross, "Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries," Reuters, October 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-africa-russia-factbox-idUKKCN1MR0KZ>.

Telegram account several times each day, reaching an audience of over 50,000 subscribers.<sup>172</sup>

Cybercrime is another emerging online capability for Rusich. A report by TRM Labs, a blockchain analysis company, identified malware that utilized victims' computer power to mine cryptocurrency, which is subsequently sent to a digital wallet associated with Rusich.<sup>173</sup> This advanced capability suggests that the group has also developed connections with cyber criminals to secure diverse revenue streams to fund its operations.<sup>174</sup>

## 2. Ties to the Russian State

Rusich maintains a relationship with the Wagner Group, a private Russian military contractor, which has increasingly operated at the behest of the Russian state. The extent of this relationship is yet unclear, but previous analysis has declared Rusich a semi-independent arm of the group.<sup>175</sup> While Rusich has operated with the Wagner Group, the relationship between the two is likely more complicated. On the one hand, the Wagner Group, founded by Dmitry Utkin, a former Russian Spetsnaz soldier and avowed neo-Nazi, is sympathetic toward violent psychopaths on the far-right. On the other hand, the Wagner Group is suspected of the January 2015 assassination of close Rusich associate Alexander Bednov, an attack that ultimately infuriated Rusich and precipitated its exit from the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>176</sup>

Claims of a formal Rusich partnership with the Wagner Group appear to have originated from assessments of the significance of Rusich members, including Yan

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<sup>172</sup> Rusich had 50,000 Telegram subscribers as of January 20, 2023, to its channel: <https://t.me/dshrg2>.

<sup>173</sup> "TRM Analysis: Crypto Fundraising Groups Supporting Russian Battlefield Efforts," TRM Labs, October 7, 2022, <https://www.trmlabs.com/post/crypto-fundraising-groups-supporting-russian-battlefield-efforts>.

<sup>174</sup> Lilia Yapparova, "'Just the Tip of the Iceberg' How Russian Neo-Nazi Paramilitary Fighters Steal Cryptocurrency through Ukrainian Charity Sites—and Use It to Fund the War," Meduza, November 17, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/17/just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg>.

<sup>175</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again."

<sup>176</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer.

Petrovsky, taking part in Wagner Group operations in Syria.<sup>177</sup> These assessments likely overestimate the connection between the two groups. Research by Bellingcat’s Michael Sheldon has suggested that some Rusich members, including Petrovsky, posed as Norwegian militants during the deployment.<sup>178</sup> There is also limited evidence that Rusich is fighting alongside the Wagner Group in the 2022 Ukrainian war, suggesting that while Rusich may have reconciled with the Wagner Group, the connection between the groups is minimal. As a result, until further public evidence of intergroup cooperation surfaces, a more probable assessment is that Rusich members occasionally serve contracts with the Wagner Group from time to time to gain money and experience.

Rusich’s closest and most enduring connections to the Russian state come from its service in the 2014 war in the Ukrainian Donbas region. There, the group developed ties with numerous separatist paramilitary organizations and Russian state sponsors of the separatist movement, including former leader of the Russian separatist republics of Ukraine, Alexander Borodai.<sup>179</sup> Rusich has maintained very close ties with Borodai, who has since become a member of the Russian Duma.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer.

<sup>178</sup> Sheldon, “The Nature of a Russian Neo-Nazi Unit That Fought in Syria.”

<sup>179</sup> Alexander Borodai, “Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД ‘Вереск’ и ‘Север’” [Alexander Boroday Visited the Units of the UDS “Veresk” and “North”], Official website of the Deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, April 23, 2022, <https://xn--80abjvwan.xn--p1ai/работа-в-регионах/ростов-донбасс/александр-бородай-побывал-в-подразде/>. Rusich leader Petrovsky met with Borodai near Belgorod in spring 2022.

<sup>180</sup> Michael Sheldon, “Meet the Irregular Troops Backing Up Russia’s Army in the Kharkiv Region,” Bellingcat, June 17, 2022, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/06/17/meet-the-irregular-troops-backing-up-russias-army-in-the-donbas/>; Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again”; Topaz Speaks, “С моей стороны будет правильно и справедливо, несмотря на личную неприязнь, отметить, что тот факт, что Стрелков сейчас находится на фронте, показывает его человеком честным и за свои слова отвечающим” [On my part, it will be right and fair, despite personal hostility, to note that the fact that Strelkov is now at the front shows him to be an honest person and responsible for his words], Telegram, November 30, 2022, 14:56, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/2743](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/2743); Borodai, “Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД ‘Вереск’ и ‘Север.’”



## B. THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL MOVEMENT

RIM is a Russian extremist organization that was officially founded by Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev in Saint Petersburg in 2002.<sup>181</sup> The group seeks a restoration of traditional cultural values in Russia, the return of an Orthodox Christian tsar, and the restoration of the lands of the Russian empire.<sup>182</sup> A May 2018 social media post by Vorobyev suggests the group’s founding was inspired by a personal connection with Viktor Antonov, a leader of one of the original monarchist Orthodox parties to emerge in the wake of the Soviet Union.<sup>183</sup> Figure 2 depicts RIM’s flag and insignia.



Figure 2. RIM’s Insignia and Flag.<sup>184</sup>

RIM has been described as both an ultranationalist and white-supremacist organization, but the group’s stated beliefs are more complex and defy easy

<sup>181</sup> “Russian Imperial Movement,” Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>.

<sup>182</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation.

<sup>183</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Четыре года назад (14.V.2014г.) отошел ко Господу Виктор Васильевич Антонов – основатель Русского Имперского Движения (РИД)” [Four years ago (May 14, 2014), Viktor Vasilievich Antonov, the founder of the Russian Imperial Movement (RID), passed away to the Lord], Telegram, May 14, 2018, 00:02, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/251](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/251).

<sup>184</sup> Source: Russian Imperial Movement, “Channel Page,” Telegram, accessed June 2, 2023, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia](https://t.me/Rus_imperia); Russian Imperial Movement, “С Богоявлением!!! Сегодня наши соратники погружались в купель по всей России. Не исключением стала и передовая. Всех с праздником!!!” [With Epiphany!!! Today, our comrades in arms plunged into the font throughout Russia. The front line was no exception. Happy holiday everyone!!!], Telegram, January 18, 2023, 16:20, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/10382](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/10382).

categorization.<sup>185</sup> RIM views itself as the vanguard for a return of the Russian empire, which encompasses people of Russian ancestry from across the Baltic states and Ukraine.<sup>186</sup> While the reunion of the Russian peoples aligns with the goals of the Putin regime, RIM does not view Putin’s leadership of Russia as legitimate and has called Putin a corrupt thief.<sup>187</sup> RIM claims that the last legitimate authority of the Russian people was vested in the Romanov dynasty, which was martyred by the Soviets.<sup>188</sup> In 2018, RIM called for a boycott of national elections, stating, “Since February 1917, more than a hundred years, Russia has had no legal authority. The country is ruled by terrorists, murderers, impostors, thieves, maniacs and lunatics, periodically replacing each other.”<sup>189</sup> RIM believes that Russia’s decline, which began in the Soviet period and continues into the modern Russian Federation, can only be reversed through a restoration of traditional Russian monarchy and authentic Orthodox Christianity.<sup>190</sup>

The group frequently highlights comparative stories of corruption and economic stagnation under the Soviets and contemporary Putin regime alongside achievements of the later Romanov dynasty. RIM has portrayed the tsars as reformers and enlightened leaders. RIM has gone so far as to compare Tsar Alexander II with Abraham Lincoln for his emancipation of the Russian serfs—not to mention his untimely assassination.<sup>191</sup> Another

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<sup>185</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, “The Russian Imperial Movement”; Lillis, Atwood, and Marquardt, “Russian Intelligence Agents Believed to Have Directed White Supremacists.”

<sup>186</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “ех и нашла отражение не только в исторических хрониках, но и в художественной литературе” [It was reflected not only in historical chronicles, but also in fiction], Telegram, September 3, 2018, 22:59, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/485](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/485).

<sup>187</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Моей семьи больше нет. Виноват правящий режим в моей стране” [My family is no more. The ruling regime in my country is to blame], Telegram, March 28, 2018, 09:57, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/206](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/206).

<sup>188</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “‘Не участвуйте в деяниях тьмы!’ Обращение русских национальных организаций” [“Do not participate in the deeds of darkness!” Appeal of Russian national organizations], Telegram, February 5, 2018, 23:29, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/178](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/178).

<sup>189</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>190</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Завершается год 2017-й. Год столетия февральской измены и начала геноцида русских в России” [The year 2017 is ending. The year of the centenary of the February betrayal and the beginning of the genocide of Russians in Russia], Telegram, January 6, 2018, 13:43, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/156](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/156).

<sup>191</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Об Александре II К 200-летию со дня рождения” [About Alexander II on the 200th anniversary of his birth], Telegram, May 3, 2018, 06:55, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/234](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/234).



recurring theme of RIM social media is its emphasis on spiritual purity as an essential component of Russian cultural achievement, a guiding principle that makes Russia superior to more materially rich, liberal Western countries. One report by RIM emphasizes the high rates of educational attainment among women during the Romanov dynasty while another critiques the high rates of abortion in Russia under Putin in an era of population decline.<sup>192</sup>

RIM has been frequently described as a white-supremacist organization, but white supremacy might be a marginal part of the group's identity.<sup>193</sup> RIM regularly refers to the "white movement" and "white Russia" in its statements on social media, but many if not most of these statements are historical rather than racial references. RIM identifies with the "white" pro-monarchist faction of Russian aristocracy that was killed or exiled by the Bolsheviks in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution.<sup>194</sup> RIM rejects associations with concepts of white supremacy and neo-Nazism, despite partnerships with such organizations.<sup>195</sup>

RIM's ideology emphasizes spiritual rather than racial purity. For instance, the group is outspoken in its criticism of Muslim immigrants.<sup>196</sup> RIM demands that Russian traditional culture be protected by limiting the immigration of non-Orthodox believers, particularly the Ingush and Chechen peoples, who it claims are particularly hostile to

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<sup>192</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "По количеству женщин, обучавшихся в высших учебных заведениях, Российская империя занимала в начале XX века первое место в Европе" [In terms of the number of women studying in higher educational institutions, the Russian Empire occupied the first place in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century], Telegram, September 19, 2018, 16:21, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/530](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/530).

<sup>193</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, "Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>194</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "По количеству женщин, обучавшихся в высших учебных заведениях, Российская империя занимала в начале XX века первое место в Европе" [In terms of the number of women studying in higher educational institutions, the Russian Empire occupied the first place in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century], Telegram, July 18, 2019, 16:21, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/1731](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/1731).

<sup>195</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "Новороссия вошла в состав России в результате войн с Крымским ханством и Турцией при Екатерине Великой, благодаря русским полководцам и солдатам" [New Russia became part of Russia as a result of wars with the Crimean Khanate and Turkey under Catherine the Great, thanks to Russian commanders and soldiers], Telegram, November 10, 2019, 09:40, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/2489](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/2489).

<sup>196</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "После XX съезда КПСС началась реабилитация и отдельных граждан, и целых народов, пострадавших в годы беззакония" [After the 20th Congress of the CPSU, the rehabilitation of both individual citizens and entire peoples who suffered during the years of lawlessness began], Telegram, October 25, 2018, 05:25, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/593](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/593).

Russian civilization.<sup>197</sup> While these demands have racial connotations due to the Middle Eastern origins of Islam, the Muslims often criticized by RIM are literal Caucasians.<sup>198</sup>

This dispute over interfaith relations forms a major divergence between the ideology of RIM and that of Russia's political establishment under Putin.<sup>199</sup> RIM seeks a restoration of Russian hegemony over Slavic and Orthodox Christian peoples while cutting ties with Russian allies in the Muslim world, such as Iran and Syria, and abandoning Russian foreign engagement with Africa. This tension between expansion and isolation is especially evident in the group's prolific posting on social media and in its newsletter, *Right View*.<sup>200</sup> A July 2017 issue of *Right View* provides insight into RIM's perspective on Russian history, which legitimizes the projection of ethnic Russian force outward from its borders while delegitimizing the influence of non-Russians in the internal affairs of the country. That issue featured editorials bemoaning the 2015 Minsk Agreements for failing to establish the legitimacy of Russian separatist republics in Ukraine and denouncing as heretical the 2017 film *Matilda*, which depicts Tsar Nicholas II as having had a relationship with Polish ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska in his youth.<sup>201</sup>

RIM's chief policy aims are laid out in posts on social media. These tenets include criminalizing homosexuality and abortion and more vigorously controlling immigration

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<sup>197</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>198</sup> Russian Imperial Movement. RIM decries Chechnya's hooliganism and violent crime targeting Russians.

<sup>199</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>200</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "Газета «Правый взгляд» №21-22 (289-290). Доступна электронная версия двойного ноябрьского выпуска вестника Русского Имперского Движения" [Newspaper "Right View" No. 21–22 (289–290). An electronic version of the double November issue of the *Bulletin of the Russian Imperial Movement* is available], Telegram, November 30, 2017, 22:34, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/146](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/146).

<sup>201</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "Уважаемые читатели! Информационный портал Русского Имперского Движения «Правый взгляд» предлагает вашему вниманию следующие новостные и аналитические материалы" [Dear readers! The information portal of the Russian Imperial Movement "Right View" offers you the following news and analytical materials], Telegram, July 18, 2017, 23:58, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/18](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/18); Andrew E. Kramer, "'Matilda,' Heretical to Some in Russia, Mostly Elicits Giggles," *New York Times*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/25/world/europe/matilda-russia-tsar.html>.

from Central Asia.<sup>202</sup> RIM also advocates introducing a Russian equivalent to the Second Amendment to the American Constitution and the corresponding “castle doctrine.”<sup>203</sup> Although not stated outright, the policy of arming the traditionalist, ethnic Russian populace is framed by RIM as connected with its anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ objectives, likely implying an endorsement of pogroms.<sup>204</sup> Another prominent post proclaims RIM’s role in Russia’s century-long fight against fascism that has become a battle against “LGBT, corruption, debauchery, alcoholism, drugs and pedophilia, etc.”<sup>205</sup> This protection of traditional culture, while differing in some respects from that of the Russian government, provides essential common cause between the two along with disaffected social conservatives worldwide.

RIM is most active in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where it is a fixture in local historical societies. The group regularly attends events related to monarchism and imperial Russian history in the city.<sup>206</sup> It has also attended gatherings of former fighters of the 2014 war in Ukraine.<sup>207</sup> These events have introduced RIM to many other Russian far-right paramilitary organizations. One of these groups is the modern incarnation of the Black

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<sup>202</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Пять мер, которые изменят Россию до неузнаваемости” [Five measures that will change Russia beyond recognition], Telegram, June 9, 2019, 15:53, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/1567](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/1567).

<sup>203</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>204</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>205</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “К чему привела тотальная борьба с фашизмом – национализмом? Что такое антифашизм?” [What did the total struggle against fascism-nationalism lead to? What is antifascism?], Telegram, October 1, 2018, 14:50, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/552](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/552).

<sup>206</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Выступления делегатов РИД на монархической конференции в Москве” [Speeches of the RIM delegates at the monarchist conference in Moscow], Telegram, March 28, 2018, 00:46, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/210](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/210).

<sup>207</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “8–9 мая в Санкт-Петербурге пройдет конференция ‘Ветераны Новороссии—Прошлое, Настоящее, Будущее’” [On May 8–9, St. Petersburg will host a conference “Veterans of Novorossiya—Past, Present, Future”], Telegram, April 20, 2018, 13:05, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/226](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/226).

Hundreds, a violent monarchist Orthodox group that also fought in the 2014 war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>208</sup>

In addition to attending local conferences, RIM also helps to organize them. RIM has been a member of the organizing committee for the Conservative Imperial Conference. That role has made RIM a close collaborator with other Russian far-right political groups, including the National-Conservative Movement, the Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers, the All-Slavic Union, and the Volunteer Corps.<sup>209</sup>

### 1. Transnational Activities and Associations

RIM expanded its focus beyond the historical borders of the Russian empire after winding down its operations in Ukraine in 2015.<sup>210</sup> RIM began developing connections with ideologically aligned groups from the United States and Europe at the International Russia Conservative Forum in March 2015 and the World National-Conservative Movement in June 2015.<sup>211</sup> These conferences, hosted by Rodina, put the group into contact with influential far-right figures from outside Russia, including one of the most prominent American white-supremacist leaders, Jared Taylor.<sup>212</sup> After these events, it is believed that a number of white supremacists from around the world came to train with RIM's Imperial Legion at its facilities near Saint Petersburg.<sup>213</sup> Among the known

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<sup>208</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “В Славянском центре Письменности и Культуры состоится встреча, посвященная теме ‘Еврейские погромы и Чёрная Сотня’” [A meeting dedicated to the topic “Jewish pogroms and the Black Hundred” will be held at the Slavic Center of Writing and Culture], Telegram, November 23, 2018, 06:03, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/654](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/654); Anna Dolgov, “Ultranationalist Activist Publishes Video Plea Calling for Russians to ‘Shed Blood’ in Ukraine,” *Moscow Times*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/31/ultranationalist-activist-publishes-video-plea-calling-for-russians-to-shed-blood-in-ukraine-a33468>.

<sup>209</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “100 ЛЕТ РУССКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ КАТАСТРОФЕ” [100 years of the Russian national disaster], Telegram, October 22, 2017, 23:25, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/95](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/95); Russian Imperial Movement, “7 ноября в Москве состоялась Консервативно-имперская конференция на тему: ‘100 лет Русской национальной катастрофы’” [On November 7, a Conservative-imperial conference was held in Moscow on the theme: “100 years of the Russian national catastrophe”], Telegram, November 11, 2017, 10:08, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/116](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/116).

<sup>210</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>211</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation.

<sup>212</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation.

<sup>213</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation.

extremists who attended the RIM’s Partizan Training Center were Anton Thulin and Viktor Melin, Swedish nationals belonging to the neo-Nazi extremist group Nordic Resistance Movement, who later used the training to conduct terrorist attacks in their home country.<sup>214</sup> In late 2016 through 2017, Thulin and Melin conducted attacks targeting the immigrant and refugee population of Gothenburg using improvised explosive devices, wounding one person.<sup>215</sup>

Two years after first connecting with U.S. white supremacists, RIM made initial attempts to establish physical networks in the United States in 2017.<sup>216</sup> That year, one of RIM’s leaders, Stanislav Shevchuk, met with numerous U.S. far-right groups at events in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington, DC.<sup>217</sup> Shevchuk apparently met with one of the organizers of the Unite the Right movement, neo-Nazi Matthew Heimbach, ahead of its violent rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017.<sup>218</sup> RIM is said to have offered paramilitary training to Unite the Right members around the time of this meeting, a claim now disputed by both groups.<sup>219</sup> Part of this attempt to develop ties in the United States appears to be grounded in group ideology. RIM has stated that imperial Russia maintained a good relationship with the United States, and its leaders claim that if Putin is overthrown and the monarchy restored, better relations can be achieved.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> “The Nordic Resistance Movement,” Anti-Defamation League, March 3, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/the-nordic-resistance-movement>.

<sup>215</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>216</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation.

<sup>217</sup> Ezel Sahinkaya and Danila Galperovich, “Radical Russian Imperial Movement Expanding Global Outreach,” Voice of America, May 9, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch\\_radical-russian-imperial-movement-expanding-global-outreach/6189020.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_radical-russian-imperial-movement-expanding-global-outreach/6189020.html).

<sup>218</sup> Olga Kiyon, “White Nationalism in the United States and Russia: Transnational Ties, Domestic Impact,” *Harvard International Review*, April 29, 2021, <https://hir.harvard.edu/white-nationalism-in-the-united-states-and-russia-transnational-ties-domestic-impact/>.

<sup>219</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>220</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Жалоба ФБР на дело представителя российской влиятельной власти Елены Алексеевны Хусьяиновой заявила, что Москва работает над тем, чтобы сеять политические волнения с помощью социальных сетей, используя конкретные события, в том числе акцию «Шарлоттсвилль объединяет право» и связанное с этим насилие” [The FBI complaint against Russian powerhouse Elena Alekseevna Khusyainova said Moscow is working to sow political unrest through social media, using specific events, including the Charlottesville Unite the Right campaign and related violence], Telegram, April 8, 2019, 00:39, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/1287](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/1287).

RIM has placed a greater emphasis on cultivating ties with European extremists than American ones and has frequented far-right political conferences across Europe. These conferences include the Forum of Europe, the Regeneration of Europe Conference, and the European Congress of Young Nationals.<sup>221</sup> The group has also claimed kinship with the leader of far-right group Junge Nationalisten (Young Nationalists) of Germany, the youth wing of a long-standing post-war far-right political party.<sup>222</sup> RIM has also advertised connections with Spanish far-right organization Democracia Nacional in numerous posts on its social media profile across several years, comparing Spain’s struggle against separatism in Catalonia to Russia’s relationship with an independent Ukraine.<sup>223</sup>

RIM has developed supportive relationships with other transnational violent extremist groups grounded in mutual aid and training. The closest of these connections are with the white-supremacist Nordic Resistance Movement of Sweden, the Russian neo-Nazi organization Rusich, and the transnational accelerationist neo-Nazi organization Atomwaffen Division.<sup>224</sup> RIM has provided training to members of these groups at its Partizan Training Center in Saint Petersburg.<sup>225</sup> RIM fighters have also participated in violent campaigns against refugees in Sweden led by the Nordic Resistance Movement.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “РИД В ДРЕЗДЕНЕ. 11 и 12 мая в городке Риза близ Дрездена проходила конференция, озаглавленная как [Re]Generation of Europe” [RIM in Dresden. On May 11 and 12, a conference entitled (Re)Generation of Europe was held in the town of Riesa near Dresden], Telegram, May 21, 2018, 00:16, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/264](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/264); Russian Imperial Movement, “В эти дни в Европе одновременно проходят сразу два мероприятия, объединяющие европейских националистов” [These days in Europe, two events are simultaneously taking place at once, uniting European nationalists], Telegram, May 11, 2018, 00:03, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/246](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/246).

<sup>222</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Болгарии и Италии (причем итальянцы, как оказалось, тоже воевали на Донбассе против украинцев)” [Bulgaria and Italy (moreover, the Italians, as it turned out, also fought in the Donbass against the Ukrainians)], Telegram, May 21, 2018, 00:16, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/265](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/265).

<sup>223</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “В гостях Русского Имперского Движения соратник из Испании, который расскажет о каталонском сепаратизме” [The guest of the Russian Imperial Movement is a comrade in arms from Spain who will talk about Catalan separatism], Telegram, October 27, 2019, 12:28, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/2404](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/2404).

<sup>224</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>225</sup> Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again”; Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>226</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

Paramilitary training is a service that RIM advertises to local paramilitaries and transnational far-right extremist organizations. This training is well organized and supported. A previous training schedule from 2017 suggests that the standard paramilitary training course offered for non-RIM members spans one week and is held at the Imperial Legion’s Partizan Training Center near Saint Petersburg.<sup>227</sup> The course consists of approximately 70 hours of training, with about 50 hours dedicated to firearms and urban warfare and the remainder consisting of familiarization with battlefield medicine, radio communications, and land navigation.<sup>228</sup> The course includes accommodations and historical tours of Saint Petersburg.<sup>229</sup> A detailed accounting of the locations and content of Partizan training, a topic not addressed by previous analyses of the group, appears in Appendix A.

The Partizan Training Center was a major contributing factor to RIM’s designation as a global terrorist organization by the U.S. Department of State.<sup>230</sup> The designation cited the group’s training of European violent extremists, including the perpetrators of terror attacks in Sweden, and attempts to develop connections in the United States.<sup>231</sup> While not directly noted, another contributing factor to the group’s sanctioning was its role in supplying foreign fighters for Russian proxy wars abroad. Indeed, Russian Imperial Legion members have fought in Eastern Ukraine, Syria, and Libya.<sup>232</sup>

## 2. Ties to the Russian State

RIM has a complicated relationship with the Russian state. It believes all permutations of the Russian state since the fall of the Romanov dynasty have been

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<sup>227</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Продолжается набор на интенсивный курс ‘Партизан’ с 24–30 июля” [Recruitment for the intensive course “Partizan” continues from July 24–30], Telegram, July 13, 2017, 01:43, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/11](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/11).

<sup>228</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>229</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>230</sup> Michael Pompeo, “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists,” Department of State, April 7, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/>.

<sup>231</sup> Pompeo.

<sup>232</sup> Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement*.



illegitimate.<sup>233</sup> It regularly comments critically on Putin’s regime and his cronies. In particular, it criticizes Ramzan Kadyrov as a Chechen and Muslim with influence on the Russian state and as a recipient of Russian state subsidies.<sup>234</sup> To RIM, Wagner Group boss Yevgeny Prigozhin is a criminal and leader of the modern equivalent of the Soviet Cheka.<sup>235</sup> It has accused Putin’s spokesperson Dmitry Peskov of having divided loyalties, with family ties to both the United States and France.<sup>236</sup> This overall conflict in ideology means the group does not seek close ties with the Putin government, but the Russian state likely tolerates its activities so long as it does not interfere with broader Russian political interests.<sup>237</sup>

Despite disapproving of the Putin regime, RIM does have strong relations with some Russian state proxies. Chief of these is the far-right political party Rodina (motherland). Rodina has collaborated with RIM on the creation of the World National-Conservative Movement, a conference that has brought together far-right groups from across Europe and the Americas.<sup>238</sup> Another Russian state proxy with whom RIM maintains connections is Igor Girkin, a.k.a. Strelkov, one of the architects of the 2014 Russian war in the Ukrainian Donbas.<sup>239</sup> When the conflict began, volunteers from RIM’s

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<sup>233</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “100 ЛЕТ РУССКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ КАТАСТРОФЕ”; Russian Imperial Movement, “состоялась Консервативно-имперская конференция на тему.” In 2017, RIM organized a centennial conference on the fall of the Romanov dynasty, 100 Years of the Russian National Catastrophe. A key topic of the conference was how the reign of the Putin government up to 2012 represented the final phase of the Russian Revolution.

<sup>234</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Из бюджета Чечни выделяют 51,1 миллиона рублей на уборку территорий в Грозном, которые называют дворцом главы республики Рамзана Кадырова” [51.1 million rubles will be allocated from the budget of Chechnya to clean up territories in Grozny, which are called the palace of the head of the republic, Ramzan Kadyrov], Telegram, December 6, 2018, 03:42, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/693](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/693).

<sup>235</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Наш главнокомандующий ЧВК Евгений Викторович Пригожин заменил опыт армии опытом зоны” [Our commander-in-chief of the PMC, Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin, replaced the experience of the army with the experience of the zone], Telegram, March 1, 2019, 16:24, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/1106](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/1106).

<sup>236</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Пресс-секретарь Президента России Дмитрий Песков имеет гражданство Франции” [Press secretary of the President of Russia Dmitry Peskov has French citizenship], Telegram, January 7, 2019, 21:39, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/815](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/815).

<sup>237</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, “The Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>238</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>239</sup> Radio Sarajevo, “Igor Strelkov.”



Imperial Legion were deployed to Donbas and fell under the leadership of Girkin and Pavel Gubarev.<sup>240</sup> Statements cited by RIM suggest that this deployment included up to 300 fighters.<sup>241</sup> RIM has made positive comments about Girkin, lauding his commitment to Russian imperial traditions and Russian religious Orthodoxy.<sup>242</sup> Girkin in turn appears to maintain ties with RIM through K25, an association of veterans of the Russian war in Donbas, whose events featuring Girkin were attended by RIM leaders.<sup>243</sup> RIM also appears to share some ideological connection with Konstantin Malofeev, who indirectly supported the group along with other Russian paramilitaries during the 2014 hybrid war.<sup>244</sup>

Nevertheless, RIM has a strained relationship with Alexander Dugin. The group has said as recently as August 2022 that it does not admire the man.<sup>245</sup> Particularly, Dugin’s Eurasian ambitions contradict RIM’s more limited concept of Russian Orthodox civilization.<sup>246</sup> A point of contention with Dugin may be his embrace of Muslims and Islamic societies in Eurasia as natural allies of a spiritually guided Orthodox Russia against the secular West.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement”; Russian Imperial Movement, “Наоборот – как люди труда идеей ‘отнять и поделить’ не горят, так ка понимают, что лодырь в коллективе не даст зарабатывать остальным” [On the contrary, just as working people do not burn with the idea of “taking away and dividing,” they understand that a loafer in the team will not let the rest earn], Telegram, November 10, 2019, 07:26, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/2484](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/2484).

<sup>241</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “отнять и поделить.”

<sup>242</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>243</sup> Laruelle, “Back From Utopia”; Russian Imperial Movement, “13 июня в Москве, в конференцзале гостиницы Измайлово, по инициативе K25 состоялась по встреча с В.В. Квачковым, в которой, по приглашению организаторов, приняли участие представители Московского отдела Русского Имперского Движения” [On June 13 in Moscow, in the conference hall of the Izmailovo Hotel, on the initiative of K25, a meeting with V. V. Kvachkov, in which, at the invitation of the organizers, representatives of the Moscow Department of the Russian Imperial Movement took part], Telegram, July 14, 2019, 07:05, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/1707](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/1707).

<sup>244</sup> Weaver, “Malofeev.”

<sup>245</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “О Дугине. Безусловно Дугин не наш герой. Некоторые его идеи, типа противопоставления Евразии Атлантизму, мы поддерживаем” [About Dugin: Certainly, Dugin is not our hero. We support some of his ideas, such as opposing Eurasia to Atlantism], Telegram, August 25, 2022, 06:24, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9919](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9919).

<sup>246</sup> Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>247</sup> Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Islam and Orthodox Russia: From Eurasianism to Islamism,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41, no. 1 (2008): 27–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609616>.

### C. SOCIAL NETWORKS COMPARED

Figures 3 and 4 provide graphic depictions of the social networks of both Rusich and RIM as they have been presented so far. Red nodes symbolize connections to the Russian state, green to Russian political parties and non-governmental organizations, yellow to paramilitary or extremist groups, blue to international organizations, and orange to significant individuals.

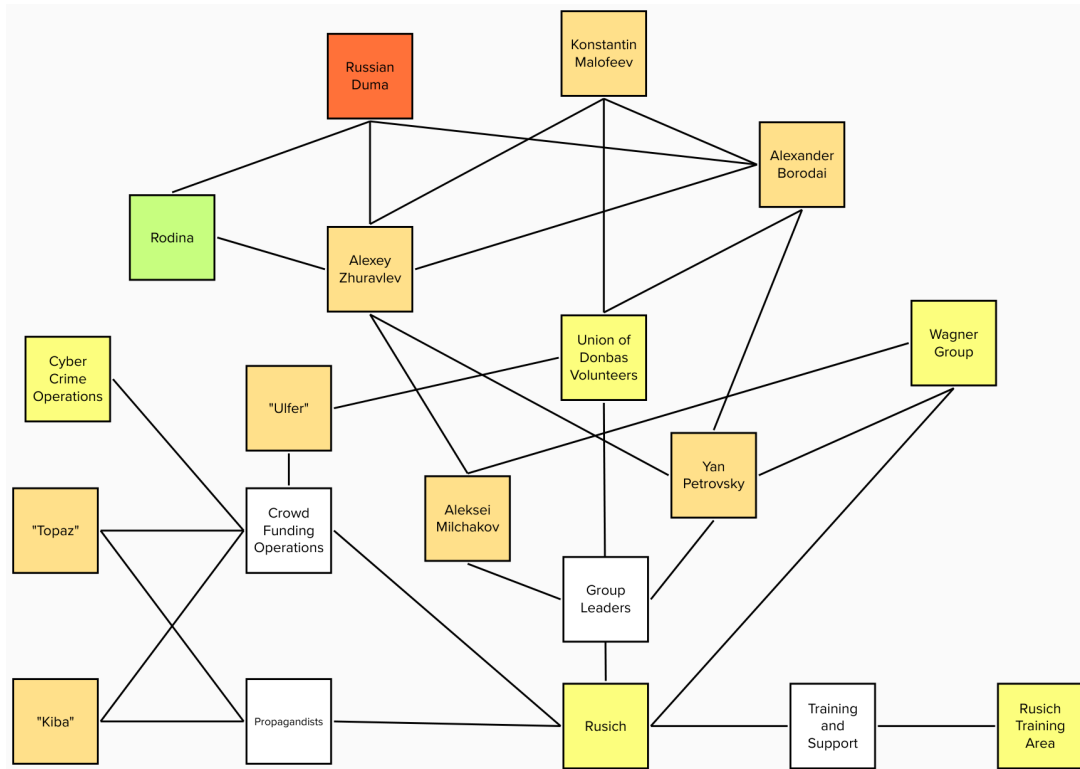


Figure 3. Rusich's Close Network Connections

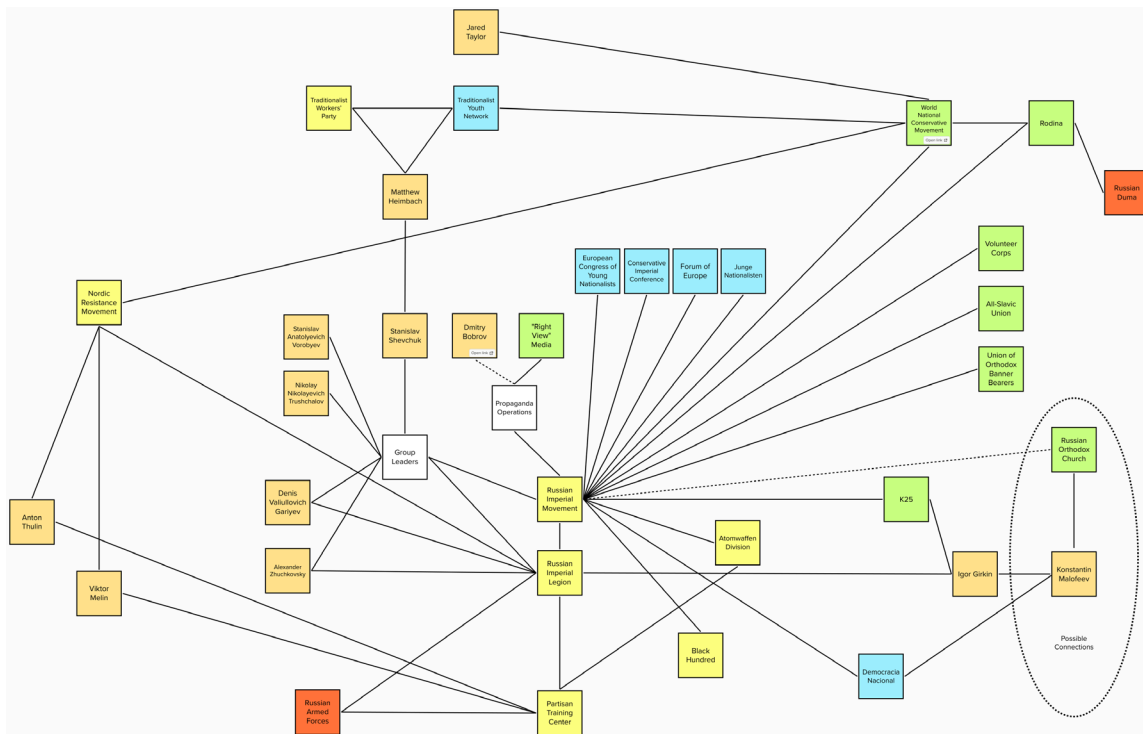


Figure 4. RIM’s Close Network Connections

### 1. Overlaps between Group Networks

The social network analysis of Rusich and RIM conducted for this thesis found little overlap in the groups’ network connections. The key commonality shared is at least one direct connection to the Russian Duma through the far-right Rodina party. The groups also share connections to leaders and veterans of the 2014 hybrid war in Donbas. Beyond these, Rusich and RIM largely occupy separate worlds.

Differences in the social networks of both groups arise from distinctions in their political ideologies. Rusich and RIM may find common cause against the West and Ukraine, but little else unites them. Rusich’s brand of mercenary neo-Nazism is removed from RIM’s Orthodox Christian theology. While RIM appears to accommodate the differing ideologies of international far-right groups, its closest ties in Russia are with other Orthodox monarchist organizations, such as the Union of Orthodox Banner Bearers.<sup>248</sup>

<sup>248</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “состоялась Консервативно-имперская конференция на тему.”

## 2. Differing Ties with the Russian State

Rusich, despite its neo-Nazi beliefs, has greater ties to Russian state power brokers than does RIM. One possible explanation for this dynamic is that Rusich's smaller and less politically organized structure is more conducive to a relationship with the Russian state in spite of its extremist beliefs. Rusich does not have a disciplined political organization. Thus, violent extremism for its own sake rather than for a domestic cause potentially makes Rusich a more appealing partner for state-affiliated organizations like the Wagner Group and state officials like Alexander Borodai.<sup>249</sup> Its members' reputation as violent extremists may even be part of the appeal for officials like Borodai, who has openly advertised connections with Rusich leader Yan Petrovsky as he has maintained connections with veterans of the 2014–2015 hybrid war in Donbas.<sup>250</sup>

Unlike Rusich, RIM is, foremost, a political network. RIM has a paramilitary wing, the Imperial Legion, but that organization is an extension of the overall group's politics. RIM's politics are genuinely problematic for the Russian state, as the group does not recognize the legitimacy of the Putin government but views it as the latest mutation of tyranny following the end of the Romanov dynasty.<sup>251</sup> The group is not openly at war with the government but still desires to work with the Russian military as it views the institution as representing the spirit of the Russian people rather than a tool of the Putin regime.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Borodai, "Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД 'Вереск' и 'Север'"; Rondeaux, Dalton, and Deer, "Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again."

<sup>250</sup> Borodai, "Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД 'Вереск' и 'Север.'" See also Appendix C for more information on Borodai's role as a leader of the paramilitary forces that fought in that war.

<sup>251</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "100 ЛЕТ РУССКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ КАТАСТРОФЕ." See the discussion on the Russian Imperial Movement's November 5, 2017, 100 Years of the Russian National Catastrophe event.

<sup>252</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, "В очередной раз перед нами, русскими людьми, встаёт этот исторический выбор" [Once again, we, the Russian people, face this historic choice], VKontakte, October 5, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_4411](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_4411).

The other relationship that RIM and Rusich share with the Russian state, the far-right Rodina political party, is more difficult to explain as it is inherently political.<sup>253</sup> A possible explanation is that the two groups see some benefit in limited cooperation. RIM's connections with the far-right in Saint Petersburg might have provided a starting network from which Rodina could launch its World National-Conservative Movement and draw the far-right from Europe and America.<sup>254</sup>

### 3. Differing Relationships with Transnational Extremists

A final takeaway from the illustrations of the groups' social networks involves differences in ties to extremist groups outside Russia. RIM has robust ties with established far-right groups while Rusich is well known among far-right extremists in the West, but the latter is smaller and has developed few formal ties with transnational far-right groups.<sup>255</sup> The difference in the levels of political organization appears to have an inverse effect on the relationships each group has with far-right groups outside Russia, likely the result of how each group conducts messaging. RIM's political organizing, through projects like the World National-Conservative Movement, creates connections with far-right extremist groups worldwide, which it follows up with emissaries and invitations to the Partizan Training Center.<sup>256</sup> Rusich, on the other hand, appears to rely more heavily on marketing itself on social media.<sup>257</sup> This approach likely produces name recognition and admiration for Rusich but does not generate meaningful relationships with foreign

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<sup>253</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement"; Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement*; "Russian Imperial Movement (RIM)," Counter Extremism Project, accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/russian-imperial-movement-rim>.

<sup>254</sup> World National-Conservative Movement, *Participants Who Are Invited to Participation in "the Worldwide National-Conservative Movement"* (World National-Conservative Movement, n.d.), <https://www.sova-center.ru/files/xeno/parties.pdf>; Counter Extremism Project, "Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>255</sup> Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>256</sup> Pompeo, "Global Terrorists"; World National-Conservative Movement, *Participants*; Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement."

<sup>257</sup> As of March 13, 2023, Rusich has approximately 60,000 subscribers to its primary Telegram account (<https://t.me/dshrg2>) and RIM 2,311 subscribers ([https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia](https://t.me/Rus_imperia)). Individual accounts of Rusich members have nearly as many subscribers as the primary Rusich account. For example, Yevgeny "Topaz" Rasskazov ([https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit)) has 65,117 subscribers.

extremist groups, which may be wary of interacting online. Furthermore, its communication strategy may explain the lack of clearly identifiable ties between Rusich and extremists outside Russia.

#### **D. THE STATE–EXTREMIST NETWORK REVITALIZED**

Relationships between the Russian state and both RIM and Rusich have waxed and waned since the 2014 hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine but have been revived followed the 2022 war. Both groups, despite divergent political views, retain close ties with the Russian state through the same power brokers. The closest and most important of these relations are with Alexander Borodai, Konstantin Malofeev, and Rodina, led by Alexey Zhuravlyov. Borodai and Zhuravlyov, both members of the Russian State Duma, and Malofeev, a high-powered oligarch, all espouse extreme interpretations of Eurasianism.<sup>258</sup> Their Eurasianist political objectives, including the subjugation of Ukraine and an end to the perceived hegemony of the liberal West, have propelled Rusich and RIM into the war in Ukraine and potential conflict with America.<sup>259</sup>

The next chapter describes the significant activities of both Rusich and RIM since the start of the 2022 war in Ukraine. It also traces significant trends within the Russian state that have influenced changes in its relationship with Rusich and RIM.

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<sup>258</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>259</sup> See Appendix C.

## IV. THE 2022 RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The sovereignty of Ukraine represents such a negative phenomenon for Russian geopolitics that it can, in principle, easily provoke a military conflict. . . . Ukraine as an independent state . . . constitutes an enormous threat to the whole Eurasia and without the solution of the Ukrainian problem, it is meaningless to talk about continental geopolitics.

—Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, 1997<sup>260</sup>

The 2022 Russian invasion represents the culmination of Russia’s shift to the political far-right under Vladimir Putin. The justification for the war stems from an even more radical and militant assertion of the ideas that were used to justify Russia’s 2014 seizure of Crimea and attempt to form Novorossiya. The extreme ideological motivations for the 2022 Ukrainian war were most clearly expressed by Putin in the months leading up to the invasion. On July 12, 2021, four months before the beginning of large-scale Russian military exercises and seven months before the launch of the “special military operation,” Putin released a manifesto on his official Kremlin website entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”<sup>261</sup> The article, steeped in Eurasianist rhetoric, declared the Russian and Ukrainian people part of a single, unique civilization that has been artificially divided by the liberal international order and is destined to be reunited.<sup>262</sup>

Within days of its release, the manifesto became required reading for the Russian army. This widespread effort to instill an ideological dimension to the war, based on a denial of international law and the existence of a Ukrainian state and people, represents the apotheosis of the extreme arguments made by far-right radicals like Alexander Dugin and the Izborsk Club. Viewed from this perspective, these early arguments shaping Russian action frame the war as not merely to throw off NATO encroachment but to end the prevailing liberal international system that constrains Russia’s potential as a great power.

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<sup>260</sup> Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics*. See also Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo, *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia’s Foreign Policy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 183.

<sup>261</sup> Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Kremlin, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>262</sup> Putin.

It is a direct assertion of Dugin’s fourth political theory—that the strength of Russian civilization is rooted in history, spirituality, and tradition, which must reign supreme over a larger territory than the present boundaries of the Russian Federation.<sup>263</sup> This radical interpretation of Russian historical purpose as justification for war laid by Putin was not merely a dog whistle to Russian far-right politicians and extremists but, as regional expert Anne Applebaum has termed it, “a call to arms.”<sup>264</sup> It was, according to a panel of 38 human rights experts commissioned by the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, an incitement to genocide.<sup>265</sup>

This call to arms has been enthusiastically embraced by Rusich and RIM, which have both engaged in significant combat operations since the start of the war. Their participation in the war as prominent members of the Russian far-right has precipitated a closer relationship with Russian state entities and power brokers. This relationship continues growing closer as setbacks incurred by Russian conventional forces in the war have prompted a shift in Russian strategy toward no-holds-barred, indiscriminate brutality against the Ukrainian populace.<sup>266</sup> This chapter describes how these groups have participated in the first year of the war, analyzes their relationship with the Russian state, and determines whether either of these factors have significantly increased the threat to international and homeland security.

## A. EARLY FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST OPERATIONS

Both Rusich and RIM joined the war in Ukraine within its first month of hostilities and took part in significant combat operations in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk regions.

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<sup>263</sup> Skladanowski, “The Myth of Russian Exceptionalism.”

<sup>264</sup> Anne Applebaum (@anneapplebaum), “Russia/Ukraine Specialists! Has Anybody Seen This Article by Putin—Now Required Reading for All Russian Soldiers—in English? It’s Essentially a Call to Arms, Laying the Groundwork for a Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” Twitter, July 31, 2021, 9:38 a.m., <https://twitter.com/anneapplebaum/status/1421480489748254723>.

<sup>265</sup> New Lines Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, *An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation’s Breach of the Geneva Convention in Ukraine and the Duty to Prevent* (Washington, DC: New Lines Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, 2022), <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/English-Report.pdf>.

<sup>266</sup> Benjamin Jensen, “Crippling Civilian Infrastructure Has Long Been Part of Russian Generals’ Playbook,” American University, October 14, 2022, <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20221014-crippling-civilian-infrastructure-has-long-been-part-of-russian-generals-playbook.cfm>.



While the groups operated in the same theater of operations in Eastern Ukraine, they were employed in considerably different ways by the Russian state.

### **1. Rusich Deploys with and Leads State-Supported Paramilitary**

Rusich entered Ukraine within the first month of the invasion and conducted combat operations mostly in Kharkiv province (Oblast) as part of a state-sponsored militia known as the Union of Donbas Volunteers.<sup>267</sup> The first definitive confirmation of Rusich’s involvement in the war appeared in early April, when members of the group posted a picture in the snow in front of a sign indicating the city limits of Vovchansk, Ukraine.<sup>268</sup> An analysis of satellite images by Norwegian news agency NRK assessed that the photo was taken between March 22, when the entire town was captured, and March 24, when snow in the area had mostly melted.<sup>269</sup>

Vovchansk was mostly seized without a fight. Shortly after its capture, Rusich and other militia fighters set up residence in the city for use as a base of operations.<sup>270</sup> The militants used the city as a staging ground for attacks on Ukrainian forces elsewhere in Kharkiv province for at least a month. Accounts of residents collected by the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KHPG) suggest that Rusich and the other paramilitaries ensconced in the city may have spent more time intimidating and interrogating civilians than fighting Ukrainian forces.<sup>271</sup> The KHPG report states that the groups created a “concentration camp,” operated between February and at least April, where residents were tortured into cooperation with the Russian administration.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Sheldon, “The Irregular Troops Backing Up Russia’s Army.”

<sup>268</sup> Christine Svendsen, “Påstår at norskrussisk nynazist kriger for Russland i Ukraina” [Claims that Norwegian-Russian neo-Nazis are fighting for Russia in Ukraine], NRK, April 8, 2022, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/pastar-at-norskrussisk-nynazist-kriger-for-russland-i-ukraina-1.15926555>.

<sup>269</sup> Svendsen.

<sup>270</sup> Halya Coynash, “Russian Invaders Create ‘Real Concentration Camp’ to Torture Ukrainian Prisoners in Kharkiv Oblast,” Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, April 28, 2022, <https://khpgh.org/en/1608810464>.

<sup>271</sup> Coynash.

<sup>272</sup> Coynash. See further details of Rusich involvement in crimes against humanity in Appendix B.

A series of posts on a Telegram channel linked to a Rusich fighter confirm this assessment. The first of these posts, on March 21, shows members of Rusich taking four men in civilian clothes prisoner.<sup>273</sup> The post’s caption ominously declares that appropriate measures would be taken against the men for acting as partisans.<sup>274</sup> On April 5, the same fighter posted a video of the Vovchansk mayor coerced into making pro-Russian statements, such as “Hail Russia,” while held prisoner in the same facility.<sup>275</sup> These posts correspond with the testimony of victims and other eyewitnesses who allege arbitrary detainment and torture by the Russian paramilitaries. These actions, further detailed in Appendix B, suggest early Rusich participation in crimes against humanity against the Ukrainian people.

After sustaining multiple casualties in combat, including group leader Alexey Milchakov, Rusich returned to Russia for rest and recovery.<sup>276</sup> Multiple Rusich-linked social media accounts show the group at a training facility near Belgorod, Russia, with other units of the Union of Donbas Volunteers beginning around April 19, 2022.<sup>277</sup> There, Rusich members and leaders were warmly embraced by state officials. Rusich leader Yan Petrovsky is prominently pictured with Alexander Borodai, a member of the Russian State Duma, on numerous occasions.<sup>278</sup> Pictures and video from this time suggest a close

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<sup>273</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Та самая небольшая группа которая призывала к убийству Русских” [The same small group that called for the murder of Russians], Telegram, March 21, 2022, 14:15, <https://t.me/WAR13Z/61>.

<sup>274</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group.

<sup>275</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Мэр Волчанска Анатолий Степанец начинает правильно отвечать на поставленные вопросы” [The mayor of Volchansk, Anatoly Stepanets, begins to correctly answer the questions posed], Telegram, April 5, 2022, 14:22, <https://t.me/WAR13Z/130>.

<sup>276</sup> Topaz Speaks, “Здравия! ДШРГ Русич с начала объявления специальной операции принимает участие в боевых действиях на территории бывшей Украины” [Hello! DShRG Rusich from the beginning of the announcement of a special operation has been taking part in hostilities in the territory of the former Ukraine], Telegram, April 6, 2022, 08:55, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/1398](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/1398). Rusich member “Topaz” reports Milchakov’s injuries on April 6 and the group’s combat under Petrovsky. Kiba’s Communication Diary, “В мирное время или во время боевых действий – учиться надо всегда” [In peacetime or during hostilities, one must always learn], Telegram, April 19, 2022, 09:41, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/86](https://t.me/signalman_diary/86). On April 19, Rusich member “Kiba” posts that the group has returned to Russia for training.

<sup>277</sup> Sheldon, “The Irregular Troops Backing Up Russia’s Army”; Kiba’s Communication Diary, “Учиться надо всегда.”

<sup>278</sup> Borodai, “Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД ‘Вереск’ и ‘Север.’”

relationship between Borodai and Petrovsky, which Borodai seemed keen to advertise.<sup>279</sup> On April 23, 2022, Borodai even prominently featured a picture of himself and Petrovsky, described as a leader of the Union of Donbas Volunteers, on his official State Duma website.<sup>280</sup> Later statements by Borodai confirmed that Petrovsky’s leadership role was over the Saint Petersburg branch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers.<sup>281</sup> While this branch’s membership is yet undefined, it likely comprises hundreds of fighters given the size of the city and the organization’s estimated 14,000 members.<sup>282</sup> This April exchange between Borodai and Rusich leader Petrovsky is the first overt display of state support to Rusich during the war in Ukraine. This support only intensified as the war progressed, with Borodai making additional trips to the frontlines where he visited Petrovsky and other Rusich fighters.

Rusich returned to Ukraine at the end of April. An April 27, 2022, photo shows Borodai traveling with Petrovsky along with other volunteer fighters to their new base of operations in the city of Izyum.<sup>283</sup> This deployment included additional command responsibilities for Petrovsky, who is referred to as a leader of Borodai’s “center” detachment of fighters, a unit of approximately 250 fighters.<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>279</sup> Union of Donbas Volunteers, “На днях несколько сводных отрядов Союза добровольцев Донбасса выдвинулись в район Изюма, для решения боевых задач” [The other day, several consolidated detachments of the Union of Donbas Volunteers advanced to the Izyum region to solve combat missions], Telegram, April 27, 2022, 02:43, <https://t.me/sddonbassa/14674>.

<sup>280</sup> Borodai, “Александр Бородай Побывал в Подразделениях СДД ‘Вереск’ и ‘Север.’”

<sup>281</sup> North Slavic Community, “Славян, руководитель Питерского отделения Союза добровольцев Донбасса. Отряд СДД «Центр», под Изюмом” [Slavyan, head of the St. Petersburg branch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers. Detachment SDD “Center,” near Izyum], Telegram, May 24, 2022, 10:30, <https://t.me/sevslavo/1133>.

<sup>282</sup> “Interregional Social Organization Union of Donbas Volunteers,” War & Sanctions, accessed February 6, 2023, <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/sanction-company/5948/>; “U.S. Treasury Sanctions Nearly 100 Targets in Putin’s War Machine, Prohibits Russian Gold Imports,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 28, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0838>.

<sup>283</sup> Union of Donbas Volunteers, “Союза добровольцев Донбасса выдвинулись в район Изюма, для решения боевых задач.”

<sup>284</sup> Christian Esch, “How Putin’s War Changed My Moscow,” *Der Spiegel*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/how-putin-s-war-changed-my-moscow-a-3b5049e7-93fd-4c2a-9c9f-742635ae2099>; Union of Donbas Volunteers, “Славян, руководитель Питерского отделения Союза добровольцев Донбасса” [Slavyan, head of the St. Petersburg branch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers], Telegram, May 24, 2022, 10:24 a.m., <https://t.me/sddonbassa/15712>.

Borodai is one of several state officials who visited Petrovsky and Rusich during combat in Ukraine. On the May 9 Russian Victory Day holiday, the Russian equivalent of V-E Day, another State Duma deputy, Aleksey Zhuravlyov, leader of the far-right Rodina party, associated with RIM, visited Rusich in Izyum.<sup>285</sup> During the visit, Petrovsky was seen briefing Zhuravlyov on current operations and taking him on a tour of the city and other units of the Union of Donbas Volunteers. This visit was the first of several to the frontlines by Zhuravlyov, who like Borodai returned periodically to Izyum to check in with Rusich. Petrovsky and Rusich member “Kiba” visited Zhuravlyov at his Moscow government office in June, further signifying a relationship between Rusich and Russian government officials.<sup>286</sup> The number of titles and amount of attention given by high-profile state representatives to Petrovsky during this time suggest he served as a senior commander of Russian paramilitary forces near Izyum until the withdrawal of Russian forces in September.<sup>287</sup> This command responsibility is an important consideration, as some of the worst crimes against humanity of the 2022 war in Ukraine occurred in Izyum during this time.<sup>288</sup>

A review of Rusich-affiliated and -sympathetic social media does not provide conclusive evidence of Rusich participation in these crimes but significant circumstantial evidence to warrant further inquiries by human rights professionals. First, many of the

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<sup>285</sup> Kiba’s Communication Diary, “Довелось тут по случаю минувшего уже Дня Победы провести обзорную экскурсию для одного интересного человека – Алексея Журавлева, депутата Госдумы и лично показать и пояснить многие проблематичные моменты, с которыми сталкиваются бойцы на передовой” [On the occasion of the past Victory Day, I had a chance to conduct a sightseeing tour for one interesting person, Alexei Zhuravlev, a State Duma deputy, and personally show and explain many of the problematic points that the fighters face on the front line], Telegram, May 26, 2022, 11:34, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/283](https://t.me/signalman_diary/283). See Chapter III and Appendix C for further information on Rodina’s relationship with the Russian Imperial Movement.

<sup>286</sup> Kiba’s Communication Diary, “Сегодня совместно со Славяном и ещё одним соратником провели встречу с депутатом Госдумы РФ Журавлевым по рабочим вопросам” [Today, together with Slavyan and another comrade in arms, we met with Zhuravlev, a deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation, on working issues], Telegram, June 14, 2022, 15:13, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/320](https://t.me/signalman_diary/320).

<sup>287</sup> Karl Ritter and Joanna Kozlowska, “Russia Announces Troop Pullback from Ukraine’s Kharkiv Area,” AP News, September 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-world-news-kharkiv-e06b2aa723e826ed4105b5f32827f577>.

<sup>288</sup> Siobhan O’Grady, Anastacia Galouchka, and Wojciech Grzedzinski, “Torture, Killings, Abductions: Russian Retreat from Izyum Reveals Horrors,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/09/16/izyum-grave-ukraine-horrors-rape/>.

atrocities committed in Izyum mirrored those committed in Vovchansk. City residents were subjected to arbitrary detention and torture in areas associated with Rusich activity, including the city administration buildings.<sup>289</sup> It is unclear how much interaction Rusich had with prisoners during this time, but it did take and interrogate prisoners. A video interview of an unclothed Ukrainian captive by Rusich member Yevgeny “Topaz” Rasskazov attests to Rusich’s involvement with prisoners.<sup>290</sup> Rasskazov advertised the interview as premium content on his subscription site to raise funds for the group. These indicators, including motivation, suggest probable Rusich involvement and responsibility for crimes against humanity in Izyum (see Appendix B).

The video interrogation is especially concerning, as Rusich, frustrated by the Russian military’s perceived leniency, has made multiple calls for the torture and murder of prisoners.<sup>291</sup> Rasskazov personally advocated for violence against Ukrainian prisoners four times on his Telegram channel while Rusich operated in Izyum, between May and September. Two weeks after posting the prisoner interview video, Rasskazov appealed again for violence by reposting a Rusich statement on the necessity of torturing prisoners for information and capturing such information on video. The statement referenced by Rasskazov also implies that Rusich members should not hesitate to murder prisoners, as accountability is unlikely. It further suggests recording the coordinates of the graves of dead prisoners to extort families who desire the locations of their loved ones’ bodies.<sup>292</sup>

## **2. Imperial Legion Deploys with Russian Military**

RIM’s paramilitary Imperial Legion did not deploy to Ukraine at the immediate outset of the war. The initial hesitancy to join the war might have been the result of

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<sup>289</sup> Lori Hinnant, Evgeniy Maloletka, and Vasilisa Stepanenko, “10 Torture Sites in 1 Town: Russia Sowed Pain, Fear in Izyum,” AP News, October 2, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-business-treatment-of-prisoners-government-and-politics-aec9afe8d6631795ae9f9478aede4cc>.

<sup>290</sup> Yevgeny Topaz, “Восхитительный рашизм” [Delightful Ruscism], video, Boosty, September 13, 2022, [https://boosty.to/topaz\\_onlyfans](https://boosty.to/topaz_onlyfans). Because this video is accessible only through subscription, it could not be accessed for this research.

<sup>291</sup> Mark Townsend, “Pro-Kremlin Neo-Nazi Militia Inciting the Torture and Murder of Ukrainian Prisoners,” *Guardian*, October 2, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/02/pro-kremlin-neo-nazi-militia-inciting-torture-murder-ukrainian-prisoners>.

<sup>292</sup> Townsend.

skepticism of the Putin regime’s war aims. Just hours before Putin’s announcement launching the special military operation to invade Ukraine, RIM excoriated Putin as unserious about reclaiming all of Russia’s historic lands in Ukraine.<sup>293</sup> RIM considered the buildup to the war and subsequent “peacekeeping operation” in the separatist Donbas provinces in the days before the invasion to be a ploy to pursue more limited aims and “half measures.”<sup>294</sup>

RIM’s criticism of Putin’s handling of the operation continued into March, the group convinced that the war was mostly a bungling attempt to force a resolution to the frozen conflict in Donbas. By March 4, RIM began to take a more positive view of the war, with members attending public rallies denouncing NATO and Ukraine.<sup>295</sup> On March 8,

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<sup>293</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Путин всех переиграл. Переиграл в первую очередь русских, чаявших воссоединения” [Putin outplayed everyone. First of all, he outplayed the Russians, who were looking forward to reunification]. Telegram, February 23, 2022, 03:31, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9357](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9357).

<sup>294</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Что стоит за признанием ДНР и ЛНР? Очередной договорняк с партнерами и полумеры в корыстных интересах или патриотический акт?” [What is behind the recognition of the DNR and LNR? Another agreement with partners and half measures in selfish interests or a patriotic act?], Telegram, February 23, 2022, 03:18, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9355](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9355).

<sup>295</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Соратники Русского Имперского Движение из сербских организаций ‘Сербска акция’ ‘Народные патрули’ вместе с другими патриотическими организациями Сербии выступили в поддержку России в ее стремлении воссоединить разделенный русский народ” [Companions of the Russian Imperial Movement from the Serbian organizations ‘Serbian Action’ ‘People’s Patrols’ along with other patriotic organizations of Serbia came out in support of Russia in its desire to reunite the divided Russian people], Telegram, March 4, 2022, 16:31, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9395](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9395); Russian Imperial Legion, “Соратники Русского Имперского Движение из сербских организаций ‘Сербска акция’ ‘Народные патрули’ вместе с другими патриотическими организациями Сербии выступили в поддержку России в ее стремлении воссоединить разделенный русский народ” [Companions of the Russian Imperial Movement from the Serbian organizations ‘Serbian Aktion’ ‘People’s Patrols,’ along with other patriotic organizations of Serbia, came out in support of Russia in its desire to reunite the divided Russian people], VKontakte, March 5, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_3966](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_3966).

the Imperial Legion announced that it had decided to join the war.<sup>296</sup> Mobilization followed on March 16, and the Imperial Legion entered Ukraine on March 24.<sup>297</sup>

The Imperial Legion's operations in Ukraine were concentrated between the cities of Izyum and Slavyansk from April to September.<sup>298</sup> Three months of this deployment were spent at a heavily contested part of the front known as Sherwood Forest.<sup>299</sup> There, the Imperial Legion distinguished itself in combat but suffered multiple casualties, including a high-ranking commander.<sup>300</sup> Statements by Imperial Legion commander Denis Gariev also suggest the deployment ended with a heightened distrust of the Putin

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<sup>296</sup> Imperial Legion Partizan, “Мы приняли решение принять участие в войне с Украиной. В настоящее время прорабатываем детали и логистику” [We have decided to take part in the war with Ukraine. We are currently working on the details and logistics], Telegram, March 8, 2022, 09:09, <https://t.me/ruspartizan/1568>.

<sup>297</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “Встреча с полковником ГРУ В.В.Квачковым в Клубе Партизан” [Meeting with GRU Colonel V. V. Kvachkov at the Partizan Club], Telegram, March 16, 2022, 11:24, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9450](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9450); Russian Imperial Movement, “Официальное сообщение РИД. Первая дека Имперского Легиона под командованием консула Имперского Легиона Дионисия выдвинулась в район боевых действий” [RIM official announcement: The first deck of the Imperial Legion, under the command of the consul of the Imperial Legion, Dionysius, moved into the area of operations], Telegram, March 24, 2022, 10:12, [https://t.me/Rus\\_imperia/9488](https://t.me/Rus_imperia/9488); Imperial Legion Partizan, “Парни там” [Guys there], Telegram, March 25, 2022, 01:47, <https://t.me/ruspartizan/1580>.

<sup>298</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “От Имперского Легиона: Изюм сдан. Мы выходили последними. Изюм и другие города Харьковской области были сданы властями РФ по предварительной договоренности. Это факт!” [From the Imperial Legion: Izyum surrendered. We were the last ones out. Izyum and other cities of the Kharkiv region were handed over by the Russian authorities by prior arrangement. It is a fact!], VKontakte, September 11, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_4277](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_4277).

<sup>299</sup> Russian Imperial Legion.

<sup>300</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “Добрый погиб в страстную пятницу. С Денисом Некрасовым мы познакомились осенью 2014 года. В составе ‘Имперского легиона’ он отправился в Новороссию в бригаду ‘Призрак’” [The good one died on Good Friday. We met Denis Nekrasov in the fall of 2014. As part of the Imperial Legion, he went to Novorossia to the “Ghost” Brigade], VKontakte, May 17, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_3983](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_3983); Russian Imperial Legion, “Друзьям и соратникам! Хотел бы обратиться к Вам. Нашим друзьям и соратникам. Этот год был непростым. Наше подразделение потеряло двоих соратников на передовой. Семь бойцов получили ранения. Многие получили государственные награды” [Friends and associates! I would like to contact you, our friends and associates. This year has not been easy. Our unit lost two comrades in arms on the front line. Seven fighters were injured. Many received state awards], VKontakte, December 29, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_4611](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_4611).



regime.<sup>301</sup> Gariev claims the September withdrawal from Kharkiv in the face of Ukrainian counterattacks took the group by surprise and almost resulted in calamity.<sup>302</sup>

The timing and location of the Imperial Legion’s deployment put it in proximity to Rusich and the remainder of the Union of Donbas Volunteers, but this analysis found no evidence of the groups’ collaborating during this time. Unlike Rusich, which joined a coalition of paramilitaries it, the Imperial Legion appears to have been attached to the conventional Russian army. While distrustful of the Putin regime and high-ranking military officials, the Imperial Legion broadly supports the institution of the military as an extension of the will of the Russian people.<sup>303</sup> Legion commander Denis Gariev has compared its service to that of the Russian people during the Second World War in choosing to fight Hitler despite Stalin.<sup>304</sup> Gariev further explained the nature of the Imperial Legion’s affiliation with the government in a July 2022 interview on a Russian far-right podcast.<sup>305</sup> According to Gariev, the Imperial Legion is a reserve battalion of the Russian armed forces rather than a volunteer unit or paramilitary group.<sup>306</sup>

This assertion—that the Imperial Legion, an internationally recognized terrorist organization, is not merely connected to government agents through the war but forms a veritable part of the conventional military—amounts to a direct admission of Russian state sponsorship of terrorism. Gariev’s claims may be exaggerated, but the Russian state has

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<sup>301</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “От Имперского Легиона: Изюм сдан.”

<sup>302</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “Изюм сдан. Мы выходили последними. Изюм и другие города Харьковской области были сданы властями РФ по предварительной договоренности. Это факт!” [Izyum surrendered. We were the last ones out. Izyum and other cities of the Kharkiv region were handed over by the Russian authorities by prior arrangement. It is a fact!], VKontakte, September 11, 2022, [https://vk.co/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_4322](https://vk.co/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_4322); Russian Imperial Legion, “Слава Богу! Бойцы подразделения ‘Имперский Легион’ вышли из-под Изюма без потерь” [God bless! Soldiers of the Imperial Legion unit came out from under the Izyum without loss], VKontakte, September 11, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_4275](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_4275).

<sup>303</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “Встаёт этот исторический выбор.”

<sup>304</sup> Russian Imperial Legion.

<sup>305</sup> Dmitry Bobrov and Denis Gariev, “Интервью с добровольцем: ‘Все успехи СВО держатся исключительно на героизме русского солдата’” [Interview with a volunteer: “All the successes of the SVO are based solely on the heroism of the Russian soldier”], Telegraph, July 9, 2022, <https://telegra.ph/Intervyu-s-dobrovolcem-Vse-uspehi-SVO-derzhatsya-isklyuchitelno-na-geroizme-russkogo-soldata-07-09>.

<sup>306</sup> Bobrov and Gariev.



demonstrated support and recognition of the group. In August, the Imperial Legion was honored with state awards, including two Medals of Courage and a prestigious Order of Courage given to fighters.<sup>307</sup>

Notably, the analysis of RIM activities during this period of the war is incomplete. The full extent of RIM activities is difficult to ascertain using open sources for several reasons. First, the group’s designation as a global terrorist organization has reduced its social media footprint. This disparity is likely the result of a combination of procedural restrictions by U.S.-based social media organizations in response to the designation and a degree of self-censorship by affiliates of RIM. A second complicating factor for assessing RIM’s activities is that its symbols are now widely used in Russia. RIM’s insignia—the black, yellow, and white Russian imperial standard of the Romanov dynasty—is now widely displayed by Russian soldiers, paramilitary, and civilians as a show of support for the war in Ukraine.<sup>308</sup> By contrast, Rusich and other Russian paramilitary groups utilize more distinct branding, which makes them easier to identify.

## **B. THE GROWTH OF A RUSSIAN EXTREMIST ARMY**

After the failure to seize Kyiv, Russia pivoted away from the maximalist aims of the initial invasion toward a more limited campaign in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, an attempt in part to concentrate combat power after sustaining significant

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<sup>307</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “Имперский легион – это Отвага и Мужество. Более десяти бойцов отряда Имперский легион были награждены медалями ‘За отвагу’ и орденами ‘Мужества’” [The Imperial Legion is courage and courage. More than 10 fighters of the Imperial Legion detachment were awarded medals “for courage” and orders of courage], VKontakte, August 21, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legiion?w=wall-10533171\\_4252](https://vk.com/imper_legiion?w=wall-10533171_4252).

<sup>308</sup> Konstantin Malofeev, “Свершилось. Главный Крестный ход года – Царский путь от екатеринбургского Храма на Крови до монастыря Святых Царственных Страстотерпцев на Ганиной Яме – пройден” [It’s done. The main procession of the year—the Royal Way from the Yekaterinburg Church on the Blood to the Monastery of the Holy Royal Passion-Bearers on Ganina Yama—has been passed], Telegram, July 17, 2022, 01:19, <https://t.me/kvmalofeev/849>. This post depicts the annual Royal March on July 16 to commemorate the members of the Romanov family executed on that date in 1917 by Bolsheviks. The photos in the post show dozens of Russian Imperial standards flown.

losses.<sup>309</sup> The ill-fated attempt to seize the Ukrainian capital involved many of Russia's best units, including its elite airborne paratroopers and Spetsnaz, which sustained massive casualties.<sup>310</sup> The summer campaign in Donbas saw the Russian military reinforced by significant numbers of irregular forces to make up for these losses. Rusich and RIM fought near the center of Russia's main military objective near Izyum during this period.<sup>311</sup> This movement of Rusich and RIM from a supporting role on the periphery of Russia's countrywide assault to part of the main effort represented a decisive shift in the prominence of irregular forces in Russia's war effort. The massive human cost of the failed summer offensive further increased Russia's reliance on irregular forces.<sup>312</sup>

### 1. Official and Shadow Mobilizations

At the end of September, Russian defensive lines disintegrated across the Kharkiv region where both Rusich and the Russian Imperial Legion operated.<sup>313</sup> Russian military units in the region were forced to cede the hard-won gains of the summer and retreat hundreds of kilometers to positions in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.<sup>314</sup> By the beginning of November, the city of Kherson, the only regional capitol seized by Russia

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<sup>309</sup> Karoun Demirjian and Rachel Pannett, "Russia Learns from Failure to Take Kyiv as New Offensive Begins, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/19/russia-invasion-eastern-ukraine-donbas-war/>; Mark Urban, "The Heavy Losses of an Elite Russian Regiment in Ukraine," *BBC News*, April 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60946340>. This article provides insight into the catastrophic losses incurred by elite Russian units early in the war.

<sup>310</sup> Jan Kallberg, "Russia's Military—Losing the Will to Fight," Center for European Policy Analysis, September 15, 2022, <https://cepa.org/article/russias-military-losing-the-will-to-fight/>.

<sup>311</sup> Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 13," Institute for the Study of War, May 13, 2022, <http://dev-isw.bivings.com/>. As noted in a previous section, both Rusich and the Russian Imperial Movement fought in the Izyum area from May to September. The Institute for the Study of War identified this area as the main subordinate effort in flanking Ukrainian forces in Donetsk and Luhansk provinces.

<sup>312</sup> Pavel Luzin, "The Finite Army," *Riddle Russia*, August 19, 2022, <https://ridl.io/the-finite-army/>.

<sup>313</sup> Jim Garamone, "Ukraine's Success Was a Surprise Only to the Russians," U.S. Department of Defense, September 13, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3157239/ukraines-success-was-a-surprise-only-to-the-russians/>.

<sup>314</sup> Mary Glantz, "How Ukraine's Counteroffensives Managed to Break the War's Stalemate," United States Institute of Peace, September 19, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/how-ukraines-counteroffensives-managed-break-wars-stalemate>.

during the war, was liberated by the Ukrainian military.<sup>315</sup> These defeats prompted Russia to enact a “partial mobilization” of 300,000 new Russian conscripts.<sup>316</sup> The partial mobilization was a chaotic disaster, which featured the recruitment of anti-war protesters, disabled veterans, and groups of men press-ganged into service at random.<sup>317</sup> The mobilized troops experienced shortages of equipment, were frequently thrust into combat without training, and were even abandoned by their commanders.<sup>318</sup> One battalion commander of newly mobilized conscripts was severely beaten by an agitated and drunken mob of his soldiers after announcing to them, “You are all cannon fodder, you are facing slaughter.”<sup>319</sup>

The disastrous mobilization was accompanied by a shadow mobilization of prisoners and paramilitary forces to close capability gaps evident in the conventional Russian military and stall Ukrainian counteroffensives.<sup>320</sup> Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Russian oligarch in command of the Wagner Group, recruited tens of thousands of prisoners across

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<sup>315</sup> C. Todd Lopez, “Liberation of Kherson ‘Significant Accomplishment’ for Ukraine,” U.S. Department of Defense, November 14, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3218131/liberation-of-kherson-significant-accomplishment-for-ukraine/>.

<sup>316</sup> Mark F. Cancian, “What Does Russia’s ‘Partial Mobilization’ Mean?,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 28, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-does-russias-partial-mobilization-mean>.

<sup>317</sup> Dmitri (@wartranslated), “Mobik regiment commander greets his soldiers. Says he doesn’t know their mission, equipment. Says he was pulled from vacation to serve. Admits he has health issues, but most problems are not enough to be demobilised. Part 1,” Twitter, September 27, 2022, 6:01 p.m., <https://twitter.com/wartranslated/status/1574896930471256073>.

<sup>318</sup> Robyn Dixon and Natalia Abbakumova, “Angry Families Say Russian Conscripts Thrown to Front Line Unprepared,” *Washington Post*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/11/20/russia-military-families-conscripts-ukraine/>; Will Stewart and Walter Finch, “Furious Conscripts Turn on Their Commander: Top Officer Is Beaten after Telling Reservists ‘You Are All Cannon Fodder, You Are Facing Slaughter’ as Video Shows Punch-up in Make-Shift Barracks,” *Daily Mail*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11265915/Furious-conscripts-turn-commander-officer-beaten-saying-cannon-fodder.html>.

<sup>319</sup> Stewart and Finch, “Furious Conscripts Turn on Their Commander.”

<sup>320</sup> Cancian, “What Does Russia’s ‘Partial Mobilization’ Mean?”; “Video Shows Prigozhin Recruiting Russian Prisoners for Ukraine Fight,” *Moscow Times*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/15/video-shows-prigozhin-recruiting-russian-prisoners-for-ukraine-fight-a78801>.

Russia to join the notoriously far-right private military company.<sup>321</sup> These prisoner-soldiers were quickly trained and sent into combat as shock troops. The efficiency of the Wagner Group’s recruitment campaign contrasts favorably with the chaotic “partial mobilization” of the Russian conventional military. Prigozhin capitalized on the negative attention given to his campaign and public dissatisfaction with mobilization to reverse the optics of the campaign and portrayed prisoner recruitment as a public service and positive social good: “Those who do not want PMCs to fight, prisoners, who talk about this topic, who do not want to do anything and, in principle, who do not like this topic, send your children to the front. Either PMCs and prisoners, or your children—decide for yourself.”<sup>322</sup>

The contrasting results of mobilization, official and shadow, were likely instructive for the Russian state, which was forced to admit unanticipated difficulties with conscription after public outcry. This shock to the system, lamented even by Russian state media, likely precipitated a greater reliance not only on the Wagner Group but also on irregular forces more broadly to perform a range of mission-essential tasks.<sup>323</sup> One of the immediate challenges irregular forces, including Rusich and RIM, were called upon to address in the wake of mobilization was the training of new conscripts.

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<sup>321</sup> “Russia’s Prigozhin Admits Link to Wagner Mercenaries for First Time,” Reuters, September 26, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-prigozhin-admits-link-wagner-mercenaries-first-time-2022-09-26/>; “Video Shows Prigozhin Recruiting Russian Prisoners”; “An ‘Orchestra’ of Murderers: Who Are the Wagner Group Mercenaries Fighting against Ukraine?,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/12/21/7379589/>; Nick Sturdee, “The Wagner Group Files,” *New Lines Magazine*, September 27, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-wagner-group-files/>. The Wagner Group has employed many far-right extremists in its service since its founding by avowed neo-Nazi Dmitry Utkin, and several neo-Nazis have joined Rusich on combat operations abroad.

<sup>322</sup> Press Service for Concord Company, “#751 Запрос от редакции радио «Комсомольская правда» и ответ: ЗАПРОС: Здравствуйте, коллеги! Вопрос лично к Евгению Викторовичу” [#751 Request from the editors of the radio “Komsomolskaya Pravda” and the answer: Request: Hello colleagues! Ask Evgeny Viktorovich personally], VKontakte, September 15, 2022, [https://vk.com/wall-177427428\\_1159](https://vk.com/wall-177427428_1159). This statement is attributed to Prigozhin, answering questions through a spokesperson on Concord’s VKontakte page.

<sup>323</sup> Brendan Cole, “Russian State Media Figures Rail against Army’s Mobilization Failures,” *Newsweek*, September 27, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/vladimir-putin-ukraine-russia-mobilization-chaos-failures-simonyan-1746557>.

## 2. Training Camps

As the conventional military grew, irregular forces also took part in training the new troops. Both Rusich and RIM hosted their own training camps to train conventional forces beginning in the fall. RIM hosted troops at its Partizan Training Center in Saint Petersburg but also sent trainers to the locations of mobilized units between October and November 2022.<sup>324</sup> Photos of these training events suggest the attendance of Federal Security Service (FSB) intelligence officers, underscoring the depth of ties between the group, a U.S. designated terrorist organization, across multiple levels of the Russian state security apparatus.<sup>325</sup>

Following the September withdrawal from Kharkiv, Rusich forces split into two detachments, one remaining in combat and one dedicated to training. The detachment remaining in Ukraine was commanded by Alexey Milchakov and supported Russian military operations in the cities of Avdiivka and Marinka in fall 2022. The other detachment, commanded by Petrovsky, known as “Zimargl,” hosted a series of training events at a Rusich camp near Saint Petersburg.<sup>326</sup> This detachment also provided instructors for training camps for new Russian soldiers run by the Union of Donbas Volunteers.

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<sup>324</sup> Imperial Legion Partizan, “Снова команда наших парней и команда мобилизованных. Снова огневая и медицина, изменилась только место обучения – в этот раз одна из частей в Луге” [Again, a team of our guys and a team of mobilized. Fire and medicine again, only the place of training has changed—this time one of the units in Luga], VKontakte, November 16, 2022, [https://vk.com/partizan\\_kurs?w=wall-55333015\\_89300](https://vk.com/partizan_kurs?w=wall-55333015_89300); Imperial Legion Partizan, “Команда наших инструкторов провела ряд занятий для ещё одной роты мобилизованных, которые в скором времени отправляются известно куда” [A team of our instructors conducted a series of classes for another company of mobilized, who will soon be sent to who knows where], VKontakte, October 28, 2022, [https://vk.com/partizan\\_kurs?w=wall-55333015\\_88915](https://vk.com/partizan_kurs?w=wall-55333015_88915); Imperial Legion Partizan, “Завершился Интенсив в лагере, было свежо и почти без дождя, 30 курсантов окончили курс” [The Intensive in the camp ended. It was fresh and almost without rain. Thirty cadets completed the course], VKontakte, October 17, 2022, [https://vk.com/partizan\\_kurs?w=wall-55333015\\_88634](https://vk.com/partizan_kurs?w=wall-55333015_88634).

<sup>325</sup> Imperial Legion Partizan, “4 пары выпускников нашего Центра приняли участие в соревнованиях. Из 32 команд – 13, 16, 20 места и дебютанты шли вне зачета” [4 pairs of graduates of our Center took part in the competition. Out of 32 teams, 13th, 16th, 20th places, and debutants were out of standings], VKontakte, February 3, 2023, 7:04 a.m., [https://vk.com/partizan\\_kurs?w=wall-55333015\\_92462](https://vk.com/partizan_kurs?w=wall-55333015_92462).

<sup>326</sup> Rusich, “Занятия по НВП с рекрутами” [NVP classes with recruits], Telegram, January 18, 2023, 05:01, <https://t.me/dshrg2/558>; Rusich, “Занятия в рамках расширенного курса военной подготовки. Зима 23” [Classes as part of an extended course of military training, winter 23], Telegram, January 12, 2023, 03:22, <https://t.me/dshrg2/547>.

### 3. Wagner Group—A New Model Army of Extremists

Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group prison recruitment campaign netted as many as 40,000 prisoner-soldiers. This army of expendable soldiers, along with as many as 10,000 other professional warriors, was thrown into battle to seize the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. Bakhmut, a city of only minor military significance, became an apocalyptic battlefield to satisfy Yevgeny Prigozhin's growing political ambition. The prisoner units, reminiscent of Soviet-era penal battalions, were sent in human wave attacks to seize the city at all costs and demonstrate the Wagner Group's ability to deliver military success in the wake of conventional military failures. These human waves typically sustained massive, sometimes total, losses because of standing orders prohibiting retreat. Prisoners who failed to advance under fire or even slowed assaults to treat wounded comrades were often killed.

This Bakhmut campaign, still ongoing at the time of this writing, represents a turning point for the Wagner Group and for Russian irregular and extremist forces more generally. While the battle for Bakhmut is still undecided, and the Wagner Group has sustained tens of thousands of casualties, the fight stopped the resurgent Ukrainian army's counteroffensives in Donbas. The result, coming on the heels of major military defeats, increased the military and political reputation of the Wagner Group, as well as private military companies and paramilitaries, as an alternative to the struggling Russian conventional military.

The Wagner Group's relative success has made it a model for numerous copycats.<sup>327</sup> New Russian private military companies are being stood up by the Russian Orthodox Church and Gazprom.<sup>328</sup> The expansion of Russian private military industry is especially concerning because these companies may follow the Wagner Group's lead and employ violent extremists, thereby greatly expanding the reach and connections of the

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<sup>327</sup> Thomas Kika, "Wagner's 'Example' Inspiring Russia to Create Private Armies: Ukraine," *Newsweek*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/wagners-example-inspiring-russia-create-private-armies-ukraine-1779601>.

<sup>328</sup> Olga Lautman, "An Unorthodox Russian Vision of Heaven and Hell," Center for European Policy Analysis, January 10, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/an-unorthodox-russian-vision-of-heaven-and-hell/>; Kika, "Wagner's 'Example' Inspiring Russia to Create Private Armies."

Russian far-right. There is growing evidence that the Wagner Group’s Bakhmut campaign has attracted renewed support from Russian paramilitaries previously demoralized by their retreat from Kharkiv. An element of Rusich under Alexey Milchakov deployed in the vicinity of Bakhmut around December to support Wagner Group operations. The Union of Donbas Volunteers, a Rusich affiliate, was additionally invited to the Wagner Centre’s opening.<sup>329</sup> Even more concerning, the Wagner Group’s massive campaign to seize Bakhmut may proliferate the number of Russian violent extremists.

The Wagner Group–led battle of Bakhmut introduced the already far-right-leaning, violence-loving Wagner Group to a confluence of factors that appear to be radicalizing it into a transnational extremist organization.<sup>330</sup> The first of these factors is the rapid injection of violent psychopaths into the group. Despite being closed to the worst violent offenders, the Wagner Group’s prison recruitment campaign for Bakhmut filled its ranks with violent extremists, mass murderers, and at least one cannibal.<sup>331</sup> This dynamic was compounded by exposure to shocking levels of violence and hard drug use during the battle of Bakhmut.<sup>332</sup> Ukrainian soldiers compared the Wagner Group’s penal battalions to zombie hordes, with fighters full of amphetamines continuing assaults despite incredible injuries.<sup>333</sup> This apocalyptic level of violence, combined with drug use and exposure to networks of violent criminals, psychopaths, and ideological radicals, is a gravely

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<sup>329</sup> North Slavic Community, “Сегодня в праздник Дня Народного Единства коллектив Северо-Славянской Общины посетил торжественное открытие в Санкт-Петербурге ‘ЧВК Вагнер Центра’” [Today, on the holiday of National Unity Day, the staff of the North Slavic Community attended the grand opening in St. Petersburg of the PMC Wagner Center], Telegram, November 4, 2022, 07:39, <https://t.me/sevslavo/2119>.

<sup>330</sup> Murtaza Hussain, “The Grisly Cult of the Wagner Group’s Sledgehammer,” Intercept, February 2, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/02/02/wagner-group-violence-sledgehammer/>.

<sup>331</sup> Ukrainska Pravda, “An ‘Orchestra’ of Murderers”; “‘There’s No Way Back’: Wagner Group Looks to Russia’s Jails to Bolster Ukraine Force,” *Moscow Times*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/10/27/theres-no-way-back-wagner-group-looks-to-russias-jails-to-bolster-ukraine-force-a79214>.

<sup>332</sup> Christoph Reuter, “‘This Here Is Hell’: A Visit to the Front in Bakhmut,” *Der Spiegel*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/this-here-is-hell-a-visit-to-the-front-in-bakhmut-a-7e8ebb13-adb8-4e3b-9809-4aeb4f616c7c>.

<sup>333</sup> Reuter.



concerning combination that resembles conditions among Islamic State jihadists in Syria.<sup>334</sup>

The Wagner Group appears to be deliberately cultivating this extremist image with theatrical displays of brutality to attract and retain violent right-wing extremists from around the world, in what Murtaza Hussain of the Intercept has called the “cult of the Sledgehammer.”<sup>335</sup> An analysis of TikTok accounts associated with the Wagner Group found 160 videos of violent acts along with hundreds more advocating violence.<sup>336</sup> Wagner Group content on TikTok has been viewed more than one billion times as of November 2022.<sup>337</sup> The most popular and notorious of these videos are beheadings of deserters with sledgehammers, an echo of previous execution videos by the Islamic State.<sup>338</sup> Yevgeny Prigozhin has been an enthusiastic promoter of this extremist image. In November 2022, Prigozhin praised the quality of the production of one particularly gruesome sledgehammer execution in Bakhmut that was released on social media.<sup>339</sup> This act provoked international outrage and prompted a resolution by the European Parliament

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<sup>334</sup> Theodore Wye, “Captagon: Violence in Syria and the War on Drugs,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, January 25, 2018, <https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2018/01/25/captagon-violence-in-syria-and-the-war-on-drugs/>.

<sup>335</sup> Hussain, “The Grisly Cult of the Wagner Group’s Sledgehammer.” See also *Ukrainska Pravda*, “An ‘Orchestra’ of Murderers”; “There’s No Way Back.”

<sup>336</sup> Eva Maitland and Madeline Roache, “1 Billion Views: TikTok Videos Promote Russian Mercenary Group, Despite Platform Rules,” *NewsGuard*, November 2022, <https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/november-2022>.

<sup>337</sup> Maitland and Roache.

<sup>338</sup> “Экс-Командир Убитого Кувалдой Нужина Рассказал о 10 Казнях Вагнеровцев” [The ex-commander of Nuzhin, who was killed by a sledgehammer, spoke about 10 executions of the Wagnerites], *Insider*, December 16, 2022, <https://theins.info/news/257925>.

<sup>339</sup> Press Service for Concord Company, “#920 Запрос от редакции издания «Народные Новости» и ответ: ЗАПРОС: В социальных сетях сегодня расходится видео с неким Евгением Нужиным, которого якобы казнили за то, что он, будучи бойцом ЧВК ‘Вагнер,’ сбежал на сторону противника. Можете ли Вы его как-то прокомментировать?” [#920 Request from the editors of the publication “People’s News,” and the answer: Request: A video with a certain Yevgeny Nuzhin, who was allegedly executed because he, being a fighter of the Wagner PMC, fled to the side of the enemy, is circulating on social networks today. Can you comment on it somehow?], *Vkontakte*, November 13, 2022, [https://vk.com/concordgroup\\_official?w=wall-177427428\\_1435](https://vk.com/concordgroup_official?w=wall-177427428_1435).



to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>340</sup> Prigozhin responded by sending a branded chrome sledgehammer with fake blood stains to the European Parliament.<sup>341</sup>

Prigozhin’s message has resonated with Russians eager to attack the West as well as Ukraine. Around the same time Prigozhin declared his intention to send a bloody sledgehammer to European legislators, the European Parliament itself came under a sophisticated cyberattack by Russian hacking group Killnet.<sup>342</sup> This pro-Wagner cyberattack was followed by more threatening behavior a month later when a large group of masked hooligans threw sledgehammers onto the grounds of the Finnish Embassy in Moscow in an apparent reference to previous sledgehammer executions.<sup>343</sup>

These hostile acts mark an escalating trend of threats by Russia to export violence beyond Ukraine. The most significant of these transnational threats are emerging from Rusich, RIM, and the Union of Donbas Volunteers. While Rusich and the Union of Donbas Volunteers have previously provided fighters to the Wagner Group, they along with RIM are now being molded into a new private army in the image of the Wagner Group. Konstantin Malofeev, another ambitious Russian oligarch, one with an overtly Eurasianist political agenda and close relationship with Alexander Dugin, is cultivating this new Wagner Group.

### **C. RUSSIA’S EXTREMIST PROXIES THREATEN TO WIDEN THE WAR**

On February 4, 2023, nearly a year after the start of the special military operation, Konstantin Malofeev, along with Alexey Zhuravlyov and Alexander Borodai, hosted a

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<sup>340</sup> Resolution Recognising the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Eur. Parl. Doc. TA/9/2022/0405 (2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0405\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0405_EN.html).

<sup>341</sup> Zdravko Ljubas, “Putin’s Chef Sends ‘Bloody’ Sledgehammer to EU Parliament,” Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, November 26, 2022, <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/17084-putin-s-chef-sends-bloody-sledgehammer-to-eu-parliament>.

<sup>342</sup> Katrina Manson, “European Parliament website Knocked Offline by Cyberattack,” Bloomberg, November 23, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-11-23/pro-russia-group-killnet-claims-cyberattack-on-european-parliament>.

<sup>343</sup> “Неизвестные Забросали Кувалдами Посольство Финляндии в Москве” [Unidentified People Threw Sledgehammers at the Embassy of Finland in Moscow], Radio Svoboda, December 20, 2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/neizvestnye-zabrosali-kuvaldami-posoljstvo-finlyandii-v-moskve-/32186023.html>.

gathering of leaders from the Union of Donbas Volunteers in the Russian-conquered city of Mariupol. At this conference, Malofeev announced his plans to consolidate all Russian volunteer soldiers into a single military unit.<sup>344</sup> According to Malofeev, the value proposition of this new army was derived from the hard lessons of partial mobilization and the success of the Wagner Group: “This all-Russian volunteer movement should provide volunteers with attention and assistance during and after the service. . . . We don’t need a second wave of mobilization. There are enough sons of the Fatherland in Russia who are ready to fight for it voluntarily.”<sup>345</sup> While this volunteer army is still in the process of forming, it must be taken as a potential threat to both international and homeland security. Malofeev’s announcement on social media prominently featured a photo of Rusich’s Yan Petrovsky in combat, in what is potentially a hint of menace to observers outside Ukraine.<sup>346</sup> That hint is especially significant because Rusich as well as RIM are both indicating a growing interest in launching attacks beyond the borders of Ukraine.

### **1. Rusich Threatens Cyberspace and the Baltics**

Increasing pressure to fund group operations has prompted Rusich to engage in transnational criminal activities in cyberspace. Rusich has generated over \$160,000 from donations and cryptocurrency, with a portion of these funds illegally siphoned through a combination of targeted hacking and malware. One Rusich hacking operation targeted a Ukrainian charitable fund, rerouting donations to Rusich-controlled accounts. Another, more sophisticated cyber operation by Rusich utilized malware inserted into torrent files to turn infected computers into cryptocurrency mining proxies. The malware caused the computers to run a background program dedicating a portion of computing power to mining cryptocurrency and depositing it into Rusich-controlled crypto wallets.

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<sup>344</sup> Union of Donbas Volunteers, “Добровольцы объединились!!! Провели в Мариуполе VIII съезд Союза Добровольцев Донбасса” [Volunteers Unite!!! We held the VIII Congress of the Union of Donbas Volunteers in Mariupol], VKontakte, February 4, 2022, 10:19 p.m., [https://vk.com/uniondonbass?w=wall-106609049\\_96886](https://vk.com/uniondonbass?w=wall-106609049_96886).

<sup>345</sup> Konstantin Malofeev, “В героическом Мариуполе состоялся военно-полевой съезд Союза добровольцев Донбасса” [The military congress of the Union of Donbas Volunteers took place in the heroic Mariupol], Telegram, February 4, 2023, 09:41, <https://t.me/kvmalofeev/1304>.

<sup>346</sup> Malofeev.

The rapid development of Rusich cyber capabilities has prompted speculation that the group is receiving assistance from third parties. One analysis on Rusich cryptocurrency schemes suggests the group contracts anonymous cyber criminals to assist with its operations. Another possibility is that the group taps into partnerships established through the Union of Donbas Volunteers.

Beyond cyberspace, Rusich has increasingly suggested the need to attack the West to win the war in Ukraine. For example, Rusich has requested intelligence on potential targets for violent attacks and sabotage in the Baltic states and called for volunteers from other states in Western Europe. While these statements may be part bluster, they must be taken seriously, as Rusich has acknowledged training and employing foreign fighters in combat since 2014.<sup>347</sup> Moreover, Rusich’s Yan Petrovsky also made attempts to engage with the Norwegian far-right, which ultimately prompted his expulsion from the country.<sup>348</sup> Furthermore, Rusich is no stranger to transnational operations, having engaged in security operations in Sierra Leone and combat in Syria and Ukraine.<sup>349</sup> Rusich’s integration into Konstantin Malofeev’s sphere of influence may further encourage the group to take action abroad.

## 2. Holy War in the Balkans

Konstantin Malofeev’s influence over Rusich and the Union of Donbas Volunteers may put the Balkan states at particular risk. As outlined in Appendix C, Malofeev has an extensive history of supporting violent and destabilizing action in the Balkans.<sup>350</sup> These actions include the 2015 attempted assassination of Bulgarian businessman Emilian

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<sup>347</sup> Rusich, “#ДШРГ #ДШРГ\_Русич #Русич #Новороссия #ДНР #ЛНР. Подготовка молодежи из разных стран” [#DShRG #DShRG\_Rusich #Rusich #Novorossiia #DNR #LNR. Training of youth from different countries], VKontakte, December 7, 2022, [https://vk.com/dshrg\\_rusich?w=wall-217053505\\_182](https://vk.com/dshrg_rusich?w=wall-217053505_182); Rusich, “#ДШРГ #ДШРГ\_Русич #Русич #Новороссия #ДНР #ЛНР. Интервью, данное в сентябре 2014 года” [#DShRG #DShRG\_Rusich #Rusich #Novorossiia #DNR #LNR. Interview given in September 2014], VKontakte, December 24, 2022, [https://vk.com/club217053505?w=wall-217053505\\_355](https://vk.com/club217053505?w=wall-217053505_355).

<sup>348</sup> Norway’s News in English, “Russian Warrior Arrested, Faces Deportation.”

<sup>349</sup> See Chapter II.

<sup>350</sup> See Appendix C.

Gebrev and an attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016.<sup>351</sup> Malofeev also maintains connections with the outlaw Night Wolves motorcycle gang in the Balkans.<sup>352</sup> Malofeev has previously supported the Night Wolves' activities in Serbia and might attempt to merge the two groups under a single command structure.<sup>353</sup> A November 2022 post by the Union of Donbas Volunteers shows a training and outreach event with the Night Wolves led Rusich member "Ulfer."<sup>354</sup> The following month, in December 2022, Night Wolves leaders began emphasizing that the fates of Slavic people in Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia were inextricably tied to the outcome of the Russian struggle in Ukraine.<sup>355</sup> Such comments coincided with escalating military tensions between Serbia and Kosovo over the status of Serbian minorities in northern Kosovo.<sup>356</sup>

A return of Russian influence in the Balkans is also an objective of RIM, which has repeatedly used joint propaganda to emphasize its unity with far-right Serbian organization Serbian Action since the start of the 2022 war.<sup>357</sup> Imperial Legion commander Denis Gariev claims that Serbian Action visited the Partizan Training Center in Saint Petersburg to coordinate pro-Russia marches and other support activities in Serbia before the start of

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<sup>351</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>352</sup> Genka Shikeroва and Tony Wesolowsky, "In Bulgaria, an Open Road for Putin's Favorite Biker Gang, the Night Wolves," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 4, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-night-wolves-russia-putin/32017720.html>. The Night Wolves are a Russian-based motorcycle gang with a global footprint, ties to Vladimir Putin, and a major presence in the Balkans.

<sup>353</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>354</sup> North Slavic Community, "Читаем лекцию по НВП для наших друзей из мото клуба 'Ночные Волки – Санкт-Петербург'" [We are reading a lecture on NVP for our friends from the motorcycle club "Night Wolves, St. Petersburg"], Telegram, November 3, 2022, 18:12, <https://t.me/sevslavo/2084>.

<sup>355</sup> Night Wolves St. Petersburg, "Ночные Волки Сербия. Ситуация в Косово и Метохии: 'Сербский народ в Косово и Метохии сейчас переживает большие испытания и страдания. Многие оставили свои дома и жизнь в Косово и Метохии'" [Night Wolves Serbia. The situation in Kosovo and Metohija: "The Serbian people in Kosovo and Metohija are now going through great trials and suffering. Many have left their homes and lives in Kosovo and Metohija"], VKontakte, December 13, 2022, [https://vk.com/nwmg\\_spb?w=wall-98895343\\_3015](https://vk.com/nwmg_spb?w=wall-98895343_3015).

<sup>356</sup> Guy De Launey, "Kosovo: Serbia Puts Troops on High Alert over Rising Tensions," BBC News, December 27, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64099388>.

<sup>357</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, "Соратники Русского Имперского Движение."

the war.<sup>358</sup> Gariev has made special appeals to Serbs to train with the Imperial Legion, as featured on the Serbian Action YouTube channel.<sup>359</sup> Gariev phrased this appeal in the starkest possible terms: “We are not fighting against some kind of fascism, but against separatism. . . . This is a fight for the Russian people, for the Russian Orthodox Church. . . . We perceive this war as a religious war, a war for Orthodox Christianity.”<sup>360</sup>

The combination of escalating rhetoric in Serbia and visible outreach between Russian-aligned paramilitary groups active in Ukraine and the Balkans may signal Russia’s willingness to target regional flashpoints with historical and cultural ties to Russia. The potential for these threats gained additional credibility in early February 2023, when Moldova received a warning of Russian plots to overthrow the pro-European government and use the country to launch a new front for the war in Ukraine.<sup>361</sup> The details of this purported plot against Moldova were eerily similar to those of the 2016 attempted coup in Montenegro involving Konstantin Malofeev.<sup>362</sup> In both cases, Russian intelligence would smuggle weapons and foreign fighters into the country and use antigovernment protests as a pretext to seize and dissolve government institutions by force.<sup>363</sup> Moldovan President Maia Sandu has claimed the coup was to be orchestrated by a mix of fighters from Russia and the Balkans.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Russian Imperial Legion, “Прошло уже два месяца жизни в новой реальности. Часто приходится слышать, что начало второй компании или развязывание полноценной войны в Малороссии для многих стало неожиданностью” [It’s been two months of life in a new reality. We often hear that the beginning of a second company or the outbreak of a full-fledged war in Little Russia came as a surprise to many], VKontakte, May 9, 2022, [https://vk.com/imper\\_legion?w=wall-10533171\\_3974](https://vk.com/imper_legion?w=wall-10533171_3974).

<sup>359</sup> Russian Imperial Legion.

<sup>360</sup> Serbian Action, “Ми се не боримо против некаквог фашизма, већ против сепаратизма. . . . Ово је борба за руски народ, за Руску Православну Цркву . . . Ми доживљавамо овај рат као религиозни рат, рат за православно хришћанство” [We are not fighting against some kind of fascism but against separatism. . . . This is a fight for the Russian people, for the Russian Orthodox Church. . . . We perceive this war as a religious war, a war for Orthodox Christianity], Telegram, January 20, 2023, 13:51, [https://t.me/srbska\\_akcija/1149](https://t.me/srbska_akcija/1149).

<sup>361</sup> “Moldova’s President Accuses Russia of Planning Coup,” Deutsche Welle, February 13, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/moldovas-president-accuses-russia-of-planning-coup/a-64690683>.

<sup>362</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>363</sup> Deutsche Welle, “Moldova’s President Accuses Russia of Planning Coup.”

<sup>364</sup> Deutsche Welle.

The exact nature of the planned Moldovan coup is not clear; neither is the composition of the foreign fighters slated to participate. As a result, it is unknown whether Rusich or RIM's Imperial Legion was supposed to play any role in the plot. Regardless, both groups are well positioned to deploy in a similar capacity in future transnational attacks. They may already have been.

### 3. The Mystery of the Spanish Letter Bombs

Between the end of November and the beginning of December, six packages containing explosives were sent to various sites around Spain.<sup>365</sup> The bombs' targets were high-profile government agencies including the office of Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, the Ukrainian Embassy, the American Embassy, and the Spanish Defense Ministry.<sup>366</sup> All but one of the letter bombs were safely defused before detonating. The bomb sent to the Ukrainian Embassy exploded and injured an embassy employee.<sup>367</sup>

There has been no official determination on the sender of the letters. Spanish officials downplayed the likelihood of Russian involvement in the bombings in December, but this initial assessment appears to have shifted. U.S. intelligence officials with knowledge of the investigation into the bombings have suggested that the bombs were likely sent by Russian state proxies, coordinated by Russian intelligence.<sup>368</sup> A top suspect among Russian proxies is RIM.<sup>369</sup> There are several reasons to suspect RIM's involvement in the attacks. First, RIM's Imperial Legion has previously engaged in a pattern of similar

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<sup>365</sup> José Bautista, Isabella Kwai, and John Ismay, "U.S. and Ukrainian Embassies Targeted by Letter Bombs in Spain," *New York Times*, December 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/01/world/europe/spain-letter-bombs.html>.

<sup>366</sup> Bautista, Kwai, and Ismay.

<sup>367</sup> José Bautista and Carly Olson, "A Letter Bomb Delivered to the Ukrainian Embassy in Madrid Explodes," *New York Times*, November 30, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/30/world/Europe/madrid-ukraine-embassy-explosion.html>.

<sup>368</sup> Wong, Barnes, and Schmitt, "Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group."

<sup>369</sup> Wong, Barnes, and Schmitt.

attacks on refugee centers in Sweden with local extremists.<sup>370</sup> Also, RIM has direct connections with the Spanish far-right through the World National-Conservative Movement, which it cohosts with Alexey Zhuravlyov’s Rodina party. RIM has an especially friendly relationship with Spanish far-right group Democracia Nacional, whose struggle against Catalanian separatism it likens to Russia’s conflict with Ukraine. There is also reason to suspect RIM’s involvement may have been facilitated by Konstantin Malofeev, who has extensive ties to the Spanish far-right, including the Vox party. Moreover, Malofeev has participated in attempts to stir unrest in Spain and collaborated with Russian GRU Unit 2955, implicated in attacks on at least one or two occasions in foreign countries.<sup>371</sup>

#### **4. Threat to the U.S. Homeland**

As of March 2023, neither Rusich nor RIM has directly expressed an interest in attacking the U.S. homeland, despite an apparent willingness to threaten American allies. Whether this omission represents a reticence to openly express an interest in attacking the United States or a genuine lack of interest is unclear. A potential explanation is geographical isolation. America’s distance from the battlefields of Europe, combined with travel prohibitions imposed on leaders of both groups from U.S. sanctions, makes terrorist plots on the U.S. homeland difficult to pull off.<sup>372</sup> This difficulty, as well as a lack of state support for open confrontation with America, may have the groups focusing primarily on the war in Ukraine and preparing for action elsewhere in Russia’s near abroad.

This dynamic may be changing as the war enters its second year. The increasingly close ties between Rusich and RIM and state power brokers such as Konstantin Malofeev, Alexey Zhuravlyov, and Alexander Borodai increase the risk that the groups may strike the U.S. homeland. All three men have engaged in threatening behavior toward the United

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<sup>370</sup> Wong, Barnes, and Schmitt, “Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group”; Anton Shekhovtsov, “Ekstreme allianser i Europa” [Extreme alliances in Europe], *Verdens Gang*, September 14, 2015, <https://www.vg.no/i/wWly1>. Shekhovtsov reports RIM’s connections to Rodina’s World National Conservative Movement and Spanish far-right groups.

<sup>371</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>372</sup> “Treasury Targets Additional Facilitators of Russia’s Aggression in Ukraine,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 15, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0954>.



States. Zhuravlyov and Malofeev have developed networks of connections with American far-right actors, which could be used to facilitate future threats. Alexey Zhuravlyov, in particular, routinely advocates violence against America on state television, including calls for nuclear strikes and the murder of U.S. Representative Ruben Gallego.<sup>373</sup> While these individual threats are likely political theater, Zhuravlyov’s Rodina political party has the ability to threaten America with smaller-scale attacks. Rodina has contacts with both the American and European far-right through the World National-Conservative Movement.<sup>374</sup>

One of these connections is with American neo-Nazi Matthew Heimbach.<sup>375</sup> Heimbach and his white-supremacist organizations, the Traditional Workers Party and Traditionalists Youth Network, are all members of the World National-Conservative Movement.<sup>376</sup> Heimbach is one of the few American far-right extremists known to have established contact with either RIM or Rusich, meeting with RIM representative Stanislav Shevchuk in the United States in September 2017.<sup>377</sup> Heimbach’s contact with RIM was unexpectedly interrupted shortly after this meeting. Between fall 2017 and spring 2018, Heimbach was embroiled in a series of legal battles over his role in organizing the 2017 Unite the Right rally and a criminal charge resulting from a domestic violence incident.<sup>378</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center notes that Heimbach largely became inactive after these incidents to comply with probation requirements from his domestic violence

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<sup>373</sup> Eileen AJ Connelly, “Russia Threatens Nukes for U.S., UK, Finland If NATO Expands,” *New York Post*, May 14, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/05/14/russia-threatens-nukes-for-us-uk-finland-if-nato-expands/>; Snejana Farberov, “Russian Alexei Zhuravlev Threatens U.S. Destruction with Missiles,” *New York Post*, May 31, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/05/31/russian-alexei-zhuravlev-threatens-us-destruction-with-missiles/>; Julia Davis, “Russian Politician Aleksei Zhuravlyov Threatens to Unleash Axe Killers on U.S. Congressman Ruben Gallego,” *Daily Beast*, December 18, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-politician-aleksei-zhuravlyov-threatens-to-unleash-axe-killers-on-us-congressman-ruben-gallego>; Darya Kozlova, “‘Putin’s Special Forces’: Mission Failed,” *Novaya Gazeta*, August 18, 2022, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/08/18/putins-special-forces-mission-failed>.

<sup>374</sup> World National-Conservative Movement, *Participants*.

<sup>375</sup> World National-Conservative Movement.

<sup>376</sup> World National-Conservative Movement.

<sup>377</sup> “Matthew Heimbach,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/matthew-heimbach>.

<sup>378</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.



conviction.<sup>379</sup> Heimbach has returned to radical politics with a new organization, the Patriotic Socialist Front, which made its public debut at the February 19, 2023, Rage against the War Machine rally in Washington, DC, protesting U.S. support to Ukraine.<sup>380</sup> The group, composed of Heimbach, several former members of the Traditionalist Workers Party, and a former member of Atomwaffen Division, attended the rally waving Russian flags, including that of the Russian empire used as a symbol of RIM.<sup>381</sup>

This display of support for Russia’s war in Ukraine by American friends of RIM and Rodina, though not overtly threatening in isolation, should not be dismissed as simply outrage baiting. Connections made through the World National-Conservative Movement have already been leveraged to launch international terror attacks. RIM and the Nordic Resistance Movement launched a series of bombings targeting migrants in Gothenburg, Sweden, after meeting through the World National-Conservative Movement.<sup>382</sup> The December letter bombs in Spain, which RIM is currently suspected of delivering, would be a second instance of RIM’s coordinating transnational terrorism with local extremists.<sup>383</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.

<sup>380</sup> Idavox (@IdavoxOPP), “Today in DC, Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front Was at the So-Called ‘Rage against the War Machine’ Rally—Which Either Ignored and/or Defended Putin’s War Machine, but Okay,” Twitter, February 19, 2023, 2:23 p.m., <https://twitter.com/IdavoxOPP/status/1627403452287426560>.

<sup>381</sup> Zeb Habash (@Habash\_Zebulon), “Matthew Heimbach Has a New Crew Attending the Libertarian Rally, Calling Itself ‘Patriotic Socialist Front,’” Twitter, February 19, 2023, 3:41 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Habash\\_Zebulon/status/1627423177046388736](https://twitter.com/Habash_Zebulon/status/1627423177046388736); Idavox, “Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front.”

<sup>382</sup> See Chapter III.

<sup>383</sup> Wong, Barnes, and Schmitt, “Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group.”

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## V. CONCLUSION

As explored throughout this thesis, the Putin regime has increasingly embraced far-right extremist politics as a central ordering principle for the nation. This ideological tilt in Russian politics has led the Russian state to periodically cooperate with violent far-right extremists. The most notable of these groups, Rusich and RIM, have played significant roles as irregular military forces for Russia since 2014. While both groups have experienced variable degrees of support and periodic crackdowns by the Russian state, the demand for military manpower brought on by the 2022 war in Ukraine is increasing their influence as means of power projection. This influence is enhanced by their employment by powerful state intermediaries such as Konstantin Malofeev and minor state officials including Alexander Borodai and Alexey Zhuravlyov.

Both Rusich and RIM have threatened to strike supporters of Ukraine’s war effort and may be further encouraged in the future by their sponsors who are overtly hostile to the West. Among these sponsors, Malofeev and Zhuravlyov are especially concerning due to their extensive connections with far-right parties across Europe and America and their previous influence in violent transnational attacks.<sup>384</sup>

As of March 2023, the threats posed by both groups are focused primarily on continental Europe rather than the U.S. homeland. This threat to international security will likely continue to grow as Konstantin Malofeev begins consolidating control among not only Rusich and RIM but all Russian paramilitary volunteer forces. The November and December letter bombings in Spain may be an early indication of future attacks to come.<sup>385</sup>

### A. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

On the first anniversary of the Russian war in Ukraine, the Biden administration committed to holding Russia accountable for all crimes against humanity committed both

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<sup>384</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>385</sup> Bautista, Kwai, and Ismay, “U.S. and Ukrainian Embassies Targeted by Letter Bombs in Spain.”

on and off the battlefield.<sup>386</sup> This thesis provides information implicating Russian extremists and Russian state actors in the commission of war crimes. Among these, Rusich, RIM, and Konstantin Malofeev stand out as particularly egregious offenders that need to be further investigated and subject to a range of punitive actions.

## **1. Rusich**

Appendix B of this thesis provides evidence of Rusich involvement in crimes against humanity in 2022 in both Vovchansk and Izyum, Ukraine. Statements by group members suggest Rusich involvement in more crimes yet undiscovered.<sup>387</sup> The group has also publicly stated that it believes it can commit atrocities with impunity.<sup>388</sup> This belief that it will not be held accountable for criminal behavior is informed by experience. Atrocities committed by Rusich in Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 have so far gone unpunished and may have contributed to the group's present popularity.<sup>389</sup>

While accountability for Rusich has remained elusive, U.S. policymakers from the Department of State and Department of Justice should utilize the information provided in this thesis as a starting point for assisting the Ukrainian government and human rights activists, such as the KHPG, in preparing criminal charges against the group. Even if group members are not captured, ready criminal charges backed by international arrest warrants may deter the group from engaging in future operations elsewhere in Europe.

## **2. Russian Imperial Movement**

Open-source information on RIM's actions during the war in Ukraine is limited. As a result, further investigation is needed by the U.S. Intelligence Community to assess RIM's role in combat. The most important unanswered question regarding this role is

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<sup>386</sup> "Fact Sheet: On One Year Anniversary of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine, Biden Administration Announces Actions to Support Ukraine and Hold Russia Accountable," White House, February 24, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/24/fact-sheet-on-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-biden-administration-announces-actions-to-support-ukraine-and-hold-russia-accountable/>.

<sup>387</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>388</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>389</sup> Kochmarskiy, "95 Executions in Donbas."

whether the Imperial Legion was activated as a reserve unit of the conventional army, as Denis Gariev claims, as opposed to its serving as a volunteer unit.<sup>390</sup> The answer is especially important as it will provide insight into material support that the Russian government is willing to provide to transnational terrorist organizations. Closing that knowledge gap will also help make sense of what involvement RIM had in the Spanish letter bomb attacks.<sup>391</sup>

### **3. Konstantin Malofeev**

Konstantin Malofeev is a significant emerging threat to international security, whose involvement in Ukraine and past transnational criminal operations warrant increased scrutiny by policymakers. Malofeev, while not the most powerful oligarch in Russia, is deeply connected with centers of Russian power and is in command of a growing paramilitary army.<sup>392</sup> Malofeev also has a portfolio of organizations used to project Russian influence, including the Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation and the Tsargrad media network.<sup>393</sup> Malofeev has utilized his wealth and connections to build extensive ties with the European far-right. These potential levers to exert power, combined with his radical religious beliefs and demonstrated willingness to use violence to achieve political aims not only in Ukraine but elsewhere in Europe, make Malofeev exceptionally dangerous.<sup>394</sup>

The need to take aggressive action to counter the growing influence of Konstantin Malofeev is made more urgent by his increasingly public involvement in the most disturbing crimes against humanity committed during the Russian invasion—the abduction and reeducation of Ukrainian children. Since February 2022, as many as 13,000 Ukrainian

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<sup>390</sup> Bobrov and Gariev, “Интервью с добровольцем.”

<sup>391</sup> Wong, Barnes, and Schmitt, “Russian Agents Suspected of Directing Far-Right Group.”

<sup>392</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>393</sup> See Appendix C.

<sup>394</sup> See Appendix C.

children have been forcibly relocated to Russia.<sup>395</sup> The Russian state does not dispute these claims—it even admits the actual number of children abducted is far higher.<sup>396</sup> Malofeev has collaborated closely on this vast human trafficking program with its architect—Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights Maria Lvova-Belova.<sup>397</sup> Malofeev’s Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation provides funding and material support to Lvova-Belova for the trafficking of Ukrainian orphans from Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia through a new program called Happy Childhood.<sup>398</sup> These efforts have earned special praise from both Lvova-Belova and Vladimir Putin.<sup>399</sup>

An exhaustive investigation of Malofeev and his Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation is needed to assess the extent of their involvement in trafficking Ukrainian children and to weigh future punitive actions. Several actions that policymakers might immediately consider include labeling the Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation a transnational criminal organization and sanctioning Gazprom Bank, which appears to finance the Happy Childhood program.<sup>400</sup> A more aggressive but potentially more impactful action could involve indemnifying Malofeev’s assets already frozen by U.S. sanctions to finance future efforts to reunify Ukrainian children with their families.

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<sup>395</sup> Camdyn Bruce, “Ukrainian Official Rips Russia for ‘Kidnapping’ More than 13,000 Children,” Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, January 20, 2023, <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/press-and-media/news/ukrainian-official-rips-russia-kidnapping-more-13000>.

<sup>396</sup> Bruce.

<sup>397</sup> “Путин поблагодарил Малофеева за помощь детям Донбасса” [Putin thanks Malofeev for helping the children of Donbas], Tsargrad TV, February 16, 2023, [https://tsargrad.tv/news/putin-poblagodaril-malofeeva-za-pomoshh-detjam-donbassa\\_726316](https://tsargrad.tv/news/putin-poblagodaril-malofeeva-za-pomoshh-detjam-donbassa_726316); Bruce, “Ukrainian Official Rips Russia for ‘Kidnapping’ More than 13,000 Children.”

<sup>398</sup> Konstantin Malofeev, “Счастливое Детство: В Рождество все дети ждут подарков. Для одних – это очередная игрушка. А для других – нормальная жизнь без бомбёжек и не в подвале” [Happy Childhood. At Christmas, all children are waiting for gifts. For some, it is just another toy. And for others, a normal life without bombings and not in the basement], Telegram, January 15, 2023, 03:30, <https://t.me/kvmalofeev/1256>; “Home Page,” Charitable Foundation of St. Basil the Great, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.schastliwoedetstvo.ru/>.

<sup>399</sup> Tsargrad TV, “Путин поблагодарил Малофеева за помощь детям Донбасса.”

<sup>400</sup> Charitable Foundation of St. Basil the Great. Banking details are prominently featured at the bottom of the home page.

## B. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR U.S. HOMELAND SECURITY

The Russian war in Ukraine has entered its second year at the time of this writing. The coming months of hostilities will potentially be the most violent and dangerous of the war. Vladimir Putin has framed the war as an existential struggle for Russian civilization.<sup>401</sup> This framing is not only an appeal to the sympathies of the Russian far-right, which will likely continue to supplement Russian combat power, but also a warning about the willingness of Russia to use all available means to achieve its aims. Rusich and RIM stand out among the most likely means of attacking the United States and its allies. Vladimir Putin's options for escalating and ultimately winning the war are limited given the failures of his conventional military. As illustrated in this thesis, these failures have been previously counterbalanced by the expanded use of irregular forces.

Since the fall 2022 partial mobilization, both Rusich and RIM have seen their roles elevated from frontline fighters to capacity builders for the Russian army. Since that time, the Wagner Group has provided an alternative model for Russian strategic success in the wake of military failures. That success has come at a severe cost to both the Wagner Group's manpower and, ironically, relations with the Russian government, as it has positioned the Wagner Group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, as a potential political challenger to Putin.<sup>402</sup> This shifting power dynamic is likely to result in the Putin government's replicating the Wagner Group's successes with other groups, a role that the revamped Union of Donbas Volunteers, comprising Rusich and RIM, appears poised to fill.

Future setbacks may see attempts to utilize Russian irregular forces outside the battlefield in Ukraine to create new strategic openings for Russia. Potential attacks can be expected in Moldova—home to the Russian separatist region of Transnistria—to which

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<sup>401</sup> Lauren Sforza, "Putin Says Ukraine War Poses Existential Threat to 'Russian People,'" *Hill*, February 26, 2022, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3874880-putin-says-ukraine-war-poses-existential-threat-to-russian-people/>.

<sup>402</sup> Andrew E. Kramer and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Ukraine Claims Bakhmut Battle Is Wagner's 'Last Stand,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/world/europe/bakhmut-ukraine-russia-wagner.html>.

Russia increasingly directs hostile rhetoric.<sup>403</sup> Future attacks are also possible in the Balkans and the Baltic states.

Future attacks by these groups on the U.S. homeland are also possible. This thesis has identified previous connections between the American and Russian far-right that might be leveraged to this end. Matthew Heimbach and the Atomwaffen Division are potential fifth columns in the United States with previous connections to RIM.<sup>404</sup> Heimbach and other far-right activists believed to be associated with the Traditionalist Workers Party and the Atomwaffen Division have re-entered far-right political activism as of February 2023 under the new Patriotic Socialist Front, which debuted at the Rage against the War Machine rally in Washington, DC.<sup>405</sup> There, the group ominously flew the Russian imperial standard, the gold, black, and white emblem of RIM and the symbol of Russia's expansionist revisionism.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Rob Picheta, "Moldova Could Be Next on Putin's List. Here's Why the Country Fears It Will Be Pulled into Russia's War," CNN, February 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/26/europe/moldova-transnistria-russia-tensions-explainer-intl/index.html>.

<sup>404</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "Matthew Heimbach"; World National-Conservative Movement, *Participants*; Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, "The Russian Imperial Movement"; Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement*.

<sup>405</sup> Habash, "Matthew Heimbach Has a New Crew"; Idavox, "Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front"; Idavox, "Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front"; Habash, "Matthew Heimbach Has a New Crew."

<sup>406</sup> Idavox, "Matthew Heimbach and His New Crew the Patriot Socialist Front"; Habash, "Matthew Heimbach Has a New Crew."



## APPENDIX A. PARTIZAN TRAINING CENTER

The Partizan Training Center is the military training site of RIM's paramilitary wing, the Imperial Legion. The Imperial Legion uses the site to train not only its own fighters but also interested members of the general public, including dedicated militants from Europe as well as hobbyists from Russia. This appendix outlines open-source intelligence collected during this research pertaining to the location and activities of RIM's Partizan Training Center.

### A. LOCATIONS

The Partizan Training Center consists of two primary training complexes: the facility headquarters located in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and a large outdoor training field to the northwest of the urban core of Saint Petersburg.

#### 1. Headquarters

The headquarters is a large subterranean facility located at Военно-Спортивная Школа Профессионального Военного Обучения Партизан (the Military Sports School, Professional Military Training Partizan), Дрезденская ул., 20, Санкт-Петербург, 194017 (20 Drezdenskaya Street, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 194017). This location has been confirmed through disclosures on the Partizan Training Center's website.<sup>407</sup> Figure 5 depicts a view of the entrance to the Partizan Training Center.

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<sup>407</sup> The Partizan Training Center's website is <https://ruspartizan.com/>.

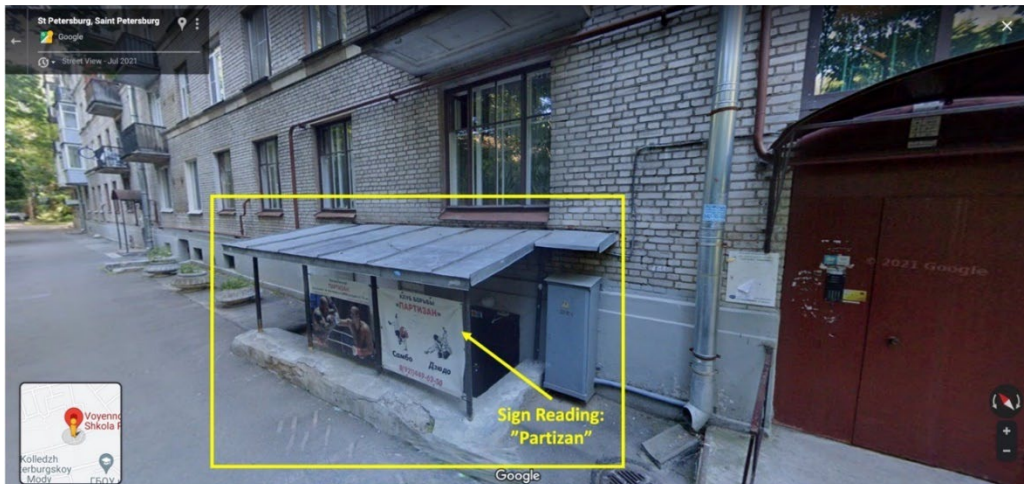


Figure 5. View of the Entrance to the Partizan Training Center.<sup>408</sup>

## 2. Field Training Areas

Through the course of research, two outdoor field training areas were identified by geolocating Partizan training videos from the Partizan Training Center’s aforementioned website (see Figure 6).

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<sup>408</sup> Adapted from “Voyenno-Sportivnaya Shkola Professional’nogo Voyennogo Obucheniya Partizan,” Google Maps, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://goo.gl/maps/dvspc3BBCyd1AHRg6?coh=178571&entry=tt>.

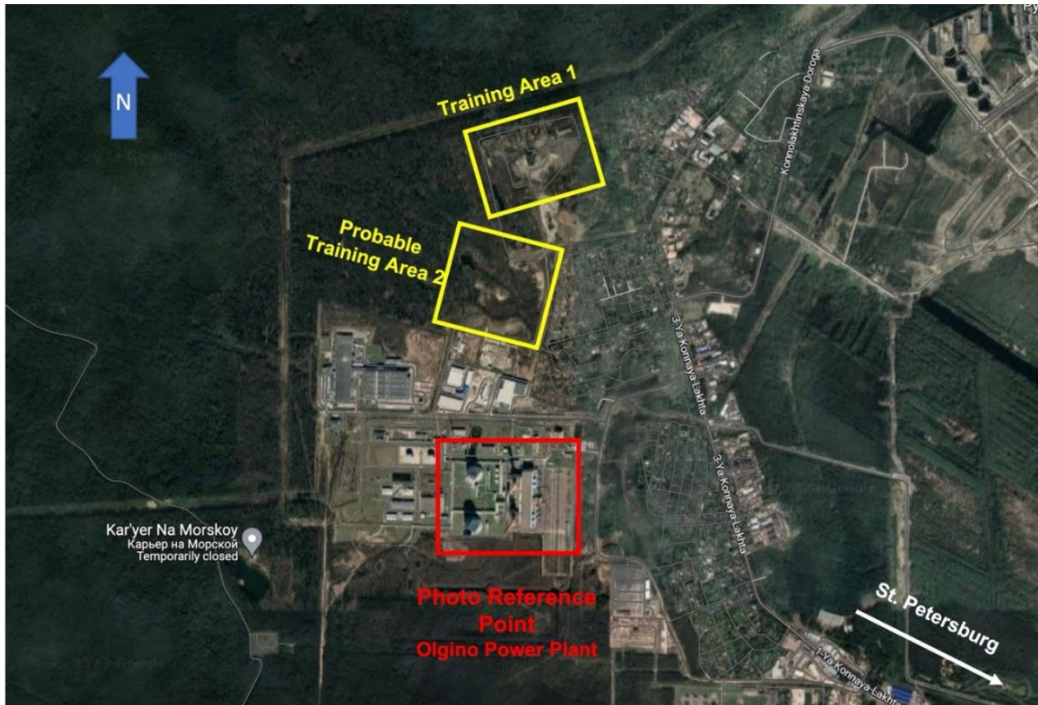


Figure 6. Overview of the Training Areas.<sup>409</sup>

*a. Training Area 1: Urban Training Ground*

The location is a series of abandoned buildings in the vicinity of the Olgino historical district, northwest of Saint Petersburg’s city center. The area, possibly used by local airsoft players, was identified as the Primorsky District, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 197229, through geolocation at the following coordinates: 60°01’43.6”N 30°05’35.9”E (see Figures 7–9).

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<sup>409</sup> Adapted from “Primorsky District, St Petersburg, Russia, 197229,” Google Maps, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://goo.gl/maps/hMSSFjGmGmsDPoHz7>.

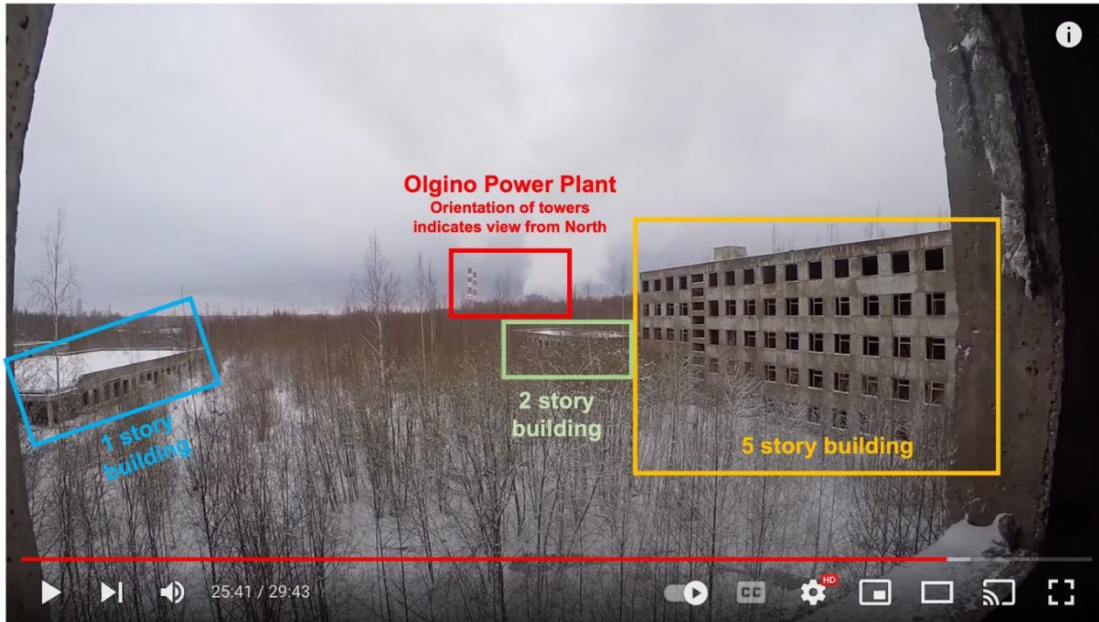


Figure 7. View from Building Used for Rappel Training Looking South toward the Olgin Power Plant.<sup>410</sup>

<sup>410</sup> Adapted from Sergey Saiman – Expedition, “ВОЕННО-СТРЕЛКОВАЯ ПОДГОТОВКА ДЛЯ ГРАЖДАНСКИХ. ТАКТИЧЕСКИЕ УЧЕНИЯ. ВОЕННЫЕ СБОРЫ В ПИТЕРЕ – ПАРТИЗАН” [Military shooting training for civilian, tactical exercises. Military camps in Petersburg, Partisan], video, 25:41 of 29:43, YouTube, January 13, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1bT\\_dJgPck](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1bT_dJgPck).



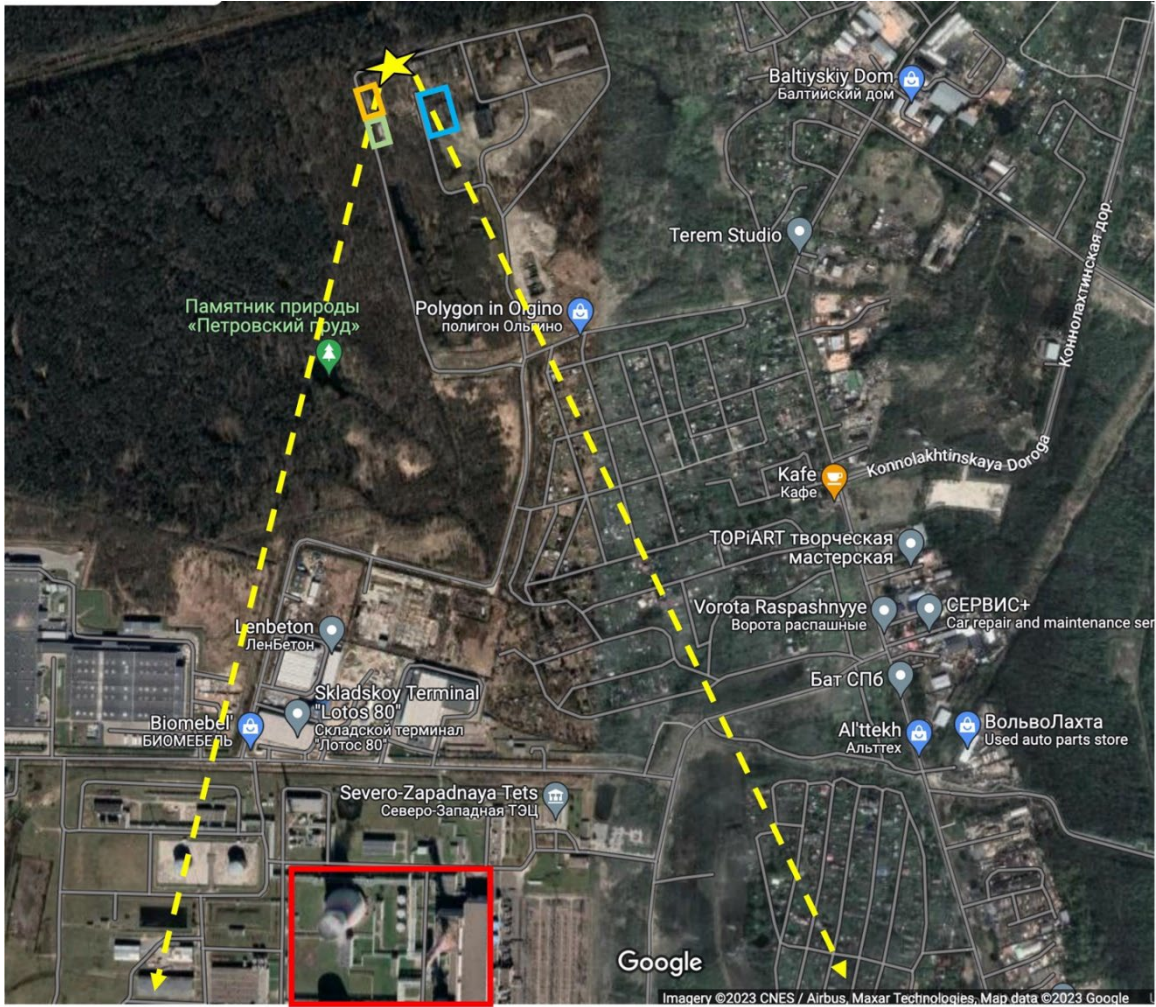


Figure 8. Bird’s Eye View of Rappel Building Overlooking Other Buildings and Power Plant.<sup>411</sup>

<sup>411</sup> Adapted from Google Maps, “Primorsky District, St Petersburg, Russia, 197229.”



Figure 9. Closer Overhead Perspective from Rappel Building.<sup>412</sup>

***b. Training Area 2: Field Training Area***

The location is a prairie surrounded by trees closer than Training Area 1 to the Olgino Power Plant. The location was identified through geolocation in Primorsky, Saint Petersburg, Russia, at the following coordinates: 60.021316, 30.094944 (see Figures 10–12).

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<sup>412</sup> Adapted from Google Maps.



Figure 10. View of Olgino Power Plant from the North in Training Area 2.<sup>413</sup>

<sup>413</sup> Adapted from Sergey Saiman – Expedition, “ВОЕННО-СТРЕЛКОВАЯ ПОДГОТОВКА ДЛЯ ГРАЖДАНСКИХ,” 9:08 of 29:43.





Figure 11. Overhead Perspective of Olgino Power Plant from the North in Training Area 2.<sup>414</sup>

<sup>414</sup> Adapted from “Primorsky, St Petersburg, Russia,” Google Maps, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://goo.gl/maps/yrUsDmKayK3w1vgy9>.



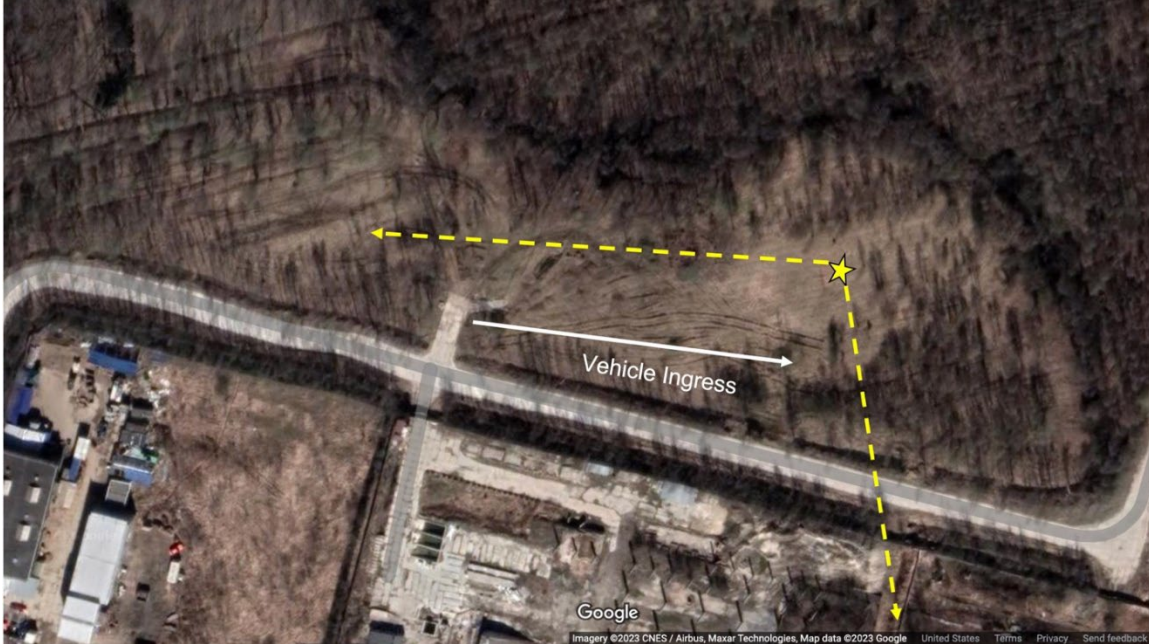


Figure 12. Closer View of Training Area 2 Showing Vehicle Ingress Route That Mirrors Location and Orientation of Vehicle in Video.<sup>415</sup>

## B. ACTIVITIES

The Partizan Training Center’s official website suggests the site offers up to 20 different programs and boasts more than 4,000 previous participants in training.<sup>416</sup> See Table 1 for a sample training schedule.

<sup>415</sup> Adapted from Google Maps.

<sup>416</sup> “Home Page,” Russian Imperial Movement Partizan Training Center, accessed January 23, 2023, <https://ruspartizan.com/>.

Table 1. Training Events as of January 22, 2023.<sup>417</sup>

Date	Course	Details
January 20–22	Artillery Reconnaissance	<p>Day 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Basic principles and algorithms for the operation of artillery.</li> <li>2. Basics of topography and work with a map, reading a map and taking coordinates from a map, encrypting maps, setting the situation.</li> <li>3. Terms, symbols, commands in artillery.</li> <li>4. Organization of interaction between artillery and other types of troops (communications and fire control).</li> <li>5. Radio broadcast and the correct delivery of commands to the gunners.</li> </ol> <p>Day 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Main artillery systems, TXX, application features.</li> <li>2. Ammunition.</li> <li>3. Methods for detecting and determining the coordinates of targets on the battlefield using various equipment (target designation).</li> <li>4. The main methods of sighting “adjustment” of artillery fire (including UAVs).</li> <li>5. Tactical methods of using artillery (firing ambushes, benchmark, fire maneuver).</li> <li>6. Recommendations on the necessary equipment and equipment for the units of the APP (artillery reconnaissance).</li> </ol> <p>Day 3</p> <p>Practical exercises on the ground (departure to the training ground), exercises must be performed by each cadet:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Radio broadcast and giving commands to artillerymen.</li> <li>2. Orientation on the ground.</li> <li>3. Detection, classification of targets and determination of their coordinates (including UAVs).</li> <li>4. Transfer of target designation to PU/OP artillery.</li> <li>5. Correction of the art of fire (shooting).</li> <li>6. Fire transfer, fire maneuver.</li> <li>7. Creation of a fire ambush.</li> <li>8. Assessment of the work of artillery (damage assessment).</li> <li>9. Return of the audience, final testing.</li> </ol>
January 21–22	Tactical Medicine	<p>Seminar Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organization of assistance to the wounded during the battle.</li> <li>- Actions of the medical instructor on the battlefield to collect and provide assistance to the wounded (in attack and defense).</li> <li>- The concept of combat injuries of various parts of the body (bullet, shrapnel, mine-explosive, etc.).</li> </ul>

<sup>417</sup> Source: Russian Imperial Movement Partizan Training Center. The training events listed have been translated from Russian into English using Google Translate.

Date	Course	Details
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Options for using standard and improvised means to provide first aid.</li> <li>- Desmurgy (bandaging).</li> </ul>
January 27–29	Yuri Yevich (Author) Teaches “Tactical Medicine”	<p>Course Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is tactical medicine, what are the goals and objectives of a tactical medic, who should he be?</li> <li>- Types of major combat damage, diagnosis and treatment.</li> <li>- Traumatic shock and its management.</li> <li>- Major wartime injuries: fractures, sprains, dislocations, bruises, burns, frostbite. Prevention and treatment.</li> <li>- Syndrome of prolonged compression (crash-syndrome).</li> <li>- Medic tactics on the battlefield: actions in the red, yellow and green zone.</li> <li>- Organization of medical centers, stages of evacuation, special equipment, tactics depending on the conditions.</li> <li>- Features of the organization of medical support in conditions of social instability and countering the “terror war.”</li> <li>- And much more.</li> </ul> <p>The first day is theory. Two more days [involve] practicing the practical skills of providing self-help and mutual assistance, individually and as part of a group. The training takes place first in a calm environment to consolidate the skill, then in the conditions of a simulated clash to gain the skill of action in a real situation.</p>
January 28–29	Psychology of Combat Stress	<p>Lesson Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* General concept of stress (dynamics of psychophysiological processes).</li> <li>* Conditions for the emergence of negative mental states.</li> <li>* Psychophysiology of combat stress. Causes of occurrence. Flow phases.</li> <li>* Types of acute reactions to the situation. Psychological support rules.</li> <li>* Psychological features of the activities of military personnel in the conditions of modern combat.</li> <li>* Features of the behavior of a soldier in battle.</li> <li>* Military-professional adaptation of servicemen to combat conditions.</li> <li>* Familiarization with exercises aimed at developing the higher psychological functions of the brain necessary for combat.</li> <li>* Psychophysiological testing under the certification program of a special service of one of the law enforcement agencies.</li> </ul> <p>Class time: Two days, from 10:00 to 19:00.</p>
January 30–February 3	“Partizan” Skills Training	<p>After completing the course, you will not become a professional, but absolutely get the most necessary skills to increase your chances of survival in the war zone. The core of the course is tactical and fire training, as well as tactical medicine and assault mountaineering. Auxiliary, but no less important disciplines, are military topography and communications.</p>

Date	Course	Details
		<p>In the course:  Tactics city: 19 hours  AK fire training: 15 hours  Tactical medicine: 3 hours  Military topography: 2.5 hours  Radio communication: 2.5 hours</p> <p>Lunches included. Perhaps free accommodation, logistics to the places of practice, special equipment, matbaza.</p> <p>80 percent of classes take place at the training ground with compulsory accommodation; 20 percent of the lecture part takes place in individual tents.</p>
February 10–12	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Operator Training	<p>Training Program:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Historical digression;</li> <li>1.2 Classification of UAV and UAV;</li> <li>1.3 Classification of UAVs of helicopter types;</li> <li>1.4 MBLA today. Features of possession, use and maintenance;</li> <li>1.5 Questions of the first chapter, complaints, suggestions.</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Architecture of helicopter-type UAVs <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 Schemes for constructing UAVs of helicopter types;</li> <li>2.2 Features and differences of different construction schemes;</li> <li>2.3 Basic modules and their interaction;</li> <li>2.4 Special modules, their interaction with the basic ones;</li> <li>2.5 Questions of the second chapter.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Helicopter-type UAV control <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Varieties of control equipment;</li> <li>3.2 General flight terminology;</li> <li>3.3 Features of control using remote control;</li> <li>3.4 Features of management using NCC;</li> <li>3.5 Questions of the third chapter.</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Use and application of UAV <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 Private and commercial use;</li> <li>4.2 Civil and government applications;</li> <li>4.3 Military applications;</li> <li>4.4 International commercial application;</li> <li>4.5 Questions of the fourth chapter.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
February 11–12	Tactical Medicine	See Above
February 13–17	“Partizan” Skills Training	See Above
February 17–19	Yuri Yevich (Author) Teaches “Tactical Medicine”	See Above
February 24–26	Artillery Reconnaissance	See Above

## APPENDIX B. EVIDENCE OF WAR CRIMES

This appendix outlines evidence of war crimes by Rusich and RIM. Some of the evidence presented is circumstantial, and though it provides no definitive proof of involvement in crimes against humanity, it does offer important leads for future investigations by human rights experts. The evidence presented in the following sections compares information collected from militants’ social media pages of their whereabouts and activities during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, with reporting from the Ukrainian government, Ukrainian civil societies groups, and international human rights organizations on crimes against humanity conducted by Russian forces. This comparison will help identify possible suspects among far-right extremists.

### A. VOVCHANSK

Vovchansk quickly fell to Russian forces at the start of the war. Once it was occupied, residents were subjected to arbitrary detention and torture to submit to Russian rule.<sup>418</sup> According to the Tribunal for Putin Initiative, a joint project of the KHPG, the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, and the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize–winning Center for Civil Liberties, there have been 72 crimes against humanity reported in Vovchansk as of February 17, 2023.

#### 1. All Reported War Crimes

As detailed in Table 2, these crimes against humanity include the following actions that violate the Rome Statute, with suspected Rusich involvement highlighted in yellow.

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<sup>418</sup> Coynash, “Russian Invaders Create ‘Real Concentration Camp.’”

Table 2. Crimes against Humanity Perpetrated in Vovchansk.<sup>419</sup>

Crime	Instances
Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects [Article 8: 2 (b) ii]	7
Extensive destruction and appropriation of property [Article 8: 2 (a) iv]	1
Enforced disappearance of persons [Article 7: 1 i]	4
Torture or inhuman treatment of civilians and military personnel [Article 7: 1 (f) or Article 8: 2 (a) ii]	9
Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive in relation to the concrete and direct overall military advantage anticipated [Article 8: 2 (b) iv]	5
Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental injury to civilians [Article 8: 2 (b) iv]	11
Pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault [Article 8: 2 (b) xvi]	2
Employing weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, or which are inherently indiscriminate in violation of the international law of armed conflict, provided that such weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare are the subject of a comprehensive prohibition: the BM-30 “Smerch,” TOS-1 “Buratino,” and other systems, cluster munitions and phosphorus bombs [Article 8: 2 (b) xx]	1
Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty of civilians or military personnel [Article 7: 1 (e)]	10
Employing weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, or which are inherently indiscriminate [Article 8: 2 (b) xx]	1
Compelling a prisoner of war or other protected person to serve in the forces of a hostile Power [Article 8: 2) (a) v]	1

<sup>419</sup> Source: “T4P’s Database of War Crimes: Statistical Information,” Tribunal for Putin, accessed January 29, 2023, <https://t4pua.org/en/stats>. The definitions were derived from “statistics by legal definition.” The number of acts was sampled from the Vovchansk area.



## 2. Evidence of Rusich Involvement

### a. Presence in Vovchansk

Figure 13 supports accounts that Rusich deployed to the special operations zone from February to March 2022.



Figure 13. DShRG Rusich in the Special Operation Zone, February–March 2022.<sup>420</sup>

<sup>420</sup> Source: Kiba’s Communication Diary, “Здравия! ДШРГ Русич с начала объявления специальной операции принимает участие в боевых действиях на территории бывшей Украины” [Hello! DShRG Rusich, from the beginning of the announcement of a special operation, has been taking part in hostilities in the territory of the former Ukraine], Telegram, April 6, 2022, 09:52, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/42](https://t.me/signalman_diary/42). Note that all social media posts originally published in Russian have been translated into English using Google Translate.

***b. Interaction with Prisoners***

Photos from a Telegram channel linked to a Rusich fighter (Time for War 13), show this group taking four men prisoner on March 21 (see Figure 14).<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Та самая небольшая группа которая призывала к убийству Русских.”





Figure 14. Rusich Fighters Taking Four Men Prisoner in Vovchansk.<sup>422</sup>

The following post, translated from Russian to English, accompanied the photograph in Figure 14:

The same small group that called for the murder of Russians. These persons gathered a militia of volunteers from the city in which we have been for a

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<sup>422</sup> Source: Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Та самая небольшая группа которая призывала к убийству Русских.” Translation provided by Google Translate.

long time. These persons merged information about the movements of military columns, as well as the integrity of bridges and crossings. Incendiary mixtures were prepared, hedgehogs for breaking through the wheels, as well as small arms taken from broken vehicles. We also know the rest of the individuals who are in this group, and measures are already being taken on them. Such individuals are the meanest and most cowardly. Instead of taking up arms and fighting like a Warrior, they form cells under the guise of civilians and vilely beat in the back. This means that appropriate measures will be taken against such persons. Victory will be ours. For Russia.<sup>423</sup>

On April 5, the same Rusich fighter posted a video of the Vovchansk mayor being coerced into making pro-Russian statements while held prisoner in the same facility.<sup>424</sup>



Figure 15. Vovchansk Mayor Anatoly Stepanets in Rusich Custody.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group.

<sup>424</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Мэр Волчанска Анатолий Степанец начинает.”

<sup>425</sup> Source: Time of War 13 Antitank Group.

As detailed in the post accompanying this photograph, “The mayor of Vovchansk, Anatoly Stepanets, begins to correctly answer the questions posed. Our unit actively helped him realize the truth of these words. P.S. Appeal to news channels: When you share our videos, tag us @war13z.”<sup>426</sup> Reporting by a Ukrainian investigative journalist with Babel also suggests the mayor was tortured during his captivity.<sup>427</sup> Figure 16 depicts another man taken prisoner by Rusich fighters around the same time.



Figure 16. Unknown Male Taken Prisoner by Rusich.<sup>428</sup>

According to a statement by the Ukrainian National Police on September 29, 2022, “It was established that in the territory of one of the enterprises, the Russians set up a prison

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<sup>426</sup> Time of War 13 Antitank Group.

<sup>427</sup> Oleksiy Yarmolenko, “The Prosecutor’s Office Announced the Suspicion of the Mayor of Vovchansk for Moving to the Side of the Occupiers,” Babel, June 15, 2022, <https://babel.ua/en/news/80024-the-prosecutor-s-office-announced-the-suspicion-of-the-mayor-of-vovchansk-for-moving-to-the-side-of-the-occupiers>.

<sup>428</sup> Source: Time of War 13 Antitank Group, “Мэр Волчанска Анатолий Степанец начинает.”

and a torture chamber for local residents who did not support the occupiers and refused to cooperate with them.”<sup>429</sup> According to witnesses, the Russian military held 20 to 40 people in one cell of approximately 12 square meters. Currently, the police and the prosecutor’s office are working at the site of the uncovered torture chamber, with the primary objective of extracting trace information and evidence of crimes committed by the Russian military. Tools for torture, shackles, and collars, among other items, were found in the room.

It was established that in this place, the occupiers mercilessly beat illegal prisoners, tortured them with electric current, pulled out nails, and broke fingers. The dates of people’s stays are recorded on the walls of the torture chamber with the inhumane conditions of detention. Moreover, one of the prisoners engraved a prayer in his cell. The police are working with the local population who was under occupation and identifying the victims who were illegally held by the occupiers on the premises of the torture chamber/prison. Criminal proceedings have been opened under Article 438 (Violation of Laws and Customs of War) of the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

The Vovchansk Engineering Works at вулиця Пушкінська, 2, Вовчанськ, Харківська область, 62500 (2 Vulytsya Pushkins’ka, Vovchans’k, Kharkiv Oblast, Ukraine, 62500) is the probable location of an illegal detention facility (see Figures 17–18).

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<sup>429</sup> Ukrainian National Police, “Катівня-в’язниця у деокупованому Вовчанську—нелюдські умови та молитви на стінах камер” [The torture chamber-prison in the de-occupied Vovchansk—Inhumane conditions and prayers on the walls of the cells], September 29, 2022, <https://www.npu.gov.ua/news/kativnia-viaznytsia-u-deokupovanomu-vovchansku-neliudski-umovy-ta-molytvy-na-stinakh-kamer>.



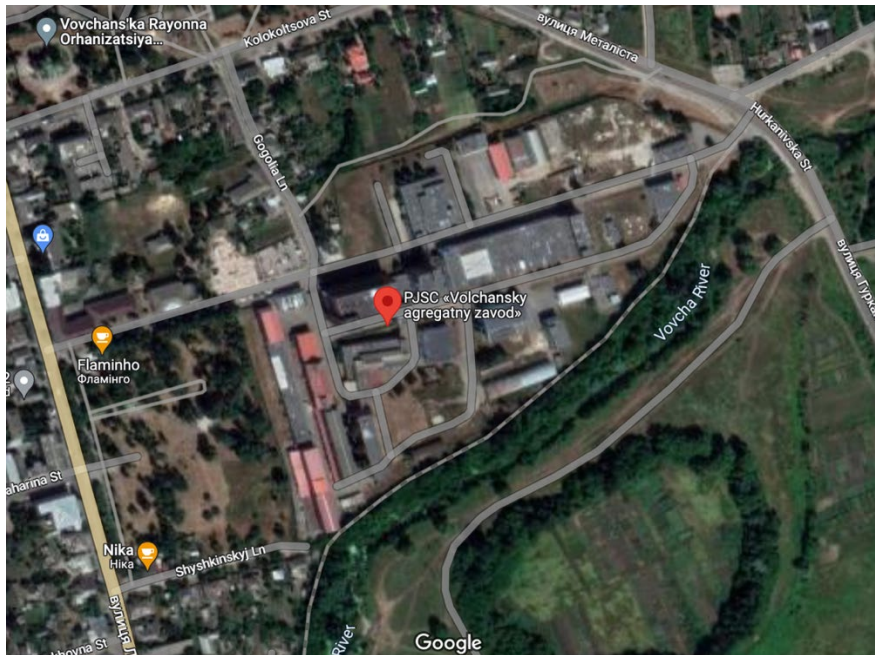


Figure 17. Bird’s Eye View of Probable Illegal Russian Detention Facility.<sup>430</sup>

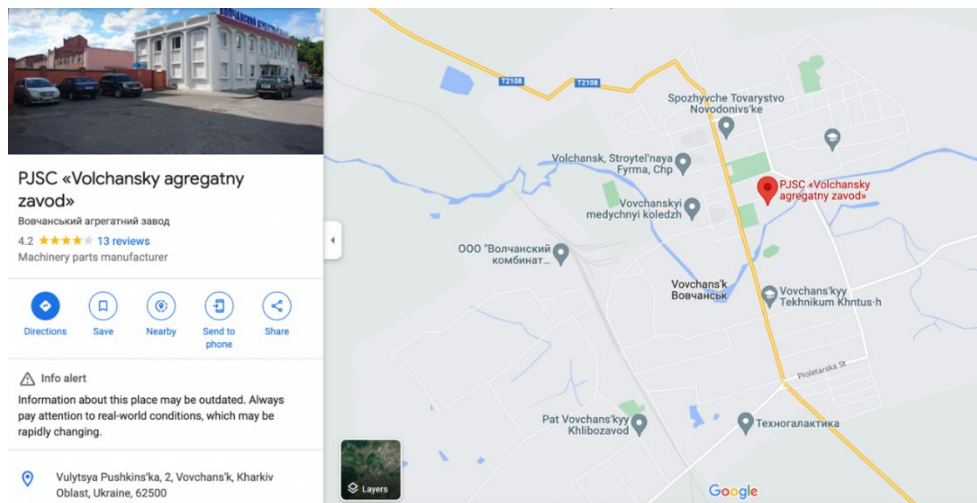


Figure 18. Map of Area Surrounding Probable Illegal Russian Detention Facility.<sup>431</sup>

<sup>430</sup> Source: “Vulytsya Pushkins'ka, 2, Vovchans'k, Kharkivs'ka oblast, Ukraine, 62500,” Google Maps, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://goo.gl/maps/dxv6ZuzczA5bKavo6>.

<sup>431</sup> Source: “PJSC «Volchanskyi agregatnyi zavod»“ [PYSC “Volchansky Aggregate Plant”], Google Maps, accessed June 2, 2023, <https://goo.gl/maps/FmnN7UTr9fvqASg8A>.

In statements to the KHPG, witnesses and victims identified the Vovchansk Engineering Works complex as the primary headquarters and detention facility for Russian militants in Vovchansk.<sup>432</sup>

## B. IZYUM

The city of Izyum was the site of some of the worst Russian crimes against humanity in the first year of the war. A staggering 1,175 crimes against humanity perpetrated by Russian forces were recorded in the Izyum area as of February 17, 2023.

### 1. All Reported War Crimes

As detailed in Table 3, these crimes against humanity include the following actions that violate the Rome Statute, with suspected Rusich involvement highlighted in yellow.

Table 3. Crimes against Humanity Perpetrated in Izyum.<sup>433</sup>

Crime	Instances
Extensive destruction and appropriation of property [Article 8: 2 (a) iv]	14
Attacking or bombarding, by whatever means, towns, villages, dwellings or buildings which are undefended [Article 8: 2 (b) v]	1
Intentionally directing attacks against civilian objects [Article 8: 2 (b) ii]	112
Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment [Article 8: 2 (b) iv]	181
Extensive destruction and appropriation of property [Article 8: 2 (a) iv]	14
Killing committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population [Article 7: 1 (a) “Murder” or Article 8: 2 (a) i “Willful killing”]	38

<sup>432</sup> Iryna Skachko, “Vovchansk Engineering Works: Dungeons on the Chechen Model,” Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, September 15, 2022, <https://khpg.org/en/1608811161>.

<sup>433</sup> Source: Tribunal for Putin, “Statistical Information.” Definitions were derived from “statistics by legal definition.” The number of acts was sampled from the Izyum area.

<b>Crime</b>	<b>Instances</b>
Willfully causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or health [Article 8: 2 (a) iii]	13
Deportation or forcible transfer of population to Russia [Article 7: 1 (d)] or “Grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949” [Article 8 (2) a] or “Other serious violations of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict” [Article 8 (2) b]	2
Enforced disappearance of persons [Article 7: 1 i]	18
Torture or inhuman treatment of civilians and military personnel [Article 7: 1 (f) or Article 8: 2 (a) ii]	64
Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental loss of life or injury to civilians or damage to civilian objects or widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive in relation to the concrete and direct overall military advantage anticipated [Article 8: 2 (b) iv]	198
Intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause incidental injury to civilians [Article 8: 2 (b) iv]	49
Pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault [Article 8: 2 (b) xvi]	51
Employing weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, or which are inherently indiscriminate in violation of the international law of armed conflict, provided that such weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare are the subject of a comprehensive prohibition: the BM-30 “Smerch,” TOS-1 “Buratino,” and other systems, cluster munitions and phosphorus bombs [Article 8: 2 (b) xx]	82
Committing rape (as defined in Article 7, paragraph 2 (f)) [Article 8: 2 (b) xxii]	8
Utilizing the presence of a civilian or other protected person as a human shield to render certain points, areas or military forces immune from military operation [Article 8: 2 (b) xxiii]	4
Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty of civilians or military personnel [Article 7: 1 (e)]	62
Enslavement, meaning “the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person” [Article 7: 1 (c)]	1
Committing outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment of either civilians or military personnel [Article 8: 2 (b) xxi]	5
Employing weapons, projectiles and material and methods of warfare which are of a nature to cause superfluous injury or unnecessary suffering, or which are inherently indiscriminate [Article 8: 2 (b) xx]	10

Crime	Instances
Compelling a prisoner of war or other protected person to serve in the forces of a hostile Power [Article 8: 2) (a) v]	1

## 2. Evidence of Rusich Involvement

### a. Presence in Izyum

Figures 19–21 support accounts that Rusich deployed to Izyum.



Figure 19. Rusich Member Yevgeny “Topaz” Rasskazov and an Unidentified Rusich Fighter Posing in Front of an Izyum Sign in the City Center.<sup>434</sup>

<sup>434</sup> Source: Topaz Speaks, Twitter photo, May 21, 2022, 08:59, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/1570](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/1570).





Figure 20. Rusich Members Posing in Front of an Izyum Sign on the Outskirts of the City, May 2022.<sup>435</sup>

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<sup>435</sup> Source: Kiba's Communication Diary, "Админ с соратниками и трофейный хайлюкс с Харьковского направления" [Admin with associates and trophy Hilux from Kharkiv direction], photo, Telegram, May 7, 2022, 14:17, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/136](https://t.me/signalman_diary/136).



Figure 21. Rusich on Top of City Administration Building Assessing Damage and Establishing Communications, May 2022.<sup>436</sup>

***b. Interaction with Prisoners and Civilians***

A Telegram post by Yevgeny Rasskazov on September 13, 2022, describes an interview with a captured Ukrainian prisoner.<sup>437</sup> This interview is unlikely to have been taken after September 10, 2022, approximately when Rusich would have withdrawn along

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<sup>436</sup> Source: Kiba's Communication Diary, "Ещё немного фото из Изюма с рейда по вышкам сотовой связи" [A few more photos from Izyum from a raid on cell towers], Telegram, May 7, 2022, 14:46, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/144](https://t.me/signalman_diary/144); Kiba's Communication Diary, "Небольшое видео с крыши Укртелекома в Изюме" [A small video from the roof of Ukrtelecom in Izyum], Telegram, May 8, 2022, 03:43, [https://t.me/signalman\\_diary/158](https://t.me/signalman_diary/158). This building is one of over 10 sites identified as detainment and interrogation centers. See Hinnant, Maloletka, and Stepanenko, "10 Torture Sites in 1 Town."

<sup>437</sup> Topaz Speaks, "На моём Бусти вышел фрагмент большого интервью с пленным ВСУшником! В грядущем фильме вы увидите полную версию этого интервью, а если подпишитесь на Бусти, то увидите фильм первыми!" [On my Boosty, there was a fragment of a big interview with a prisoner of the Armed Forces! In the upcoming film, you will see the full version of this interview, and if you subscribe to Boosty, you will see the film first!], Telegram, September 13, 2022, 08:39, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/2024](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/2024).

with the rest of Russian forces from the area. This video was likely taken at the end of August or beginning of September, as one of the individuals involved, Max Kholod, was engaged in combat in the area around this time.<sup>438</sup> The following pages document Rusich’s violent encounters with the civilian population of Izyum through the words and photographs of Rusich fighters around this time.<sup>439</sup>



Figure 22. Image Posted by Yevgeny Rasskazov on September 13, 2022.<sup>440</sup>

Rasskazov’s post accompanying this September 13 photograph reads as follows:

On my Boosty, there was a fragment of a big interview with a prisoner of the Armed Forces! In the upcoming film, you will see the full version of this interview, and if you subscribe to Boosty, you will see the film first!

My military commander, Max Kholod, showed himself in this voyage not only as an excellent correspondent, but also as a solid fighter. I found myself

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<sup>438</sup> Topaz Speaks, “Тизер со стрима. Следите за новостями на этом канале, в скором времени я выложу сбор средств на закупку необходимого для подразделения” [Stream teaser. Follow the news on this channel. Soon I will post a fundraiser for the purchase of the necessary unit], Telegram, August 14, 2022, 15:03, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/1877](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/1877). This post shows Kholod’s arrival in Ukraine in early August 2022. Topaz Speaks, “Холод (второй слева) на позициях, за которые сейчас идут ожесточенные бои, в настоящий момент он не на связи” [Kholod (second from left) at the positions for which there are fierce battles now. He is not in touch at the moment], Telegram, September 7, 2022, 06:12, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/1977](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/1977). This post suggests Kholod is engaged in fighting in the Izyum sector on September 7, 2022.

<sup>439</sup> All translations from Russian to English in this appendix were derived from Google Translate.

<sup>440</sup> Source: Topaz Speaks, “На моём Бусте вышел фрагмент большого интервью с пленным ВСУшником!”



in two circles, together with the Bars held the defense in the settlements left by the federals and met many amazing people.

Subscribe to Busty so you don't miss out!

On August 10, 2022, Rasskazov's Telegram post describes his desire to murder Ukrainian prisoners as well as all people who support the Ukrainian government:

Today I looked through the materials that have already been filmed by my correspondent in the NVO zone. In one of the fragments, he talked with a Khokhlyat prisoner. He spoke politely and even in a friendly way somehow. Later, I saw a video from the vicinity of the Donetsk brewery, where people are suffocating from poisonous ammonia, and I realized that I could not be in the place of my correspondent, because I would strangle the VSU pig with my bare hands simply because, knowing about the crimes that Ukrainian authorities commit, he continued to wear the uniform of the Ukrainian army and a chevron with the Ukrainian flag.

Everyone who supports the Ukrainian government is a war criminal. Every opponent of the NWO is an accomplice of war criminals.

If I made decisions about the fate of every scum that supports the killing of civilians, then the so-called "liberals," fighters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and other Russophobic garbage would be sentenced to death for the genocide of the Russian people.<sup>441</sup>

On a September 22, 2022, Telegram post Rasskazov references another post, from a now-deleted Rusich channel, that included instructions to torture and murder Ukrainian prisoners and use the information obtained through torture to extort families:

Oops, I accidentally reposted this, do not pay attention ... 🙄<sup>442</sup>

The following post, as depicted in Figure 23, and its English translation correspond with Rasskazov's reference on September 22, 2022, originally posted by Rusich fighters from a now-defunct site and retweeted by user Necro Mancer.

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<sup>441</sup> Topaz Speaks, "Сегодня просматривал материалы, которые уже сняты моим корреспондентом в зоне СВО" [Today, I looked through the materials that have already been filmed by my correspondent in the NVO zone], Telegram, August 10, 2022, 17:22, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/1853](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/1853).

<sup>442</sup> Topaz Speaks, "Ой, я случайно это репостнул, не обращайтесь внимание . . ." [Oops, I accidentally reposted this. Do not pay attention . . .], Telegram, September 22, 2022, 02:03, [https://t.me/Topaz\\_Govorit/2081](https://t.me/Topaz_Govorit/2081).

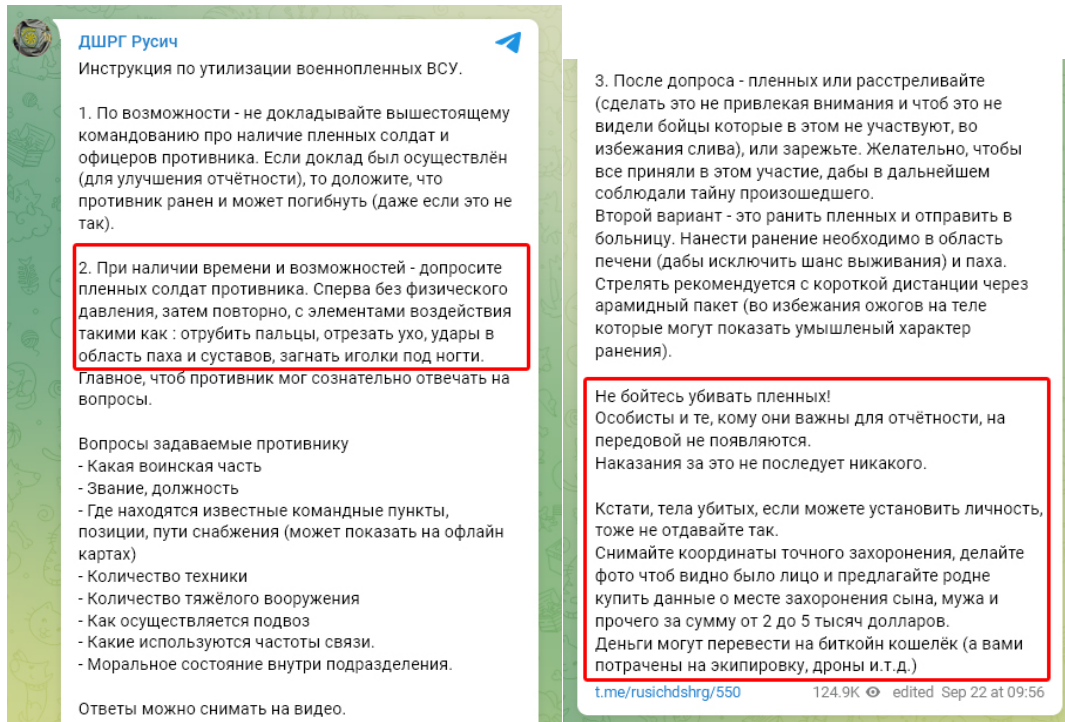


Figure 23. Rusich Instructions for Disposing of Prisoners of War.<sup>443</sup>

### Instructions for the disposal of prisoners of war of the Armed Forces of Ukraine

1. If possible, do not report to the higher command about the presence of captured enemy soldiers and officers. If the report was carried out (to improve reporting), then report that the enemy is wounded and may die (even if this is not the case).
2. If there is time and opportunity, interrogate captured enemy soldiers. First, without physical pressure, then again, with elements of influence such as: cutting off fingers, cutting off an ear, blows to the groin and joints, driving needles under the nails. The main thing is that the enemy could consciously respond to questions.

#### Questions asked to the enemy

- What military unit?

<sup>443</sup> Source: Necro Mancer (@666\_mancer), “Инструкция по обращению с наёмниками из ‘ДШРГ Русич’” [Instructions for dealing with mercenaries from DShRG Rusich], Twitter, September 22, 2022, 4:59 a.m., [https://twitter.com/666\\_mancer/status/1572888366265544704](https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1572888366265544704).

- Title, position?

Where are known command posts, positions, supply routes (can show off-line maps)?

- Number of vehicles?
- The number of heavy weapons?
- How is the delivery?
- What communication frequencies are used?
- Morale within the unit?

Answers can be videotaped.

3. After interrogation of prisoners, either shoot (do this without attracting attention and so that the fighters who are not involved in this do not see it, in order to avoid draining), or slaughter. It is desirable that everyone take part in this, so that in the future they would keep the secret of what happened.

The second option is to wound the prisoners and send them the hospital. It is necessary to inflict a wound in the area of the liver (in order to exclude the chance of survival) and groin. It is recommended to shoot from a short distance through an aramid package (in order to avoid burns on the body that can show the intentional nature of the injury).

Don't be afraid to kill the prisoners!

Specialists and those to whom they are accountable do not appear on the front lines.

There will be no punishment for this.

By the way, if you can identify the bodies of those killed, don't give them away like that either.

Take the coordinates of the exact burial place, take a photo so that the face can be seen, and offer relatives to buy data on the place of burial of their son, husband, and other things for an amount of \$2,000–\$5,000.

Money can be transferred to a bitcoin wallet (and you spend on equipment, drones, etc.).<sup>444</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Necro Mancer.

An August 28, 2022, tweet by Sergej Sumlenny highlights another video of Rasskazov describing his enjoyment in killing Ukrainians, which sexually arouses him (see Figure 24).



Figure 24. Screen Capture of Interview with Rasskazov.<sup>445</sup>

<sup>445</sup> Source: Sergej Sumlenny (@sumlenny), “Here Is a Russian Soldier Yevgeniy Rasskazov (Topaz) Telling in His Interview That He Gets Sexually Aroused When He Kills Ukrainians. He Says He Gets an Erection When He Kills Ukrainians and Thinks about How Their Families Will Suffer from This News,” Twitter, August 28, 2022, 5:30 a.m., <https://twitter.com/sumlenny/status/1563866565979914241>.

### C. MARINKA

Another video by Rusich, posted on October 20, 2022, likely filmed near Marinka, where Rusich was engaged in combat as of early October, suggests the group seized and killed prisoners of war after taking a Ukrainian position (see Figure 25).<sup>446</sup>



Figure 25. Russian Soldiers Storm a Ukrainian Position after Hitting It Multiple Times with Artillery.<sup>447</sup>

The caption for this video reads as follows:

Fire support from the DShRG Rusich of the Assault Reconnaissance Group of the Southern Military District (<https://t.me/BARS023>)

Position taken.

NWO 2022<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Rusich, “ГРУЗ-800: Марьинка, разведка боем. Совместно с ДШРГ РУСИЧ” [Cargo-800: Marinka, reconnaissance in force, together with DShRG Rusich], video, Telegram, October 5, 2022, 13:03, <https://t.me/dshrg2/128>. The video shows Rusich in combat alongside another detachment of Russian militants called Cargo-800 in Marinka, Donetsk province.

<sup>447</sup> Source: Rusich, “Огневая поддержка со стороны ДШРГ Русич штурмовой группы разведчиков ЮВО” [Fire support from the DShRG Rusich of the assault group of reconnaissance officers of the Southern Military District], video, Telegram, October 20, 2022, 06:25, <https://t.me/dshrg2/226>. One Ukrainian soldier, identified by his uniform, is taken at the 1:15 mark.

<sup>448</sup> Rusich.



On October 21, 2022, Rusich posted a photograph of a dead Ukrainian soldier, one day after a video documented a prisoner’s capture, with a caption reading “Khokhlenko is tired” (see Figure 26).<sup>449</sup>



Figure 26. Photograph of Dead Ukrainian Soldier, October 21, 2022.<sup>450</sup>

As a follow-on post, Rusich suggests that the prisoners captured on October 20, 2022, were tortured and murdered:

We did not take prisoners, but intelligence.

Our position is to interrogate prisoners (get information), torture and kill them.

And don’t care about the consequences.

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<sup>449</sup> Rusich, “Хохленок устал” [Khokhlenko is tired], photo, Telegram, October 21, 2022, 13:08, <https://t.me/dshrg2/231>. “Khokhlenko” is a derivative of a common slur used by Russians to describe Ukrainians.

<sup>450</sup> Source: Rusich.

We kill the enemy in order to defeat him!

And so that he does not produce future enemies for our children.<sup>451</sup>

Posted less than an hour after the photo of the dead Ukrainian soldier, this message suggests the individual depicted was among the murdered prisoners.

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<sup>451</sup> Rusich, “Пленных брали не мы, а разведка. Наша позиция – пленным допрашивать (получать информацию), пытать и убивать. И плевать на последствия” [We did not take prisoners but intelligence. Our position is to interrogate prisoners (get information), torture, and kill them. And don’t care about the consequences], Telegram, October 21, 2022, 13:54, <https://t.me/dshrg2/232>.

## APPENDIX C. RUSSIAN FAR-RIGHT STATE ACTORS

### A. KONSTANTIN MALOFEEV AND ASSOCIATES

Konstantin Malofeev is an ultraconservative Russian oligarch, who emerged as an ideological acolyte of Alexander Dugin and kingpin of a large, transnational far-right network. Malofeev's network includes influential deputies Igor Girkin, a Russian black operative; Alexander Borodai, a far-right politician; elements of the Russian Orthodox Church; paramilitary units; think tanks; philanthropic organizations; and media outlets.<sup>452</sup> This network of organizations, united using Malofeev's political and financial connections, has been used to foment separatism to destabilize Russian rivals and promote Russian Eurasianist ideology since at least 2014.<sup>453</sup> An analysis by Bellingcat's Christo Grozev suggests that on numerous occasions, Malofeev has been tapped by the Kremlin to use his network to conduct shaping operations in foreign countries.<sup>454</sup>

Konstantin Malofeev is far from the only Russian oligarch involved in foreign influence and subversion operations. Other prominent oligarchs, such as Vladislav Surkov and Vladimir Yakunin, have had significant roles facilitating Russia's seizure of Crimea and interfering in foreign elections.<sup>455</sup> Malofeev stands out from his peers, however, in his extreme ideological convictions. Malofeev is an ideological descendant of Alexander Dugin and the Izborsk Club, whose Eurasianist dreams he aggressively attempts to inject into state policy, beginning first in 2014 in Russian-occupied Ukraine.

#### 1. Network History

Malofeev was instrumental in uniting the Russian far-right with Russian state geopolitical goals during the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This war would link

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<sup>452</sup> Weaver, "Malofeev."

<sup>453</sup> Christo Grozev, "The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part I," Bellingcat, March 4, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>.

<sup>454</sup> Grozev.

<sup>455</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, "The Hidden Author of Putinism," *Atlantic*, November 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/11/hidden-author-putinism-russia-vladislav-surkov/382489/>.

Malofeev with Russian clandestine operative Igor Girkin, radical politician Alexander Borodai, and Alexander Dugin in an attempt to develop the Eurasianist idea of Novorossiia into a political entity.<sup>456</sup> While the political state of Novorossiia did not last, the project provided a proof of concept for Eurasianist ideas along with a network of veterans and supporters who remain influential voices on Russian foreign policy.<sup>457</sup> Many of these veterans of the war are far-right extremists, including fighters from the Russian Imperial Legion and Rusich who fought under the command of Igor Girkin and continue to echo his geopolitical stances.

Igor Girkin's career is indicative of the Russian Federation's progressive experiments with hybrid warfare and the grassroots relationships developed with extremists and separatists on the political far-right. In 1992, Girkin, serving as an officer with the Russian FSB, fought as a volunteer in Russian separatist wars in Moldova and Bosnia.<sup>458</sup> In Bosnia, the separatist war took on early characteristics of the traditionalist geopolitics later articulated by Dugin. There, Girkin embedded with Serbian paramilitary in the separatist region of Republika Srpska.<sup>459</sup> During this deployment, Girkin was assigned to Russian Volunteer Unit 2 along with hundreds of other Russian volunteers.<sup>460</sup> This unit became known as the "Tsar Wolves" because of the number of volunteers sympathetic to the restoration of the traditional Russian monarchy.<sup>461</sup>

The Tsar Wolves are believed to have participated in numerous cases of crimes against humanity, with Serbian fighters targeting Bosnian Muslims. The worst of these atrocities occurred in the city of Visegrad, where up to 3,000 Bosnian Muslims were

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<sup>456</sup> Weaver, "Malofeev."

<sup>457</sup> Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiia"; Laruelle, "Back From Utopia."

<sup>458</sup> Miroslav Mareš, Martin Laryš, and Jan Holzer, *Militant Right-Wing Extremism in Putin's Russia: Legacies, Forms and Threats* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>459</sup> Majda Ruge, "The Past and the Furious: How Russia's Revisionism Threatens Bosnia," European Council on Foreign Relations, September 13, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-past-and-the-furious-how-russias-revisionism-threatens-bosnia/>.

<sup>460</sup> Mareš, Laryš, and Holzer, *Militant Right-Wing Extremism in Putin's Russia*.

<sup>461</sup> Mareš, Laryš, and Holzer.

massacred, and a local spa, the Vilina Vlas hotel, was turned into a mass rape camp.<sup>462</sup> Girkin has acknowledged participating in the Visegrad campaign (and was photographed in the city) but denies participating in the most horrendous crimes against humanity there.<sup>463</sup> He still admits to participating in the war in defense of ethnic Slavs in Serbia against “Muslim savages.” Girkin would later “volunteer” in the Russian wars in the Caucasus into the early 2000s. At some point, amid these various wars, Girkin cultivated a relationship with future Russian ultraconservative politician Alexander Borodai.<sup>464</sup>

Alexander Borodai similarly volunteered for service in the small wars that followed the collapse of the USSR and fought in Transnistria in 1992.<sup>465</sup> Borodai would later become a political radical, participating in the attempted coup against President Boris Yeltsin in 1993.<sup>466</sup> This interest in radical politics may have been instilled in him by his father, Yury Borodai, a scholar of conservative political philosophy and an early proponent of Eurasianist ideology along with Lev Gumilyov.<sup>467</sup>

Borodai became an associate of Malofeev while working as an editor for far-right intellectual and Izborsk Club member Alexander Prokhanov at Prokhanov’s newspaper *Zavtra*.<sup>468</sup> *Zavtra* is a Russian neo-fascist news organization, with as many as 100,000

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<sup>462</sup> Hikmet Karčić, “An Erased Memorial, a Rape Motel, and a Nationalist Disneyland: Bosnian Genocide Denial and the Fight for Memory in a Bosnian Town,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2021): 167–73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2021.0025>.

<sup>463</sup> Radio Sarajevo, “Igor Strelkov.”

<sup>464</sup> “Просто я, Леонтьев и Стрелков Давно Знакомы” [It is just that I, Leontiev, and Strelkov have known each other for a long time], *RBK Daily*, May 26, 2014, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2014/05/26/56bea07a9a7947299f72d02d>.

<sup>465</sup> Andrew Roth, “Former Russian Rebels Trade War in Ukraine for Posh Life in Moscow,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/former-russian-rebels-trade-war-in-ukraine-for-posh-life-in-moscow/2015/09/13/6b71f862-3b8c-11e5-b34f-4e0a1e3a3bf9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/former-russian-rebels-trade-war-in-ukraine-for-posh-life-in-moscow/2015/09/13/6b71f862-3b8c-11e5-b34f-4e0a1e3a3bf9_story.html); O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, “The Rise and Fall of ‘Novorossiya.’”

<sup>466</sup> Ivan Rakhmetov, Vladimir Vinnikov, and Alexander Borodai, “Слово дня: РАССТРЕЛ” [Word of the Day: Shooting], *Zavtra*, October 4, 2013, [https://zavtra.ru/word\\_of\\_day/1993](https://zavtra.ru/word_of_day/1993).

<sup>467</sup> Alexey Eremenko, “Ukrainian Rebel Leader’s Father Linked Evolution to Masturbation,” *Moscow Times*, July 22, 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/22/ukrainian-rebel-leaders-father-linked-evolution-to-masturbation-a37572>.

<sup>468</sup> Tom Balmforth, “From the Fringes toward Mainstream: Russian Nationalist Broadsheet Basks in Ukraine Conflict,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 17, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/26534846.html>.

subscribers in 2014.<sup>469</sup> Borodai contributed to over 150 articles while working at *Zavtra*, including extensive writings on Russian ethnic exceptionalism.<sup>470</sup> Igor Girkin also contributed to the newspaper.<sup>471</sup>

Borodai and Girkin would both later come to work for Malofeev at his investment bank, Marshall Capital, where they served until the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>472</sup> During this time, it is believed both Borodai and Girkin served as officers in the Russian intelligence service FSB.<sup>473</sup> These roles may have been fused by Malofeev, who would go on to collaborate with Russian intelligence services in other future foreign operations.<sup>474</sup>

When the war came, Malofeev, who played a key role funding separatists in Eastern Ukraine, secured the promotions of Borodai and Girkin to key positions managing administrative and military activities.<sup>475</sup> Borodai was appointed prime minister of the breakaway region of Donestk in 2014, until he was replaced by a Ukrainian militant, Alexander Zakharchenko, to whom he would continue serving as deputy prime minister.<sup>476</sup> Igor Girkin became the architect for the hybrid war in Donbas.<sup>477</sup> Girkin organized a networks of militants from Russia, Ukraine, and third countries into a formidable coalition of irregular support for Russian combat operations in Donbas.<sup>478</sup> These “Strelkovites,” or disciples of Strelkov (Girkin’s nom de guerre), as they are

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<sup>469</sup> Balmforth.

<sup>470</sup> Irena Chalupa, “A Ukraine Secessionist from Moscow Builds Greater Russia, One Province at a Time,” Atlantic Council, May 22, 2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-ukraine-secessionist-from-moscow-builds-greater-russia-one-province-at-a-time/>.

<sup>471</sup> Balmforth, “From the Fringes toward Mainstream.”

<sup>472</sup> Dmytro Putiata, Andrii Karbivnychi, and Vasyl Rudyka, “Springtime for the Invader, Part One,” *Militaryni*, April 11, 2020, <https://mil.in.ua/en/articles/springtime-for-the-invader-part-one/>; Chalupa, “A Ukraine Secessionist from Moscow Builds Greater Russia.”

<sup>473</sup> Chalupa, “A Ukraine Secessionist from Moscow Builds Greater Russia.”

<sup>474</sup> Christo Grozev, “Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang,” *Bellingcat*, March 25, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>.

<sup>475</sup> Weaver, “Malofeev.”

<sup>476</sup> O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, “The Rise and Fall of ‘Novorossiya.’”

<sup>477</sup> O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov.

<sup>478</sup> Radio Sarajevo, “Igor Strelkov.”

sometimes known, included hundreds of fighters from the Russian Imperial Legion and Rusich.<sup>479</sup>

After initial gains in Eastern Ukraine, combat operations bogged down in late 2014, and the war began to pose greater costs than benefits for Russia. By early 2015, the utopian dreams of the Novorossiia experiment were abandoned as the war in Donbas became a frozen conflict with a static frontline.<sup>480</sup> When the conflict stalled, Russia scaled back its ambitions and began to reel in the irregular forces operating in the region. The irregular forces had proven themselves a valuable asset but also a major liability.

Influencing this decision may have been the out-of-control behavior of Girkin and Dugin. In July 2014, forces commanded by Girkin shot down the civilian airliner Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 flying over Ukraine.<sup>481</sup> Girkin followed the incident with an disinformation campaign that ignited international outrage.<sup>482</sup> Igor Girkin and two of his subordinates were eventually found guilty of murder in a Netherland's court in November 2022 after a lengthy investigation into the incident.<sup>483</sup> All three men were sentenced to life in prison in absentia.<sup>484</sup> Dugin also provoked international outrage with unhinged comments about the war. These included calls for a Ukrainian genocide, which got him banned from entry into the United States.

## 2. Influence Operations

Malofeev is the founder and director of several organizations that are used to promote traditionalist ideology and advance Russian geopolitical interests. These include the Tsargrad Society, Katehon, and the Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation.

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<sup>479</sup> Russian Imperial Movement, “отнять и поделить.”

<sup>480</sup> Dergachev and Kirillov, “Republics Announced the Closure of the Project.”

<sup>481</sup> Bellingcat, “Identifying the Separatists Linked to the Downing of MH17”; EU vs. Disinfo, “MH17.”

<sup>482</sup> EU vs. Disinfo, “MH17.”

<sup>483</sup> “MH17 Trial: 3 Suspects Convicted over Role in 2014 Crash,” Deutsche Welle, November 17, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/mh17-trial-3-suspects-convicted-over-role-in-2014-crash/a-63790076>.

<sup>484</sup> Deutsche Welle.



The Tsargrad Society, previously known as the Double-Headed Eagle Society, is an ultranationalist organization dedicated to the revival of the Russian monarchy and the restoration of the Russian empire and its historical borders.<sup>485</sup> Tsargrad has developed its own media network that airs a combination of news, fringe opinions, and conspiracy theories from the Russian far-right. The content aired on Tsargrad TV varies from news of questionable veracity—such as stories of Tajik migrants recruiting Islamic State terrorists to advance anti-immigrant sentiment—to lowbrow bigotry—such as promoting one-way plane flights for gay people out of Russia.<sup>486</sup> Malofeev used Fox News as inspiration in creating Tsargrad, saying in an interview with *Financial Times*, “In many ways Tsargrad is similar to what Fox News has done. We started from the idea that there are many people who adhere to traditional values and they absolutely need a voice.”<sup>487</sup>

To court intellectuals, Malofeev developed Katehon, a think tank dedicated to spreading pro-Russian, Eurasianist ideas. The think tank regularly publishes articles, analyses, and outright conspiracy theories by politicians and scholars sympathetic to Russian, anti-Western beliefs, and pan-Slavism.<sup>488</sup> Katehon regularly features articles by Eurasianists, including Alexander Dugin, who is a regular contributor.<sup>489</sup> Katehon’s board of directors exemplifies the extent to which Malofeev has rallied Russian political support for Eurasianist ideology. The board includes former Putin advisor Sergey Glazyev, influential Russian politicians Alexander Makarov and Andrey Klimov, descendant of

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<sup>485</sup> “U.S. Treasury Designates Facilitators of Russian Sanctions Evasion,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, April 20, 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0731>.

<sup>486</sup> Yaroslava Kiryukhina, “Russian TV Offers Gay People One-Way Tickets to Leave,” BBC News, June 30, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-40456443>; Joanna Paraszczuk, “Russian News Channel Claims Tajik Migrants ‘Recruiting for IS’ in Yekaterinburg,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 27, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/124ussia-isis-recruitment-tajiks-report-islamic-state/26923879.html>.

<sup>487</sup> Courtney Weaver, “God’s TV, Russian Style,” *Financial Times*, October 17, 2015, ProQuest.

<sup>488</sup> Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, “Russia’s Toolkit in the Balkans,” in *Russia’s Game in the Balkans* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20988.6>.

<sup>489</sup> “Dugin,” Katehon, accessed January 20, 2023, <https://katehon.com/en/tags/dugin>.

Georgian aristocracy Zurab Chavchavadze, and former director of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies retired Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov.<sup>490</sup>

Malofeev's choice of name for the think tank is a significant dog whistle for the Russian far-right, contextualizing his geopolitical aims. Katehon is a reference to the "Katechon," or restrainer of the anti-Christ, who German fascist thinker Carl Schmitt viewed as an amoral force assigned by God to stabilize the earth to pave the way for the return of Christ.<sup>491</sup> This nod to Schmitt is notable as his ideas of "great spaces" for empires to administer their civilizational interests formed an essential component of Nazi expansionism.<sup>492</sup> This concept of great spaces, too, is explicitly stated as a field of interest in Katehon's analysis.<sup>493</sup>

The Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation is a Moscow-based philanthropic organization used as a front for funding Eurasianist political projects. The foundation is the largest private charitable organization in Russia.<sup>494</sup> The daily operations of the foundation are run by Malofeev advisor Alexander Komov. Metropolitan Tikhon (secular name Georgiy Alexandrovich Shevkunov), personal confessor to both Vladimir Putin and Malofeev, is a major stakeholder in the foundation. The foundation also runs a private school dedicated to restoring the traditions of the old Russian aristocracy.<sup>495</sup> Adjacent to his role as leader of this church-connected foundation, Malofeev serves as deputy head of the World Russian People's Council, an organization led by Patriarch Kirill, the chief religious leader of Russia.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> "About Us," Katehon, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://katehon.com/en/about-us>.

<sup>491</sup> Calvin Dieter Ullrich, "Carl Schmitt: Katechon," *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), July 3, 2018, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2018/07/03/carl-schmitt-katechon/>.

<sup>492</sup> Trevor J. Barnes and Claudio Minca, "Nazi Spatial Theory: The Dark Geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, no. 3 (2013): 669, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23485411>.

<sup>493</sup> Katehon, "About Us."

<sup>494</sup> Lautman, "An Unorthodox Russian Vision of Heaven and Hell."

<sup>495</sup> Shaun Walker, "'Russia's Soul Is Monarchic': Tsarist School Wants to Reverse 100 Years of History," *Guardian*, March 6, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/russia-revolution-tsarist-school-moscow-nicholas-ii>.

<sup>496</sup> "Konstantin Malofeev," Roscongress Foundation, accessed January 18, 2023, <https://roscongress.org/en/speakers/malofeev-konstantin/biography/>.

### 3. Illicit Financial Operations

Malofeev has organized a complex array of corporate entities to move illicit funding for himself and help Russian companies evade sanctions. The centerpiece of this financial network is the Autonomous Noncommercial Organization for the Study and Development of International Cooperation in the Economic Sphere International Agency of Sovereign Development (IASD).<sup>497</sup> Registered in May 2020 in Moscow, IASD is closely linked to Russian political influence operations in Africa.<sup>498</sup> The Saint Basil the Great Charitable Foundation has also been used to provide cover for illicit finance operations. The foundation has channeled material support to illegal separatist activities in Eastern Ukraine under the guise of humanitarian aid.<sup>499</sup> The foundation has also provided direct and indirect support to numerous far-right political parties and interests in Europe and the United States, as detailed in the following paragraphs.

### 4. Support to Global Far-Right Organizations

Malofeev has supported far-right political movements through Europe with both information operations by Katehon and Tsargrad and illicit financing by the Saint Basil the Great Foundation. These operations are run through additional intermediaries to disguise their origin. Malofeev deputy Alexander Komov plays a key role in interfacing with foreign political organizations to distribute funds and coordinate action.<sup>500</sup> Komov has personally directed funding to the Lega party of Italy through a connection with party leader Matteo Salvini's advisor Gianluca Savoini, cultivated through the Lombardy-Russia Cultural

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<sup>497</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "U.S. Treasury Designates Facilitators of Russian Sanctions Evasion."

<sup>498</sup> "Konstantin Malofeev: 'Russia Is a Partner of Strategic Importance to Africa,'" Roscongress Foundation, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://roscongress.org/en/materials/konstantin-malofeev-rossiya-dlya-afrikanskikh-stran-yavlyaetsya-prioritetnym-partnerom/>.

<sup>499</sup> "TV Producer for Russian Oligarch Charged with Violating Crimea-Related Sanctions," U.S. Department of Justice, March 3, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/tv-producer-russian-oligarch-charged-violating-crimea-related-sanctions>; "St. Basil the Great Foundation Collects 100 Tons of Aid for the Ukrainian Refugees," Orthodox Christianity, July 23, 2014, <https://orthochristian.com/72468.html>.

<sup>500</sup> Ellen Rivera, *Unraveling the Anti-choice Supergroup Agenda Europe in Spain: A Case Study of CitizenGo and HazteOir*, IERES Occasional Papers, no. 4 (Washington, DC: Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University, 2019), <https://www.illiberalism.org/unraveling-the-anti-choice-supergroup-agenda-europe-in-spain/>.

Association. Komov has also developed a relationship with the Spanish far-right political activist group CitizenGo, which he has utilized to funnel money to the Vox party in Spain, Front National in France, Freedom Party of Austria, Alternative for Germany, and Fidez of Hungary.<sup>501</sup>

Malofeev has cultivated relations with ultraconservatives in the United States as well. In 2013, Malofeev recruited former Fox News director Jack Hanick to develop a new media network to promote Russian interests and far-right ideology.<sup>502</sup> Hanick, ostensibly motivated by Malofeev’s ultraconservative vision of Christianity, moved to Moscow in July 2013 to work on what would eventually become Tsargrad television.<sup>503</sup> Hanick continued to work for Malofeev, including attempting to build affiliates in Bulgaria and Greece, until at least 2017.<sup>504</sup> In February 2022, Hanick was arrested for violating U.S. sanctions.<sup>505</sup>

Malofeev has sought to develop ties with American evangelical Christians. Malofeev’s surrogate, Komov, is the Russian representative of the Illinois-based World Congress of Families.<sup>506</sup> The World Congress of Families promotes concepts of traditional families grounded in fundamentalist takes on Christianity and is classified as an anti-LGBTQ hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>507</sup> Malofeev has also made connections with other influential voices on the religious fringe, including Austin Ruse, director of World Congress of Families affiliate the Center for Family and Human Rights.<sup>508</sup> One of Malofeev’s administrators of the Saint Basil the Great Foundation,

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<sup>501</sup> Rivera.

<sup>502</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, “TV Producer for Russian Oligarch Charged.”

<sup>503</sup> U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>504</sup> U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>505</sup> U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>506</sup> “How the World Congress of Families Serves Russian Orthodox Political Interests,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed January 1, 2023, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>.

<sup>507</sup> “World Congress of Families,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/world-congress-families>.

<sup>508</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, “World Congress of Families.”

Sergei Rudov, is alleged to have met with National Rifle Association (NRA) representatives in Moscow along with Rodina's Dmitry Rogozin in 2016 to gain possible connections to then-candidate Donald Trump.<sup>509</sup> Malofeev has leveraged these relationships to launder conspiracy theories about religious persecution of Christians in the United States and an LGBTQ agenda to undermine the Ukrainian state, thereby agitating conservative blocs in both countries.<sup>510</sup>

## 5. Destabilization Operations

The most dramatic of Malofeev's attempts to cultivate separatist organizations was in Ukraine in 2014. Since then, Malofeev appears to have adopted the more indirect approach of destabilizing foreign governments through support to far-right political movements and the purchasing of Russian stakes in critical infrastructure, strategic businesses, and natural resources of foreign nations. But even these lower-profile operations have involved direct action, including attempted coups and assassinations.

One such incident was the attempted assassination of Bulgarian arms maker Emilian Gebrev in April 2015.<sup>511</sup> Gebrev and his two sons were poisoned by GRU Unit 29155 agents shortly after entering a bid to purchase Dunarit, a large Bulgarian weapons production business.<sup>512</sup> Malofeev had made competing offers to purchase Dunarit, one of several strategically important Bulgarian defense and communications businesses.<sup>513</sup> Malofeev's bids to acquire the businesses began in September 2014 and were eventually withdrawn and disguised through several surrogates.<sup>514</sup> These surrogates included

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<sup>509</sup> "Reps Lieu and Rice Call for FBI Investigation into Russian Influence on NRA," Official website of Congressman Ted Lieu, May 25, 2018, <https://lieu.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/reps-lieu-and-rice-call-fbi-investigation-russian-influence-nra>.

<sup>510</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "World Congress of Families."

<sup>511</sup> Michael Schwartz, "How a Poisoning in Bulgaria Exposed Russian Assassins in Europe," *New York Times*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/22/world/europe/bulgaria-russia-assassination-squad.html>.

<sup>512</sup> Schwartz.

<sup>513</sup> Schwartz, "Poisoning in Bulgaria"; "Malofeev's JV Partner Acquiring Strategic Bulgarian Assets: A Risk Analysis," *Christo's Blog*, March 26, 2015, <https://cgrozev.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/malofeevs-jv-partner-acquiring-strategic-bulgarian-assets-a-risk-analysis/>.

<sup>514</sup> "Malofeev's JV Partner."

Russian-Belgian citizen Pierre Michel Louvrier and American Jack Hanick, whose involvement in developing Malofeev's media businesses was discussed previously. According to Bellingcat researcher Christo Grozev, the bid to purchase these companies appeared to be rigged from the start, with collusion between Malofeev and the seller, fugitive Bulgarian banker Tzvetan Vassilev.<sup>515</sup> Grozev argued that the sham deal (originally proposed at one euro due to company liabilities) was concealed through a shell company developed by Pierre Michel Louvrier, a close associate of Malofeev, to avoid triggering intervention from the Bulgarian government on national security concerns.<sup>516</sup> The assassination attempt occurred approximately a month and a half after Pierre Michel Louvrier began buying significant stakes in Dunarit's parent company in March 2015.<sup>517</sup> The deal was ultimately stopped in June 2015 after Bulgarian authorities learned of the threat posed by Louvrier's connections to Malofeev and the Russian state due to investigative reporting on the subject.<sup>518</sup>

Some analysts have attributed the assassination attempt on Gebrev to his companies' arms shipments to Ukraine after the Russian seizure of Crimea rather than competition with Malofeev.<sup>519</sup> The motive for the assassination attempt was never disclosed by Bulgarian authorities, but there are compelling reasons to suggest that Malofeev was the primary instigator. First, the timing of the incident coincided with attempts to conclude Malofeev-sponsored acquisitions of strategic Bulgarian companies, which Gebrev helped forestall. Second, and more significantly, the GRU agents involved

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<sup>515</sup> "Malofeev's JV Partner."

<sup>516</sup> "Malofeev's JV Partner."

<sup>517</sup> Atanas Tchobanov, "Journalistic Investigation Stopped Russian Oligarch from Taking Over Bulgarian Telecom," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, September 28, 2015, <https://www.reportingproject.net/internetownership/>; Schwartz, "Poisoning in Bulgaria."

<sup>518</sup> Tchobanov, "Journalistic Investigation Stopped Russian Oligarch."

<sup>519</sup> Michael Schwartz, "The Arms Merchant in the Sights of Russia's Elite Assassination Squad," *New York Times*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/24/world/europe/arms-merchant-russia-assassination-squad.html>.

in the operation would work with Malofeev a year later in an attempt to overthrow the Montenegrin government.<sup>520</sup>

Russian threats to Montenegro escalated in 2015 when the country began expressing interest in joining NATO.<sup>521</sup> These threats, particularly from Russia's foreign ministry, began intensifying after May 2016, when the Montenegrin government signed NATO's ascension process.<sup>522</sup> The threats turned into decisive action days before the October 16, 2016, presidential election.<sup>523</sup> Unable to stop the NATO ascension process scheduled to be finalized in 2017, Russian GRU agents and Serbian paramilitaries attempted to overthrow the government.<sup>524</sup> The plan to overthrow the government involved over 20 paramilitary saboteurs from Serbia and Montenegro. These insurgents were instructed to obtain weapons and use them to seize the country's parliament disguised as police and install a pro-Russian government.<sup>525</sup> The plot, coordinated by Malofeev, Russian GRU agents, and Montenegrin opposition leaders, failed to launch.<sup>526</sup> The plot was broken up by law enforcement the night before the election, resulting in 20 arrests.<sup>527</sup>

The Montenegrin coup fiasco was only the latest of Malofeev's destabilizing operations in the Balkans. Malofeev is believed to have begun cultivating pro-Russian support in the Balkans since at least 2014.<sup>528</sup> Malofeev views the Slavic, Orthodox peoples

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<sup>520</sup> "The Dreadful Eight: GRU's Unit 29155 and the 2015 Poisoning of Emilian Gebrev," Bellingcat, November 23, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/11/23/the-dreadful-eight-gru-unit-29155-and-the-2015-poisoning-of-emilian-gebrev/>.

<sup>521</sup> Grozev, "Balkan Gambit: Part 2."

<sup>522</sup> Grozev.

<sup>523</sup> Grozev.

<sup>524</sup> Grozev.

<sup>525</sup> Grozev.

<sup>526</sup> Grozev, "Balkan Gambit: Part 2"; Heather A. Conley and Matthew Melino, "Russian Malign Influence in Montenegro: The Weaponization and Exploitation of History, Religion, and Economics," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 14, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-malign-influence-montenegro-weaponization-and-exploitation-history-religion-and>.

<sup>527</sup> Grozev, "Balkan Gambit: Part 2."

<sup>528</sup> Grozev, "The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit"; Grozev, "Balkan Gambit: Part 2."



of the Balkans as part of Russia’s Eurasian sphere of influence.<sup>529</sup> Malofeev has stoked Serbian separatism in Bosnia through support to Bosnian Serb politician Milorad Dodik and deployment of pro-Russian paramilitaries to the flashpoint region of Republika Srpska.<sup>530</sup> Malofeev has also cultivated ties with the Night Wolves, a far-right Russian motorcycle gang whom he helped expand into the Balkans, particularly Serbia and Bosnia.<sup>531</sup> There, the Night Wolves have engaged in numerous subversive pro-Russian, pro-Serbian activities, including fomenting and disrupting protests.<sup>532</sup>

Konstantin Malofeev, like Yevgeny Prigozhin, has taken a significant role in advancing Russian geopolitical goals in Africa. Malofeev’s IASD has signed numerous financing agreements with African countries including \$2.5 billion in contracts with Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger.<sup>533</sup> These agreements have been touted as a Russian alternative to Western development for Africa, grounded in respect for the sovereignty of each nation.<sup>534</sup> Like Prigozhin’s Wagner Group operations on the continent, these financial arrangements appear designed to capture the resource wealth of African nations by securing the support of illiberal African leaders. Malofeev has expressed this aim when speaking about IASD’s mission in Africa, noting an interest in the continent’s \$4 trillion of untapped natural resources while bashing the unfairness of governance stipulations required by International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Toolkit in the Balkans.”

<sup>530</sup> Stronski and Himes.

<sup>531</sup> Stronski and Himes.

<sup>532</sup> Sead Turcalo, “Bosnia Must Counter Russia’s Cultivation of Far-Right Extremists,” *Balkan Insight*, August 26, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/26/bosnia-must-counter-russias-cultivation-of-far-right-extremists/>.

<sup>533</sup> Matt Maldonado, “Russia’s Hardest Working Oligarch Takes Talents to Africa,” *PONARS Eurasia*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/russia-s-hardest-working-oligarch-takes-talents-to-africa/>.

<sup>534</sup> “Second Summit Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum for Peace, Security and Development,” *Roscongress Foundation*, accessed December 30, 2022, <https://summitafrica.ru/en/news/ekonomicheskij-suverenitet-afriki-problemy-i-reshenija/>.

<sup>535</sup> *Roscongress Foundation*.

## **B. RODINA—PROMOTING RUSSIA AS THE CENTER OF THE GLOBAL FAR-RIGHT**

Rodina, or the All-Russian Political Party, is a political coalition of ultranationalist groups in Russia. The group’s name derives from the Russian word “Rah-dyn-ah,” which roughly translates to “native land” or “motherland.” Rodina has been an influential proponent of far-right policies within the Russian parliament (Duma) and has ties to RIM.

Rodina was first founded in 2003 as a politically left nationalist party and quickly became the fourth-largest political party in the Russian Duma by 2004.<sup>536</sup> Rodina, while not a dominant force in the Duma, proved an important catalyst for Russia’s drift to the political extremes. The party combined constituents across the political spectrum under increasingly radical nationalist positions, which over time normalized extreme politics.<sup>537</sup> Putin’s government, fearing the group’s leftist leanings, facilitated multiple dissolutions and reconstitutions to bend Rodina toward political orthodoxy, beginning in 2006. By 2012, the Rodina political party of today emerged as a distinctly far-right-leaning entity beholden to allies of Vladimir Putin.<sup>538</sup> Some accounts even go so far as to portray Putin’s influence over the party as absolute from its inception. In 2005, Tom Parfitt of *The Guardian* claimed that Putin himself was involved in the creation of the left-leaning Rodina to marginalize remaining communist blocs within the Russian Duma and consolidate power.<sup>539</sup>

### **1. Organization and Leadership**

Rodina has deep connections to the sources of power and state policy within Russia. Its founders include long-running members of Putin’s inner circle, including Dmitri Rogozin and Sergey Glazyev. Rogozin has held numerous high-level political positions in

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<sup>536</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “Rethinking Russian Nationalism: Historical Continuity, Political Diversity, and Doctrinal Fragmentation,” in *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (London: Routledge, 2009), 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203879726>.

<sup>537</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>538</sup> Laruelle.

<sup>539</sup> Tom Parfitt, “‘Racist’ Russian TV Advert Investigated,” *Guardian*, November 10, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/nov/10/russia.tomparfitt>.

Putin’s regime, including deputy prime minister of defense and space industries.<sup>540</sup> In addition to his involvement with Rodina and the Putin regime, Rogozin has been an active proponent of the return of the Russian tsar. In 2007, Rogozin founded the Greater Russia party, a pro-monarchist, far-right political organization.<sup>541</sup> Shortly after its founding, Rogozin appointed Andrey Savelyev, former Rodina representative, to the State Duma to run the organization. The Great Russia Party, while never granted registration as a political organization, remains an advocacy group that is believed to interface with RIM.<sup>542</sup>

Glazyev, a member of the Izborsk Club, has been a long-running (though on and off again) advisor to Putin. Glazyev has been leader of numerous major Russian economic projects including the Eurasian Economic Union.<sup>543</sup> Glazyev has been a longtime promoter of Russian paranoia surrounding ethnic extinction.<sup>544</sup> A 1999 book by Glazyev entitled *A Genocide: Russia and the New World Order* suggests a host of internal and external pressures caused catastrophic Russian population losses after the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>545</sup> This narrative became a recurring theme of Russian military intervention into foreign nations to protect “ethnic Russians” under Putin.<sup>546</sup>

## 2. Transnational Activities

In addition to its role in shaping domestic politics within Russia, Rodina has played a role in exporting Russian far-right ideology abroad. In March 2015, Rodina hosted the

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<sup>540</sup> Ed Brown, “Who Is Dmitry Rogozin? Putin’s War Strategist Ally Tipped for Top Role,” *Newsweek*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/dmitry-rogozin-putin-rosocosmos-fired-1725447>.

<sup>541</sup> Mikhail Malaev, “Главные монархисты России” [The main monarchists of Russia], *Kommersant*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3246565>.

<sup>542</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>543</sup> “Sergei Glazyev,” Eurasian Economic Commission, accessed October 6, 2022, [http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/act/integr\\_i\\_makroec/Pages/director.aspx](http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/act/integr_i_makroec/Pages/director.aspx).

<sup>544</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Ivan Grek, “Decoding Putin’s Speeches: The Three Ideological Lines of Russia’s Military Intervention in Ukraine,” *Russia Matters* (blog), February 25, 2022, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/decoding-putins-speeches-three-ideological-lines-russias-military-intervention-ukraine>.

<sup>545</sup> Sergei Glazyev, *A Genocide: Russia and the New World Order*, trans. Rachel B. Douglas (Washington, DC: Executive Intelligence Review, 1999), <http://archive.org/details/AGenocideRussiaAndTheNewWorldOrder1999>.

<sup>546</sup> Laruelle and Grek, “Decoding Putin’s Speeches.”

International Russian Conservative Forum in Saint Petersburg to promote traditionalist values.<sup>547</sup> The event attracted far-right parties and outright extremists from across Europe and the United States and connected them with RIM members who attended the conference in large numbers.<sup>548</sup> The forum attracted prominent neo-fascist groups from Europe, including Golden Dawn from Greece, the National Democratic Party from Germany, and Forza Nuova of Italy, and provided a speaking opportunity for Jared Taylor, prominent American white-supremacist intellectual and editor of the racist publication *American Renaissance*.<sup>549</sup> The success of the event led to the creation of the World National-Conservative Movement as a joint RIM–Rodina enterprise in 2015.<sup>550</sup> This coalition comprises 50 far-right organizations around the world as a bulwark against the incursion of multi-culturalism and liberalism on traditional values.<sup>551</sup> The movement has a distinct paramilitary flavor, as it promotes camps for training in both athletics and military operations.<sup>552</sup>

In December 2015, Rodina founder Dmitri Rogozin met a delegation of NRA representatives in Moscow in violation of U.S. sanctions.<sup>553</sup> The meeting is alleged to have also included Sergei Rudov of the Saint Basil the Great Foundation.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement*.

<sup>548</sup> Soufan Center.

<sup>549</sup> Soufan Center.

<sup>550</sup> Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

<sup>551</sup> Soufan Center, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement*.

<sup>552</sup> Soufan Center.

<sup>553</sup> U.S. Senate Committee on Finance, *The NRA & Russia: How a Tax-Exempt Organization Became a Foreign Asset* (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, 2019), [https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/The%20NRA%20&%20Russia%20-%20How%20a%20Tax-Exempt%20Organization%20Became%20a%20Foreign%20Asset%20\(with%20addendum\).pdf](https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/The%20NRA%20&%20Russia%20-%20How%20a%20Tax-Exempt%20Organization%20Became%20a%20Foreign%20Asset%20(with%20addendum).pdf).

<sup>554</sup> Official website of Congressman Ted Lieu, “Call for FBI Investigation.”

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