

THE SOUFAN CENTER

SPECIAL REPORT:

INSIDE THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL MOVEMENT

Practical Implications of U.S. Sanctions

April 2020



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWD	The Atomwaffen Division
BNP	British National Party
CTED	United Nations Counterterrorism Executive Directorate
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DoJ	Department of Justice
E.O.	Executive Order
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
IEEPA	International Emergency Economic Powers Act
INA	U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act
IS	The Islamic State
JTTF	FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force
LOC	Letter of Concurrence
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NRM	The Nordic Resistance Movement
REMT	Racially and Ethnically Motivated Terrorism
RIM	The Russian Imperial Movement
SDGT(s)	Specially Designated Global Terrorist(s)
TWP	Traditionalist Worker Party
U.S.C	Code of Laws of the United States
VK	VKontakte
WNCM	The World National Conservative Movement
WSE	White Supremacy Extremism

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KEY FINDINGS

- The U.S. Department of State's designation of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) as a terrorist organization is a significant and unprecedented policy step toward taking more concrete action against this group. The State Department's designation was announced against the backdrop of a growing white supremacist threat in the United States and around the world. The designation underscores the reality that violence stemming from WSE groups pose an equivalent, or perhaps even greater, threat to that of Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaida, to the U.S. homeland.
- RIM and the Imperial Legion, the group's military wing, have been responsible for training white supremacist terrorists and cooperating with U.S.-based white supremacists. RIM also has clear links to the Sweden-based neo-Nazi group, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), a group that U.S. President Donald Trump has highlighted in his National Security Strategy on Terrorism as a potential threat to U.S. national security and American interests overseas. It is crucial for the U.S. government to further investigate transnational networks of white supremacy groups abroad, particularly those like RIM and NRM, which have connections to the United States and the West.
- The designation unlocks a set of practical policy tools that allow U.S. authorities and the private sector to monitor the activities of RIM and those who associate with it. Additionally, the designation can lead to tangible action. This includes prosecutorial leverage in applying civil and criminal penalties to RIM and its associates; provide the Treasury Department the ability to designate RIM individuals; the freezing of RIM's assets in the United States; curbing RIM's entry and that of its leaders and supporters into the United States; and influencing social media and technology companies to take down the group's hateful and violent content on the internet. The U.S. Government and its relevant agencies should move to operationalize the tools now at their disposal to ensure that the designation is not only symbolic, but results in tangible gains in countering these groups and their broader network.
- There are important differences between the 'Specially Designated Global Terrorist' (SDGT) designation – by which RIM is designated – and the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation. It is important to note that an FTO designation provides slightly more leverage to the U.S. Department of Justice, particularly as it relates to pursuing material support charges against U.S. citizens associated with RIM, but this does not in any way diminish both the symbolic and practical importance of the State Department's SDGT designation of RIM.

- The U.S. Congress has taken important steps in recognizing the rising threat of violent white supremacy and far-right extremism, including through proposing legislation. Similarly, the international community, specifically the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED), has reported on the threat, including a 320 percent rise in extreme right wing attacks globally in the last five years, and, as a consequence, has sparked critical discussions to better understand the complexity of the threat, including its transnational nature.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past several years, high-profile terrorist attacks by violent white supremacist extremists have gained worldwide attention and thrust the movement onto the front page of the news. From the deadly mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand to a violent rampage motivated by xenophobia in El Paso, Texas, the violent white supremacist movement is on the offensive and is gaining momentum. Its legions of followers congregate online to spread propaganda, recruit new members, and intimidate minorities. And as the movement continues to grow, it has sought to expand its network globally.

Among the most high-profile organizations in the broader constellation of ultra-nationalist and white supremacist organizations is the Russian Imperial Movement, or RIM, a group that has served as a catalyst for politically motivated violence from St. Petersburg to Stockholm and beyond. And while groups like The Base, Atomwaffen Division (AWD), or the Azov Battalion might get the most media attention, RIM has efficiently built an infrastructure that has allowed it to expand its network, train terrorist operatives, and entrench itself as a viable entity in Russian society, even as its primary objectives are, at times, at odds with the Kremlin's priorities.

Internationally, the far-right continues to mobilize in Europe, where organized marches took place in Budapest, Hungary and Sofia, Bulgaria, and were attended by neo-Nazis from Germany, Sweden, Poland, the United States and elsewhere. In February 2020, in Hanau, Germany, a town located 15 miles east of Frankfurt, a lone individual went on a terrorist rampage, shooting patrons at two separate hookah bars and murdering nine people. The terrorist involved in that attack has been described as motivated by a mix of anti-immigrant beliefs, eugenics, conspiracy theories, and extreme misogyny – many of the same ideological beliefs that motivate white supremacist terrorism worldwide. These events are merely the latest in a series of global incidents

of violence linked to the far-right and white supremacy, which has staged a resurgence in recent years.¹

International institutions are recognizing the threat that far-right and white supremacy groups pose and are growing increasingly concerned about their transnational connections. In November 2019, following a global spike in white supremacist violence, the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law hosted a scoping workshop on Racially- and Ethnically-Motivated Terrorism ('REMT') in Valletta, Malta. The workshop brought together 35 policy practitioners from 12 countries across Africa, Asia, North America and the Caribbean, as well as 13 international organizations to better define and understand the threat posed by 'REMT.' The United Nation's (UN) Counterterrorism Executive Directorate (CTED), a counterterrorism body of the UN Security Council, published a trends report in April 2020 underscoring concerns by UN member states of the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism. The report² included research indicating an alarming 320 percent rise in terrorist attacks by individuals or groups affiliated with such movements over the past five years, noting the deadly attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 2019), El Paso, United States (August 2019), Halle, Germany (October 2019) and Hanau, Germany (February 2020).

This special report of The Soufan Center analyzes the significance of the U.S. State Department's designation of RIM as a terrorist organization, against the backdrop of the rising white supremacy extremism (WSE) threat to the United States and the West. This paper elucidates the practical implications of the State Department's designation and how U.S. government agencies and the private sector can use an expanded set of tools to pursue RIM and those who do business with the organization and its leadership. Finally, this paper reveals RIM's global reach, tracking its transnational links and activities across the West and beyond, including the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

RIM is an ultra-nationalist and paramilitary group dedicated to fighting against globalization, multiculturalism, and liberalism. The group also plays a prominent role in the violent white supremacy movement, as documented by the September 2019 report of The Soufan Center titled 'White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement.'³

On April 6, 2020, the U.S. State Department designated RIM as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13224.⁴ At the same time, also pursuant to E.O. 13224, the State Department designated three of the group's leaders, Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev, Denis Valliullovich Gariev, and Nikolay Nikolayevich Trushchalov.⁵ The recognition of the threat posed by RIM, via the action taken by the State Department to sanction

this group and three of its leaders as terrorists, is both a major symbolic milestone and a practical step in U.S. and international efforts to counter violent white supremacy and its broader supporting network.

This is the first time in history that the U.S. government has taken such an action against a white supremacy group, as historically, such sanctions have been almost exclusively applied to Salafi-jihadist groups including the Islamic State (IS), al-Qaida, and its affiliates. This move demonstrates that the threat of white supremacy has reached, and arguably surpassed, the threat of IS, al-Qaida, and Salafi-jihadist groups to the U.S. homeland. FBI Director Christopher Wray has also elevated the threat level of WSE groups, noting that the FBI has made ‘racially motivated violent extremism’ a top-level priority,⁶ ‘so it’s on the same footing in terms of our national threat banding as ISIS and homegrown violent extremism.’

The State Department reported that it was able to designate RIM thanks to an expansion of E.O. 13324 via an order that U.S. President Donald Trump signed in September 2019, noting that it was ‘the most significant expansion of federal terrorism sanctions authorities since the aftermath of 9/11.’⁷ The State Department’s designation is unique in that RIM and its leadership are the first white supremacist group and individuals to be sanctioned pursuant to U.S. law.⁸

The State Department’s RIM designation offers U.S. authorities a wider array of tools to monitor RIM and its activities.⁹ This includes blocking RIM from participating in the U.S. financial system; preventing RIM and its supporters from entering the United States; providing law enforcement authorities new surveillance and investigatory tools to build cases against RIM members and those who do business with them; and providing an impetus for social media and technology companies to take down RIM’s websites and limit its social media presence, which can help to stop RIM from spreading its hateful ideology online.¹⁰

Finally, now that the United States has designated one violent supremacist group, it has established a crucial precedent to consider designating other white supremacist groups that are also deemed a national security threat to the U.S. homeland. In U.S. President Donald Trump’s ‘National Strategy on Counterterrorism,’ released in 2018, it includes the mention of several white supremacy and nationalist groups and movements abroad whose ‘use of violence and intent to destabilize societies often puts American lives at risk.’¹¹ Among the groups singled out is the Nordic Resistance Movement, which, as this paper describes, maintains ties to the Russian Imperial Movement. According to the strategy document, NRM has ‘demonstrated against the U.S. Government actions it perceives are supportive of Israel and has the potential to extend its targeting to U.S. interests.’ Another WSE organization mentioned in the strategy is the neo-Nazi

group, National Action, a terrorist organization banned by the United Kingdom. As the strategy explicitly mentions, the National Action group, while based in the United Kingdom, has connected with like-minded organizations in the United States, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia and Poland.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SANCTIONS AGAINST RIM

What is the Russian Imperial Movement?

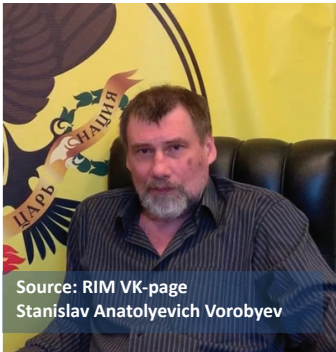
RIM is an ultra-nationalist and paramilitary group that believes in the notion of a Russian autocratic monarchy that harkens to the days of imperial rule under monarchists like Nikolai II.¹² Concerned with fighting against globalization, multiculturalism, and liberalism, RIM is part and parcel of the broader international WSE project, even if it mostly hovers on the periphery of this movement at various points. The group's membership is rigid and adheres to the dualistic beliefs that members should be part of the Russian Orthodox Church and conform to the group's view of the necessity of creating a Russian Imperial state. The group's vitriol is aimed at Jews and Ukrainian nationalists. Denis Valliullovich Gariev, the militant leader of RIM who was one of three RIM leaders sanctioned, was quoted as saying, 'We [RIM] see Ukrainian-ness as rabies... either quarantine or liquidation, or he'll infect everyone.'¹³ RIM also views Western societies, as represented by the United States and Europe, as enemies that are attempting to weaken, kill, or otherwise undermine Russian nationalism and Russian influence throughout the world.

The U.S. Government Sanctions the Russian Imperial Movement and its Leaders as Terrorists

On April 6, 2020, the U.S. State Department designated RIM as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13224. At the same time, also pursuant to E.O. 13224, the State Department designated three of the group's leaders, Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev, Denis Valliullovich Gariev, and Nikolay Nikolayevich Trushchalov. The State Department reported that it was able to designate RIM thanks to an expansion of E.O. 13224 via an order that President Trump signed in September 2019, noting that it was 'the most significant expansion of federal terrorism sanctions authorities since the aftermath of 9/11.'

Figure 1: Flag Used by RIM and Sanctioned Leaders

THE SOUFAN CENTER **Flag Used by RIM and Sanctioned Leaders**



What is Executive Order 13224 and How Has it Changed?

Ten days after the terrorist attacks that took place on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush, in a joint Congressional session, declared financial war against terrorists. A few days later, Bush signed E.O. 13224 into law, which provided expanded legal authorities for the Departments of State and Treasury to designate individuals and organizations as ‘Specially Designated Global Terrorists’ (SDGTs). Since the inception of E.O. 13224, the U.S. government has designated more than 1,000 entities and individuals, the overwhelming majority of which are Salafi-jihadist in nature.

After 9/11, the U.S. government began aggressively sanctioning terrorists. It had no choice: The 9/11 Commission found that al-Qaida operatives had abused the formal U.S. financial system when they cashed checks, made bank deposits, and ATM transactions as they prepared the attacks. However, nearly 20 years since the adoption of E.O. 13224, the underlying legal bases for State and Treasury Department designations remained unaltered. As such, E.O. 13224 did not adapt to changing legal interpretations or the evolving threat landscape. This changed in September 2019 when the Trump Administration changed E.O. 13224, to expand both State and Treasury's ability to wield sanctions against terrorists. Specifically, the modernization of E.O. 13224 now provides the State Department with the explicit authority to designate leaders of a terrorist entity. As the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau's Coordinator discussed during his April 6 press briefing on the RIM designation, '[The] State Department can now designate groups and individuals that participate in training to commit acts of terrorism, [and] we can also designate the leaders of terrorist groups, without needing to show that they were involved in particular attacks.' Simply put, the Department does not have to develop long and elaborate dossiers to designate leaders of terrorist groups, as was the case in the past under the original E.O., that required meticulously detailed compendiums citing both unclassified or classified sources of information.¹⁴

Why Was RIM Designated for Sanctions?

The State Department cited particular incidents that led to the designation of RIM and its leaders. For example, in August 2016, two Swedish men traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, and participated in 11 days of paramilitary-style training provided by RIM. A few months later, these men and an alleged accomplice conducted a series of terrorist attacks in the Swedish city of Gothenburg. In November of 2016, the individuals detonated a bomb outside a book cafe. Two months following the 2016 incident, they bombed a location used as a migrant center. Finally, a few weeks later that same year, they placed another bomb at a campsite used to house refugees, but the device failed to detonate. Swedish authorities arrested the attackers, and they were prosecuted and convicted for their crimes. According to the State Department, the prosecutor who handled their case found that RIM was responsible for radicalizing them and for providing the training that enabled their attacks.

The State Department's designation is unique in that RIM is the first white supremacist group to be sanctioned pursuant to U.S. law. While RIM was not added to the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, at least not at the time of this writing in late April, the designations provide critical leverage to other U.S. agencies as they attempt to combat the organization. If an individual willfully provides support to RIM, he/she can be criminally prosecuted for violating 50 U.S.C § 1705. For example, the Taliban is designated as a terrorist entity pursuant to E.O. 13224 but is not listed as an FTO. Nonetheless, John Walker Lindh, who

notably was an American citizen who fought with the Taliban,¹⁵ pleaded guilty to 50 U.S.C. § 1705 violations.¹⁶ The United States is also the first country to sanction RIM. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, have sanctioned white supremacist groups before, but to date, neither have targeted RIM for designation.

Congressional Efforts

U.S. Members of Congress and Congressional committees have paid attention to the rising threat posed by transnational WSE groups, and some have proposed designating such groups for sanctions. In February 2020, the House Committee on Homeland Security voted unanimously to approve the ‘Transnational White Supremacist Extremism Review Act,’ proposed by Congressman Max Rose, the chairman of the Homeland Subcommittee on Intelligence and Counterterrorism. This act, if passed by both chambers and signed into law, would require that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) ‘develop and disseminate a terrorist threat assessment of foreign white extremist groups.’ This is a necessary step in adopting a more rigorous posture to combating groups like RIM and others of similar hateful ideology who intend to commit violence.

The Soufan Center has been invited to brief the U.S. Congress on the WSE movement, its transnational links, and the threat WSE groups pose to the United States. In 2019, The Soufan Center staff testified before U.S. Congress on two occasions on the growing WSE threat.¹⁷ The Center has also briefed other U.S. government entities, foreign governments, civil society organizations, multilateral institutions, media, and academia on the threat posed by transnational white supremacy extremists.

“White supremacists from around the world are increasingly forming global networks, much as jihadis did in the years leading up to 9/11... These similarities should inform our strategy. Terrorism, after all, is terrorism, regardless of race, faith, ideology, or creed. Our current framework, created after 9/11, allows for the designation of transnational groups as foreign terrorist entities... We need to recognize the international nature of this threat and start treating white supremacist terrorists the way we treat other global terrorists. Only then can we give our law enforcement the tools they need to meet the challenge.”

—Ali Soufan, House Committee on Homeland Security, September 10, 2019.

What Does the RIM Designation Mean in Practical Terms for U.S. Authorities?

The State Department's RIM designation provides U.S. authorities with a more robust set of tools to monitor RIM and its activities. First, the designation allows for RIM's assets to be essentially blocked and frozen by the U.S. financial system. Banks and financial institutions are now required to freeze the assets of RIM in the United States. The designation gets communicated to the banking sector on behalf of the State Department by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. While such asset-freezing is U.S.-specific, the United States is a dominant player within the global financial system, so U.S.-based asset freezing has historically had an outsized impact on a terrorist group's ability to move money around, in addition to blocking terrorist groups' access to any assets they currently have in the United States.¹⁸

Second, the State Department's designation provides the Treasury Department derivative authorities to pursue new designations of RIM members and those who act on behalf of the group.

Third, the designation, used in conjunction with other tools, means that overseas-based RIM members and associates are ineligible for entry into the United States, essentially a travel ban on its members.

Fourth, individuals who provide assistance to RIM could be investigated and potentially prosecuted as a result of the designation, and law enforcement agencies will have additional surveillance and investigatory tools following the designation to build such cases. Although the novelty of this designation has likely not yet produced substantial changes in how law enforcement authorities approach cases potentially connected to RIM, it could, for example, spur greater cooperation between the Domestic Terrorism and International Terrorism branches within the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF).¹⁹

There are particular nuances by which the SDGT – under which RIM is designated – and Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designations work and how they are applied in practical terms. For example, it is much more likely that the Department of Justice (DoJ) would bring material support charges against individuals who are designated under an FTO designation. U.S. State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator, Ambassador Nathan Sales, noted in a press briefing April 6, 'this [RIM] is an SDGT designation, not an FTO designation. As a result, the possible criminal charge for providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization would not be available here.'

While the FTO designation, as defined under the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, (INA) would provide for material support prosecutions, the E.O. 13224 designation (considered an

‘SDGT’ designation), under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), still provides for criminal penalties for those who try to do business with RIM. E.O. 13224-connected prosecutions, however, have been rare, and historically, the trend has been a preference for DoJ to pursue material support prosecutions that are linked to FTO designations. The legal standard is slightly less onerous for an FTO-related prosecution than an E.O. 13224 prosecution. Second, the prison sentences associated historically with an FTO violation are slightly higher than an E.O.13224 designation. Third, the FTO-related material support prosecution pathway is more familiar to prosecutors and thus has been used more, due to this increased familiarity.

However, it is important to note that while an FTO designation provides slightly more powers to the DoJ, this does not in any way diminish both the symbolic and practical importance of the State Department designation. For example, willful violation of an E.O. or implementing regulation pursuant to IEEPA is a criminal offense. This provides the DoJ with important prosecutorial leverage that did not exist before the SDGT designation.²⁰

Figure 2: New Tools Available to U.S. Authorities and Private Sector



Fifth, the designation, and previous designations in the past, have influenced social media companies to take action against sanctioned groups online. Following the designation of RIM and its leaders, for example, both Facebook and Youtube took down RIM’s pages. This is very

significant, especially since RIM maintained an active presence online prior to the designation. In its online propaganda videos, the group highlights its paramilitary training regiment, which includes the use of various firearms. RIM's online narrative circulates in English, German, and Russian languages and is used as a mechanism to define its enemies, propagate its ideology, and recruit new members. Two of the three RIM leaders sanctioned by the State Department, Vorobyev and Gariev, responded to the designation by calling it an attack on Christianity. RIM reportedly continues to recruit new members online through mechanisms such as Google Forms, following the designation. RIM continues to retain a visible presence on Russian Language social media platforms, like VKontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook.

Of note, there has been much attention paid to the fact that RIM was not designated as an FTO. There are several reasons, that are non-political in nature, as to why the group may not have been elevated to an FTO status.

- First, and as Ambassador Sales referenced when RIM was designated, the modernization of E.O. 13324 was a key reason why the group was listed, and he underscored that the group has engaged in the training of individuals who would go on and carry out a terrorist attack in Sweden. The updated E.O. provides the State Department with greater flexibility in sanctioning individuals and entities who provide training to terrorists. It could be for these reasons, and others below, that may explain why the State Department determined that the case for designating RIM as an FTO would have been more difficult, at least at the present time.
- Second, the designation process for sanctioning individuals and entities pursuant to E.O. 13224 is bureaucratically more efficient. The FTO process requires additional steps that the E.O. designation process does not. All new FTOs require the State Department to receive a letter of concurrence (LOC) from high ranking individuals within the Departments of Justice and Treasury. The E.O. process does not require LOCs. Additionally, FTO designations require the State Department to provide the U.S. Congress advance notification of the designation. The E.O. process does not and, as such, expedites the process.
- Third, given the pressure the Trump Administration may have felt from Congress to pursue sanctions against WSE groups, including from U.S. Congressman Max Rose, who wrote a letter²¹ signed by 39 other congressional members urging the State Department to list violent white supremacy groups as foreign terrorist organizations, the State Department may have been interested in acting in response to this pressure quickly – the E.O. designation pathway provides faster action in this regard.

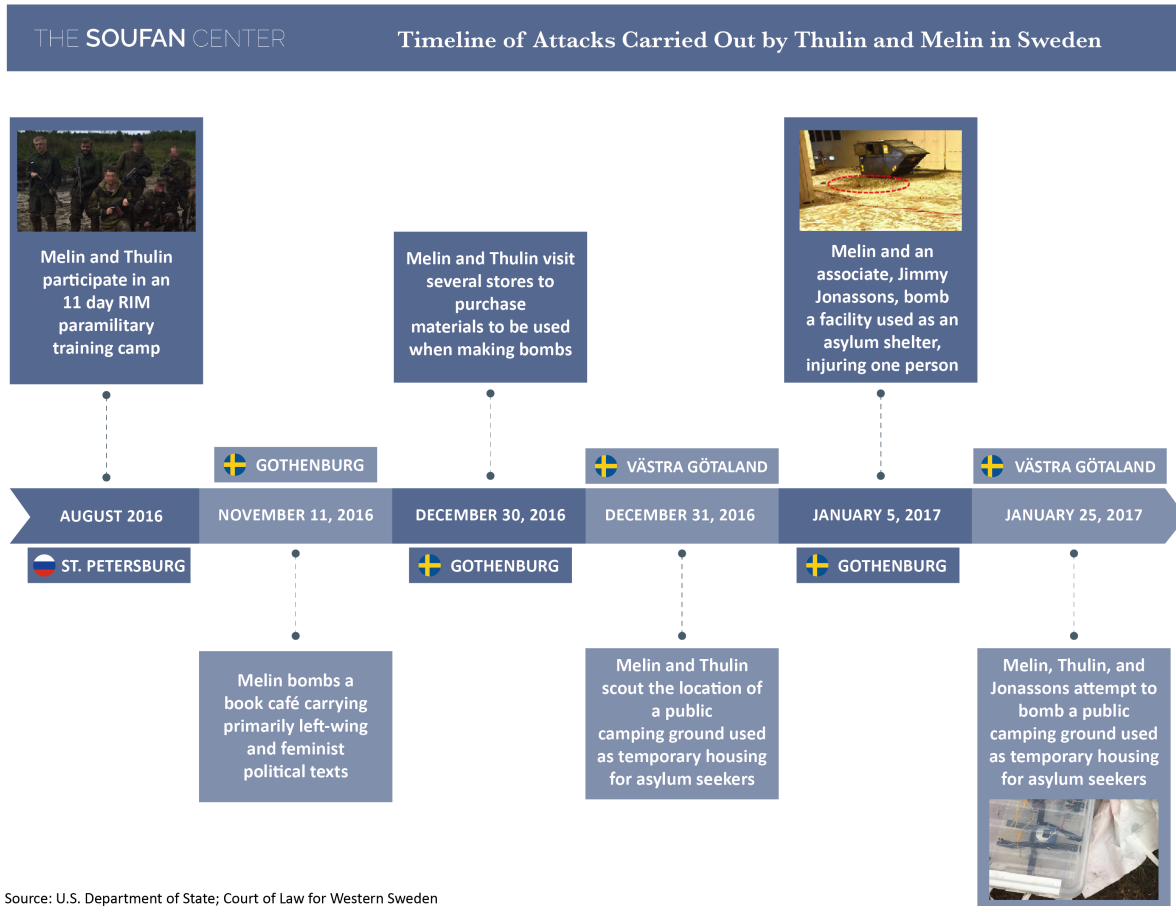
- Fourth, FTO designations are subject to a legally-mandated administrative review. This review begins for an FTO five years from its initial designation, or from its last review. The State Department is obliged to remove any group from the FTO list should it no longer meet the legal requirements for remaining on the list. If the State Department has assessed that the group may not remain solvent for five years, they could be concerned that the removal of it from the FTO list could send a terrible message to the world that such groups (white supremacist-linked) no longer pose a threat. In contrast, E.O. designations do not require a regular review. As such, the State Department may be looking ahead to avoid the possibility of being legally required to remove the State Department's only white supremacist group from its FTO list should the group potentially disband within five years or effectively obfuscate its activities.

THE RUSSIAN IMPERIAL MOVEMENT'S TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

RIM has played an important role in fostering connections between various elements of the international WSE movement, as demonstrated by its involvement in Ukraine, primarily through its self-described military wing known as the ‘Imperial Legion.’ Ukraine has emerged as a hub in the broader network of transnational white supremacy extremism, attracting foreign recruits from all over the world. Where foreign fighters have previously travelled to fight in places like Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq, and Syria, white supremacists now have their own theater in which to learn combat—Ukraine, where the conflict between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces has been raging since 2014, attracting fighters from around the globe who are fighting on both sides. Recent research shows that around 17,000 foreigners from over 50 countries, including the United States, have gone to fight in that conflict.²² RIM has played a decisive role in Ukraine on the pro-separatist side, sending at least 300 fighters to battle in 2014 alone.²³

RIM also operates several combat training courses, known as Partizan, which is tolerated by Russian authorities and operates freely in Russia. The combat program is run by a former Russian Armed Forces veteran, Denis Valliullovich Gariev (now sanctioned by the United States), who was a member of Russia’s Strategic Missile Forces.²⁴ The course offers weapons training and teaches recruits a range of paramilitary tactics. A specialized Partizan course offered by RIM is titled ‘English for Communication with Captured NATO Troops’ and includes lectures on the U.S. Army and how to interrogate a captured adversary in English. Among the most concerning elements of RIM’s activity is the group’s training camps in St. Petersburg, where it maintains the ability to offer hands-on training to recruits.²⁵ There is no substitute for tacit knowledge transfer, particularly when it comes to bomb-making know-how and diffusion of explosives expertise.

Figure 3: Timeline of Attacks Carried Out by Thulin and Melin in Sweden

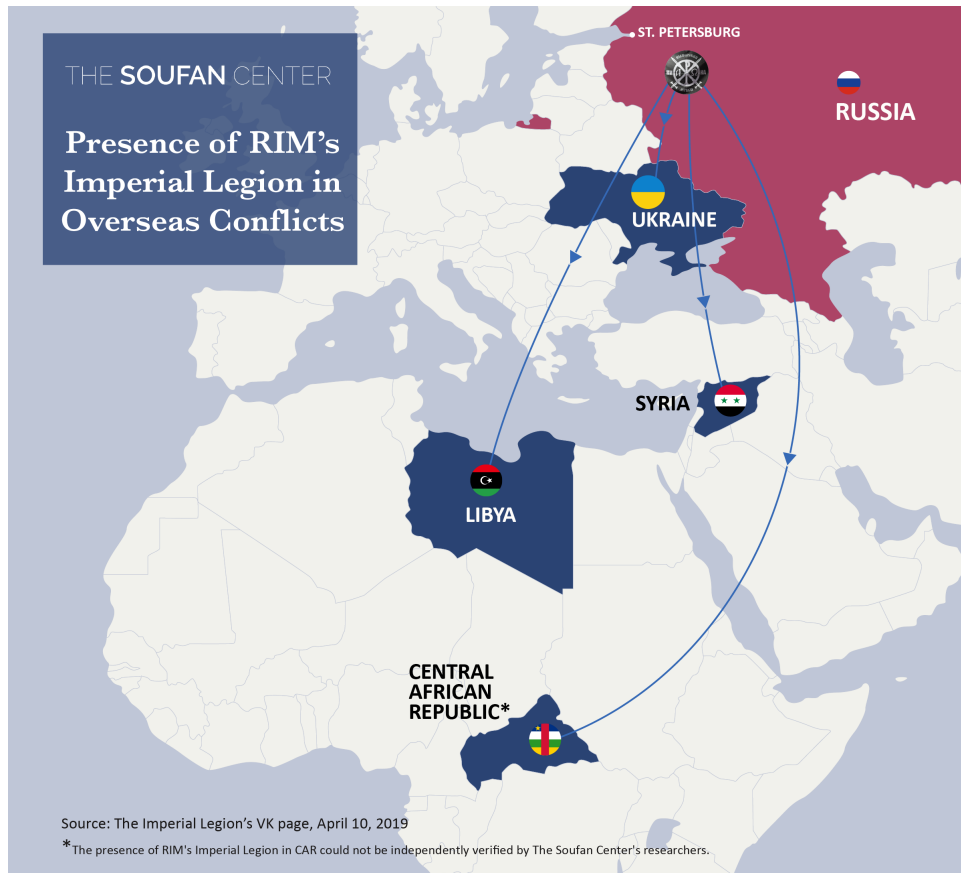


RIM not only trains Russian nationals in these camps, but also actively seeks to attract foreigners.²⁶ Some foreigners have returned to their countries of origin and committed acts of violence. The most well-known example, which provided the impetus for the State Department to sanction RIM, is that of two Swedish nationals who were former members of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM): Anton Thulin and Viktor Melin. After participating in a RIM paramilitary training camp in the fall of 2016, Thulin and Melin went on to carry out several bombings in Sweden in late 2016/early 2017. Their targets included two locations used to temporarily house asylum seekers.²⁷

According to social media analysis, as of April 10, 2019, RIM’s ‘Imperial Legion’ has sent its fighters to other conflicts beyond the Eastern front in Ukraine, including to Syria, Libya, and the

Central African Republic (CAR) — though no evidence has been found at the time of this writing to independently verify the presence of the ‘Imperial Legion’ in CAR. For example, on January 27, 2020, the Imperial Legion’s page on VKontakte, a Russian social media platform equivalent to Facebook, commemorated one of its fighters, Vladimir.²⁸ The Imperial Legion’s presence in Syria is described as ‘Our Crusade’ to protect the Christian faith. Similar to the language used in propaganda by Salafi-jihadist organizations, like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, RIM’s military wing urges its followers to actively fight what they see as the enemies of Christianity, and ‘killing anti-Christians.’²⁹

Figure 4: Presence of RIM’s Imperial Legion in Overseas Conflicts



One of the clearest and most direct examples that highlight RIM’s transnational connections including to the United States, and the influence other terrorist groups have had on the WSE movement, can be understood when considering the actions and operations of white supremacist Matthew Heimbach. Heimbach, a U.S. citizen, has demonstrated an affinity for terrorist groups

like Lebanese Hezbollah and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, maintains links to RIM, and has served as a crucial interlocutor between white supremacists in the United States and Russia. Heimbach founded the neo-Nazi Traditionalist Worker Party (TWP) in the United States and was a key organizer of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. He has gone on record to state that Russia is the ‘biggest inspiration’ for the TWP and that he and many of his colleagues view Russian president Vladimir Putin as ‘the leader of the free world.’ In September 2017, Heimbach welcomed a RIM delegation to the United States. The delegation, which included a RIM member known as Stanislav Shevchuk who has been described as RIM’s Western European representative, toured Washington D.C. and posed in front of the White House with the RIM flag.³⁰ Heimbach described the visit as overwhelmingly positive for his goal of uniting the traditional nationalist movement across borders and compared his group’s goals with those of RIM as very similar.³¹ Heimbach has reportedly received funding from RIM and met with representatives of the organization on numerous occasions in the United States. He has also received invitations to travel to Russia and train with RIM, and aspired to set up meetings with RIM representatives in Russia and Europe.³² Heimbach has allegedly renounced his ties to the white supremacy movement.³³

Shevchuk, reportedly based in Barcelona, Spain, engages in networking in Western Europe on behalf of RIM. In November 2019, he participated as a speaker in an international conference organized by the Spanish far-right National Democracy party. Other well-known figures from Europe’s right-wing scene also attended the gathering, including Nick Griffin, former leader of the far-right British National Party (BNP), from the U.K.³⁴ According to RIM leader Vorobyev (now sanctioned by the United States), 2019 was an important year for the organization to establish new ties to likeminded organizations based in Western Europe. RIM reportedly participated in several events across Europe in 2019, including in Poland, Bulgaria, and Austria. In an interview, Vorobyev identified Germany as the next most important country for the movement in Europe.

In March 2015, several well-known American white supremacists, including Jared Taylor³⁵, spoke at the International Russian Conservative Forum in St. Petersburg. The event was organized by the Rodina party and heavily attended by RIM. At the event, Taylor mingled with members of Golden Dawn (Greece), the National Democratic Party (Germany), and Forza Nuova (Italy).³⁶ Later in 2015, together with the extreme right Rodina party in Russia, RIM announced what they call the ‘World National Conservative Movement’ (WNCM), a transnational movement ideologically aligned against the Western principles of ‘liberalism, multiculturalism and tolerance’ according to its own manifesto. The WNCM promotes violence through its ‘joint camps for military and athletic instruction’³⁷ and uses WNCM as a platform for organizing an ideological transnational network of likeminded organizations. RIM is not an official arm of the Russian

state, although its close ties with elements of the Russian political and religious establishment lend it a sense of legitimacy that few non-state actors enjoy.³⁸

Figure 5: U.S. Citizen Matthew Heimbach's RIM Connections



The WNCM has invited over 50 organizations and parties to participate in the movement, many of them WSE organizations from Europe and the United States, including: the Nordic Resistance Movement (Scandinavia/Sweden), Golden Dawn (Greece), American Freedom Party (USA), British Unity (UK), and the National Democratic Party of Germany (Germany), among others.³⁹

Also, in September 2015, RIM representatives visited Sweden to participate in meetings with the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). RIM leader Vorobyov gave a speech during one of the meetings, professing that ‘a full-scale war against the traditional values of Western civilization’ was imminent and explained that he and his men were fighting ‘the Jewish oligarchs in Ukraine’ on the side of pro-Russian extremists in Eastern Ukraine.⁴⁰ According to both NRM and RIM, the latter has contributed funds for NRM to establish a political party, which was announced at the event attended by the RIM leadership.⁴¹ These ideological links between NRM and RIM are critical, especially as RIM positions itself at the center of a growing transnational movement. RIM has all of the necessary elements to make NRM a dangerous global terrorist organization, including resources, training camps, ideological support, and the ability to recruit new members and expand its network abroad. RIM’s close ties to Scandinavia provide the group with a foothold in Europe and an opportunity to recruit foreign fighters to its movement.

RIM is a unique ultra-nationalist group in that, while not an arm of the Russian government, is one that appears to exist with the implicit approval of Moscow. While the group has expressed disdain for Putin, both Putin and RIM promote an orthodox narrative discourse, in Putin's case to consolidate power, and in RIM's case to attract recruits and build its movement. RIM's members have gone to fight in Ukraine, even alongside foreigners including the ultra-nationalist Continental Unity, a French-Serbian legion whose leaders reportedly are veterans from Afghanistan, Chad, and other conflicts, and provides combat training to Western recruits.⁴² One could describe RIM as opportunist, and one that exercises strategic and tactical flexibility, much like the modus operandi of Moscow itself. While RIM is an ultranationalist and fascist group, its members have been on the frontlines of battle in Syria and Libya, alongside strange bedfellows who do not fit the typical white male profile that most far-right and white supremacist groups consist of. This dynamic begs the question of the underlying relationship between RIM and Moscow.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The recognition of the white supremacy threat to the United States, via the designation of RIM, is an unprecedented policy step in U.S. efforts to combat transnational violent white supremacy. Now that RIM is designated, U.S. law enforcement, intelligence, and financial agencies can now access an expanded set of tools, including those available to them, in some cases, for countering groups like IS and al-Qaida. Law enforcement agencies should be in the process of implementing this designation at the practical and operational level, including by monitoring communications between people connected to RIM, including other transnational white supremacist organizations.

The recent designation should enable law enforcement to share intelligence with U.S. allies overseas, thus facilitating a critical asset in the fight against international terrorism. Prosecutors should now be able to build cases against RIM and those who do business with its leaders and supporter, and bring charges to such individuals and groups, with appropriately severe penalties attached. It is crucial that the U.S. Government and its relevant agencies, including the Departments of Justice and Treasury, leverage the tools now available via the State Department's designation of RIM to ensure that this important action is not merely ceremonial. The designation has generated considerable momentum to take concrete actions against RIM and any individuals or groups that associate with it. Additionally, now that the United States has designated one violent supremacist group, there lies a precedent for it to consider designating other white supremacist groups they may deem a threat to the homeland, including those with demonstrated ties to RIM.

It will be important for the United States and its allies to continue collecting and analyzing intelligence on the transnational nature of WSE groups. Over time, this will help map out

connections and overlap between the groups that comprise this movement. These violent organizations frequently take advantage of overseas conflicts and destabilizing events to connect, engage in battlefield training, and share knowledge. This includes RIM's connections to overseas organizations, including the Nordic Resistance Movement, among others, and their connections to U.S.-based WSE ideologues and groups. It is also expected that international and multilateral institutions will continue to examine the threat of white supremacy extremism, particularly given the concerns of many countries around the world who have been directly affected by such movements and attacks.

In closing, twenty years ago, the United States underestimated the rising threat of Islamist terrorism. That inattention cost us dearly on Sept. 11, 2001, and the U.S. government saw the warning signs building up in the 1990s, with respect to the danger of Al Qaida. We cannot afford to wait for the white-supremacist equivalent, and we are already witness to the manifestations of the dangerous and transnational nature of the WSE movement and its connections to the United States.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jason Blazakis

Senior Research Fellow

Jason Blazakis is a Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center. Blazakis is a Professor of Practice at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS) at Monterey. He is also the Director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism (CTEC) at MIIS. He is also a professor at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland. He worked for nearly 20 years in the federal government on national security issues.

Colin P. Clarke

Senior Research Fellow

Colin P. Clarke is a Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center. Clarke has briefed his research at a range of national and international security forums, including the U.S. Army War College, US Air Force Special Operations School, Society for Terrorism Research International Conference, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Counter ISIS Financing Group (CIFG), which is part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

Mohamed H. El Shawesh

Multimedia Coordinator

Mohamed H. El Shawesh assists The Soufan Center with multimedia editing. El Shawesh has an MBA in Media Management from the Metropolitan College of New York through a Fulbright scholarship granted to him by the US State Department.

Stephanie Foggett

Resident Fellow

Stephanie Foggett is a Resident Fellow at The Soufan Center and Director of Global Communications at The Soufan Group. Her work at the Center focuses on: multilateral security cooperation; counter-terrorism cooperation with international organizations and governments; crisis management; and narratives and strategic communications as it relates to security.

Hajer Naili

Media and Communications Manager

Hajer Naili is the Media and Communications Manager for the Soufan Center. She is a communications and media expert with over a decade of experience in humanitarian affairs, displacement, and conflict.

Mollie Saltskog

Intelligence Analyst

Mollie Saltskog is an Intelligence Analyst at The Soufan Group. She has global experience in international security, specifically on issues related to terrorism, geopolitics, and foreign policy.

Emerita Torres

Director of Policy Research and Programs

Emerita Torres is the Director of Policy Research and Programs at The Soufan Center. She has over a decade of experience in the federal government as a national security expert, where she has developed and coordinated U.S. policy on human rights, counterterrorism and conflict prevention.

ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER

Based in New York, The Soufan Center is a non-partisan strategy center dedicated to serving as a resource and forum for research, analysis and strategic dialogue related to global security issues and emergent threats. TSC fills a niche-role by producing independent, quality research and hosting proactive events in order to effectively equip thought leaders, policy makers, governments, bi- and multilateral institutions, the media, funders, and those in the non-profit and academic communities to engage in strategic security-related practices. Our work focuses on a broad range of complex security issues—from international and domestic terrorism, to humanitarian crisis analysis, to refugee and immigrant issues, and more.

TSC's dynamic team of research and policy analysts, with diverse professional, educational and cultural backgrounds—including experience in human rights; international development; federal, state and local government; law enforcement; and military—leverage subject matter expertise against real-world experience to offer world-class investigative methodologies, innovative analytical tools, and contextualized, actionable solutions.

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