

**IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**MEDIA CONTACT:**

Stephanie Foggett

+1-646-233-1704

[stephanie.foggett@thesoufancenter.org](mailto:stephanie.foggett@thesoufancenter.org)

**PRESS RELEASE**

**RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE INTRODUCES A NUMBER OF NON-STATE ACTORS TO THE FRAY,  
CREATING CHALLENGES FOR STATES AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

*A new report from The Soufan Center sets out how states should prepare themselves as non-state actors complicate a battlefield contending with great power competition and rampant disinformation*

**[LINK TO REPORT](#)**

**(New York, NY – April 4, 2022)** A new report by The Soufan Center, [Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, & Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine](#), examines the various non-state actors in Ukraine, while contending with great power competition, varied narratives, and rampant disinformation. States will need to consider the myriad implications of their citizens traveling to the conflict zone, and the range of issues they must be prepared to manage upon the return of their nationals. The report highlights the complicating role of disinformation, especially the nexus between state-backed campaigns and extremist messaging.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin justified the invasion of Ukraine on the grounds of needing to "de-nazify" the country. These claims stand in stark contrast to Russia's long track record of supporting and empowering far-right extremists in Russia and the West, including entities like the Wagner Group which has its own far-right unit, *Rusich*. "Russia has its own neo-Nazi fighters in Ukraine," explains Colin P. Clarke, Senior Research Fellow at The Soufan Center. "Take a group like *Rusich*, as an example, who have played a role in the Donbas since 2014 and who have been accused of numerous war crimes. *Rusich* has attempted to recruit new members to fight in Ukraine today."

As the conflict draws on, the roles and impacts of extremist elements will bear watching, and could exacerbate security risks within Ukraine and in neighboring states. Mis- and dis- information campaigns can also further polarize already fragmented societies where foreign interference has been able to exploit domestic tensions and conspiracy theories to foment distrust in democratic governments.

**Awareness and preparation needed**

Only one month into Russia's invasion, the scale of the mobilization is significant. "With the potential for a protracted conflict in Ukraine, it will be fundamental that governments and policymakers begin planning for the fallout and related challenges that will result from foreign fighters, volunteers, and other conflict voyeurs returning from the battlefield to their countries of origin," says Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Executive Director of The Soufan Center. "The number one recommendation is that states need to monitor developments carefully and prepare for both the short-term needs of their nationals abroad as well as planning for medium-term implications."

Disinformation also presents a complicating factor, especially the nexus between state-backed campaigns and extremist messaging. Since the beginning of the conflict several narratives espoused by likely Kremlin-

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backed/aligned actors have served to reinforce already existing extremist narratives among the far-right in the West. “Given the blurred lines between likely state-backed disinformation campaigns by foreign adversaries and resonance among U.S. online audiences, including domestic violent extremists, the U.S. government should prioritize combatting the spread of dis-, mis-, and mal-information in the context of this conflict,” cautions Mollie Saltskog, Research Fellow at The Soufan Center.

The report offers policy recommendations to governments, including: *Clarify the legal framework governing foreign fighters and prepare for potential needs and challenges upon their return; Consider designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism; Strengthen international cooperation to counter disinformation, hate speech, and incitement online; Strengthen inter-agency cooperation to counter disinformation from foreign adversaries, both within states and through international partnerships; Ensure effective implementation of existing international instruments to inhibit transnational organized crime networks and others from exploiting trafficking of small arms and light weapons, and strengthen upstream measures aimed at preventing illicit acquisition of small arms and light weapons (SALW); and provide vetted or screened channels for communities to give direct support to Ukraine and ensure that funds and material goods are not misdirected or exploited by criminals and other illicit actors.*

A webinar on these issues was organized on March 29, 2022, and is [available to watch via our website](#).

### **ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER (TSC)**

Based in New York, The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Please contact Stephanie Foggett with any media inquiries or interview requests: [stephanie.foggett@thesoufancenter.org](mailto:stephanie.foggett@thesoufancenter.org).

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