



Foreign Fighter Returns and Organized Crime in Southeast Europe Post-Ukraine Conflict

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

This study asserts that the repatriation of foreign fighters from the conflict in Ukraine poses a significant threat to the peace and stability of the Southeast Europe within the realm of organized crime. It contends that Southeast Europe serves as fertile ground for foreign fighters during times of war crises, facilitating their exploitation by organized crime for illicit purposes. Regarding the context of the Southeast Europe, the study argues, firstly, that serious organized crime groups demonstrate a propensity to recruit individuals with military experience. Secondly, it underscores the historical roots of foreign fighter presence in the region, including the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Lastly, it highlights the inadequate response and policies at both national and European Union levels to address this concern in the region.

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The conflict in Ukraine represents a pivotal shift in European security dynamics, prompting calls for novel security arrangements to address its multifaceted nature (Kemp & Sporrer 2022). A direct consequence of this conflict has been the proliferation of criminal markets and the bolstering of organized crime networks. In response to these emerging challenges, an extraordinary meeting of European Union (EU) Ministers of the Interior was convened on March 28, 2022, followed by a European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) meeting hosted by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL)¹ on April 7, 2022, specifically focusing on the threats posed by serious and organized crime stemming from the Ukraine conflict (EUROPOL 2023).

During these meetings, representatives from EU member states deliberated on coordination plans for various crime areas and devised strategies to mitigate threats emanating from the conflict. Initial intelligence gathered on the ground identified the development of four prominent criminal markets—namely, human trafficking, online fraud, cybercrime, and firearms trafficking—out of the ten crime priorities identified in the 2021 EU serious and organized crime threat assessment for 2022–2025 (EUC 2021). However, subsequent analysis indicated that the evolving dynamics of the Ukraine conflict could potentially impact all ten criminal markets, including ‘High-risk criminal networks.’²

Notably absent from the EU’s strategic considerations is the role of returned foreign fighters in the context of organized crime and its implications for the security and political stability of Southeast Europe. It appears that neither EU policymakers nor the governments of Southeast Europe (European Parliament 2021) have addressed this looming threat in their national anti-terror strategies or organized crime threat assessments (EUC 2021a).

This analysis seeks to underscore two critical aspects that warrant attention from the international community and national governments in the region. Firstly, there exists a persistent demand among organized crime groups for individuals with military training, including foreign fighters. Notably, some of the most formidable criminal organizations in the region and globally are led or comprised of former military personnel (Smith 2018).

Secondly, the phenomenon of foreign fighters is not novel to Southeast Europe. Emerging from historical conflicts fuelled by ideological or religious fervour, the phenomenon of foreign fighters traces its origins to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and spans across various conflicts in regions such as the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and more recently, the Ukraine conflict, encompassing roles in events like the annexation of Crimea in 201 (Beslin & Ignjatijevic 2017).

The introduction of this study aims to illuminate the significance and relevance of the topic by contextualizing it within the broader landscape of contemporary security challenges in Europe, particularly in the Southeast Europe. The conflict in Ukraine serves as a catalyst for exploring the nexus between returned foreign fighters and organized crime, offering unique insights into the evolving dynamics of regional security and stability.

The topic is inherently intriguing due to its multifaceted nature and its potential implications for regional security architecture. The convergence of foreign fighters and organized crime in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict presents complex challenges that demand nuanced analysis and proactive policy responses. By examining this intersection, we can better understand the underlying dynamics driving criminal activities and their impact on the socio-political fabric of the Southeast European countries.

1 EMPACT introduces an integrated approach to EU internal security, involving measures that range from external border controls, police, customs, and judicial cooperation to information management, innovation, training, prevention, and the external dimension of internal security, as well as public-private partnerships where appropriate. For more on EMPACT see the information provided at the official website of EUROPOL. Available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/empact> [Last accessed 09 March 2024].

2 EMPACT does not provide a specific definition for ‘high-risk criminal networks.’ However, based on the language used to describe this criminal market, it suggests that such networks are likely to encompass those engaging in activities involving corruption, violence, firearms, and money laundering through alternative financial channels. For more see Council of the European Union. 2021. Fight against organized crime: Council sets out 10 priorities for the next four years, 26 May. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/26/fight-against-organised-crime-council-sets-out-10-priorities-for-the-next-4-years/> [Last accessed 02 January 2024].

Furthermore, the topic holds broader implications for international security discourse, particularly in light of ongoing debates surrounding counter-terrorism efforts and transnational organized crime. The resurgence of foreign fighters in Southeast Europe underscores the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of radicalization and effectively combat organized criminal networks.

Overall, this study seeks to shed light on a pressing security concern that has thus far been overlooked in both academic and policy circles. By delving into the complexities of the returned foreign fighter phenomenon and its links to organized crime, we aim to contribute to a more informed understanding of contemporary security challenges facing the Southeast Europe and beyond.

The methodology employed in this study integrates elements of descriptive and analytical approaches, complemented by insights derived from a comprehensive literature review. By synthesizing findings from the existing literature, the study seeks to offer valuable insights into the emerging challenges posed by the Ukraine conflict and their implications for regional security.

The selection of Southeast Europe as a case study region is informed by its strategic significance and historical context, as well as insights gleaned from the literature review. The literature review provides valuable theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence that inform the study's understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the region. By synthesizing insights from existing research with primary data sources, the study seeks to offer a holistic analysis of the implications of the Ukraine conflict on organized crime and security dynamics in Southeast Europe. Through this integrated approach, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the broader implications of the Ukraine conflict for regional security architecture and international security discourse.

On the other hand, it is imperative to acknowledge the limited data available on this subject, with the present article being among the few studies to address this concern in the context of Southeast Europe, focusing specifically on the implications of the 2022 Ukraine conflict.

The study commences by highlighting the escalating demand for individuals with military training by serious organized crime organizations operating in conflict zones, followed by an exploration of why the Southeast Europe serves as fertile ground for such individuals. Additionally, it elucidates how the Ukraine conflict has reignited concerns surrounding foreign fighters in Southeast Europe and concludes with an assessment of the efficacy of regional policies in addressing this issue. The focus of the study will be on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

ORGANIZED CRIME'S DEMAND FOR MILITARY-TRAINED INDIVIDUALS IN THE SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Recent academic research indicates that organized crime groups, particularly those operating within Southeast Europe, have exhibited considerable sophistication in their operational tactics and recruitment strategies. These groups have expanded their networks globally, reaching regions such as Latin America, South Africa, and the Middle East (EUROPOL 2020). The evolution of complex criminal markets has compelled Southeast Europe-based criminal entities to seek individuals with military training, capable of executing not only untraceable communication methods and smuggling operations but also advanced tactics such as counter-surveillance, neutralization of adversaries, and sophisticated methods of violence (Kemp 2020).

There has been a noticeable increase in the recruitment of corrupt police officers and special forces by organized crime groups, particularly in drug trafficking activities (Dragojlo 2022; ABC TV 2020). Notable instances, such as the crackdown on the Sky ECC encryption network by French and Dutch authorities in February 2021, revealed the extensive involvement of public officials, including law enforcement personnel (Jeremic, Stojanovic & Kajosevic 2022). In a more recent case in August 2022, the Serbian police apprehended individuals, including a police officer and his wife associated with the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), involved in smuggling large quantities of cocaine from South America to the EU. This criminal network, reportedly linked to powerful criminal organizations like the Kavaci clan and Belivuk group, laundered proceeds through financial channels spanning the Netherlands, Serbia, and Montenegro (Insajder 2022).

Similarly, in August 2021, a member of Albania's Special Forces (RENEA) was arrested for leading an organized crime group engaged in cocaine smuggling operations in Tirana (Exit.al. 2021). Military-trained members of organized crime groups have also been implicated in providing protection to political parties during elections or threatening security, as seen in the attempted coup in Montenegro in 2016 (Gadzo 2022). The hiring of police and special forces personnel has played a significant role in enabling Southeast Europe-originating criminal organizations to advance within the European criminal markets over the past two decades (Kemp 2020).

In its 2023 report, the Albanian Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK) emphasized in its analysis of terrorism the identification of more sophisticated forms of terrorism in 2019. This classification of terrorist activities involves the participation of intelligence services from countries hostile to Albania. The recruited individual was directed to cooperate with local organized crime groups to carry out the terrorist act on Albanian territory (SPAK, 2024).

The symbiotic relationship between organized crime groups and military-trained individuals facilitates the neutralization of law enforcement agencies, exploitation of border control data for trafficking activities, enhancement of secrecy and confidentiality, and ultimately, the bolstering of efficiency against adversaries. Given this dynamic, there is a foreseeable demand for military-trained individuals by organized crime groups in the future, potentially extending to the recruitment of returned foreign fighters. In the context of this argument, the Southeast Europe presents a conducive environment due to its historical legacy of foreign fighter involvement, the alarming presence of foreign fighters in the ongoing Ukraine conflict, the military training of returned foreign fighters, and the ideological motivations or prior criminal backgrounds of some individuals.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: PAST AND PRESENT

The Southeast Europe region, given its geographical location and cultural diversity, has historically been a battleground for conflicts such as the World Wars and the wars of former Yugoslavia, among others. Consequently, the concept of foreign fighters is not unfamiliar to the region. Rather, the phenomenon of foreign fighters, portrayed as a demonstration of societal solidarity with noble causes and support for oppressed nations, has been prevalent. In modern times, these individuals, often referred to as volunteers, can trace their origins back to events like the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), where approximately 1,910 people from the former Yugoslavia, with a significant portion from Croatia, volunteered to fight alongside the leftists (i.e., Republican side) (Pavlaković 2022). Similarly, around 60 Albanians, including a former prime minister of Albania, participated in this conflict (Shehu 2021).

The phenomenon of war volunteers continued in more organized forms during subsequent conflicts, such as the Second World War and the wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991–2001) (Kohlmann 2004). However, the motivations behind participation shifted, grounded in religious and ethnic differences.

It is widely believed that the number of foreign fighters involved in the wars of former Yugoslavia, contributing to all sides, did not exceed 5% of the total fighters participating in these conflicts. According to reports from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the city of Višegrad endured 'one of the most extensive and ruthless ethnic cleansing campaigns during the war in BiH, resulting in the tragic deaths of about 3,000 Bosniaks, including approximately 600 women and over 100 children, in and around Višegrad.'

Supporting the Serbian side were fighters predominantly from countries that shared the Orthodox religious affiliation, including Russia, Greece, Romania, and Ukraine, often referred to as 'kontraktniki' or contracted soldiers (Arielli 2012). This group also included kontraktniki from Poland (Kurier WNET 2020). The government of Republika Srpska suggests that around 700 Russian foreign fighters participated in the war in BiH alone. Remarkably, Višegrad now houses a monument commemorating Russian volunteers, listing the names of 37 Russians who lost their lives in BiH (Kešmer 2022).

Conversely, the Muslim Bosnian side received support from several hundred foreign fighters (approximately 400–1,200) originating from countries with a Muslim-majority, primarily from the Middle East (Azinović & Sadović 2008; Subašić 2019). While there are ongoing debates about the accuracy of this data, it is suggested that the number of foreign fighters within the ranks of the Bosnian army amounted to at least 1% of the formal army (Urban 2015).

Additionally, hundreds of foreign fighters joined the Kosovo Liberation Army, representing various countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, Sweden, Belgium, the UK, Germany, and the US. Interestingly, these fighters declined support from volunteers in the Middle East (Kelmendi 2001). Even during the insurgency war in North Macedonia in 2001, a limited number of volunteers from the Kosovo Liberation Army joined the Albanian National Liberation Army, while the Macedonian Security Forces were officially supplied with mainly military air power from Ukraine until July 2001 (Kuzio 2001).

Moreover, the Southeast Europe served as a source of foreign fighters who ventured overseas. For instance, during the conflict in Syria and Iraq from 2012 to 2016, it is estimated that approximately 1,000 individuals, including women and children, joined ISIS (Albania-144; BiH-240; NM-140-150; Kosovo-445; Montenegro-20; and Serbia-49) (Azinovic 2017).

THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICTS

The involvement of foreign fighters in conflicts, particularly in the context of the invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, has garnered significant attention (Omerovic 2022). In the initial incursion, an estimated 1,500 foreign fighters participated between 2014 and June 2016 (Metodieva 2019). Conversely, during the 2022 invasion, approximately 36,000 foreign combatants were reported to have been engaged as of July 2022 (Mehra & Thorley 2022). These figures, when juxtaposed with the estimated 40,000 foreign fighters who joined ISIS during its four-year presence in Syria and Iraq (2014–2018), underscore the substantial scale of foreign involvement in the Ukrainian conflicts.

Among the contributing factions, a notable presence of foreign fighters from the Southeast Europe has been observed in both the 2014 and 2022 invasions, operating as mercenaries or volunteers (Metodieva 2019). Despite limited publicity, it is believed that around 300 individuals from Southeast Europe participated in the initial invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, aligning themselves with either pro-Russian separatist groups or Ukrainian volunteer battalions (Velebit 2017). Serbia, in particular, emerged as a significant contributor, with an approximate deployment of 100 combatants fighting alongside pro-Russian separatist forces (Beslin & Ignjatijevic 2017). The assertion by Ukraine's ambassador in Belgrade, Oleksandr Aleksandrovych, in 2017 suggested an even higher number of Serbian combatants involved in the 2014 conflict (Zivanovic 2017). The involvement of Serbs from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in combat and counter-intelligence activities across eight pro-Russian paramilitary units, including the prominent Wagner mercenary group, further underscores the complexity and multi-faceted nature of foreign fighter participation in the Ukrainian conflicts (Metodieva 2019).

In the context of the second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, comprehensive data concerning the total number of foreign fighters from Southeast Europe is not available, thus necessitating a cautious approach when considering official figures that are either provided or refuted. Media reports have indicated a notable presence of volunteers from BiH and Serbia aligning themselves with pro-Russian factions in eastern Ukraine, commonly referred to by Russian nationalists as Novo Rossiya or New Russia. Some of these individuals were reported to have been present since the initial conflict in 2014 (Kuloglija & Husaric 2022).

On February 21, 2022, Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russia, alleged the involvement of mercenaries from Albania, Kosovo, and BiH in the conflict (Taylor 2022). However, representatives from Albania, Kosovo, and BiH denied Lavrov's assertions, emphasizing that no reports of mercenaries from their respective countries had been documented, deeming Lavrov's claims as false accusations (Ozturk 2022).

Subsequently, in June 2022, the Ministry of Security of BiH declared that only two citizens were confirmed to be participating in the conflict in Ukraine on opposing sides, contrary to claims made by the Russian Ministry of Defence, which alleged a substantially higher number of 51 individuals (Svijet 2022). Conversely, Mamuka Mamulashvili, a commander of the Legion of Foreign Volunteers in Ukraine, reported in March 2022 that only two Albanians had joined their ranks, with an additional 20–30 individuals having submitted applications for enlistment (Euronews Albania 2022).

Questionable reports from Russian authorities have suggested the involvement of foreign fighters from Southeast European countries, notably BiH, Albania, and Kosovo, with over 100 fighters purportedly engaged in the conflict on the Ukrainian side (Russia Today 2022). However,

it is worth noting that the majority of foreign fighters supporting Ukraine originate from Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Japan, alongside Eastern European nations like Poland, Romania, and Croatia (Grgurinovic 2022), as well as former Soviet republics including Georgia, Belarus, Latvia, and Lithuania (Murauskaite 2022).

A significant proportion of pro-Russian foreign fighters are affiliated with the 'Wagner Group,' predominantly comprising individuals from the Middle East (Murauskaite 2022). Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, there exists a notable presence of Serbs within the ranks of the 'Wagner Group' (Zivanovic 2018). Pertaining to statements made by the Russian Minister of Defence in June 2022, it was asserted that the influx of pro-Ukrainian foreign fighters had decreased by 50%, albeit without providing any substantiating data on the corresponding number of individuals supporting the Russian invasion (Teslova 2022).

Following the demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, a notable shift in the operational dynamics of the Wagner Group is observed. Concurrently, the Kremlin has adopted a more direct approach in engaging military leaders from Sahelian nations. Prigozhin's strategic network, which included warlords, coup orchestrators, and morally questionable political and business figures, constituted a fundamental aspect of the group's organizational framework (Beaumont 2023). This development may potentially impact the status and involvement of foreign fighters from Southeast Europe within the Wagner Group (Grove et al. 2023).

PROFILE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Recent scholarly investigations have underscored the potential security risks associated with the repatriation of foreign combatants to their countries of origin or to broader regional contexts, as exemplified by the situation in the Southeast Europe. A considerable portion of these foreign fighters undergo rigorous military training and engage in combat in some of the most challenging theatres of conflict. Although the impact of foreign fighters in the 2022 Ukrainian conflict does not parallel that observed in conflicts such as those in Iraq and Syria, their notable influence was observed notably in engagements such as the battle of Severodnetsk and at the Hostomel airport, where the Georgian Legion, comprising approximately 700 individuals, played a significant role (Murauskaite 2022). Additionally, various non-state actors acting as proxies for different states, such as the Wagner Group, have recruited adept mercenaries who have been extensively involved in multiple conflict zones, including Ukraine. Mehra and Thorley (2022) assert that mercenaries and foreign fighters share several commonalities, notably they are often foreign nationality and their potential to prolong or exacerbate ongoing conflicts.

In his comprehensive analysis of the typology of foreign fighters espousing extremist ideologies in the 2022 conflict in Ukraine, Kacper Rekawek (2022: 6) observes that the relatively small presence of violence-oriented extremists actively engaged in the conflict does not negate the potential challenges they may pose to domestic security upon their repatriation. Rekawek highlights the concerning convergence of factors contributing to this risk, including the adoption of violence-oriented ideologies, the acquisition of combat training and experience, access to weaponry and explosives within the conflict zone, and enhanced transnational networking opportunities. Consequently, Rekawek (2022) emphasizes the necessity for proactive mitigation measures in addressing this complex security threat.

It is important to highlight that the research conducted by Rekawek (2022) does not encompass case studies from Southeast Europe, focusing instead on countries from North America and the EU. However, despite this limitation, certain conclusions can still be extrapolated. Rekawek's study underscores the diverse ideological backgrounds of Western foreign fighters involved in the conflict, encompassing perspectives ranging from the far right, far left, to red-brown national communism. Notably, those arriving in 2022 appeared to exhibit less radicalization and politicization compared to previous cohorts (Rekawek 2022: 4).

Regarding Balkans-originated individuals, their motivations often stem from nationalistic and religious sentiments. For instance, Croatians cite reasons such as Ukraine's early recognition of Croatian sovereignty and assistance following earthquakes in Zagreb and Banovina as grounds for their support (Grgurinovic 2022). Conversely, pro-Russian Serbs express solidarity with Russia and a desire for revenge against the West, fuelled by a 'Slavic brotherhood' narrative propagated by far-right organizations like the People's Patrols (Kuloglija & Husaric 2022).

The primary risk lies with individuals associated with politically and ideologically oriented units. For instance, the Azov battalion, known for its right-wing narrative during the 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine, has since integrated into the Ukrainian national military forces in 2022, distancing itself from extremist ideologies (Soufan Center 2022).

The Russian side presents a multifaceted scenario, characterized by a confluence of violent non-state actors recruiting members from terrorist groups and other extremists driven by diverse ideologies, including racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism. Prominent among these organizations are the Wagner Group and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), both actively involved in paramilitary activities and direct military engagements across various conflict zones, including the recent conflict in Ukraine (Soufan Center 2022: 13). Additionally, several extremist groups, such as Srbska Akcija, a clerical-fascist organization, maintain affiliations with RIM, further complicating the landscape of extremist involvement in the region.

The Serbian right-wing parties' connections with Russia are substantiated by the Czech EU Presidency report, which assesses the efficacy of bans on right-wing extremists in Southeast Europe. The report highlights Russia's influence on the predominantly Christian Western Balkan countries (Bjelotomic 2022). However, investigations into the motivations of foreign fighters from the Southeast Europe who joined ISIS and participated in the 2014 invasion of Eastern Ukraine reveal motives beyond ideology or religion. Some of these foreign fighters possessed criminal backgrounds with prior convictions, while others sought involvement in conflicts to evade criminal prosecution in their home countries (Beslin & Ignjatijevic 2017). Consequently, the ramifications of returned foreign fighters associated with violent non-state actors should be viewed not solely through a political lens but also through the perspective of organized crime. This is because the motivations of foreign fighters and mercenaries frequently intertwine ideological and profit-driven incentives (Mehra & Thorley 2022).

POLICIES ADDRESSING FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

In response to the emergence of ISIS and the proliferation of foreign fighters joining terrorist organizations, the UN Security Council has enacted two significant resolutions: resolution 2178 (2014) and resolution 2396 (2017). These resolutions aim to mitigate the recruitment and travel of foreign terrorist fighters and address the risks associated with their return from conflict zones (Fink & Clarke 2022). Both resolutions received unanimous approval from all member states, including the Southeast Europe (DeBartolo 2018).

As outlined in the legal analysis conducted by Luka Glusac (2020: 48–49), all the Western Balkan countries (WB6) have amended their legislation to criminalize various activities related to engagement in armed conflicts abroad. These activities include association with forbidden organizations, recruitment, logistical support, public incitement to travel abroad, and participation in armed conflicts abroad. Notably, Montenegro is the sole WB6 country where engagement in armed conflict abroad is explicitly linked with terrorism. Serbia stands out as the only country within the WB6 that has not explicitly criminalized public support for traveling abroad to conflict zones (Glusac 2020).

Penalties for criminal offenses associated with foreign fighters vary across WB6 country, with prison sentences ranging from 5 to 15 years. Albania and Kosovo impose the most severe sentences (Glusac 2020).

According to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network's Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database, which records convictions for domestic terrorism and involvement in conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, more than 160 individuals have been incarcerated across Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Notably, Kosovo's data is not included in this figure.³ Bosnia and Herzegovina has the highest number of cases (45), followed by North Macedonia

³ The European Commission's 2021 progress report on Kosovo indicates that there is limited data specifically on individuals sentenced for joining ISIS and involvement in the war in Ukraine. However, the report does provide information on cases related to terrorism offenses in general. According to the report, during the reporting period, the police initiated seven new cases related to terrorism, with three suspects arrested. Additionally, from January to May 2021, four new terrorism-related cases were initiated. Indictments were filed against 17 individuals, and courts found 32 people guilty, while one person's indictment was rejected (EC 2021b: 44).

(29), Serbia (23), and Albania (12). As of 2021, Kosovo has 18 individuals serving prison sentences for terrorism-related offenses (Konushevci 2021).

When comparing the number of prison sentences to the number of individuals convicted, Albania has the highest ratio of 12.1 sentences per person, followed by North Macedonia with 5.65 sentences per person, BiH with 3.91 sentences per person, Serbia with 3.04 sentences per person, and Montenegro with 0.5 sentences per person.⁴

It is notable that a significant portion of individuals convicted in Serbia in connection to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine were members of the Unité Continentale, an extreme-right movement established in Belgrade in 2014 (Gajić 2022).

The 2022 study conducted by the Soufan Center on the repercussions of foreign fighters on peace and security suggests several recommendations, one of which emphasizes the implementation of existing international instruments. Specifically, it advocates for measures aimed at inhibiting transnational organized crime networks and other entities from capitalizing on the illicit movement of small arms and light weapons (SALW). Additionally, the study underscores the necessity of bolstering upstream interventions to prevent the unauthorized acquisition of SALW (Soufan Center 2022).

Furthermore, the study proposes the establishment of vetted or screened channels to enable communities to provide direct support to Ukraine. This recommendation aims to ensure that funds and material resources are not misappropriated or exploited by criminal elements and other illicit actors. By facilitating transparent and accountable channels for assistance, this approach seeks to mitigate the risk of diversion or misuse of resources intended for legitimate purposes (Soufan Center 2022).

However, Glusac (2020: 62–63) presents a critical perspective on the efficacy of addressing the phenomenon of foreign fighters primarily through criminal prosecution. Glusac observes that this approach, particularly prevalent in Western Balkan countries (WB6)⁵ with broad legislative changes criminalizing participation in conflicts abroad regardless of ties to terrorism, may prove ineffective and even counterproductive. He argues that punitive measures alone are unlikely to deter individuals from joining such conflicts; instead, they may reinforce a discourse of existential threat and further justify participation in conflict as a means of survival. This underscores the complexity of addressing the root causes of radicalization and the limitations of solely punitive measures in mitigating the phenomenon of foreign fighters.

Moreover, Glusac's observation highlights the challenges posed by divergent geopolitical interests in the context of recent conflicts. While there was consensus among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council on criminalizing participation in conflicts abroad for terrorist purposes, such as in Syria and Iraq, the situation becomes more nuanced with regards to the conflict in Ukraine. The involvement of China and Russia, both members of the Security Council, complicates efforts to establish a unified approach towards criminalization (Chowdhury Fink 2022). This raises doubts about whether similar consensus can be achieved regarding conflicts where geopolitical interests diverge among Security Council members.

Furthermore, the absence of ratification of the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries by the majority of WB6, including Albania, BiH, and North Macedonia, presents additional challenges.⁶ The failure to sign this convention increases the risk of these countries inadvertently facilitating the use, financing, and training of mercenaries by international organized crime groups. This not only undermines efforts to combat transnational crime but also threatens to destabilize the rule of law within the region. Thus, the failure to ratify this convention underscores the importance of international cooperation and commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by foreign fighters and related transnational threats.

⁴ See Balkan Investigative Reporting Network. Regional Terrorism and Foreign Fighters Database. Detektor.ba. Available at: <https://www.detektor.ba/> [Last accessed 12 October 2022].

⁵ Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

⁶ See United Nations. List of signatory countries. Treaty Series. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=_en [Last accessed 5 March 2024].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores the significant threat posed by returned foreign fighters to the peace and stability of the Southeast Europe region within the context of organized crime. Several factors outlined in the study contribute to the validity of this concern. Firstly, organized crime groups are increasingly leveraging individuals with military experience, potentially including returned foreign fighters. Secondly, the historical presence of foreign fighters in the region, coupled with ongoing conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, indicates the continued relevance of this issue. Thirdly, both national and EU responses and policies to address this concern lag behind, leaving a critical gap in effective measures.

While current evidence suggests relatively weak links between organized crime and foreign fighters from the Southeast Europe in the context of Ukraine, the potential repercussions of the return of young men from Southeast Europe who have participated in conflicts abroad are profound. Such returns could exacerbate existing inter-ethnic tensions, bolster paramilitary groups, and enlarge the pool of potential recruits for criminal enterprises, echoing patterns observed after the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s.

Therefore, the study advocates for a re-evaluation of threat assessment strategies, particularly those focused on combating organized crime and terrorism, to incorporate the specific risk posed by returned foreign fighters. Special attention should be given to individuals who have joined formations such as the Wagner Group, prioritizing their inclusion in both national and EU-level strategies and action plans. By addressing this multifaceted challenge comprehensively, policymakers can better mitigate the potential consequences and safeguard the stability and security of Southeast Europe.

As a study, the findings presented in this research can be generalized beyond the specific context of the Southeast Europe to inform broader discussions and policy considerations related to the intersection of foreign fighters, organized crime, and conflict.

Firstly, the study sheds light on the broader implications of returned foreign fighters for peace and stability in regions affected by conflict. Recognizing potential risks, such as heightened inter-ethnic tensions and susceptibility to recruitment by criminal organizations, extends beyond regional confines and underscores universal challenges encountered by post-conflict societies.

Secondly, the study highlights the evolving tactics employed by organized crime groups, particularly their recruitment of individuals with military experience. This observation has relevance beyond the Southeast European context and offers insights into emerging trends in transnational crime networks and their exploitation of conflict zones for recruitment and expansion.

Thirdly, the study's critique of existing response and policy frameworks, both at national and EU levels, underscores systemic deficiencies in addressing the complex nexus of terrorism, organized crime, and conflict. This critique resonates with broader debates on the effectiveness of counterterrorism and crime prevention strategies, prompting reflection on the need for more comprehensive and integrated approaches.

Moreover, the study's recommendation for tailored threat assessment strategies to address the specific risks posed by returned foreign fighters can be extrapolated to other regions grappling with similar challenges. By prioritizing the inclusion of returned fighters in threat assessments and action plans, policymakers worldwide can better anticipate and mitigate the potential security ramifications of their presence.

To conclude, this study's findings on the threat of returned foreign fighters and their intersection with organized crime in Southeast Europe provide valuable insights applicable beyond its borders. By recognizing the broader implications and systemic challenges highlighted herein, policymakers worldwide can better tailor responses to address the multifaceted nature of this complex security dilemma.

COMPETING INTERESTS

This article expands upon a brief contribution initially authored for the South East Observatory of GI-TOC, featured in the Risk Bulletin #14 titled 'Balkans fighters are taking up arms in Ukraine, with risks for organized crime,' released in February–March 2023.

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