



9 January 2024

# PERSPECTIVES



## Russian Offensive Resistance Operations

By D. Jonathan White

Russian offensive resistance operations include the recruiting, training, and equipping of irregular forces abroad for the pursuit of national objectives. For example, in the Ukrainian province of Zakarpattia, a right-wing Polish nationalist [threw a Molotov cocktail](#) into the window of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Uzhhorod in 2018. In another example, Alexander Zakharchenko, a Ukrainian of Russian heritage in Donetsk, was so outraged by the 2014 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv that he went out to his garden, [unearthed weapons](#) that he had buried there, and joined the effort to found the Donetsk People's Republic, a puppet regime controlled by Moscow. This paper will analyze how and why Russia conducts offensive resistance operations and will conclude with some policy recommendations for targeted Western governments. Russian offensive resistance operations refer to activities undertaken by Moscow in foreign countries, where they exploit divisions, often based on ethnicity, in the targeted nation to achieve political objectives through the use of coercive diplomacy.

Russia's activities today are not without historical precedent. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Imperial Russia recruited foreign fighters [to join Russian troops](#). Further, during the Balkan wars of the 1870s, "Tsar Alexander II granted [official permission](#) to active service military personnel to take part in hostilities in the Balkans" supporting the Serbs and later the Bulgarians.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has actively engaged foreign citizens to orchestrate resistance against the governments of those nations in alignment with Russian policy objectives. In the 1990s, in regions such as Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, it appears that support for separatist movements did not necessarily emanate from the Kremlin's direct orders. However, it did occur with the tacit consent of local Russian authorities, notably the Russian army. Under the Putin regime, the Russian government continues to support offensive resistance operations that serve its interests.

In Ukraine in 2014, some of the most notable examples of these activities unfolded. Nikolay Mitrokhin delved into this subject in an [insightful article](#) published in 2015. In Crimea, Russia enlisted men who participated in protests against the Ukrainian government in Crimea (referred to as the rent-





a-mob). These rent-a-mobs surrounded Ukrainian army installations, effectively preventing Ukrainian army units from leaving their barracks without endangering civilians. This tactic granted Russian forces the freedom to take control of Crimea. Locally recruited men surrounded and “secured” airports while seizing key infrastructure. [Mobs obstructed Ukrainian army convoys](#), took over townhalls, and seized police stations.

It is worth noting that these activities may not receive official funding from the Russian government. Pro-Russian Ukrainian Alexander Khodakovsky, Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev, and Putin adviser Sergey Glazyev have each played a role in recruiting and financing pro-Russian rent-a-mobs. All these individuals have varying degrees of personal connections to Putin. Khodakovsky recruited and led the Vostok Battalion in Donbas. Malofeyev had previous associations with Alexander Borodai and Igor Girkin, who later became Prime Minister and Defense Minister of the separatist People’s Republic of Donetsk. The so-called “Glazyev tapes,” intercepted telephone calls between Sergey Glazyev and organizers on the ground in Ukraine, contain discussions about Russians paying to support protest activities. Glazyev [emphasized](#) the importance of making the protests *appear* spontaneous and organic. At times, the Russians recruit, equip, and train individuals for immediate deployment, while at other times, they sow seeds that may not bear fruit for several years. The key point is that just because Russian actions are not immediately impending does not mean Russia is not quietly preparing for future contingencies.

### **Recruiting**

In the post-Soviet era, Russia continues to recruit ethnic Russians both within and outside the boundaries of the Russian Federation. During the Transnistria conflict in Moldova in the 1990s, [numerous Russian Cossacks went to Transnistria](#), ostensibly to safeguard fellow Russians. To protect ethnic kin within Transnistria, it appears that local Russians organized themselves into militias, with some support from proximate Russian officials, particularly army commanders, though there is no evidence this was directed by the Yeltsin Administration.

In the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, several events occurred that implied prior Russian preparation by the Russian government. In the middle of events in Crimea, Ukrainian Admiral Sergei Yeliseyev [announced he was resigning](#) from the Ukrainian Navy and accepting the position of Deputy Commander in the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Yeliseyev’s replacement, Rear Admiral Denis Berezovsky, [followed suit the next day](#). The turning of a Ukrainian admiral during the Crimea invasion was probably not accomplished on the spur of the moment. Russian intelligence set the groundwork before the crisis by recruiting Ukrainian officers such as Yeliseyev. One Ukrainian officer who remained loyal to Ukraine said, “generals... came to persuade me” to defect, playing on their shared service in the Soviet Navy. Ukrainian SBU general Alexander Petrulevich [noted that](#) “Russian secret services set the groundwork for the separatist uprising well before President Yanukovich fled Kyiv.”

Igor Girkin, also known as Igor Strelkov, was [identified in 2014](#) by the European Union as an officer in the Russian Army’s military intelligence unit, the GRU. In February 2014, Girkin appeared in Crimea, introduced himself to Crimean separatists as “the Kremlin’s emissary,” and [assisted in negotiations](#) concerning Ukrainian naval officers switching allegiance to the Russian navy. While in Crimea, Girkin recruited a militia unit comprising volunteers from Russia, Crimea, and other regions of Ukraine,



PHOTO OF IGOR GIRKIN-STRELKOV, A GRU OFFICER WHO HELPED ORGANIZE OFFENSIVE RESISTANCE OPERATIONS IN UKRAINE PRIOR TO RUSSIA'S INVASION, ON [WIKIMEDIA COMMONS](#)

particularly the Donbas. He organized, trained, and employed this militia unit to assist in securing Crimea. Once operations in Crimea concluded, [Girkin led the unit to Donetsk](#). Notably, Girkin indicated that two-thirds of the militia unit consisted of Ukrainian citizens, although many were ethnically Russian, and most [had combat experience](#). Recruiters like Girkin may have targeted Zakharchenko.

In Georgia, hostilities erupted in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the Soviet Union's dissolution. The Kremlin did not establish separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but it leveraged Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists. In 2014, GRU Colonel General Anatoli Zaitsev discussed the effectiveness of "partisan forces" in supporting offensive operations. His article, "Partisan Methods," described how the Republic of Abkhazia's GRU equivalent [uncovered alleged plans](#) of the Georgia special forces to strike high-value targets within Abkhazia. In response, Zaitsev endorsed the idea

of recruiting offensive partisans for diversions such as raids, ambushes, and reconnaissance in strategic offensive operations.

In 2016, the Russian GRU attempted to create a resistance network in Montenegro to obstruct the country's path to NATO membership. The Montenegrin special prosecutor for organized crime and corruption, Milivoje Katnic, [disclosed that the plot involved as many as 500 individuals](#). If accurate, this would have required extensive recruiting. According to the UK investigative journalist organization Bellingcat, members of this conspiracy [included at least two Russian GRU officers](#), Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Nikolaevich Moiseev, suggesting that the GRU may be recruiting non-Russians for operations beyond Russia.

Russia analyst [Mark Galeotti argued](#) that actors in the Russian foreign policy apparatus act as "political entrepreneurs." They receive broad policy guidance from the Kremlin, then devise methods to pursue those objectives within their geographic or functional areas. If these ideas show promise, they are presented to the Kremlin. Upon approval, they receive resources and are executed. Montenegro appears to represent one such gambit. While Vladimir Putin may not have initiated the operation, he likely sanctioned it upon being briefed.

In a broader context, Russian political entrepreneurs are likely developing ideas to advance Russian objectives in other locations. These plots have not been activated yet, and their activation may depend on Russian strategic objectives and the conditions in the relevant countries.

Another likely example occurred in Moldova in 2017. Moldova expelled GRU agents for recruiting "volunteers" to serve in Donbas. The volunteers were ethnic Gagauz, a Turkic people who practice Orthodox Christianity. The Gagauz were intended to undergo [paramilitary training](#) near the Russian



city of Rostov-on-Don and then join the fighting in Donbas. There are likely other cases where the GRU maintained operational security successfully, and Russian offensive resistance activities, like the submerged part of an iceberg, remain undetected. However, their lack of detection does not indicate inactivity.

### **Training**

Russian intelligence services engage with foreign resistance members through various means, including training. For example, in Serbia, the ENOT Corporation, described as a “Russian ultranationalist organization,” [established a paramilitary camp for Serbian children](#) near Mount Zlatibor, Serbia, with support from the Russian embassy in Belgrade. The primary aim was not to employ children for immediate Russian policy objectives but rather to sow seeds that may bear fruit later. The young Serbians received instruction in survival skills, mountaineering, basic military training, first aid, self-defense techniques, and attended lectures on Serbian and Russian history. This camp was eventually shut down by Serbian authorities, and the participants were sent home. The Russian ENOT Corporation’s website indicated the presence of other camps elsewhere in Europe.

Similar Russian activities occurred in Latvia. From 2013 to 2018, Latvian children, likely from the Russophone minority, participated in [youth military training camps](#) inside Russia conducted by “veterans of military intelligence.”

Russian officers are further involved in training individuals who share similar views in other EU countries. In Estonia, Russian guest instructors, believed to be intelligence officers, have been engaged in teaching *systema*, a practical Russian martial art. In Latvia, [the government expelled Russians](#) who were participating in paintball and airsoft competitions. These martial activities serve as a means to gather local pro-Russian individuals and introduce them to Russian intelligence operatives. This may serve as preparatory work for an as yet, undetermined future need, or it may merely be a pretext for making contact with like-minded ethnic Russians in those countries, with only a vague idea of how Russian intelligence might eventually utilize them.

Russia also conducts training for adults aimed at more immediate action. As previously mentioned, the GRU operates paramilitary camps in Rostov-on-Don for men recruited to fight in Donbas. In 2020, an organization in Kaliningrad conducted marksmanship training alongside the “[Union of the Polish First Army](#),” a Polish group opposing the EU and advocating for the so-called “Russian World.”

### **Equipping**

Russian operatives interact with resistance forces through equipping them and storing supplies when not immediately required. This technique has historical roots in the Cold War as a tool of [the KGB](#). As mentioned, Alexander Zakharchenko unearthed his Donbas weapons cache to participate in the rebellions of 2014, though he did not reveal his original supplier. While it is possible that some of these weapons may have been procured through illegal means before 2014, a more probable explanation is that they were supplied to him at some point preceding the Euromaidan protests. Russian intelligence agencies were involved in delivering weapons to other locations at that time. Igor “Strelkov” Girkin, [a Russian intelligence service colonel](#), played a pivotal role in [coordinating the delivery of weapons](#) from the Russian Federation to the separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk. The Russian program of equipping separatists in the Donbas even included the provision of [Buk anti-aircraft missiles](#).



In countries that do not share a border with Russia, the challenge of equipping resistance forces is surmounted by Russian operatives in creative ways. In Slovakia, an armed camp was established with assistance from Slovak state officers. A Slovak nationalist group, led by Josef Hambalek, created a military-style camp outside Bratislava, which [incorporated military equipment borrowed from the Slovakian military](#). The visibility of this activity increased when the Russian motorcycle gang Night Wolves visited. This prompted concerns among Slovak authorities, leading to the recovery of the [borrowed equipment](#).

### **How Russia Utilizes Offensive Resistance Operations**

For decades, the Russian Federation has employed offensive resistance operations for various purposes. Pro-Russian insurgents have formed the cadres of armies [in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia](#). When the Russian government aims to alter the policies of a targeted government, it may employ a rent-a-mob to protest these policies, or at the very least, to create the appearance of local opposition. For example, on 26 February 2014, in Sevastopol, Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior troops attempting to disarm the Sevastopol Berkut (riot police) were obstructed by a pro-Russian mob. Later, recruiting tables for local militias were set up in Sevastopol, and anti-Maidan individuals signed up. Subsequently, checkpoints were established on roads leading to Sevastopol and [manned by former Berkut officers](#), Crimean Cossacks, and Cossacks from Russia's Kuban region. In Donetsk and Lugansk, insurgent forces initially recruited in Crimea played a key role in seizing government police facilities:

“[In Donetsk and Kharkov](#), crowds of protesters stormed and occupied the regional governors' offices. In Lugansk, they occupied the local office of the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), where they seized a large number of small arms. In Mariupol, the second-largest city of Donetsk Region, protesters occupied the city prosecutor's office.”

On 12 April 2014, Girkin and a group of fifty-two men seized the police station and the SBU office in Sloviansk, Ukraine. Later, twenty of Girkin's men seized the police station in Kramatorsk. These actions aimed to address the imbalance of forces favoring the government. At this stage, the insurgents had personnel but lacked weapons, while the government had weapons, but [lacked personnel](#). In other instances, mobs obstructed government forces and seized their weaponry. On 16 April 2014, elements of the Ukrainian 25<sup>th</sup> Airborne Brigade entered Kramatorsk and were surrounded by pro-Russian civilians. To avoid using force against civilians, the Ukrainian commander eventually surrendered his weapons and equipment to the mob, which then [handed them over to Girkin's men](#). On 29 April 2014, [a group of men](#) under the command of Valerii Bolotov “stormed the most important administrative buildings in Luhansk.”

In 2018, Konstantin Sivkov, a professor and Russian army officer, digested the country's experience in Ukraine. [In the Military-Industrial Courier](#), he discussed offensive Russian resistance operations conducted by what he referred to as “Active Irregular Forces.” The tasks he mentioned included “deploying a group of irregular formations in a given area and maintaining control over it, political and diplomatic registration, planning and organizing hostilities, and conducting them to achieve ultimate political goals.” Currently, offensive resistance activities fall under Russian intelligence agencies, such as the GRU, but it is evident that some in the Russian defense establishment are already thinking about offensive resistance operations.



The ongoing debate revolves around whether Vladimir Putin is an opportunist or a strategist. In general, it appears that the Kremlin pursues operational readiness and strategic flexibility, establishing the ends in the broadest possible manner. Junior officers are tasked with finding ways to achieve these ends and requesting the means to implement the strategy.

### **What is to be done?**

When responding to these activities, liberal governments aim to respect the rights of their citizens, even those who may hold grievances against the government and harbor subversive agendas. Nevertheless, some prudent actions are available. First, Western government intelligence and law enforcement agencies, if not already doing so, should infiltrate organizations suspected of working with Russian agents in building offensive resistance organizations. This could be achieved through undercover police officers. Second, Western governments should attain membership lists for these organizations, whenever possible. In the event of crisis, the Russians are likely have a list of members they may wish to contact. Western governments should have their own version of these records. Finally, a delicate balance must be struck in deciding whether to prosecute or exploit for intelligence purposes. National authorities may have to choose between law enforcement who may prefer to arrest suspects as soon as there is sufficient evidence for a conviction, and intelligence agencies who may prefer to keep the subject under surveillance to gather more intelligence.

Apprehending some perpetrators can lead to those not arrested going into hiding, making them harder to locate. It should be kept in mind that once Serbian officials shut down the Mount Zlatibor youth paramilitary camp, the [ENOT web page declared](#) that “from now on, we will be carrying out our operations in a much more clandestine manner.” This did not imply they would stop their activities but rather that they will become more secretive.

The stakes are high. In the worst-case scenario, if the government waits too long to arrest perpetrators, the Russians can use them as a cadre of insurgent forces, or “muscle,” for protests, as they did in Donbas, with disastrous consequences for the Ukrainian government. By acting proactively, Western governments can protect themselves and their societies.

The number of people involved in Russian recruitment, training and equipping may be relatively small in specific locations. In periods of political instability, a small number of motivated, trained, and equipped individuals can exert significant influence on larger events. Russia has shown itself to be willing and able to leverage local collaborators to pursue political objectives.



### *About the Author:*

*D. Jonathan White spent 25 years in the U.S. Army, 22 of that in Special Forces. He earned a PhD in military history in 2017. He has worked for NATO since 2015 at the NATO Special Operations University in Belgium and at Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia.*

*The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy, opinion, or position of the Department of Defense, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the Irregular Warfare Center, U.S. Special Operations Command, or the authors' employers.*