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STRENGTHENING UKRAINE'S DEFENSE: A POLICY PROPOSAL FOR RECRUITING FOREIGN FIGHTERS

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Strengthening Ukraine's Defense: A Policy Proposal for Recruiting Foreign Fighters

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Executive Summary

In his State of the Union address in 2022, President Biden characterized the global situation as a battle between autocratic and democratic regimes. The collective support of Western nations for Ukraine, including the recruitment of foreign fighters, exemplifies this struggle. This article proposes a policy to support Ukraine in its war of attrition against Russia by recruiting foreign fighters to join the Ukrainian Foreign Legion. The policy aims to bolster Ukraine's military capabilities by offering a direct path to citizenship and financial compensation to volunteers who commit to fighting for 12 months. This initiative, backed by Western countries, seeks to address the disparity in military resources and personnel between Ukraine and Russia and contribute to a more balanced and sustainable defense effort.

The proposed policy for recruiting foreign fighters in exchange for a path to Western citizenship is directly aligned with the global struggle between democratic and autocratic regimes. By actively supporting Ukraine in this manner, democratic countries are taking a stand against autocratic aggression, demonstrating their commitment to democratic values and the sovereignty of nations.

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Introductory Remarks by the Editors

Dr. Josef Demergis & Dr. Marios P. Efthymiopoulos

With the war in Ukraine reaching a new phase, where industrial production and manpower numbers seem to shift the balance, the question of how to address the problem of recruiting more fighters for Ukraine is a difficult one.

While we are not aware of the real losses that were inflicted by the Russian armed Forces upon the Ukrainian army, the population disparity between the two countries does not bode well for future generations.

Dr Lemieux proposes an approach that employs global recruitment in a manner more befitting a balanced and efficient approach in procuring efficient fighters for the battlefield.

With President Zelensky recently signing a new law that seeks to readdress recruitment shortages, drawing from a Ukrainian populace that has already sacrificed a lot, Dr Lemieux offers a new perspective on how manpower shortages can be mitigated.

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea by Russia and escalated significantly with the full-scale invasion in 2022, has transformed into a protracted war of attrition. This form of warfare is characterized by a sustained and gradual wearing down of the enemy's resources and personnel, with victory contingent on which side can endure the longest. Ukraine faces formidable challenges in this war of attrition, primarily due to disparities in military funding and manpower. Despite receiving substantial support from Western countries in the form of financial aid, weapons, and training, the Ukrainian military is still outgunned when compared to the vast arsenal and resources of the Russian armed forces. This imbalance has led to staggering losses for Ukraine on the battlefield, with a significant toll on both soldiers and civilians. The war's prolonged nature has put immense pressure on Ukraine's military and economic infrastructure. The country's call for volunteers and limited mobilization efforts have been commendable but are insufficient to match the scale and intensity of the conflict. The need for a sustainable and effective strategy to bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities is evident.

This paper explores a policy solution to address these challenges by recruiting foreign fighters to supplement Ukraine's defense efforts. The proposal entails the creation of a structured program for enlisting volunteers from around the world to join the Ukrainian Foreign Legion. This initiative aims not only to reinforce Ukraine's military strength but also to demonstrate a global commitment to supporting the country's sovereignty and resilience against aggression. By offering a direct path to citizenship and financial compensation, the policy seeks to attract skilled and motivated individuals who are willing to contribute to Ukraine's defense. This approach is inspired by historical precedents and contemporary examples where foreign volunteers have played pivotal roles in conflicts, bringing valuable expertise and diversity to the military forces they join. In the following sections, we will examine the details of the policy proposal, outlining the benefits, challenges, and implementation strategies to ensure its effectiveness and alignment with international norms and Ukraine's strategic objectives.

War of Attrition and Foreign Legion

The casualty figures from the conflict in Ukraine are stark, regardless of the method of calculation. According to estimates provided by Ukrainian presidential advisers, the daily casualty rate ranges from 600 to 1,000 individuals. Specifically, Ukrainian official reported to the media that the figures stand at approximately 150 killed and 800 wounded per day, while other officials provided the media with a slightly lower estimate of 100 to 200 fatalities among Ukrainian troops daily. These statistics translate to a monthly casualty rate exceeding 20,000, raising significant concerns regarding the sustainability of Ukraine's military forces should the conflict persist into the latter part of the year. Furthermore, the pre-war strength of Ukraine's military, as reported by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, was approximately 125,000 personnel, supplemented by an additional 102,000 national and border guards. Analysts have crudely estimated that the total number of personnel may have increased to around 500,000 since the onset of the conflict, a figure that underscores the significant mobilization efforts undertaken by Ukraine in response to the invasion (Sabbath, 2022). In December 2023, President Zelenskiy announced that the military had suggested the mobilization of an additional 450,000 to 500,000 Ukrainians into the armed forces, representing a significant escalation in Kyiv's conflict with Russia. This would entail the recruitment of 20,000 to 30,000 individuals each month. To support this proposed mobilization, Zelenskiy stated that an extra 500 billion hryvnias (approximately $13.5 billion) would be required for the army (Polytiuk and Balmforth, 2023).

Ukraine Recruitment Effort

As of February 2024, with Russia controlling approximately one-quarter of Ukraine's territory and a stalemate along a 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) front line, the willingness to enlist among Ukrainian men has waned. Many are avoiding conscription by remaining hidden at home or attempting to use bribes to escape participation in the conflict. Commanders along the challenging and muddy front-line report that their forces are insufficiently sized and comprised largely of fatigued and injured soldiers. The soldiers are also getting old, 43 years old on average. As the conflict enters its third year, a critical and politically sensitive issue facing Ukraine is its ability to recruit sufficient new soldiers to counter an adversary with a substantially larger pool of combatants. The Ukrainian government is endeavoring to strike a balance between

coercion and persuasion in its efforts to bolster its military ranks (Polytiuk and Balmforth, 2023). The parliament is contemplating a bill that would expand the potential pool of recruits by approximately 400,000, partly by reducing the enlistment age from 27 to 25. Typically, brigades consisting of 3,000-5,000 soldiers are operating at only 75% of their full capacity, with some brigades functioning with as little as 25%. However, this proposal faces widespread unpopularity creating internal political tensions (Kullab and Blann, 2024).

Challenges in military recruitment are not unique to Ukraine. In the United States, the armed forces collectively fell short of their recruitment goals by approximately 41,000 recruits during the fiscal year 2023 (Vergun, 2023). In Canada, the Department of National Defence (DND) projected in 2024 that the Canadian military could face a shortfall of 15,225 personnel across both regular and reserve forces by the end of the fiscal year. Defence Minister Bill Blair described this decline in recruitment as "a death spiral for the Canadian Armed Forces" (Burke, 2024). In the United Kingdom, the army and navy have consistently failed to meet recruitment targets every year since 2010, according to data compiled by the Labour Party. The Royal Navy's personnel numbers are 5% below the target set in 2015, while the Royal Air Force (RAF) is 9% below its target. The British Army's numbers appear to be on target only because its goal was reduced to 73,000 in 2021, marking its smallest size since approximately 1714, as calculated by the National Army Museum (Sabbagh, 2024).

Russia's Recruitment Effort

As of February 2024, Russia has been able to recruit 25,000 to 30,000 new recruits per month (Harward et al., 2024). While Russia is facing staggering losses on the battlefield, its military recruitment effort has been boosted by a multifaceted strategy. The Russian government has launched extensive propaganda campaigns to instill a sense of national pride and duty among its citizens. Additionally, advertisements and public announcements emphasize the opportunity to defend the motherland, appealing to the patriotic sentiments of the population. Financial incentives play a significant role in attracting recruits. The Russian military offers competitive salaries, bonuses, and benefits packages to new enlistees. These financial rewards are particularly appealing in regions with limited economic opportunities, making military service an attractive career option for many (Sor, 2024). Legislative measures have also been implemented

to facilitate recruitment. For example, the Russian government has passed laws that streamline the enlistment process and provide certain legal protections and advantages for military personnel. These legal incentives include expedited paths to citizenship for foreign nationals who serve in the Russian military and reduced bureaucratic hurdles for enlistment. Moreover, the Russian military has expanded its recruitment efforts to target specific demographics, such as young adults, prisoners, ethnic minorities, and even foreign nationals. Special programs and initiatives have been developed to reach these groups and address their unique needs and motivations for joining the armed forces. So far Russia has recruited foreign fighters from Central Africa, Cuba, Nepal, Serbia and Syria (Cordoba, 2024).

In January 2024, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree that accelerates the process for foreigners to obtain Russian citizenship if they enlist in the country's military, a move aimed at bolstering troop numbers amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, which has lasted for 22 months. This initiative is part of Moscow's broader strategy to replenish its forces in Ukraine, which includes recruiting migrants. Russia attracts a significant number of individuals from economically disadvantaged Central Asian countries, many of whom seek Russian citizenship annually. The decree, first issued in September 2022 following Putin's announcement of a partial mobilization to draft 300,000 reservists for the conflict in Ukraine, permits foreigners who sign contracts with the Russian army to fast-track their citizenship application process. Immigrants who commit to a contract of at least one year and participate in active combat for a minimum of six months are eligible to apply for citizenship without the need to prove their proficiency in the Russian language or their continuous residence in Russia for five years under a residency permit. This expedited citizenship process also extends to the spouses and children of these individuals. According to the presidential decree, authorities are required to make decisions on such citizenship applications within three months (Litvinova, 2024).

Ukraine's Foreign Legion

The Ukraine Military Foreign Legion, officially known as the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine, is a volunteer military unit formed by the Ukrainian government to allow foreign nationals to join the fight in support of Ukraine. The Legion was established in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022. According to the Ukrainian government website[1], the Legion actively recruits foreign volunteers who wish to support Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Volunteers can be from any country and do not need to have Ukrainian citizenship. The recruitment process typically involves an application, background checks, and interviews to ensure the suitability of the candidates. Once accepted, recruits undergo military training to prepare them for combat. This training covers a range of skills, including weapon handling, tactical maneuvers, and first aid. The training is conducted in Ukraine and is tailored to the needs of the conflict. After completing their training, members of the Legion are deployed to various front lines across Ukraine. They may be involved in a variety of military operations, including defensive positions, reconnaissance missions, and direct combat engagements. While the specifics may vary, volunteers in the Legion are typically provided with a salary, accommodation, and other necessary support during their service. Volunteers usually sign contracts for a specified duration, which can vary depending on the needs of the Ukrainian military and the availability of the volunteers (Clapp, 2022). As of February 2024, more than 20,000 individuals from 50 different countries have joined the legion (Tharoor, 2024).

Similar to Russia's strategy of offering citizenship to foreign fighters, the Ukraine Foreign Legion, along with the collective West, could adopt this approach to help mitigate the attrition rate in the Ukrainian military. This strategy could provide an incentive for foreign volunteers to join the Ukrainian forces, potentially bolstering their numbers and capacity to sustain the ongoing conflict. Adopting such a strategy would enable global recruitment efforts and offer citizenship in Western countries to foreign fighters who are willing to support Ukraine beyond just providing financial aid and weapon supplies. This approach could attract a diverse pool of volunteers motivated by the opportunity to gain citizenship while contributing to Ukraine's defense without being involved directly with deployment of western armies.

[1] https://ildu.com.ua/

Rationale for a Global Recruitment Policy

The US foreign policy establishment is currently single-mindedly dedicated to militarily and economically defeating Russia, without contemplating alternative approaches. Contrary to Western expectations, Russia's economy is not only resilient but also becoming pivotal in the reorganization of global supply chains. On the other hand, Ukraine faces challenges in reinforcing its military forces and sustaining its air defenses. With its larger population and artillery superiority, Russia appears to be gaining the upper hand in the war of attrition. Moreover, several European leaders believe that this conflict could persist for several years, indicating a protracted struggle with no immediate resolution in sight. The proposals to intensify the conflict, such as targeting Russian infrastructure or deploying NATO troops in Ukraine, carry the risk of transforming the proxy war into a broader European conflict. This potential escalation underscores the need for a more nuanced and long-term strategy to address the challenges faced by Ukraine.

By welcoming foreign volunteers who support Ukraine's defense efforts, Western nations can demonstrate their commitment to international solidarity and human rights. This approach could also serve as a powerful counter-narrative to any negative perceptions, showcasing the values of openness, inclusiveness, and support for democratic principles. Furthermore, providing citizenship to foreign fighters can be seen as a recognition of their sacrifices and contributions, which could enhance the perception of Western countries as being appreciative and supportive of those who stand with them in times of crisis. It could also attract skilled and motivated individuals from diverse backgrounds, enriching the social and cultural fabric of Western societies. In summary, this approach could not only help alleviate the attrition rate in the Ukrainian military but also bolster the West's reputation as a beacon of freedom and opportunity.

Finally, this approach could serve as a strategic countermeasure to Russia's influence efforts in regions where the West has limited contacts. It could attract allies and partners in areas where Russia has traditionally held sway, providing an alternative to Russian influence. Moreover, by welcoming skilled and motivated individuals from diverse backgrounds, Western countries can strengthen their societies while demonstrating a

commitment to inclusiveness and diversity. This could further enhance the West's appeal as a model for governance and societal values, countering Russia's narrative and influence in these regions. The effectiveness of such a global recruitment strategy could demonstrate the collective West's determination to Russia, potentially compelling it to consider a ceasefire or initiate peace negotiations.

Formulating and Implementing a Global Recruitment Policy

The conflict in Ukraine has resulted in a significant demand for military personnel. To bolster its defense, Ukraine seeks to recruit foreign fighters. The policy aims to strengthen Ukraine's defense by recruiting foreign fighters with the incentive of citizenship. It calls for international support and cooperation to ensure its successful implementation and to contribute to Ukraine's security. Implementation of this policy will require close coordination between various government agencies, including the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as well as international partners. Table 1 outlines the essential components of the policy, along with its guiding principles and approaches to implementation.

Table 1 – Key Elements of a Global Military Recruitment Policy for Ukraine

Key Elements	Principles	Implementation
Rationale	The conflict in Ukraine has resulted in a significant demand for military personnel. To bolster its defense, Ukraine seeks to recruit foreign fighters	- Offering citizenship as an incentive aims to attract skilled and committed individuals who are willing to contribute to Ukraine's defense efforts

Eligibility Criteria	Prospective recruits must be between 18 and 45 years of age.	- Candidates must pass a physical examination and a psychological evaluation to ensure fitness for combat. - A thorough background check is required to screen for criminal history and any ties to extremist or terrorist groups. - Applicants must have no pending legal issues or outstanding warrants in their home countries.
Recruitment and Training Processes	Ukrainian government manage the recruitment and training processes	- Interested individuals must submit an application form along with required documents, including a passport, proof of age, and a clean criminal record. - Shortlisted candidates will undergo interviews and further background checks. - Selected recruits will receive military training tailored to their role, as well as basic language training in Ukrainian.

Terms of Service	Recruits commit to a 12-month combat tour in Ukraine.	- They will be assigned roles based on their skills and the needs of the Ukrainian military. - Adherence to a strict code of conduct and compliance with international humanitarian law is mandatory. - Compensation includes a competitive salary, health insurance, and provisions for family support.
Path to Citizenship	Upon completing the 12-month tour and receiving a positive evaluation of their service, recruits can apply for citizenship pool offered by NATO countries.	- The application process will involve submitting documentation of their service and a final background check. - Once granted citizenship, individuals will have the same rights and responsibilities as other citizens.
Support and Integration	Foreign fighters are eligible to health and financial support.	- During their service, foreign fighters will receive support such as language classes, cultural orientation, and access to psychological services.

		- After obtaining citizenship, individuals will be assisted with housing, job placement, and integration into society through various programs.
Legal and Ethical Considerations	The recruitment of foreign fighters will comply with international laws, including the Geneva Conventions.	- Legal frameworks will need to be established or adjusted to facilitate the recruitment, deployment, and naturalization processes
Monitoring and Evaluation	A monitoring system will be established to track the well-being, performance, and integration of foreign fighters.	- The policy's effectiveness in attracting skilled fighters and its impact on Ukraine's defense will be regularly evaluated.

The viability of this policy depends on several factors, including political will, legal framework, international relations, and public opinion. This policy offers several benefits but will also face important challenges.

Challenges

The proposal to recruit foreign fighters and offer citizenship as an incentive could lead to legal and ethical concerns at both domestic and international levels. Ensuring adherence to international law and addressing potential accusations of mercenary activities are crucial. Rigorous screening is essential to prevent the recruitment of individuals with malicious intentions or connections to extremist groups. Maintaining the loyalty and dependability of foreign fighters presents a significant challenge. Integrating these fighters into the Ukrainian military and society may be difficult due to language barriers, cultural differences, and possible social tensions. The policy could affect Ukraine's relationships with other nations, especially if citizens from NATO countries participate. It might also cause diplomatic friction if it is seen as exacerbating the conflict. Furthermore, the policy could encounter resistance from parts of the Ukrainian population who may perceive it as a threat to national sovereignty or as giving preference to foreign nationals over Ukrainian citizens.

Benefits

The proposed policy could significantly enhance Ukraine's military capabilities by attracting skilled and motivated individuals to the battlefield. Foreign fighters can contribute a variety of skills, experiences, and perspectives, potentially improving the military's effectiveness and adaptability. This policy could also symbolize international solidarity with Ukraine, garnering worldwide support against Russian aggression. Offering citizenship to foreign fighters could address demographic issues like population decline by integrating dedicated and skilled individuals into Western society. Moreover, the policy could provide a strategic edge by demonstrating to adversaries that Ukraine has extensive international backing and is prepared to adopt innovative defense strategies. To make this policy more feasible, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive legal framework, implement strict vetting and training procedures, and engage in diplomatic efforts to navigate international relations. Additionally, effective public communication strategies are necessary to alleviate concerns and garner support for the policy both within Ukraine and globally. Finally, this policy

could be implemented in other future conflicts in which NATO countries cannot be directly involved militarily without triggering a major war escalation (e.g., Taiwan).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the proposed policy of recruiting foreign fighters with the incentive of citizenship offers a multifaceted approach to bolstering Ukraine's defense capabilities. By addressing the critical challenges of manpower and resource disparities, this policy not only enhances Ukraine's military strength but also symbolizes a robust international commitment to supporting its sovereignty and resilience against aggression. The successful implementation of this policy hinges on careful consideration of legal, ethical, and logistical challenges, as well as effective international collaboration and support. Moreover, this policy has broader implications beyond the immediate conflict in Ukraine. It sets a precedent for future engagements where direct military involvement by NATO countries might not be feasible. By fostering a global coalition of skilled and motivated individuals, the West can demonstrate its unwavering support for democratic principles and human rights, while countering adversarial narratives and influence. As the situation in Ukraine continues to evolve, the need for innovative and sustainable defense strategies becomes increasingly evident. This policy proposal offers a viable path forward, leveraging international solidarity and the spirit of volunteerism to strengthen Ukraine's defense and contribute to a more secure and stable global order.

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