

II. COMMENTARIES

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THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL LEGION – THE WAR FOR GEORGIA IN UKRAINE?

Abstract: *The paper attempts to look closer into and assess one of the truly significant parts of the Ukrainian struggle against the Russian invaders on its territory, the territory of a sovereign post-Soviet state – Russia’s former important ally, with which Russia shares the common history. The Georgian National Legion, which was founded in 2014, joined right away, since then, still ongoing the Russo-Ukrainian War to fight against Russia-backed separatist forces in Ukraine’s Donbas region after Russia annexed Crimea first. In the article, we try to find out what in particular the Georgian National Legion is, who its leadership and members are, and what their motivations actually can be for struggling in Ukraine. Along with the majority of Georgian volunteers, facing and not rarely even personally experiencing Russian aggression against their homeland, Georgia, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and establishment of the independent Georgian state, the legion consists of people from 31 other countries either.*

Keywords: *Georgian National Legion; Russo-Ukrainian War; Georgia; Ukraine; Georgian volunteers*

What is the Georgian National Legion?

The Georgian National Legion was established in 2014 by a group of Georgian nationals to fight Russia-backed separatist forces in Ukraine’s

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Donbas region, where it took part in hostilities even during the first intense phase of the war in 2014-2015. Since the very start of the conflict in 2014, many Georgian military officers immediately decided to arrive in Ukraine to first of all – help train the Ukrainians, who afterwards have taken part in the fighting.

According to Mamuka Mamulashvili², the commander of the Georgian National Legion, Georgian fighters were in Ukraine already in April 2014, by the time when Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine proclaimed the establishment of the Donetsk People’s Republic (in Ukraine’s Donetsk Oblast) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (in Ukraine’s Luhansk Oblast) obviously, with the decisive support from Russia. The Georgian battalion was fighting on the Luhansk front line from the very beginning.

Noteworthy to mention that in 2016, the Georgian National Legion unprecedentedly till then, became part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This was indeed the first time in Ukraine’s history when foreigners were officially accepted into the Armed Forces of Ukraine – under the law “On the integration of foreigners into the Ukrainian army”.

The Georgian National Legion began to recruit more personnel after it officially became part of the Ukrainian army. As soon as the contract was signed, volunteers, including the higher level personnel from different countries started joining the legion. As of now, the Georgian Legion is the largest foreign unit in the Ukrainian army.

Since 24th February 2022, the legion has had even more volunteers. And the geography of their origins is not limited to Georgia – the Legion is a battalion-plus strength unit, consisting of ca. 1000 volunteers, half of them Georgians.

Worth mentioning that as Russia’s full-scale invasion began, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky famously called in fact “every friend of Ukraine”, and “Anyone who wants to join the defence of security in Europe and the world”³ to join the Ukrainians’ fight. He announced that his administration would form a new foreign legion, officially called the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine. It has been unknown though who leads the group, what kind of training they do receive, and how many years fighters are expected to serve. What is interesting is the fact that a lot of foreign fighters still just join Mamulashvili’s legion instead, which suggests that the Georgian battalion has quite a good reputation.

² S. Musaieva, Y. Buderatskyi, *Mamuka Mamulashvili, Commander of the Georgian Legion: Ukraine is the only country to take on the challenge of the barbaric terrorist state that is Russia*, <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/07/10/7357256/>> (13.09.2022).

³ *FightforUA*, <<https://fightforua.org/>> (15.09.2022).

Mamuka Mamulashvili claims to speak personally with every person joining his unit to make sure that they are fighting for the right cause. The Georgian National Legion stands for exclusion of the radical views, religious fanaticism, extremism, Nazism, racism, etc. The battalion leader has drawn a distinction between his group and for instance, the Azov Battalion, another segment of the Ukrainian army, which reportedly welcomed neo-Nazis and other white supremacists, cultivating international ties at the same time⁴.

Due to the high effectiveness and particular contribution of the Georgian Legion in the Ukrainians' struggle for their territorial integrity and sovereignty since 2014, which has been recognized by the Ukrainian President and awarded with the corresponding medals for Mamuka Mamulashvili and several other Georgian officers, Russian propagandists, including media and special services, not surprisingly have been raging the multidimensional information war against the battalion, claiming falsely that the Russian units have destroyed some part of it⁵, or that the legion avoids taking prisoners, suggesting – directly killing them instead⁶.

Who are the Leaders and Members of the Georgian National Legion?

The Georgian National Legion is headed by Mamuka Mamulashvili who is the founder and leader of the Georgian battalion of the Ukrainian army. Mamulashvili has personally been fighting against the Russian expansion in wars since his childhood, when he was 14 years old, beginning with the separatist war in Georgia's Abkhazia region that started in 1992.

In his interview with *Ukrainska Pravda*⁷, Mamuka Mamulashvili talked about his relevant family background mentioning his father, who used to be a military general serving in the Georgian army in the 1990s. It was exactly him, who took Mamulashvili to war at the age of 14. He practically grew up on a military base, and at such an early age, the minor already became a soldier as he joined the combat action. A year after the war began, the father with his son got captured together, and they stayed for about three months in captivity. Despite studying to be a diplomat in Paris, France, "...we can't use diplomatic language with Russia at all... We couldn't do it in Georgia and we can't do it in

⁴ J. Shamsian, *A Georgian commander fighting Russian forces in Ukraine says more international support will help defeat Putin*, <<https://www.businessinsider.com/georgian-legion-commander-ukraine-army-russia-war-mamuka-mamulashvili-2022-3>> (14.09.2022).

⁵ F. Akbarov, *Georgian mercenaries participating in killing of Russian servicemen in Ukraine have been destroyed, says Konashenkov*, <<https://apa.az/en/cis-countries/georgian-mercenaries-participating-in-killing-of-russian-servicemen-in-ukraine-have-been-destroyed-says-konashenkov-379540>> (15.09.2022).

⁶ S. Musaieva, Y. Buderatskyi, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibidem.*

Ukraine”⁸ – Mamulashvili said. The wars before the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 seem to affect the leader of the Georgian Legion more than the one that happened in 2008. He explains this by noting: “Because it was a very short war, and there were peace agreements with Russia, which Russia still does not adhere to. But that was the beginning of modern wars on the territory of the former Soviet Union. It was an attempt to start the <<reunification of the USSR>>... There was no penalty for Russia in 2008, so its ambitions went further. But Georgia said repeatedly in 2008 that Ukraine would be next.”⁹

The legion overall is comprised of people from 32 different countries, among whom the majority are still Georgians followed by the UK and US citizens, as well as other nationals from various states around the world.

After 24th February 2022, recruiting foreigners to the battalion became quite complicated and it was paused for a while once there had been recruited the optimal number needed for the Georgian Legion. There were selected highly motivated people based on their professional criteria and combat experience as they are not expected to undergo preliminary training to participate in combat operations. The fighters coming from the Western countries majorly gained their combat experience from the missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the Georgians have been through several wars orchestrated by Russia specifically, and therefore, they have a lot of experience in war against the Russian aggressors. That’s why, it is logical that as of now, the majority in the Georgian battalion are still Georgians as already mentioned above.

The Georgian Legion now contains around 1000 people being divided into special groups that operate as special operations groups, which carry out very specific work along almost the entire front line. The fighters have been purposefully spread on different fronts avoiding their concentration on one place as Russia truly seeks to take a large contingent of the Georgian battalion and kill them.

The Georgian National Legion, involved in the destruction of command centres, the destruction of Russian logistics, etc. reportedly has warfare tactics that are quite focused and very well planned.

Motivations to Fight in the Others’ Struggle

To understand and analyze what drives the members of the Georgian Legion – Georgians and other nationals, we need to illustrate some pieces even from their interviews. “Ukraine is the only country today physically fighting for freedom and democratic ideals... Everybody should get more engaged because

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

it is the only place now where you can see the real fighting for real freedom¹⁰”, Mamuka Mamulashvili, the founder of the Georgian battalion of the Ukrainian army, told Insider.

When it comes to personal motivations for joining the Ukrainians’ struggle to defend their country from Russian aggression currently, Mamuka Mamulashvili’s personal and family story plays a decisive role. As there has been already mentioned above, Mamulashvili keeps fighting against Moscow’s expansion in wars since his teenage years, beginning with the separatist war in Georgia’s Abkhazia region that started in 1992. He noted his inspiration, which he got from the Ukrainian civilians that have made him prouder to fight alongside them, and that he has been impressed with the leadership of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky personally – during the ongoing crisis. According to the leader of the Georgian Legion, for years, he was anticipating Russia’s massive attack on Ukraine, and therefore, has used his group to train civilians across Ukraine, to learn how to handle arms and protect themselves from gunfire. Vladimir Putin’s interest isn’t just in geographical expansion, but to suck the country’s soul – he said¹¹. Mamulashvili’s vision of the prospects for Ukrainians in the war is deeply connected with moral standing, which seems missing in the case of Putin and his occupant forces, which differ from Ukrainians defending their homeland¹². However, the victory from the part of latter would at the same time need collective attempts to resist from Ukrainians and the rest of the world.

The Georgian fighters’ inspiration for joining the Ukrainian struggle can be explained by various special circumstances, but one is especially important – Ukraine is a strategic partner of Georgia. During the first Russian aggression after the collapse of the USSR in Georgia, Ukraine was the only country that openly helped the South Caucasian state and sent volunteers, many of whom died defending Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. “So it was a matter of principle for us to come and help”¹³ – said Mamuka Mamulashvili.

The major motivation seems distinct for everyone and every individual from different countries. One of the reasons that for example, the American fighters give is the fact that the United States is one of the countries, which signed the Budapest Memorandum, and many of them think that the US has not done as much as it should have done for Ukraine. Therefore, the American members of the Georgian battalion intend to show Ukraine that they are standing together with the post-Soviet country. As in the case of several Georgian or other fighters, some US citizens, part of the legion, have been

¹⁰ J. Shamsian, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ S. Musaieva, Y. Buderatskyi, *op. cit.*

killed during the war. The idea behind accepting fighters from different countries in the Georgian Legion used to be the demonstration of how many states support Ukraine. And if there was even one representative from each country, that would be quite a lot of fighters.

After some volunteers from Georgia or other countries have been killed, many more people from those very or other states keep expressing their will and join the Georgian battalion in the Ukrainian war.

According to the Georgian Legion members¹⁴, Russian soldiers, lacking once again, any moral standing in the war, tend to maximally avoid a direct meeting and equal combat with the Ukrainian military. Instead of that, as it is a well-established and widespread fact, the occupants massively rape, kill and torture children and women, along with men, and civilians in general.

When attempting to convince the Western allies to more actively and precisely help Ukraine, the Georgian Legion leader Mamulashvili noted: “Ukraine has taken on the role of protecting all European countries and democratic values – not only its own but also those of the entire Western world. And the West needs to really understand this because this is costing Ukrainians their lives”¹⁵. “We’d rather have more heavy weapons”¹⁶, Henryk Diasamidze, another legion officer commented on the Ukrainian army’s needs, including those of the Georgian battalion either.

To the question, what could be considered a victory for Ukraine in the ongoing war, could it be the return of territory – the return of Donbas or the return of Crimea under Ukraine’s control, and what might victory for Georgia mean for them personally, Mamuka Mamulashvili thoughtfully said: “Today, Ukraine’s victory is also Georgia’s victory”, and “The only option for ending the war in Ukraine is the de-occupation of absolutely all territories of Ukraine, the de-occupation of Crimea and all the occupied territories. [...] 20% of the territories in Georgia are also occupied by Russia. And Georgia today is completely dependent on the war in Ukraine. On how the war in Ukraine will end. [...] I think every citizen of Georgia has to understand that his or her place is in Ukraine today, and it’s not just the fate of Ukraine that’s being decided here. It’s not just Ukraine, but many European countries, NATO countries and Georgia in particular as well. [...] I really want every Georgian to understand that the struggle for Georgia is going on here today, and they should join it”¹⁷.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ K. Livingstone, *The Wolves Leading the Pack: Inside a Key Foreign Unit Fighting to Protect Ukraine*, <<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/08/24/wolves-leading-pack-inside-key-foreign-unit-fighting-protect-ukraine.html>> (15.09.2022).

¹⁷ S. Musaieva, Y. Buderatskyi, *op. cit.*

The People and the Government

As the war of 2022 started, the Georgian Government blocked a group of 400 Georgian fighters from joining the legion¹⁸. Georgia keeps avoiding joining international, or the initiation of sanctions against Russia, although officially complies with the existing ones, maintains a visa-free regime for the uncontrollable already and dramatically increases on an ongoing basis – the influx of Russian citizens, while at the same time, in parallel, the country demonstrates clear support to Ukraine though, keeps sending humanitarian aid, supports Russia's suspension from international organizations, etc. All these facts illustrate a very careful and diplomatic position (if that can be called like that), made by the part of the Georgian authorities towards Russia – the occupant of Georgia's officially 20% of the territory as well – and its actions in Ukraine.

As the Georgian Legion leader Mamuka Mamulashvili also points out even just observing the significant number of volunteers coming from Georgia to Ukraine manifests great and genuine support of the Georgian people towards Ukrainians¹⁹. There are popular events, for example, frequently categorical demands towards the Georgian Government raised by the dominant part of civil society, youth and opposition in the country for the much stronger official denouncement of Russian actions, allowing more direct and mobilized involvement of Georgian volunteers fighting in the Ukrainian war, etc. These events are taking place in the South Caucasian state and demonstrate the apparent disagreement between the ordinary citizenry and the country authorities.

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