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The Union of Donbass Volunteers: Between reintegration and remobilization¹

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In a shadowy basement near Moscow Center, half a dozen of people in military fatigues are working in an underground office covered with Donetsk and Luhansk Republics flags, ‘volunteers’ pictures and other ‘blagodarnosti’²: After having gotten yelled at by the press-Officer for not having called before my coming (I actually did), I was welcomed by the Apparatus Chief assistant, a mid-forty woman, to the kitchen where I was offered tea and cookies. Here stand the *Soiuz Dobrovol’yshev Donbasa* Union of Donbass volunteers (Union of Donbass volunteers: UDV) the main association for Donbass war veterans.

Founded in October 2015, The Union of Volunteers of Donbass was officially created in order to provide welfare assistance to the Russian volunteers back to civil life after having fought in eastern Ukraine thus substituting the Russian State which does not recognize those combatants as veterans as Russia wasn’t officially involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine and denies any participation in it.

At the outbreak of the war in eastern Ukraine in spring 2014, a large contingent of foreign fighters came to back the separatists’ side in the breakaway Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. If among them many fighters came from diverse countries, including western countries, they are overwhelmed by Russian foreign volunteers³. Although the first of them were spotted with Igor Girkin⁴ at the battle of Slavyansk between April and July 2014, the main wave broke in after the events in Odessa in May 2014 following the Trade Unions House fire where around forty pro-Russian activists have been killed. After several month in the battlefields, and having been engaged in the battles of Ilovaisk, Donetsk Airport, and Debaltsevo, most of them left the battlefields in the aftermath of the second Minsk Agreement and the consequently decline of intensity in the conflict and came back to Russia.

If the UDV could be seen as a typical veteran organization aiming to provide aid to war veterans as many others exists in Russia, it has recently evolved into a political platform and

¹ This paper is a first work of an ongoing research which included Fieldtrips in Moscow in 2019. Two other fieldtrips were scheduled in 2020 and 2021 but due to the Pandemic outbreak, they were put in hold. The author ask therefore to not quote, circulate and publish without permission of the author.

² Translated by “gratitude” a blagodarnosti is a document issued by a natural or a legal person intended to a natural or legal person in recognition for outstanding service or help. This type of document is very common former USSR and can be found in any public or private administrations.

³ Volunteers is understood here as a non-regular and therefore a non-conscripted combatant. The term volunteers encompassed those who made freely the choice to fight in Ukraine no matter if they received personal compensation and could thus be considered as mercenaries.

⁴ Igor Girkin (1970-), also known by his war nickname “Strelkov” is a former artillery veteran and an alleged former FSB (main Russian security agency) or GRU (Russian military intelligence) officer. He was involved in many post-soviet and post-cold war conflicts (Transnistria, Bosnia) and played a key role in the War in Donbass. He was appointed Defense minister of the Donetsk Republic and he was charged by Dutch prosecutors for the shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014.

is now running for the next local and Federal elections. Notwithstanding the fact that the UDV never hid its political agenda from the beginning *i.e.* advocating for the Donbass annexation by the Russian Federation, the UDV goes also far beyond the traditional aim of veteran's organizations by bringing veterans as a entitlement group (veterans) to a status group (Crotty & Edele, 2013). First it tries to promote an to put the question of the rights of the veterans of the unofficial war in Donbass on the political agenda. Secondly the UVD is today on the edge to become a political party seeking alliances for the Next Duma election in Fall 2021 and thus aiming to become a political actor in domestic politics. Moreover, beyond those political prospects, the UVD appears to be running ambiguous activities as it could have become a recruitment pool for private military companies (PMC's) as well as some of its members seem to be involved in criminal activities and in domestic political violence activities. The blurring lines between its primary purpose – providing benefits and welfare to veterans – its political aims – Bringing Donbass veterans from an *entitlement group* to a *status group* and thus gaining political influence – and its suspected unofficial activities, bring the questions of its atypical nature regarding traditional veteran organizations and the historical context of Russian veterans' policies. The paper tends also to highlight the relations between the UDV and the Russian State in the light of its relationship with other veteran organizations.

Using the intensive literature on Veteran organizations and policies, this first part of this paper will briefly explore veterans' policies including Russian policies toward veterans since the Great Patriotic War. The second part will focus on the creation of the UDV, its political sponsorship and how it tries to put forward the interests of Donbass war veteran on the political agenda. Finally in a third and final part we will describe how the UDV pretends to become an influent political actor in domestic politics, and we will conclude by questioning if these features are atypical in relation with other veteran organizations.

Beyond academic literature on veteran policies, this paper research is based on different sources mostly Open Sources: numeric ethnography by monitoring all Union's activities in Social Networks, Official UDV speech and interview given mostly its director Alexander Borodai, journalistic investigation, and some official legal sources. A field trip has been made in spring 2019 where the organization was visited several times and some interviews were conducted in the UVD's Office in Moscow.

A theoretical framework of veterans' organization and veterans' policies: an overview

Veterans' organizations and policies since the XXth century: a highly political object

Most veterans' organizations came up in the aftermath of the two World Wars whose magnitude and unprecedented rates of casualties caused social trauma and resentment among surviving veterans bringing them to federate into organizations. Beyond the problems related to demobilization, those veterans' organizations aimed to lobby governments for "what they considered their due": material compensations and recognition for their sacrifice and what they have endured during wartime (Crotty & Edele, 2013). Focusing on Soviet veterans of the Great Patriotic War, Mark Edele (2006) has theorized the claim of war veterans, who considered deserving special treatment and benefits not available to other citizen, as an "entitlement groups" whose goal is to form a recognized "Status Group" (Crotty & Edele, 2013). As the former represent the feeling "to deserve, to merit" inhabited by veterans who

assume that “they acquired something through service [...] and earned special rights vis-à-vis the larger community they defended” (Edele, 2006) the latter describe the achievement of such group which managed to translate these entitlement claims into an officially and recognized privileged status thus forming an institutional specific group apart of the society. The extend of the benefits they get by achieving this legal status through veterans’ organizations widely varies depending the countries. In France, among the several veterans organizations which proliferated during and after the First World War, the two main veterans associations, *The Veterans National Union* (L’union nationale des combattants) and the *Federal Union of former French Veterans* (L’Union fédérale des associations d’anciens combattants) respectively created in 1919 and 1917, have not only successfully lobbied the French government for the officially “Veteran status” (Statut d’ancien combattant), opening numerous advantages for war veterans (extensive pensions, tax cuts, reduced or free public transports fees), but were political springboard for numerous war veterans as some of them became member of the French Parliament and subsequently formed an influential “Former combatants parliamentary group” in 1929” therefore ensuring the WWI veterans a special status (Prost, 1977).

The recognition of this kind of privileged group is part of what some scholars has theorized as an “conservative-corporatist” welfare policy towards veterans in contradiction with Anglo-Saxon countries with a “liberal” welfare regime where the level of official support towards veteran is much lower⁵ (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, beyond the influence of social policy in forging veterans’ policies, the latter are also largely determined by the country’s history and more specifically its warfare history, its military-civil relation pattern and by the structure of the armed forces and other contextual factors (Danilova, 2009).

In addition to advocating on behalf of former combatants, Veterans organizations can be seen also as a mean to control veterans once back in civil life. A large literature has focused on how huge waves of demobilization movements could trigger the fear that veterans could transpose their military culture in civil societies once back from the front (Huttington, 1957) and thus could become a potential threat to civilians’ societies with the effect of militarizing and “brutalizing”⁶ the domestic politics (Mosse, 1990). Even though the ‘brutalization’ theory has been widely criticized (Prost, 2004; Duclos, 2012), there is a little doubt that depending on contextual factors and circumstances, largely discussed by the literature of War Veterans (Duclos and al., 2012), the return to civil life can be a sensitive issue. Tempering Mosse hypothesis of *brutalization* about veterans of the Chechen Wars, Anne Le Huérou and Elizabeth Sieca-Kozlowski (2012) agree however that a certain “continuum” between war and post-war situation as well as a “syndrome” do exist and are also both fed by Russia’s armed forces and military-civil relations historical patterns (Danilova, 2009) thus constituting “a complex spiral of brutalization” (Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozlowski, 2012). Veterans’ organizations could be seen as a way to channel war veterans by federating them, recognizing their sacrifice and thus responding their “strong sense of entitlement” (Edele, 2006).

⁵ Some scholars consider on the contrary that despite their privileged status in the former Soviet Union, veterans of the Great Patriotic War, received lower level of social benefits than in the United States with its “G.I. Bill” providing house loan for discharged soldiers.

⁶ As pointed out by Georges Mosse (2010) and Robert Gerwarth (2016), the role of German Veteran organization after World War I had a significant impact on the rise of domestic violence and on the Weimar Republic early days

The late case of Russia: from ignorance to the Cult of the Great Patriotic War Veterans

Surprisingly, war veterans of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) only benefitted some limited privileges⁷ and only for a short time after the end of the War in 1945 (Danilova, 2009). Once the huge demobilization wave was achieved in 1947, the Soviet government abruptly abolished most of the privileges for the approximately 8,5 million soldiers discharged from the Red Army. Veterans ceased to exist as an officially recognized group for approximately the next thirty years. Even Victory day 9th of May ceased to be a non-working holiday in December 1947 until 1965. A first shift toward the re-recognition of GPW veterans was the foundation in 1956 of the the *Sovietski Komitet veteranov voiny* (SKVV, Soviet Committee of War Veterans). The SKVV was the only state organization representing the GPW veterans. However, as Mark Edele (2006) puts it, it was more “a front organization in the propaganda war with the west” which expended in the 60’s in the context of the developing cult of World War II” under Leonid Brezhnev (Edele 2006, Danilova 2009) than a recognition of Veterans as an entitled group let alone providing them social benefits. The question whatever they benefitted informal benefits from the society is widely discussed among scholars but whatever theses informal privileges could have been, Soviet war veterans had to wait the Khrushchev leadership to see some improvement of their conditions.

Indeed, as Natalia Danilova stresses it, the creation of the “Myth of the Great Patriotic War” in the begging of the 60’s resulted in a growing recognition towards veterans and welfare initiative which expended from then onwards every year. For example, in 1967, USSR introduced the cult of the “unknown soldier” and despite the fact that Victory Day remained a working day, it was marked by military parade and gathering of veterans⁸. In 1978, the status of *Uchastnik Otechestvennoi voiny* (participant of the great patriotic war) was officially institutionalized in legally recognized as a privileged status group. From then, GPW veterans enjoyed a high level of privileged ranking from health provision, housing, free transportation, free annual trip to a health resort, and a large set of care allowance for severely injured veterans. What could have been the reasons leading to such a complete reversal policy towards veterans in thirty years making them in the 1980 the most privileged group of the entire Soviet Union? According to some scholars, theses privileges are part of a kind of social contract between the state and the veterans where the latter benefit high level of privileged and recognition by the GPW ongoing growing myth in exchange of loyalty and state support and “their active participation in the war making process [...] and unquestionable support for military mobilization campaigns (Danilova, 2005, 2006). Even more surprising is the fact that the GPW is officially considered as the only “War” by the Soviet and then Russian legislation as other conflicts are only mentioned as “military operations” or “special operations”⁹.

Soviet veterans of the Afghan war (1979-1989) didn’t enjoy any state benefits until the middle of the 1980’s as the Soviet Union painted the operations in Afghanistan as a humanitarian

⁷ Which included privileges in education, employment, and pension. However, it seems that the soviet veterans received less support than in other countries (Danilova 2009; Edele 2006). Some scholars declare that the Soviet war veterans were less well treated than in western countries (Fitzpatrick 1985 cited by Danilova 2009).

⁹ See the 12.01.1995 (amended on 30.12.2020) Federal law “on veterans” N 5-F3

operation in order to support the afghan struggle against “imperialistic invasion” and thus impeding the recognition of any war situation and therefore the recognition of war veterans. Only in exceptional circumstances, veterans of the War in Afghanistan received official support from the State which ironically granted them the status of “participant of the GPW” thus fueling an increasing feeling of frustration among veterans of the Afghan war. They had to wait the end of Brezhnev leadership in order to get the right to some privileges in 1983 and only after the perestroika that the Central Committee announced a special resolution granting them the same privileges than the GPW veterans although they did not hold the official status of “Veterans”. However, the bad implementation of the resolution made claiming those benefits a painful and often a fruitless process in a crumbling Soviet Union.

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the SKVV lost its monopoly on veterans’ affairs thus fostering the creation of several veterans’ organizations from civil society¹⁰. The economic and social situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union led the newly Russian State to rely on Non-governmental organization (NGO’s) in order to provide welfare to war veterans especially to Afghan veterans organizations through a Presidential grant program¹¹. However, the high level of corruption and alleged criminal activities within these organizations led to the failure of such welfare projects. The benefits were captivated by a minority while the large majority of veterans were struggling to get support (Kotkin, 2001; Volkov, 2002). This situation led the Russian State to put an end in the mid-90’s to this subcontracting policy with NGO’s and implemented a newly Official Veterans policy. The still in force 1995 Federal law “on veterans” recognizes the status of veterans to all who fought in the “GPW” as well as “in military operations outside former USSR, inside former USSR and within the Russian Federation¹²” thus officially recognizing for the first time the veteran status to Afghan War veterans. However, the lack of economical means in the very instable 1990’s Russia largely counterweighted this official recognition.

Veterans of both Chechnya wars were also initially denied the status of veterans as the Russian state didn’t recognize both conflict as a “war” and instead labeling the first Chechnya war as “restauration of constitutional order” and the second “an anti-terrorist operation”. However, the 2002 amendment of the 1995 law eventually added “veterans of the military operations within the Russian Federation” thus including Chechnya veterans who were eligible to welfare benefits¹³. Like it was the case with Afghan war veterans some years before, some combatants of the first war in Chechnya under exceptional circumstances were granted under exceptional the status of invalided of the GPW (Ushakin, 1997). Chechnya veterans’ organizations also followed the same pattern as those for Afghanistan. The Russian state first delegated welfare to those organizations, however, the fact that they were under-funded left Chechnya veterans

¹⁰ Among those organizations, three Afghan war veterans’ organizations collected the majority of State Support: The Union of Afghan Veterans, the Russian Union of Afghan War Veterans and the Russian Foundation for Disabled Afghan War Veterans.

¹¹ The veterans of the GPW were excluded from this program. Their privileged status although still officially in force suffered however from the transition and the economic reforms of the 90’s.

¹² The Russian Federation operations were added in 2002.

¹³ The law was lately amended in December 2020, it now includes Afghan veterans of the new subjects of the Russian Federation (The Republic of Crimea and the Federal town of Sebastopol) granting veterans benefits to war veterans who held the same status from the Ukrainian States thus including Ukrainian veterans of Afghanistan.

with a lack of constant resources. The case of the second Chechnya war is even more specific. Considering the fact that it was labelled as “an anti-terrorist operation”, a significant number of Police troops from the Ministry of Internal Affairs were sent to Chechnya. Like the others, the latter also faced with state non-recognition and as their military counterparts they weren’t subject of any rehabilitation or psychological program. As their situation slightly improved in the past decade, since 2007 however, the Russian authorities do not hesitate to instrumentalize them for patriotic program in Civil Institutions including patriotic educational programs towards younger generations (Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozlowski, 2010).

After having drawn a historical and contextual picture of veterans’ organization and veteran’s policy in Russia since the GPW, one can identify a constant of Russian policy towards veterans. After facing an initial non-recognition, veterans of Russia’s war attempt for obtaining what they consider being entitled to, manage on the long run to succeed to be recognized as a legal “Status group”. However, despite this recognition, the bad implementation of veteran’s regulation¹⁴ and the absence of sufficient resources prevent its efficiency and veterans have to struggle a long period of time in order to get some state or informal support. However, although veterans eventually got their status recognized, the conflicts they have fought in are still not considered as “war” in Russian legislation. Indeed, according to the latter there is only one “War”, the GPW whose veterans still enjoy nowadays an exclusive and highly privileged situation among others especially in the context of the GPW myth re-introduced by Vladimir Putin (Wood, 2011). In any cases, more than rights, veterans have duties towards the state. Their recognition depends on their loyalty and they must take an active part promoting Russia’s values and policies. Considering that regular veterans’ soldiers have been struggling for their rights, how an organization like the Union of Donbass Volunteers can therefore defend the rights of several thousands of irregular fighters of an “usual” unofficial war?

The Union of Donbass volunteers: an organization of an Unofficial War

A Social organization under high Sponsorship

In a Press Conference held in Moscow in August 2015, Alexandre Borodai former prime minister of the Donetsk People’s Republics announced the creation of a Donbass War Veterans organization, The Union of Donbass Volunteers (UDV). Setting up few months after the return of large number of Russian Volunteers due to the second Cease-Fire agreement signed in Minsk in February 2015 putting an end to the high intensity phase of the Conflict the UDV began its activities in the aftermath the failure of Novorossiia, the confederation project of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics in May 2015. Shortly after the organization was officially registered in September 2015 as an interregional public organization and held its first Congress one month later in October. The UDV was immediately put under both symbolic and political patronage. Its first – and spectacular – Congress took place inside the Great Patriotic War Museum located in the Victory Parc and was attended by almost six hundred representatives of both breakaways Republics as well as battalion commanders - as Arseniy Pavlov known as “Motorola”. The UDV can count among its political

¹⁴ Which can be delegated to regions and provinces creating thus inequity in the access of welfare (Le Huérou & Kozlowski, 2010)

sponsors Vladislav Surkov, at the time President Putin advisor, and Konstantin Malofeev, a businessman head of the nationalist orthodox oriented media outlet Tsargrad, suspected to have financially supported the Donbass insurgency. Both of them attended some of the Union's Congress and events along the years.

The UDV claims to represent not only the Russian "volunteers" who have fought in Eastern Ukraine but all activists, social workers who came to be involved in a way or in another to the still-ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Union's is led by Alexander Borodai (1972), a Moscow born entrepreneur and former "prime-minister" of the Donetsk Republic in Spring/Summer 2014 at the beginning of the war. The Union's vice president Andrey Pinchuk was the head of the Security of the Donetsk Republic after having held the same charge in the breakaway Transnistria Republic in Moldova. The Union's everyday routine is taken care by the Unions "Apparat" led by former DNR Viking battalion Commander Aleksey Sossoni which is in charge to implement the Union Official main missions. According to its statutes, it has Offices in Moscow, Rostov and in Crimea, and has representatives in more than sixty subjects of the Russian Federation. Its officials' missions rank from bringing financial, legal and administrative support to Donbass war veterans once back in civil life but also to help families of Fallen or disabled fighters. The Union holds one Congress per year, kind of a big patriotic show, where political orientations for the year to come are set. It takes place generally in Moscow at the Great Patriotic War Museum but can be held also in Rostov and in Sebastopol and is attended by many hundred Veterans delegates and by political personalities. According to Borodai, the Union counts more than 14,000 members, a figure that can't be verified and is approximately the same number of people following UDV page on the Russian social network VK (*Tass*, 2017). Nevertheless, to become an UDV member, one must fill an application form where presence in the Donbass must be proven and then must be send to the UDV regional representatives. The origin of the organization's funding is unclear, as this topic never appears on any of the UDV statement or publication, Borodai briefly stated in a press interview that "important public figures donate to the organization" (*La Croix*, 2017).

Social and Welfare Institution

Like many veterans' organizations, the UVD can be suspected to be an institution "set up most likely with the support of the [Russian] authorities to monitor and control foreign Fighters once they return home" (Secrieru, 2017). As stated above, demobilizing waves of combatants is always of some concern for public authorities as they don't want to lose sight of experienced veterans and aim to keep control of the latter. The fact that Russia denies any participation in the war in Ukraine, whose war veterans are thus considered as irregular, there is no doubt that the monitoring of such fighters could only be delegated to a non-governmental organization. Ironically this situation makes the case of the UDV similar to veterans' organizations of the Chechnya wars while they initially lacked state recognition.

However, UDV official main missions showed on its official website, cover a broad spectrum of activities including legal, medical and financial aid to war veterans and their families as well as social and psychological assistance; commemorating of fallen 'volunteers' memory and bringing back to Russia the bodies of combatants killed in battle. It also aimed developing "voluntarism" activities in the regions of the country as well as youth patriotic education and to provide assistance for civil life reinsertion by providing employment to veterans, mostly in

the construction area and in in the field of private security. It also vaguely claims to help the peaceful inhabitants of the Donbass.

According to UVD chairman Alexander Borodai by 2019 the UDV brought treatment to “at least 354 wounded” and “141 people received psychological help and 343 volunteers were provided with medicines”. In addition, the UVD helped 80 people to receive prosthetics. Moreover, in its fifth Congress held in 2019, the UVD claim to have “helped to place more than 1,630 volunteers in jobs (Tass, 2019). It is unknown how much if its main tasks are simple umbrella activities, as there is no precise figure of its social activities available. The UVD leader put forward some achievement on social networks without describing precisely how many people they helped. The yearly medicinal support assistance reports presented in each organization Congresses are also unclear about the UDV achievements and lacks precise financial information’s, Olga K. in charge of organization medicinal assistance program stating in the 4th Congress that the organization helps “hundreds “of war veterans but is “underfunded” bringing them to “optimize” their actions¹⁵.

The second main task put forward by the organization can be seen as classical for veteran’s organization: it relates to the commemoration of fallen ‘volunteers’ memory and also the transport back to Russia of bodies of dead combatants. The UDV created the *Pomni Donbass* (Remember Donbass) webpage project where the UDV gather information and publish short stories of “volunteers and militias who stand to defend the Young Republics [who] gave their lives for the Donbass and the Russian World”¹⁶. The project far from willing to be limited to be a simple “Memorial Book” of fallen fighters intends to become in the future “a real archive of the War in Donbass” for “future historians” and hence promoting the voluntarism movement around the Russian World¹⁷. According to the project website, most of the data is given by fighters’ relatives or are collected from various Opensource data including social networks. collected by the combatant relatives. To this date, it has so far identified 1431 Donbass fighters who lost their lives and has collected 547 ‘volunteers’ stories.

Beyond its social and charitable features, the UDV always held a political agenda from the beginning as it advocates, for the official recognition of Donbass War veterans by the Russian State in what one can consider a classical feature for veterans’ organizations as seen above with the example of the interwar French veterans’ organizations. Before its first Congress held in October 2015, Alexander Borodai stated that the “Union is a mobilization reserve but has above all a social and a humanitarian nature. We plan to lobby with the clear objective to change the actual legislation to give to the participants in the War in Donbass social benefits and official status as a war veteran”¹⁸. However, along the Years, if the objective of advocating for the Donbass veterans’ rights still remains at the top of the UDV Agenda, the organization is in a process of politization and aims to play an increasing role in domestic politics as well as becoming the “Russian World” flagship thus transcending its traditional social framework towards war veterans and become a leading nationalist organization.

¹⁵ “IV S”ezd. Otčet po medicinskoj pomošči ot SDD”[4th Congress. UDV medical aid report], *sddonbassa.ru*, 22. Jan 2019, Web, accessed March 2021. <https://sddonbassa.ru/iv-sezd-otchet-po-meditsinskoj-pomoshhi-ot-sdd/>

¹⁶ « O proekte » (About the project), *pomnidonbass.ru*, Web, accessed March 2021. <http://pomnidonbass.ru/o-proekte/>

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ « Pervyj s”ezd Soûza Dobrovol’cev Donbassa » [First UDV Congress], www.sddonbassa.ru, 11 Oct. 2015, Web, last accessed March 2021, <https://sddonbassa.ru/pervyj-sezd-soyuza-dobrovoltsev-donbassa/>

A loyal nationalist organization aimed to defend the Russian world

The shift of the UDV toward an increasing politization started during its Fifth Congress where Borodai stated that “About the Union main objectives, we understand that we are not a veteran’s organization [...] “Russia and the Russian World need to be defended in every of its boundaries [...] We must be ready to face our opponents, both in Russia and outside the country, who entered in a hostile behavior toward us. To this day, the UDV is one of the few organizations which is ready to stand against this growing hostility”¹⁹. As mentioned above, the yearly organization Congresses increasingly stress the defense of the “Russian World” as its main task. The Idea of the Russian world can be traced back to the Kievan Rus in the XIth centuries but was above all a philosophical conservative nationalistic Idea in the 18th and 19th centuries linked to the concept of “Russianness” around Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality. The question was at the core of the philosophical debate which divided Russian intelligentsia between “Occidentalism” and “Slavophilism” (Heller, 1997). The Idea resurrected after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is since mostly articulated around the Russian language and thus encompass all Russian speaking people around the world and more specifically Russian nationals or Russian Speaking minorities in the near abroad (Laruelle, 2015). Some consider the idea of the “Russian World” as an instrument of restoration of Russia’s influence throughout what was the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and Vladislav Surkov, one of the UDV most prominent political support, and one of its most influential occult representatives (*Svoboda*, 2015).

The 90’s is largely considered as a humiliating time by Russia’s nationalists and has led some of them to join the ranks of armed groups in many regional conflicts in the post-soviet space and in the Balkans. Fighters like Igor Strelkov was involved in Russian volunteers’ battalions in Transnistria as well as in Bosnia in support of Serbian Fighters and play a key role in the beginning of the War in Donbass. He had closed ties at that time with Alexander Borodai, who was covering those regional conflicts for the nationalist journal *Den/Zavtra* [Day/Tomorrow] owned by the nationalist figure of the 90’s Alexander Prokhanov. They worked together for the same journal in the coverage in the war in Dagestan in summer 1999.

According to UDV officials, the beginning of the “Russian Spring” coincided with the Crimea takeover and the outbreak of the war in Eastern Ukraine and is the first step to a Russian restauration into its former borders. Examining the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 at its sixth and last Congress held in Moscow in October 2020, the UDV decided after further debates not to send volunteers in Armenia sides but raised the question whether to back volunteers to armed conflict abroad (Hurska, 2020). Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian entrepreneur suspected of having funded Donbass insurgency and owner of the traditionalist orthodox media outlet *Tsargrad TV*, who was at the Congress stated that the UDV Donbass volunteers must play an increasing role in future regional conflicts since “veterans defend the ideals of the entire Russian World” (*Tsargrad.tv*, 2020), Andreï Pinchuk, the deputy head of the UVD and former security minister of the Donetsk Republic

¹⁹ Itogi V S’ezda Soûza dobrovol’cev Donbassa [Conclusion of the Fifth UDV Congress], www.sddonbassa.ru, 15 Dec 2019, Web accessed: March 2021, <https://sddonbassa.ru/itogi-v-sezda-soyuza-dobrovoltsev-donbassa/>

acknowledges stressing in a recent interview: “The Russian Spring is the starting point of Russia’s independence battle”²⁰.

Evolving into a hybrid organization the UDV can be described as a Bicephalic organization with in one side the apparatus dealing with current affairs concerning the social and charitable aspects of the Union and a political board led by Alexander Borodai and Andrei Pinchuk. The latter, moved by a discursive around the Russian world, is maintaining the UDV as a military reserve and transforming the organization into a wider political organization looking forward to weigh in the domestic political and thus preparing the ground for future participation in upcoming local and Federal elections.

A military reserve on alert for public and private use

As many nationalist clubs the UVD, conducts many training camps and tournaments for young children and teenagers via its “Military and Patriotic Education Committee” (Yudina & Verkhovski, 2019) It also cooperates with secondary schools in order to conduct training where children are taught to wear a gas mask²¹. It conducts training exercise for Donbass veterans in its “Volunteer Military Training Camp” (Hurska, 2020). In addition, the UDV occasionally organizes competition for Donbass veterans. For instance, more than one hundred Donbass volunteers and veterans gathered at the “Legioner Game” held in the July 2017²² in Kaluga oblast. The different events included shooting exercises, a 10km walk with heavy military load, and a boxing tournament and other military obstacle courses. In an interview alongside the games Borodai and Pinchuk claimed that this tournament strives to maintain the Donbass Volunteers in a good physical condition in order keep them ready in case of an eventual increase of intensity in Eastern Ukraine (Youtube, 2017) and thus to keep a mobilizing reserve ready to be engaged in combat in Ukraine or in any other war (OD Dobrovolets, 2017).

According to some journalistic sources the UVD, far from keeping this mobilized reserve for the only purpose of an eventual Resurgence of the war in Eastern Ukraine, keeps it at the disposal of any political entrepreneurs, in order to fulfil public and private interests (*Meduza*, 2019a). Evgeny Prigozhin, a famous multitasks entrepreneur, with alleged closed links with Vladimir Putin known among others for his Trolls Factories in St-Petersburg and for ruling the Wagner mercenary group, is suspected lately to have recruited some of its mercenaries among

²⁰ « Andrej Pinčuk: Russkaâ Vesna — èto načalo bor’by za nezavisimost’ Rossii» [Russian Spring is the starting point of Russia’s independence battle], <https://sddonbassa.ru>, 25 Mar. 2021, last accessed: March 2021 <https://sddonbassa.ru/andrej-pinchuk-russkaya-vesna-eto-nachalo-borby-za-nezavisimost-rossii/>

²¹ « Otdelenie Soûza Dobrovol’cev Donbassa Kurganskoy oblasti prinâli učastie v organizacii i provedenii voenno-sportivnoj igry «Zarnica» v srednej škole № 42 g. Kurgana» [The UVD branch of the Kurgan region took part in the organization and holding of the military sports game «Zarnica» in high school 42 g. Kurgan], <https://sddonbassa.ru>, 8 Feb. 2012, last accesses: march 2021, <https://sddonbassa.ru/otdelenie-soyuza-dobrovoltsev-donbassa-kurganskoy-oblasti-prinyali-uchastie-v-organizatsii-i-provedenii-voenno-sportivnoj-igry-zarnitsa-v-srednej-shkole-42-g-kurgana/>

²² So far the biggest tournament organized by the UDV who dedicates to it a special web page (which seems today offline) and many officials’ pages on social networks including Instagram. See:

<http://legioner.games>

<https://www.facebook.com/legionergames/>

<https://www.instagram.com/legionergames/>

the UVD members for military operations far beyond the Russian World, in Syria, Libya or in Central African Republic (*Meduza*, 2019b). UVD members can also be hired for political vendettas activities as the beating of the head of the Investigation committee of the Republic of Crimea by a UDV member²³ hired by the Internal minister anti-corruption department of the same Republic. Some of its members seems to be involved in the domestic political violence market. During the protests in Yekaterinburg in 2019 against the construction of an orthodox church in the city center, they were called in order to stand against the protesters (Hurska, 2019; *Meduza* 2019a). They were also seen during the protest in Moscow in the summer 2019 during the City Council election campaign attacking the pro-democracy protesters. According to Lubov Sobol, one people related to the UVD and to Progozhin followed her and threw her some dirty mud on her (Twitter 2019, *Meduza* 2019a).

The UVD seems to have diversified its activities and to be well integrated in the violence market as in the Near Abroad as in the domestic political market. It keeps throughout its various social and training activities a core of Donbass veterans members mobilized for various punctual actions. Lately the UVD intend to push over some of its members involved in politics arena in order to defend the Union's agenda.

Looking forward for 2021: political involvement

First discussed in its spring Congress in 2020, the UDV made official in its last Congress in Fall 2020 at the Tsargrad Hotel in Moscow held mostly online, its alliance with Konstantin Malofeev, Vladislav Surkov and the reactionary Rodina party which could result "in the emergence of a new, well-organized and patriotic political force equipped with paramilitary skills" (Hurska, 2020; *Versia* 2020). Borodai stressed "that the UDV will remain a social charity organization but its member will run for Rodina in the next election at all levels" (*ANNA NEWS*, 2020). Andrei Pinchuk, deputy head of the UDV, justifies political involvement being the best way to promote the UVD national memorandum pretending defending the fate of Russian volunteers stressing that the UDV main objectives are their recognition in Russian Legislation and to demand State protection for those Russian volunteers actively taking part in regional conflict beyond the country's borders"²⁴. UDV does not exclude further cooperation agreement with other political parties as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, with United Russia and according to Pinchuk with Zakhar Prilepin political party *Za Pravdu* (For the thruth) but with certain conditions²⁵. Finally, in March 2021, Borodai stated on his side that he is running himself for the next Duma election (*Novorossia*, 2021).

It is not sure that the UDV and *Rodina* will do better than the previous nationalist parties in the upcoming election. Except for Jirinovsky LDPR party which managed to become a systemic opposition in Russia, all nationalist parties failed to gain significative weight in Federal and

²³ Alexander Lesnov, a member of the UVD was sentenced to a three-years term. See the Supreme Court of the Crimea Republic press service: <http://vs.krm.sudrf.ru/modules.php?name=modsearch&text=%E0%EB%E5%EA%F1%E0%ED%E4%F0+%CB%E5%F1%ED%EE%E2%E0&doSearch=%CD%E0%E9%F2%E8>

²⁴ « Itogi VI S'ezda Soûza dobrovol'cev Donbassa», [6th UDV Congress Report], <https://sddonbassa.ru>, 20 Oct. 2020, <https://sddonbassa.ru/itogi-vi-sezda-soyuz-dobrovoltsev-donbassa/>, last accessed: March 2021

²⁵ «Dobrovol'cy Rossijskoj Imperii: Glavnye itogi s'ezda SDD» [Volunteers of the Russian Empire: UDV Congress main conclusions], <https://sddonbassa.ru>, 1st Nov 2020, <https://sddonbassa.ru/dobrovoltzy-rossijskoj-imperii-glavnye-itogi-sezda-sdd/> last accessed: March 2021.

local elections. Despite the fact that *Rodina* scored 9% in the State Duma election in 2003 and 13,23% in 2011, it has notably declined in the last Federal elections where it managed to get only one PM elected. It is unlikely that an alliance with the UDV could change the trend, especially as the UDV does not arouse sympathy among many nationalist organizations which see the UDV as “pro-Kremlin” and “para-governmental” (Yudina & Verkhosvky, 2019). Furthermore, some other Donbass volunteers’ associations accuses the UDN not caring much about Donbass veterans describing it as a platform for its leaders (Svoboda, 2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion one can state that The UDV shares many features with many other veterans’ organizations. Its social and political advocacy activities for the recognition of Donbass veterans’ rights make the UDV no different than any regular veterans’ organizations. The fact that the UDV seems to be a political springboard for its leader is also not atypical for a veteran’s organization. The examples of the French veterans’ organization leaders becoming Member of Parliament and Boris Gromov former president of the Chechnya veterans’ organization *Boevoe Bratstvo* (Military brotherhood) prove that Borodai political ambition is quite common among public figures emerging from war context. The fact that the UDV is advocating for the rights of veterans of non-recognized war sounds familiar with the struggle of war veterans who were denied their veterans status as former USSR and then Russia didn’t initially consider Afghan and Chechnya wars, despite structural differences between those different “non-recognitions”. In a purely Russian context, the UDC is also involved in patriotic programs especially in educational patriotic programs. However, the UDV share also some unconventional features as it promotes, unlike other organizations, an ideology around the Russian world and the protection of Russians minority abroad thus keeping trained troops ready to be mobilized. Those features which go far beyond its social missions as stated in its statuses, tend to bring the UDV closer to organizations like the German *Freikorps* (Free Corps) of the interwar period and thus maintaining a high level of tension within Donbass veterans despite the fact that the UDV claims to help them back in civil life. Beyond Borodai’s latest statements on an imminent war, whose main goal were certainly to draw public attention for its political campaign for upcoming State Duma election, there is no doubt that such environment is not working in favor of any de-escalation nor reintegration of Donbass veterans. Loyal to the Kremlin, which is the price to pay for its informal support, the UDV is to be seen more and more as a political actor than a social advocating organization for Donbass veterans’ rights as it is wrapping itself into the imaginary of the Russian World. It is not sure that the UDV will succeed in the next Duma legislative elections in September 2021, unless it allies with the ruling United Russia. However, as long as the war in Donbass is still ongoing its influence will maintain, and its will be essential for Russian authorities even more if the War in Ukraine resume back as a high level intensity conflict.

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