

## **The New Media and Framing of a Transnational Identity through Contemporary Internationalist Insurgencies**

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The rapid rise of non-state actors in recent years, along with a general disdain toward established territorial lines, has been eroding state sovereignty and territoriality, resulting in a number of irredentist conflicts across the world. As local struggles in Eastern Ukraine and Northern Syria turned into international conflicts, the proliferation of digital media platforms has provided unprecedented opportunities for the creation of new “imagined communities” independent of territoriality, national borders, and ethnic ties to a homeland. Thanks to “the new media,” non-state actors and transnational groups have not only transcended geographic boundaries and instilled a sense of belonging within their virtual communities, but also worked with local groups on the ground to transmit their norms, values, and action-oriented identities into the international system with relative ease.

This project examines the process of identity construction in small, geographically dispersed, and ideologically motivated transnational groups so as to understand the “incompletely imagined communities” (Marandici, 2020, p. 63) of such non-state armed actors in Eastern Ukraine and Northern Syria. By focusing on two internationalist insurgent groups (*Sut Vremeni* and the *New International*), we analyze the video content created and disseminated on YouTube that targets a global/English-speaking audience. The method of content analysis we employ here allows us to compare the strategies of the two transnational groups and examine how they engage in public diplomacy, securitize certain issues on the basis of vague referent objects, and provide justification for their violent actions. We explore their identity articulations, take a close look at speech acts, and investigate whether, or to what extent, the demonization of their enemies eventually creates collective identities. Our analyses show that both groups employ communist and nationalist frameworks, without discussing the apparent dissonance between the two. Our findings also indicate some similarities between the images, arguments, and rhetorical devices adopted by these groups in Syria and Ukraine, raising questions about the relevance and importance of ideology in information warfare and foreign fighter recruitment. We argue that their strategic use of securitization emerges in certain contexts that necessitate the construction of a referent object, so they utilize a wide array of metaphors, symbols, and stereotypes (Balzacq, 2005) to create new virtual “imagined communities” with their local and global supporters (Anderson, 1991).

This identity-building project takes two forms: first, through intellectual bonds, it connects like-minded individuals; and second, it provides symbols and myths for the construction of a new imagined community and “invents traditions” (Hobsbawm, 1983), mirroring the nation-building processes that take place in real world. For this reason, we “think of securitization as a process

which simultaneously constitutes the group and securitizes it towards other groups” (Eide, 1998: 71) and call for a reappraisal of securitization theory. We believe that this theory’s application beyond its traditional European core (Bilgin, 2011), as well as its adoption of a wider set of actors (Pratt & Rezk, 2019), can shed light on the long-term implications of “securitizing moves” within conflict narratives.

Our project’s contribution to the literature is threefold. Its conceptual contribution lies in its analysis of insurgents’ nation-building practices, resulting in the mutual constitution of “the securitization process and the identity referent” (Friis, 2000: 4). Its empirical contribution expands the current understandings of insurgent-generated content, by situating this concept within the context of cyber-nationalism and examining the newly-established virtual communities through the lens of strategic communications. Finally, its theoretical contribution supplements the existing research on foreign fighters, especially by focusing on the nation-building activities of international insurgents (Mylonas, 2012; Kaneva, 2021) in Donbass (Eastern Ukraine) and Rojava (Northern Syria).

### **From Internationalists to Foreign Fighters**

Within the context of this study, the label “insurgent” covers all foreign and local fighters who participate in ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. It also includes civilian volunteers who work with insurgent groups to help build utopian societies in Donbass and Rojava. The literature refers to these insurgents as “volunteers” mainly because they travel, on their own volition, to another country, “without expectation of pay” (Arielli, 2018, p. 4; Fritz & Young, 2020, p. 450). The groups we analyze are also “foreign fighters” mainly because they join conflicts “outside their home country,” despite their “lacking citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions” (Bakke, 2013, p. 32; Hegghammer, 2010, p. 57).

Internationalists, on the other hand, constitute a specific group of insurgents, consisting of foreign fighters and transnational volunteers who join the conflict due to their commitment to a global or international struggle (Burke, 2018). Although there are “as many reasons to go [to conflict zones] as there were men [and women] who went” (Jackson 1994: 12), these internationalists tend to be more utopian or idealist, often subscribing to a higher universal good beyond the promises and constraints of the nation-state. Whether aiming to revitalize “the Soviet inspired concept of proletarian internationalism” (Holbraad, 2003: 152), or simply employing “the rhetoric and symbology of internationalism that has been a hallmark of the Communist movement for decades” (Malet, 2020: 47), it is this ideological stance, rather than their familiarity with – or their knowledge of- Ukrainian or Syrian politics, that brings these foreigners into conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. In this sense, our definition of the “Internationalists” does not include mercenaries and diaspora communities (that is, ethnic Russians and Kurds living abroad). The material expectations of the former group, and the kinship ties of the latter group to the region, set them apart from the internationalists in question.

Even when their contributions to war efforts are minimal, foreign fighters and transnational volunteers play a role in regional and global politics far beyond their size and military prowess. Whether in the form of publicizing the local struggle, giving legitimacy to the cause, or boosting the morale on the ground, they help their local allies strengthen their internal sovereignty and gain

international recognition for the territories they control. In fact, the following quote, attributed to the YPG's foreign volunteer training program commander Deniz Sipan, illustrates this point well:

We do not need soldiers... We need people who represent their countries... So, when you're from Australia, or you're from Canada, or you're from America, or you're from Sweden, it's not only *you* here, it's your whole country helping us and supporting us (YPG International, 2015).

The following section explains the ways in which the internationalists generate this support through the skillful use of the new media platforms.

### **Media, Conflict, and the Construction of Meaning**

Digital platforms in general, and social media networks in particular, serve as novel arenas to share ideas and identities and to make persuasive appeals. In addition to well-known commercial practices in the area of "influencer marketing" (Enke & Borchers, 2019), political messages of online activists and ideological influencers have been known to frame "events, issues, and realities" in specific ways to inspire audiences and encourage particular action (Holbrook, 2015; Lewis, 2020). YouTube, with its almost three billion users worldwide, has become a particularly influential "Web 2.0" space in this process, democratizing mass communications and empowering individuals and groups that traditionally lacked access to, or voice in, the mainstream media (Gillespie, 2010). In doing so, it has offered individuals and groups a platform to share their content, socialize, and reinforce group identities (Askanius, 2012; Birdsall, 2007; Vergani & Zuev, 2011).

As the internet becomes the primary venue for the creation of virtual communities and formation of transnational alliances, it also dramatically changes the existing power structures. Reminiscent of the role the printing press played in the creation of modern nation states (Anderson, 1991), this new media, as a "fundamentally democratic" space (Ess, 2018), facilitates exposure to new information, brings geographically distant groups together, generates common discourses among them, and create or deepen their identities. In addition, the advent of social media allows transnational organizations, parastates, and other non-state actors to promote their own political discourses, organize like-minded individuals, and recruit supporters. Skillfully adapting to fighting wars and conducting public diplomacy within "the new information-dominated operational environment" (Olson, 2007), digitally savvy insurgents and transnational groups learn to shape public opinion their favor and increase their chances of success at the physical battlefield.

In this sense, "the contemporary operations environment" has a second dimension: the parties involved in conflicts not only fight in the actual battlefield, but also engage in a "war of ideas," contending "with words and images to manufacture strategic narratives which are more compelling than those of the other sides" (Betz, 2008). Insurgents construct conflict narratives that harness the power of the internet, provide a public record of their political dissent (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013), and mobilize the support of "distant others" (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013) to achieve their strategic goals in the end. These new trends in insurgent communication, along with the accessibility of media production technologies and abundance of online platforms for sharing the multimedia material, have promoted a new genre (*insurgent vlogs*) and gave conflict narratives

a new form. At the same time, this convergence has turned the internet-savvy insurgents into political influencers, citizen-journalists and propagandists, blurring the boundaries between their on-the-ground reporting from, and active participation in, ongoing conflicts.

To complicate the issue further, the growing access to Internet across war zones, combined with the decline in the number of professional war correspondents (Selvajah, 2020), popularizes insurgent videos even more. This links individual insurgents to larger support networks and creates a basis for mobilization and action in this globalized competition for soft power (Nye, 2004). Moreover, this medium of communication creates new forms of organization that are not bound by the current boundaries. Perhaps more importantly, groups formed through these efforts often lay the groundwork for future efforts to build physical communities that represent and reinforce the ideological positions of their members (Jones, 1997), “bridging the imagined world of cyberspace to the dimensional world where politics and conflict reside” (Palmer, 2012: 128).

Even though scholars have explored the digital media communication of jihadist transnational groups in great detail (Krona & Pennington, 2019; Monaci, 2017; Winter, 2018; Yusha’u, 2015), other types of insurgent groups have not received such attention. Non-jihadist groups in Syria are severely understudied (Badran & De Angelis, 2016; Toivanen & Baser, 2016; Way & Akan, 2017), with little to no academic material on the insurgent-generated online content from the region (Oztas & Lukacovic, *forthcoming*). Even the noteworthy studies that focus on the conflict in Ukraine (Laruelle, 2019; Voronovici, 2019) and on the uses of new media within the Donbass War (e.g. Makhortykh & Lyebyedyev, 2015; Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017) pay little attention to the media narratives of left-wing organizations. This study aims to fill this gap in the literature by identifying the competing understandings of “security” emphasized by non-jihadist insurgent groups from a comparative perspective.

### **Securitization as an Identity-Building Process**

Entman (1993; 2003) argues that one of the main functions of a frame within political communication is to define a proposed problem that purportedly requires public attention as well as an institutional response. Since “security threats do not simply exist out there” (Floyd, 2020: 1),<sup>1</sup> securitization works as a frame element and “constructs a certain meaning for a given phenomenon” by emphasizing some aspects and obscuring others (Froio, 2018: 699; Vultee in Balzacq, 2010; Watson, 2012). Accordingly, certain influential actors (e.g., state officials) employ securitized discourses as strategic frames, or political tools, to draw attention to (perceived) threats to a specific referent object and advance extraordinary policies that may be questionable or even unacceptable under normal circumstances (Vuori, 2008). By creating threat perceptions through their “speech acts,” these political elites gain the ability to persuade their audiences and/or act upon that real or imaginary threat with exceptional means without much protest (Buzan, Wævaer, & De Wilde, 1998: 24).

Even though securitization literature mostly focuses on Western democratic leaders concerned about public perceptions (Wilkinson, 2007) or authoritarian regime elites desperate to legitimize repressive policies (Vuori, 2011; Pratt & Rezk, 2019), the rise of non-state actors and parastates

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<sup>1</sup> After all, “the sense of threat, vulnerability and (in)security are socially constructed rather than objectively present or absent” (Buzan et al., 1998: 50-51).

offers new areas of research and necessitates new applications of the securitization theory. These developments require reconceptualization of securitizing actors as well, simply because neither state officials, nor political elites, hold a monopoly over securitization frames or securitizing speech acts (Vuori, 2008). Studies show that anyone with the necessary social capital, including experts, media figures, and activists, can successfully securitize issues and persuade their audiences to adopt extraordinary measures against real or imaginary threats (Lukacovic, 2020; Salter & Piche, 2011; Vultee, 2010). In fact, even insurgents and irredentists, who are often at the receiving end of such policies, can become securitizing actors, refer to their opponents as existential threats, and call for extraordinary measures to remove these threats. The IRA in Northern Ireland and ETA in Basque Country illustrate this point well, as the top echelons of these groups saw terrorism as a necessary evil to address the severe security threats to their state-building projects.

The literature also assumes fixed identities based on core values or essential characters (Smith, 1991), and ignores the ongoing process of identity formation (or self-perceptions of securitizing actors) to a large extent. In most analyses, both the referent object and the securitizing actor correspond to already established and uncontested entities, such as sovereign nation-states or political elites (McSweeney, 1996). It does not discuss *how* these identities get “forgotten and/or reinvented” either (Wæver et al. 1993: 37) or ask *why* actors securitize in the name of certain referent objects but not in others (Silva, 2016: 202). Because the content, significance, and boundaries of communal identities change over time (Chandra, 2012; Wimmer, 2013), however, we believe Benedict Anderson’s approach to nationalism and nationhood (1991), according to which a community does not exist “unless people think so, unless they feel some sort of solidarity with people they never have met” (Friis, 2000: 7), better explains the constellation of in-group and out-group members in these cases. It also provides a more appropriate framework for the study of global/non-territorial communities like internationalist insurgents in Donbass and Rojava.

At this point, it is important to note that securitizing acts usually take identity-construction and community-building practices to a new level, as “the other” is no longer just “different” but also a threat, or a problem that needs to be eliminated for the well-being, and even the continuity, of the community itself. Nevertheless, because they interact with their global audiences and engage in boundary-making processes (Wimmer, 2013) at the same time, they end up adopting largely *ephemeral* referent objects for their securitization frames.

By deciding which issues to highlight and which others to downplay, securitizing actors not only play the role of gatekeepers (Eide, 1998; Floyd, 2020), but also help their audiences make sense of the identities and events on the ground. When this message resonates with the target audience, it asserts certain ‘truths’ and give legitimacy to measures which could otherwise violate international norms and standards. Far from objecting to securitizations “in which they are not referent object or threatener,” some members of the target audience feel ready to die, or kill, for their “imagined community” (Floyd, 2020: 3).

### **Internationalists and Irredentist Insurgencies in Ukraine and Syria**

Internationalists who subscribe to these imagined communities arrive to a complicated situation on the ground. The insurgents of Eastern Ukraine adhere to a plethora of political and

ideological tendencies, so they lack a clear focus, long-term vision, and agreed-upon priorities. Even though “Novorossiia” (or, New Russia) was the dominant idea of the separatists during the earlier stages of the conflict (i.e., around 2014), but that idea was abandoned in favor of an independent Donbass project, and some started to support the status quo in the region, which is the *de facto* existence of Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic (Laruelle, 2019).

At this point it is difficult to assess public opinion in the region, but various studies over the years suggest heterogeneity of public opinion (Kudelia & van Zyl, 2019). There has been support for integration with Russia, support for broader autonomy as a part of Ukraine, as well as for other alternative projects. Ukraine might have lost control of its eastern territories, but the internationalist insurgents’ disagreement over priorities, objectives, and long-term goals persists to this day (Laruelle, 2019). Despite these differences, both republics drew upon long-standing ideas and tropes, ranging from communism and anti-oligarch populism to monarchism and ethno-nationalist capitalism. In fact, the commemoration and glorification of the Soviet Union is prominently woven into the public life of the self-proclaimed People’s Republics, despite the fact that means of production continue to be privately owned.

In comparison, internationalists of Northern Syria (Rojava Commune) appear more unified in their long-term goals and strategies. An overwhelming majority of the Rojavan insurgents call for a revolution, even though the referent object of such calls (*a revolution for whom?*) remain quite vague, and often fluid. This apparent lack of cohesion can be attributed to the teachings of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* – PKK) and inspirational figure for many internationalists in Rojava. Öcalan started his political career in 1980s as a Marxist-Leninist, became the leader of an irredentist struggle in 1990s, renounced his nationalist aspirations in 2000s, and embraced the idea of a radical, stateless, democracy (“democratic confederalism”) later in his life. This complex heritage, combined with the needs and demands of the Syrian Kurds and other ethnic groups living in the region, leads them to adopt seemingly contradictory stances on communism and nationalism. Following the doctrine of “strategic ambiguity” (Sohn & Hatfield, 2018) to survive and thrive in a region plagued by frequent conflicts, they bring more elements into play and present an additional layer of identity formation – at least in the discursive realm. At the same time, they generate a rally-around-the-flag effect to win the hearts and minds of their potential allies, without alienating their left-leaning support bases.

In spite of the Commune’s self-proclaimed communist agenda, Syria’s war-depleted resources, as well as low levels of industrialization in this specific region, render a true socialist economy effectively impossible at this point. Strong irredentist sentiments among local Kurdish groups interfere with this revolutionary project, even though nationalism defined as self-determination does not necessarily contradict the liberative aims of this communist project (Holbraad, 2003: 144; Mevius, 2009). Interventions by regional powers (e.g., Turkey) and by distant allies and foes (e.g., the United States and Russia) complicates this picture further, creating a number of tribal, sectarian, or nationalist alliances and ideological allegiances for members of the Rojava Commune. Such ephemeral character is also symptomatic for Donbass, especially with regard to the diversity of opinions about borders or expectations around political identity and state-building. This multitude of ideas compel prospective members of these communities to envision their roles within ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Syria.

## Imagining the Insurgent Community

In her study of collective actors in social media, Bakardjieva demonstrates the tendency of ordinary people to seek and accept security frames, especially because both political influencers and social-media activism “infuse” them “with the sense of agency and efficiency – ‘I/we can do something’” (2015: 985). Capitalizing on this tendency, insurgent groups offer compelling narratives and interactive frameworks that go beyond the linear communication methods of mainstream media. In doing so, they prime their audiences to accept a new narrative, forming a virtual community and collaborative network along the way (Lewis, 2020). In these virtual communities, like-minded individuals not only work within their immediate environments, but also communicate with their *distant others* without the need for traditional organizations, generate support for their causes. In other words, such structures allow these insurgent organizations to reach beyond supporter bases that would be available to them within their local domains. They also help construct and shape perceptions of the group, by emphasizing the distinction between in-group and out-group members and creating new identities as a result.<sup>2</sup>

In the cases of Donbass and Rojava, these imagined communities include geographically distant groups and individuals that accept the security frames but exclude *others* who don’t fit the definitions of the *self* despite their close proximities. The construction of such communities then gives them the ability to influence, even manipulate, public opinion, and the power to represent the *self* and the *other* in a way that they see fit. Even though they sometimes face stiff competition from other political actors who create their own, often opposing, narratives, they still disseminate information about their goals and share their vision and mission with geographically dispersed internationalists and other sympathizers across the world.

The large number of foreign fighters and transnational volunteers who went to Ukraine or Syria to join the internationalists should be seen as a sign of this successful securitization process. The *speech acts* and *persuasive appeals* of the internationalists have achieved their primary goals, simply because the target audience accepted the securitizing move, gave their support to the cause, and even joined the organization as a recruit. These new members were essentially convinced to abandon the relative safety of their lives in order to pursue a difficult and uncertain future in a distant land, supporting, or fighting on behalf of, a non-state entity without any legal protections. This constituted a huge break from “normal politics” (Pratt & Rezk, 2019), creating more than “a natural response to a self-evident threat” (Nunes, 2012: 346) but normalizing extraordinary measures like militancy and violent activism in the name of protecting ‘the community.’

Because these fighters and volunteers took such drastic measures, we argue that the type of securitization internationalists use goes beyond justification of the extraordinary means and actually constructs a new referent object that also includes *the target audience*. By using ‘the

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<sup>2</sup> This realization may have contributed to the proliferation of insurgent-generated content (Oztas & Lukacovic, *forthcoming*) in recent years. Because the new media technologies are rapidly developing, however, scholars need to reflect on the implications of these developments and study new genres to (continue to) draw theoretical lessons from them.

enemy other' to decide on "the limits of a given identity" (Neumann, 1999; Williams, 2003: 519), these speech acts facilitate the emergence of new virtual communities, on whose behalf securitizing actors can speak and demand action. They also reinforce the community identity through rules of inclusion and exclusion, as well as with the help of "permanent state of emergency" narratives and images of "what would happen if security did not work" (Wæver, 1995: 61).

Although the existing studies tend to neglect this generative potential of securitization frames, we believe that this type of securitization actually "contributes to group-making strategies and the (re)construction of [a communal] identity" (Lord, 2019: 71). This is especially true when a securitizing actor does not refer to an already-established community as their referent object but declare some nebulous, or transient, entity to be existentially threatened. Even when the referent object of interest is loosely defined, or when it constitutes nothing but an *empty signifier* "void of any meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning" (Levi-Strauss, 1987, p. 63), the addressees of securitizing moves can be factored into conflict narratives and integrated into speech acts as active participants and/or referent objects of securitization frames.

### **Research Questions and Empirical Analysis**

In this sense, three sets of research questions guide this project. The first set of questions explores the elements of securitization frames, and the second takes a look at the major frames that dominate the insurgent narratives:

**RQ1a:** What types of security frames are articulated by the internationalist insurgents in the videos?

**RQ1b:** How, or to what extent, do Donbass and Rojava internationalists differ in terms of their security arguments?

**RQ2a:** Which other conflict frames are articulated by the internationalist insurgents in these videos?

**RQ2b:** How, or to what extent, do Donbass and Rojava internationalists differ in their overall conflict frames?

Together, these two sets of questions aim to explore the frames internationalist insurgents of Donbass and Rojava use to explain the conflict from their perspectives. While securitization is the key narrative element here, it is important to examine other framing strategies, because the paradoxical nature of these narratives, combining internationalism/communism, and nationalism/irredentism, require these groups to emphasize certain aspects of their struggle while downplaying others.

Because securitization can take a visual form as well (Williams, 2003), it is important to explore whether, or in what ways, images contribute to speech acts. Likewise, it is necessary to analyze the "ideological" visual framing (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011) and see which symbols, images and other ideological elements dominate the conflict narratives in these contexts. That is why the third set of questions ask:



**RQ3a:** Which visual ideological symbols are used by the internationalist insurgents in these videos?

**RQ3b:** How, or to what extent, do Donbass and Rojava internationalists differ in terms of their visual ideological symbols represented in these videos?

To answer these questions, we analyzed the video content of two specific YouTube channels that gave detailed descriptions of the Donbass and Rojava insurgencies from the internationalist/Communist fighter perspective. The Donbass videos feature Russell Bentley, an American citizen who is using the *nom de guerre* “Texas”, while the Rojava videos offer in-depth interviews with a number of internationalists, the majority of whom hail from Germany, France, and the United States.<sup>3</sup> We chose these three accounts due to their self-proclaimed “internationalist” identities and the high number of followers (over a hundred thousand views for each channel) they have amassed on YouTube.<sup>4</sup> The ease of access (almost all videos are still available online), and the insurgents’ coverage of wide range of issues, also played a role in that decision, promising a reliable insight into insurgent groups’ preferences and priorities.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Bentley is a member of the Vostok Brigade,<sup>5</sup> who is working with *Sut Vremeni* (“Essence of Time”) combat unit, a Russian Marxist-nationalist organization with known ties to international volunteers fighting on the side of irredentist insurgents.<sup>6</sup> He has been creating content on YouTube since 2015, and his videos appear both on the official *Sut Vremeni* channel and his own *Russell Bentley* channel, albeit at different times. Our sample includes sixty randomly selected videos from

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<sup>3</sup> While the Rojava commune consists of local Kurdish insurgents, foreign fighters, and transnational volunteers recruited through the internationalist movement, only the last two groups give their testimonies in the New International videos. As they take part in different local units (YPG, YPJ, and SDF) and serve through both military (such as the First Internationalist Freedom Battalion) and civilian organizations (such as the Mesopotamia Academy), however, their exact numbers are not known. The estimates range from hundreds of foreign volunteers to thousands (Malet, 2018), consisting mostly of American veterans of the Operation Iraqi Freedom and adventure-seeking college students from Europe, but also including out-of-work actors like Michael Enright (Fritz & Young, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> As of April 2021, the New International has approximately 133K views and 2.57K subscribers, and Russell Bentley has 381K views and 4.57K subscribers. *Sut Vremeni*/Essence of Time, which combines English and Russian content, has more than 44 million views and 167K subscribers.

<sup>5</sup> The Vostok Brigade (also known as the East Brigade, Battalion Vostok, or Battalion East) is a Donetsk separatist militia that was established in 2014 by Alexander Khodakovsky (Hosaka, 2019; Kudelia & van Zyl, 2019). Khodakovsky was a high rank officer in Alpha, a type of special forces unit in the Ukrainian Security Service (Cemal, 2015), but he decided to leave following the EuroMaidan protests. As a self-identified Soviet and Russian, he did not like the steps taken towards the integration of Ukraine within EU or NATO and preferred the socialist and leftist political organizations instead (Khodakovsky, 2019). The Vostok Brigade was reported to be the most powerful, and perhaps the best organized, insurgent militia in the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic (Hosaka, 2019). Besides Ukrainian citizens, foreign fighters have been a part of the Vostok Brigade since the early stages of the conflict.

<sup>6</sup> *Sut Vremeni* is a political movement and an organization established by a popular Russian public figure and author, Sergei Kurginian, to represent an amalgamation of communist, nationalist, and religious leanings. The organization is a culmination of Kurginian’s efforts to combine Soviet nostalgia with national and religious identities of post-Soviet successor publics (Laruelle, 2009; Vedenev, 2013). Kurginian argues that the purpose of the movement is to articulate a new brand of communism, which will allow for both flourishing of a human being and national states. Kurginian’s ideology diverges from the classic Marxist-Leninist articulations of communism, as it emphasizes Russian exceptionalism and builds on the alleged messianic role of the Russians in world history (Pozner, 2009; Vedenev, 2013).

these two channels: twenty videos were produced in 2015, twenty in 2016, and twenty between the years of 2017 and 2019.<sup>7</sup> The average length of these videos is five minutes.

The *New International* channel, in contrast, was active for a shorter period of time (the first video was published in December 2018, and the last in June 2019), but its fourteen videos feature a different aspect of “the Rojava revolution” in each episode.<sup>8</sup> Even though those episodes are considerably longer than the videos posted by Bentley (~40 minutes), each interview starts and ends with the famous anti-fascist song, *Bella Ciao*, and runs approximately for five minutes, creating 78 comparable units to analyze.

Both *Texas* and the Internationalists of Rojava communicate their messages in English, even though their videos often include subtitles in the local language as well (Russian and Kurdish, respectively). Because visual elements can be just as effective in these situations,<sup>9</sup> they also rely heavily on ideological symbols and images. That is why our video transcripts not only recorded the verbal messages, but also made specific references to the prominent images, gestures, and ideological symbols used in these videos.

To conduct this analysis, we developed a coding scheme that structurally categorized and deductively analyzed the verbal and visual content of these videos (Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2017). In addition to securitization, we selected four prominent frames (a “global revolution”, an “anti-fascist” struggle,<sup>10</sup> a “Manichean conflict”,<sup>11</sup> a struggle for “self-determination”) through which insurgent groups explained the conflict to their global audience and justified their actions in and out of the battlefield. Having defined the variables and identified the key features of these variables, we created a codebook that allowed us, two senior researchers and four undergraduate research assistants, to meticulously examine the material and ensure the validity and reliability of

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<sup>7</sup> Bentley was sharing his content through the *Sut Vremeni* channel at first, but his videos started to appear on his own channel, “Russell Bentley” in 2017. Because this channel includes a lower number of videos, our last subset covers a longer time period.

<sup>8</sup> While the rise of the Rojava and its internationalist commune is directly linked to the Syrian Civil War and the power vacuum it left in the region, the movement’s origins actually lie in the Kurdish Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* - PKK) formed by Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey as a Marxist-Leninist organization. Having fought a bloody guerilla war in the 1980s and 1990s in the name of Kurdish independence, the PKK later went through a period of crisis, sectarianism, and internal violence (Gunes, 2012), which culminated in Ocalan’s capture and imprisonment by Turkish authorities in 1999 as a terrorist leader. Re-examining the group’s ideological motivations during his imprisonment and re-positioning the Kurdish movement through the “Declaration of Democratic Confederalism” in 2005, Ocalan abandoned his Marxist/Leninist roots and his Kurdish independence/nation-state project. His “democratic confederalism,” a form of stateless democracy largely influenced by Murray Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism (1995), prioritized liberation from “patriarchal, authoritarian, and fascist elements” instead, and envisioned a commune “electoral on a municipal basis, confederal in its vision and revolutionary in its character” (Özçelik, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Hertog & McLeod (2001) note that visuals do not require too much cognitive attention; and Rogers & Thorson (2000) show that they can be retained in the memory for a longer period of time. Images and symbols can also provide symbols that solidify public memories (Perlmutter & Wagner, 2004) or take the audience to the core issue (Gamson & Stuart, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Bray defines anti-fascism as a method of politics, a locus of individual and group self-identification, and a transnational movement that adapted preexisting socialist, anarchist, and communist currents to a sudden need to react to the fascist menace” (2018).

<sup>11</sup> A Manichean outlook or mindset refers to employ binary oppositions to make sense of complex issues and see anybody who or anything that opposed it as “evil” (Mudde, 2004).

our research instruments.<sup>12</sup> After the first round of coding, we watched the videos posted in these three channels again and noted the ways in which *Sut Vremeni/Texas* and the New International talked about their community, imagined themselves as members of an identity group, and created boundaries between in-group and out-group members. During this stage of analysis, we paid special attention to the groups' appropriation of ethno-cultural symbols (e.g., flags, icons, heroes, rituals) and adoption of leftist/communist emblems (e.g., a red star and a yellow hammer-and-sickle). The results of our quantitative (RQ1 and RQ2) qualitative analyses can be found in the following sections.

## Results

Table 1 presents a descriptive overview of the security frames employed in the videos of *Sut Vremeni/Russell Bentley* and the *New International* channels. While both groups rely heavily on securitized frames in their conflict narratives ( $\chi^2 = 8.84$ ,  $p = 0.0029$  in Donbass context; and  $\chi^2 = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.0016$  in Rojava), they highlight different aspects of securitization. For *Texas*, threats to political security<sup>13</sup> (mentioned in 38 videos) represent the main problem in Donbass, followed by threats to human life (mentioned in 23 videos) and sovereignty<sup>14</sup> (mentioned in 22 videos). *Texas* does not seem to be too concerned about cultural security,<sup>15</sup> however, as this theme appears only eight times in the sample of videos we analyzed. In contrast, internationalist insurgents in Rojava focus heavily on threats to cultural security, as this theme appears more than half their videos. They also seem to be concerned about threats to political security (mentioned in 40 videos) and human life (mentioned in 38 videos), while significantly downplaying the sovereignty aspect of their struggle ( $\chi^2 = 0.97$ ,  $p = 0.0016$ ). Some videos try to turn all these frames into action, by calling for the boycott of certain countries and organizations for instance, but the majority lacks a concrete plan of action beyond securitization.

<Table 1 around here>

As mentioned above (RQ2), however, securitization is not the only conflict frame used in these videos by the internationalists, as they seek to create a dual image— global revolutionaries engaged in local conflicts – and popularize their claims on YouTube. Since different conflict themes often appeared simultaneously, however, we coded these additional frames through a scale, using 1 to denote a passing reference and 2 to demonstrate a dominant frame within a specific video or video segment. This approach allowed us to test the salience of particular conflict frames through a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

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<sup>12</sup> These research assistants were primarily responsible for transcribing the audiovisual materials from the videos, as the heavy accents of the insurgents, as well as the conflict-specific jargon they used, meant that we could not use automated transcriptions in our analyses. After a week-long intensive training, two of them also helped us code the prominent frames and security discourses embedded in the videos – that way, we were able to test intercoder reliability.

<sup>13</sup> In this context, military-political security is related to the region's unresolved political and territorial disputes and weak governments (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> This refers to “the ability of the society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats” (Wæver *et al.*, 1993)

<sup>15</sup> Cultural security is “about situations when societies perceive a threat in identity terms” (Wæver *et al.*, 1993, 23).

Adopting the broad definition of anti-fascism (Bray, 2017), both groups portray the ongoing conflict as an existential struggle against fascist forces and their allies. In fact, a statistically significant tendency,  $F(1) = 7.66, p = 0.0061$ , emerged in the Donbass context, with “anti-fascism” being the most frequent dominant frame ( $M=1, SD=0.88$ ), followed by a “Manichean outlook” ( $M = 0.60, SD = 0.79$ ) and a struggle to bring about a “global revolution” ( $M = 0.47, SD = 0.67$ ). Even though there were some references to “self-determination” in the videos *Texas* posted, this frame did not reach the levels of frequency or prominence ( $M = 0.28, SD = 0.61$ ) that would qualify as dominant. Rojava Internationalists, on the other hand, were much more likely to prioritize the “Global Revolution” frame ( $M = 0.91, SD = 0.94$ ) over all other possible frames ( $F(1) = 48.54, p < 0.0001$ ). They mentioned their anti-fascist struggle, depicting the Turkish state as a fascist power and President Erdogan as a modern-day Franco, but the videos did not discuss the group’s attitude towards self-determination or its “Manichean struggle against the evil” extensively. More information on these differences can be found in Table 2.

<Table 2 around here>

In these frameworks, the groups not only take a strong stance against their threatening others (fascist powers, Ukrainian/Turkish nationalists, decadent capitalists, or indifferent members of the international community) but also appeal to their audiences’ sense of care and concern for “the suffering and persecuted peoples” everywhere. In the words of a British internationalist in Rojava, Heval Gelhat:

[This is about] trying to link all these different struggles you have around the world, be it from the Americas, be it to Europe, be it to Palestine, here in Rojava as well as the far east. Each of these parts of the world have their own struggles for freedom, and again, *it’s not just capitalism, but also against patriarchy, racism, imperialism, you know, and fascism*, [emphasis added]...so with the idea that these groups kind of link together to form the *formal international structure* [emphasis added], you know, it’s like our struggle (The New International, 2019).

The insurgents reinforce their constructed identity through specific media campaigns, rituals, and commemorations. The Rojava Commune, for instance, shares various images of blonde, blue-eyed insurgents in military fatigues, smiling in front of a poster of Abdullah Öcalan and proudly displaying their Communist red stars, which gives the impression of a community consisting of motivated and dedicated commune members who are willing to fight, and die, for the cause. Having manufactured the symbols of unity, the group then turns its attention to the creation of words and phrases that would define their activities and distinguish them from others in cyberspace. The *New International’s* emphasis on “democratic confederalism” and *Sut Vremeni’s* prioritization of “new generation communism” can be illustrative at this point, as they both give distinct labels to their respective communities, through which a physical entity -a real community, even a sovereign state- can be constructed, legitimized, and institutionalized in the long run.

<Table 3 around here>

In addition to these appeals, both groups attempt to manage perceptions of their movement and consolidate support for their actions by demonizing the enemy. They highlight the dichotomy of

“us” and “them” and evoke a sense of peril, encouraging their audiences to take action to secure the community. For example, Donbass internationalists, embodied in Russell Bentley character, “claim the right to use violence” against anyone that threatens the political security of this new community, giving the audience the message that “we are here to protect you from the enemy others by all means” (Coskun, 2012: 46). Likewise, Rojava internationalists, represented by the insurgent-journalist Rojhat Baran, provide grounds for a consensus around the use of violence to achieve revolutionary goals, even if the revolution in question is supposed to be peaceful, or at least bring an end to violence. The following monologue from *Texas*, as he visits the ruins of a school in Donetsk, illustrates this point:

My friend, Pulver, was here too. We sat here listening to the bombs come down but we weren't scared, he certainly wasn't scared, -- maybe I was a little bit scared, but he said to me one time, he said, “you know, if we get hit, one minute later I'll open my eyes again and I will see a beautiful garden and I'll be in paradise,” which, you know is what they say in Islam, you know, *if you die in a war and you're fighting on the right side, you go to paradise* [emphasis added]. I'm not afraid to die, I've had a good life. I don't want to die, I try and keep from dying as best I can, but I've had a good life. *If I have to give my life to defend Donbass, I will because we need to rebuild this school. We need to get the Nazis out of this country. We need to bring little kids back in here* [emphasis added]. I'll show you the rest of the school here. Alfonso was here too, gave some Spanish lessons to Russian speakers. (Bentley, 2015)

Additional speech acts and quotes from the insurgents that highlight the most notable frames are presented more formally in Tables 4 A (securitization) and 4 B (dominant frames).

<Table 4A-B around here>

## Discussion

Despite the obvious differences in their membership bases and local situations, internationalist insurgents in Donbass and Rojava show marked similarities in their use of online media and securitization frames. They both fill a niche caused by the absence of mainstream media to present a narrative of the field that is consistent with their agendas. They do not necessarily offer objective reports from insurgent-controlled territories, as the presented content is usually mediated through the ideologies, priorities, and preferences of the group in question. At the same time, both groups do their best to communicate the urgency of their situation and convey a sense of struggle to their audiences, so as to justify the measures they took to protect their political communities.

As such, these videos provide important information about the way that internationalists articulate their goals, obstacles, and ultimate objectives, and deploy securitized framing along the way. Capturing the military and political developments in real time and passing them along through their videos, they allow their audiences to observe the events in the region and be a part of the change from a distance. In that regard, the new media serves as a tool for securitization: the coverage portrays “the threat” as events unfold and adds to the sense of urgency. The audience is

told, over and over again, that if the group does “not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant (because [they] will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in [their] own way)” (Buzan et al., 1998: 24). Since the audience is not fully immersed in the conflict in the way these fighters and volunteers are, they often rely on the discourse presented by the group and, for the most part, accept the securitized frames, thinking that they “must have ‘good reasons’ to” see a certain foe as a real threat (Balzacq, 2005: 190).

Although they adopt a range of strategies to convince their audiences and shape their opinions, both *Sut Vremeni* and the New International ultimately “bundle” a large number of securitizations (e.g., cultural or political) together, creating a macro-securitization frame as a result (Buzan & Wæever, 2009: 257). This macro-securitization incorporates strong elements of universalism, capable of mobilizing a range of political actors and creating even more loosely defined set of referent objects. Furthermore, securitizing actors use these macro frames to legitimize any action that can be taken to stop the (real or imaginary) threat and ensure the security of the community built on the abstract concepts of Donbass or Rojava.

Interestingly, left-wing politics and nationalist aspirations get fundamentally intertwined within this discourse, showing that nationalism and communism are not the antagonistic and mutually exclusive entities their proponents (or opponents) sometimes portray them to be (Mevius, 2009). To illustrate, the internationalists of Rojava Commune adopt Kurdish names as their *noms de guerre* upon their arrival, use the moniker *heval* (meaning ‘comrade’ in Kurdish), and even learn Kurmanji dialect, and follow Kurdish customs and traditions. Similarly, flags, rituals, and commemorations of fallen soldiers link the internationalists, both emotionally and cognitively, to these newly-built communities in both Donbass and Rojava and help them ‘remember who gave their lives’ to the cause. On the other hand, *Texas* continuously invokes the memories of World War II, frequently calls the Ukrainian forces ‘Nazis, and reminds his audience “this war will end like in 1945” (Bentley, 2019). In a similar way, the Internationalist Commune refers to nation-states in the region as hegemonic and inherently violent entities that are dismissive of minority identities. Both arguments build on the long-standing *anti-fascist/anti-nationalist* tradition of internationalists, going all the way back to the Spanish Civil War (Malet, 2013).

In this regard, the messages disseminated by both groups fit the speech acts of securitization quite well. Rarely acknowledging the complex realities on the ground, both *Sut Vremeni* and New International videos on YouTube rely on already-established narratives of sacrifice and victimhood and use words and phrases that clearly delineate the friends and the foes. The plot revolves around insurgents (Coskun, 2012: 43), but “enemy others” still play an important role in this narrative, particularly by disturbing the peace and order that insurgents “have been working to establish” in the territories they claim. Having simplified the complex realities of war in this manner, internationalist insurgents then represent their struggle as a Manichean conflict (“we are Good, and they are Evil”) and leave almost no room for in-between categories (Friis, 2000: 10). For this reason, securitization-based conflict narratives sometimes serve “as an entry point for more extreme views” (Lewis, 2020: 214) designed to protect the imaginary boundaries between different groups.

## Conclusion

Given the volatility in both regions, it is too early to tell if this securitization process will result in a unified, loyal, and long-lasting community in Donbass or Rojava. It is harder to know whether their vision is strong and inspirational enough to bring all internationalists and nationalist together and settle their disputes under the banner of a new community. However, one thing is certain, and it is that these internationalist insurgent groups, along with the virtual communities they helped to build, shift the focus of attention from traditional structures (i.e., nation states or international organizations) to new, and more ambiguous, forms of authority. Both in Donbass and in Rojava, non-traditional actors (including irredentist groups and foreign fighters) securitize and construct enemy others in the name of a group they claim to represent, even though they emphasize different aspects in this process (an emphasis on political security in Donbass, as opposed to an emphasis on cultural security in Rojava). They also create narratives that idealize and promote their cause, such as anti-fascism in Donbass and global revolution in Rojava, so as to manage perceptions of their movements and consolidate support for their actions.

Our study also points to an important shift of emphasis in these internationalist insurgent contexts, which justifies internationalists' participation in irredentist struggles against sovereign states and infuses the revolutionary messages with nationalist content. Despite the apparent incompatibility of these narrative structures, this juxtaposition of communist symbols with nationalist emblems, reinforced through macro-securitization process, appear to add another layer of legitimacy to the cause, give the internationalist insurgents a sense of purpose, and lay the groundwork for the camaraderie that binds them together in the absence of a cohesive ideology. That this sense of purpose, and the subsequent new collective identity, was created in a somewhat contradictory manner, during a conflict in a foreign land, by a group of people who share nothing but strong devotion to an ideology seem to matter little for insurgents in Donbass and Rojava. We hope that this observation raises new questions on the communist expressions of nationalist aspirations and encourage further research on the subject.

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Table 1: The frequency distribution of the mentions of specific types of security for the analyzed Donbass (A) and Rojava (B) videos.

*Table 1A*

*Frequency distribution of the mentions of specific types of security (Donbass).*

	Survival & Preservation	Actualization & Sovereignty
	N	N
Physical & Legal Reality	<i>Lives:</i> 23	<i>Sovereignty:</i> 22
Identity/Social Construction	<i>Political Security:</i> 38	<i>Cultural Security:</i> 8**

$$\chi^2 = 8.84, p = 0.0029$$

*Table 1B*

*Frequency distribution of the mentions of specific types of security (Rojava).*

	Survival & Preservation	Actualization & Sovereignty
	N	N
Physical & Legal Reality	<i>Lives:</i> 38	<i>Sovereignty:</i> 10**
Identity/Social Construction	<i>Political Security:</i> 40	<i>Cultural Security:</i> 41

$$\chi^2 = 9.97, p = 0.0016$$

Table 2: The dominance of discursive conflict frames on the topics of self-determination, global revolution, Manichean outlook, and anti-fascist structure measured for the analyzed videos of Donbass and Rojava. M stands for mean and SD stands for standard deviation.

<u>Dominance of Discursive Conflict Frames</u>		
	<u>Donbass</u>	<u>Rojava</u>
<u>Conflict Frame</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>	<u>M(SD)</u>
Self-Determination	0.28 (0.61)	0.10 (0.33)
Global Revolution	0.42 (0.67)	0.91 (0.94)***
Manichean Outlook	0.60 (0.79)	0.17 (0.41)
Anti-Fascist Struggle	1.00 (0.88)**	0.22 (0.57)

Donbass;  $F(1) = 7.66$ ;  $p = 0.0061$

Rojava;  $F(1) = 48.56$ ;  $p < 0.0001$

Table 3: The total screen time and the approximate percentage of the appearance of the ideological visual symbols insignia, martyrs, leaders, and monuments measured for the Donbass and Rojava videos.

	Donbass		Rojava	
	Screen-time		Screen-time	
	Minutes	Approx. Percentage	Minutes	Approx. Percentage
Insignia	127.45	43%	84.17	15%
Flag	44.48	15%	6.67	1%
Martyrs	22.33	7%	24.95	4%
Leaders	0.65	0.20%	5.50	1%
Monuments	6.22	2%	3.00	0.50%

Table 4A: Example quotes from the analyzed SutVremeni and The New International videos on the subjects of political security, cultural security, human security, and sovereignty.

Security Frames	SutVremeni/Russell Bentley	The New International
Political Security	<p>I'm just thinking what would happen to them if the Ukrop fascists were to take over here in Donbass. And they would, you know, they would end up being slaves and these kids have way, way more potential than that, and so, you know, the Russian army is not going to let that happen.</p> <p>(Texas - September 24, 2015)</p>	<p>I think the bigger terrorists at the moment is the Turkish regime: they come with jets which blow people in pieces. Now, what they do in <i>Bakur</i> [Kurdish name for the southeast Turkey] is even worst, so when they [the Americans] want to fight terrorists they should fight more against the Turkish State.</p> <p>(Heval Elefteriya – Episode 7)</p>
Cultural Security	<p>If you're a church-going person, you got to think about what it would be like if somebody did this to your church.</p> <p>(Texas - June 19, 2015)</p>	<p>We're fighting for freedom, we're fighting for peace, which is a paradox somehow, yeah, we're fighting for the opportunity to build up the life how we want it and not how others say we have to do it, or suppose we have no other chance.. because we have.</p> <p>(Heval Elefteriya – Episode 7)</p>
Human Security	<p>What kind of people spend billions of dollars to destroy innocent people's homes, to murder children, to murder families in the morning while they're sitting down to breakfast? What kind of people do this?</p> <p>(Texas - May 31, 2015)</p>	<p>Especially for me, as a German, with the history of my society, I want to stop this -let's say this circle, devil's circle, [vicious cycle], this circle of madness. I don't want to see any more people in prison people, for their origin, imprisoned. I don't want to see genocides I don't want to see that the same class is winning and winning and winning again and again.</p> <p>(Heval Agit – Episode 15)</p>
Sovereignty	<p>What if a foreign government took over your government, put a puppet in power, and said that the people in one part of the country that didn't want to be under the control of a foreign government.</p> <p>(Texas – June 8, 2015)</p>	<p>Oh yeah people might come and fight about the smallest trivial things around the world but here you've got people from every possible background in the world. It doesn't matter what your religious views are, your political views are everyone is here, at least in my opinion, they see something wrong and they want to do something about it. Whether it's working in the commune or working here in the military area. They want to contribute in any way shape or form which is admirable in itself.</p> <p>(Heval Zafer – Episode 6)</p>

Table 4B: Example quotes from the analyzed SutVremeni and The New International videos under the categories of anti-fascism, Manichean outlook, self-determination, and global revolution.

<b>Dominant Frames</b>	<b>SutVremeni/Russell Bentley</b>	<b>The New International</b>
<b>Anti-fascism</b>	<p>Fascism is the philosophy of masters and slaves, Ukrainian fascist Stefan Bandera said over 70 years ago that Russians do not belong to the human race. They are not homo sapiens therefore they are subject to destruction for enslavement. Bandera has many followers in Ukraine...</p> <p>(Texas - November 23, 2015)</p>	<p>Afrin should have never happened. It makes me really angry to think about it because, you know, so many people were killed there who did not need to be killed, you know? It's that kind of fascism, that kind of authoritarianism, I think, has no place in the world.</p> <p>(Heval Azad – Episode 1)</p>
<b>Manichean Outlook</b>	<p>The people who boarded flight MH17 didn't ever think the war in Donbass could ever affect them. There is a war going on all over the world right now today and this war is between humanity and those who want to exterminate most of us and enslave the rest. Donbass is the front lines and what happens in these places will determine the future for us all.</p> <p>(Texas - October 13, 2015)</p>	<p>On the one hand, [I came here] to fight against Daesh, because that's an enemy for anyone in the world, an enemy of the very idea of like freedom. But, on the other hand, I'd been seeing a lot about the Democratic Confederalist Project that they'd been developing the ideology of Öcalan and seeing how it had been making really big differences in people's lives here, really progressive changes, particularly for women's rights in this area.</p> <p>(Heval Nubar – Episode 8)</p>
<b>Self-determination</b>	<p>We will fight for our freedom, for our world outlook, to the last breath. We won't put up with this regime.</p> <p>(Anna Tuv, July 7 2015)</p>	<p>The main point that every international must be, must have it clear is that the liberation of Kurdistan, the liberation of, of the Middle East, it is also our liberation. And to feel it also as yours. If you don't feel it as yours, you cannot do a lot of stuff. So, this is really important.</p> <p>(Heval Welat – Episode 14)</p>
<b>Global Revolution</b>	<p>Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, fascism raises its ugly head again. The great people of Russia, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, China. If we have to, we'll chop it off again, but today is the great day of celebration. We won before. We know we can win again if we have to, but we know we won before.</p> <p>(Texas – May 12, 2019)</p>	<p>I'm from a leftist extra-parliamentary or leftist movement in Italy...I didn't come to Rojava to kill people, but I am here to protect this revolution and the people that made it. If it's necessary, I'm ready.</p> <p>(Heval Egid – Episode 5)</p>