

EXCLUSIVE
By Lord Ashcroft
in Odesa

BY any standards, Denis Kapustin has a colourful past. He is a former football hooligan and far-right activist, the founder of a men's clothing brand, a mixed martial arts fight promoter and the commander of a military unit fighting for Ukraine against his homeland, Russia. To cap it all, he was "killed" in an assassination attempt only to rise from the dead.

Known widely by his call sign of "White Rex", he insists he never sought fame yet he seems to be enjoying his notoriety. He has the swagger of a film star, the scars of a bare-knuckle fighter and his entourage includes two burly bodyguards.

During my 15 visits to Ukraine since the start of the all-out war in early 2022, I have met many military personnel, including those wearing balaclavas, who for personal security reasons prefer not to be identified.

Kapustin is the opposite: he is happy to be named and photographed because he wants to spread his anti-Russia message far and wide.

Yet, he knows that when he goes into battle, including on missions behind enemy lines, he would have a truly torrid time if he was ever caught by the enemy. To avoid such an occurrence – inevitable torture and death – "White Rex" always carries a hand grenade beneath his body armour.

Would he really blow himself up if he was ever wounded and about to be captured, I ask him. "Without hesitation," he replies, staring straight at me with his steely brown eyes. As if to prove the point, he says that two of his men committed suicide in just such circumstances to avoid being taken prisoner by the Russians.

I interviewed Kapustin, aged 42, in the corner of a busy café in Odesa, the so-called "pearl of the Black Sea" in southern Ukraine, because I wanted to learn more about his motivation for fighting not just against his homeland but also for founding the Russian Volunteer Corps, a unit that has grown in size from three men four years ago to several-hundred-strong today.

Born in Moscow in March 1984, Kapustin was the elder son of an engineer. He was brought up in the Russian capital for 17 years until his family moved to Germany where he dropped out of university. For years, he lived between Moscow, Cologne and, eventually, Kyiv.

"It's true that for a certain period of time, I was very much into football violence, the rough stuff, so, yes, I was a football hooligan in both Moscow and Cologne," he told me in perfect English.

"I saw myself as a warrior. We used to all wear T-shirts with numbers on them because the fight was being filmed from many angles and we wanted to see who was brave and who was a coward."

AFTER being arrested for football and right-wing violence in Germany, "White Rex" was banned from Schengen countries.

Kapustin has been described as a neo-Nazi, a label he says is unfair. As a nationalist, he insists he has never been racist to an individual because of the colour of their skin, but he unashamedly concedes his opposition to mass immigration, Islamists gaining influence and the LGBT+ community.

From 2008, he began earning money from staging MMA tournaments in Germany and this led to the creation of the White Rex clothing brand which he describes as "aggressive, modern and stylish".

When Kapustin returned to Russia in

The football hooligan who came back from the dead

In his latest dispatch from embattled Ukraine, Lord Ashcroft meets the controversial far-right Russian activist Denis Kapustin who is fighting against his countrymen... and has already been 'killed' once

2010, Vladimir Putin was well established in power and he [Kapustin] blamed the government for allowing immigrants to spoil Russia, taking part in many anti-state demonstrations.

After Russia illegally seized Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014, Kapustin admits that he briefly fell for Putin's propaganda that these were legitimate acts and that pro-European Maidan protesters in Ukraine were terrorists.

However, his friends in Ukraine convinced him that this was not the case and that the protesters had a legitimate grievance.

Ahead of the all-out invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kapustin had been living in Kyiv for five years.

By then, "White Rex" was nearly 38, married to a Ukrainian woman and they had a baby son.

Despite the build-up of Russian forces on two borders, he – like many Ukrainians – did not think Putin would dare to invade Ukraine. He was wrong: "On the night of the invasion, I ran out into the street at 4am wearing baby-blue pants and with a knife in my pocket preparing to tackle the 'second strongest army in the world'."

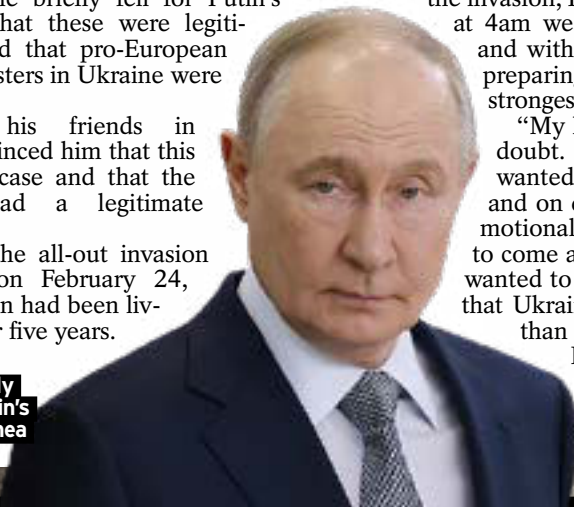
"My loyalties were never in doubt. Straight away, I wanted to fight against Russia and on day one I made a promotional video urging people to come and fight for Ukraine. I wanted to fight for the freedoms that Ukraine gave people rather than the terrorist state of Russia which tortured its own people.

"I expected to die in a street fight in



Lord Ashcroft with 'White Rex' Denis Kapustin in Odesa

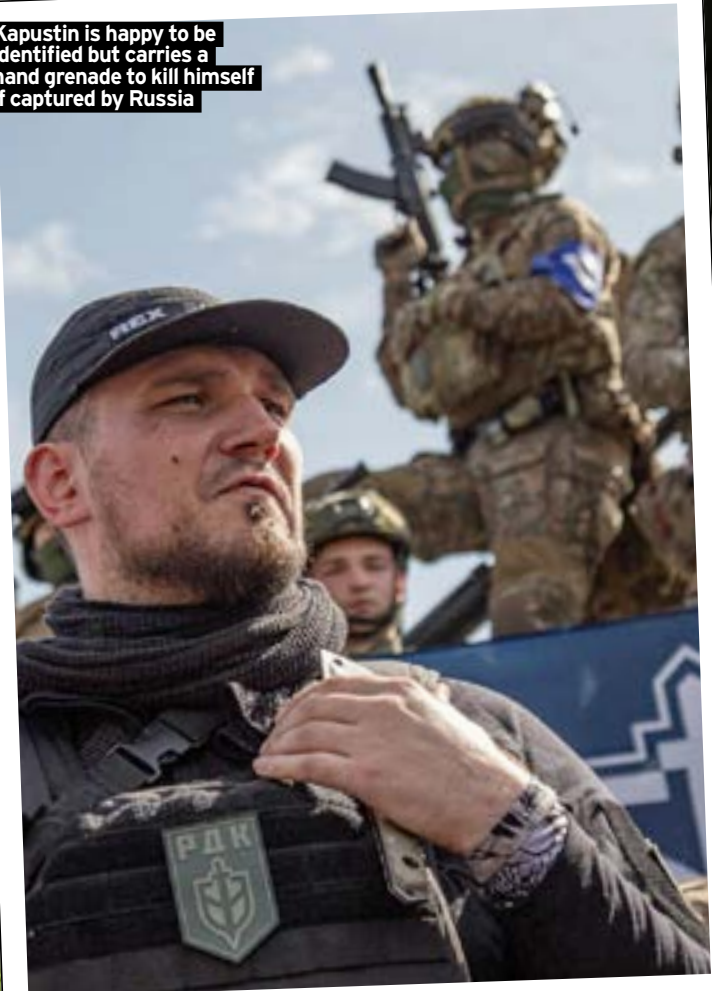
Kapustin briefly supported Putin's seizure of Crimea



Firemen at the scene of a Russian missile attack on a food warehouse in Kyiv last week



Kapustin is happy to be identified but carries a hand grenade to kill himself if captured by Russia



Kyiv but I was mentally prepared for that." Soon, having arranged for his wife and son to travel abroad, he was fighting in a well-armed civilian militia.

"I wanted to defend families, friends and values in my adopted homeland," he said.

Kapustin said he never tried to hide that he was a Russian citizen with a Russian passport who spoke Russian as his first language. In May 2022, his legs were injured during a mortar battle but he was soon

He created the Russian Volunteer Corps in August 2022 because he wanted a brand with a logo. Its members consist mainly of Russians who had been living in Ukraine but also some who escaped from Russia to fight for Ukraine. They operate under the umbrella of the GUR, the Ukrainian military intelligence, and take part in both special ops

missions and more traditional frontline roles. Kapustin says that his unit has killed many Russians but says he has not shed tears over the deaths of his former countrymen.

"When I kill, I feel that I am doing something that I should do. I feel like a man who is protecting his family and his home. I know that if Russia took over [Ukraine], there would be raping, pillaging, looting. I know exactly what Russians do once they are off the leash.

"Remorse is a feeling that comes with doing something wrong. I have never had a feeling of doing something wrong because I have not invaded someone else's country."

However, as the founder and commander of a military unit, he feels profound sadness when his men are killed in battle – he is believed to have lost nearly 30 comrades

'I wanted to defend families, friends and values in my adopted homeland of Ukraine'

so far. "We cherish the fallen. I do cry when my men, my friends and comrades, are killed in combat," Kapustin said.

He has no immediate family left in Russia which is why he is willing to be identified. Russia has retaliated to his "betrayal" by confiscating his flat in Moscow and interrogating his mother's close friend.

He is aware Putin's spies will try to infiltrate his unit so would-be members face tough recruitment checks, including lie detectors and psychological analysis.

Kapustin became better known in Ukraine over Christmas 2025 and New Year 2026. That is because on December 27 the RVC reported that Kapustin had been killed in a drone strike while fighting for Ukraine in the Zaporizhzhia region and his men vowed to avenge his death.

HOWEVER, the following week, Ukrainian intelligence published a video of Kapustin and stated that he was still alive and well. They said that Russia had ordered Kapustin's assassination, but they had foiled the plot through an undercover operation lasting more than a month.

The false reports of death were part of the special operation. Ukrainian intelligence claimed to have then obtained \$500,000 from Russian special services for carrying out the "assassination" – money which will now be used for Ukraine's war chest. Kyrylo Budanov, the former spy chief turned head of President Zelensky's office, told him after his resurrection: "I congratulate you on returning to life."

"White Rex" told me with a broad smile: "I am alive and Ukraine has 500,000 bucks to use for its military so it was a good outcome."

Like all those living in Ukraine, his future is uncertain but, even after the Russia-Ukraine war ends, he sees himself opposing Putin's Russia for many years to come.

Kapustin ended our interview by inviting me to join his unit on the frontline and I might just take him up on that. His past deeds and his political views will, understandably, be regarded as unsavoury by many people.

However, having less than 90 minutes in the company of this broad-chested, bearded tough-guy, I suspect that Ukraine should be grateful that he is fighting for their cause rather than against it.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft