



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**PUTIN'S INFANTRYMEN:
KADYROV'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE 2022 UKRAINIAN CONFLICT**

**ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE
CERWYN MOORE**

183

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EXPERT OPINION

**ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE
CERWYN MOORE**

**PUTIN'S INFANTRYMEN:
KADYROV'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE 2022 UKRAINIAN CONFLICT**

183

2022



The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia. The views expressed in the publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not in any way represent the views of the Embassy.

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

All rights reserved and belong to Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, including electronic and mechanical, without the prior written permission of the publisher. The opinions and conclusions expressed are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies.

Copyright © 2022 Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

ISSN 1512-4835

ISBN

Background

On 22nd February 2022, two days before the start of the war in Ukraine, the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, posted a text on his Telegram channel, declaring: “Everything will be back on track. The takeover happened in Crimea. Luhansk and Donetsk are not settled, nor are they a limit. It all lies ahead.”¹ Since Russian armed forces launched their attack against Ukraine, various ethnic Chechen paramilitary units associated with Kadyrov – and collectively known as *kadyrovtsy* – have been actively participating in the war. The present report examines the composition of Chechen groups deployed in

Key Points

- External involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, particularly pro-Russian volunteerism, has been a prominent feature of the Russian war effort
- Chechen involvement in the conflict is more complex than is often reported. Pro-Russian groups known as *kadyrovtsy* serve a number of functions, including bolstering Kadyrov’s cult of personality in Chechnya, although their military significance is negligible
- Chechen volunteer groups are involved in support of the Ukrainian military: this raises issues about the role of foreign fighters and volunteerism
- The political implications of pro-Kremlin Chechen volunteerism in Ukraine are linked to fierce institutional infighting within Russia

Ukraine, assesses their role in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and discusses the implications for Chechen society and the Russian political landscape.

For much of the last two decades, Russia, a non-Muslim-majority state, has faced an Islamist insurgency in its southern region, the North Caucasus, where Chechnya is located. This insurgency has its origins in the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994-1996 and 1999-2002, respectively). During the First War, the ideology of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) was predominantly nationalist, with Islam playing only an instrumental role. However, a loose Islamist camp formed, consisting of Chechen activists, Salafis from across the North Caucasus, and foreign ideologists and fighters who migrated to the region came to dominate the resistance in the Second Chechen War.² Although large-scale Russian combat operations in the region ended in the mid-2000s, rolling counter-terror operations continued unabated into the 2010s.

During this time, a pro-Kremlin Chechen administration, initially led by Akhmat Kadyrov (father of Ramzan), was installed in Grozny: the Kadyrov administration sought to pacify the local population and normalize relations as a Russian republic. Meanwhile, a Chechen-led insurgency,

which transformed into a regional Islamist movement known as the *Imarat Kavkaz*, also took root. The regional insurgency linked loosely connected groups across the North Caucasus, leading to an extended period of instability and terrorism in the region, and in Moscow on occasion. However, following the death of successive leaders in the period from 2010-15, the movement splintered, and organized insurgent activity effectively ended in 2016.³ Since the end of large-scale counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus and the collapse of organized armed resistance in the region, Ramzan Kadyrov has continued to consolidate power in Chechnya and the North Caucasus as a pro-Kremlin strongman. His local police and paramilitary groups have instituted purges against minority communities, made territorial claims against neighbouring regions, and attacked human rights workers. In this way, Kadyrov has cultivated Chechen society in his image, “encouraging displays of religious piety and military might while orchestrating extrajudicial killings and abductions targeting those who opposed him. He built a cult of personality around himself and his late father while defining hypermasculinity and sporting prowess as highly valued in Chechen society.”⁴ In 2015, Ramzan Kadyrov launched his own combat sports training facilities and a mixed martial arts (MMA) franchise known as Akhmat MMA. Close associates of Kadyrov, such as Abuzaid Vizmuradov, are involved in running and publicising the MMA franchise activities. The franchise trains thousands of Chechen men in combat sports, most of whom go on to serve in local police and paramilitary units of the *kadyrovtsy*.

Chechen Involvement in Ukraine

Three units of *kadyrovtsy* have been deployed in Ukraine: the 141st Special Regiment known as “Sever” commanded by Magomed Tushaev; a battalion known as “Yug” led by Huseyn Mezhidov; and, finally, a Special Purpose Mobile police unit, known as “Akhmat-Grozny” commanded by Anzor Bisaev.⁵ For the most part, these paramilitary groups have little active combat experience, being just young recruits from the MMA network. It appears that most are not key members of the Kadyrov’s armed units, but instead are those who have been released from prison and offered the ‘opportunity’ to fight in support of Russian forces. However, some of their senior members have long-standing links to counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya in the period from 2002-09 and in conflicts in the region.⁶ In Ukraine, these units are under the authority of Russian National

Guard, otherwise known as the *Rosgvardia*. These *kadyrovtsy* units amount to hundreds of fighters, often seen in publicity videos distributed on pro-Kadyrov social media. These are the units that were active in the Kyiv region and in the vicinity of the Ukrainian-Belarusian border.⁷ In addition, Kadyrov's close associate and member of Russian Duma, Adam Delimkhanov, is operating with a Chechen group who have appeared in DNR (Donetsk People's Republic) controlled territory. Video footage indicates that this group is participating in the eastern flank of the siege of Mariupol.⁸ In addition, according to various Chechen Telegram channels, Kadyrov's administration is actively involved in recruiting volunteers in Chechnya, offering them monetary rewards and assisting with financial problems to enable them to participate in active duties.

Little is known about the exact functions of *kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine. That at least some of the senior figures have experience of the Second Chechen War and subsequent counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus is suggestive of the possible use of these forces in urban warfare in large cities and cleansing operations, called *zachistka*. A different role, associated with the extensive media coverage of the *kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine, is as a propaganda tool, aimed at intimidating Ukrainian units and the local civilian population. In turn, the projection of power through social media and the presence of pro-Russian Chechen paramilitary units on the ground in Ukraine also serves to reinforce the position of Kadyrov as a key part of the Putin security infrastructure in the North Caucasus.

The information on casualties among *kadyrovtsy* is difficult to triangulate. Ukrainian sources indicate that the *kadyrovtsy* suffered considerable casualties during the battle for Gostomel airport.⁹ This information was echoed by several Chechen Telegram channels.¹⁰ So far Kadyrov has confirmed the death of two members of his forces.¹¹ Another two ethnic Chechens have been captured and interrogated by Ukrainian armed forces, the footage of which was recorded and released on YouTube.¹² Local authorities from the North Caucasus have also confirmed the death of soldiers from across the region. For example, the Ingush authorities have reported 16 dead, from a population of half a million.¹³

Kadyrov's administration justifies its contribution to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in various ways: reciting Russia's official rhetoric, stressing that they do not target Ukrainian people but fight against "supporters of Bandera"¹⁴ and the "neo-Nazi Azov battalion."¹⁵ In addition to the standard

pro-Russian messaging, Kadyrov's units characterise pro-Ukrainian Chechen volunteer units as "*Shaytans*",¹⁶ while Chechnya's Official Mufti (Muslim Spiritual Leader) Salah Mezhiev has framed the war in Ukraine as "*jihad*", meaning that participation is a religious duty for all Muslims.¹⁷

The two Chechen volunteer groups who have been fighting alongside Ukrainian armed forces since 2014 are the Sheikh Mansur Battalion commanded by Muslim Cheberloykiy and the Jokhar Dudaev Battalion led by Adam Osmaev.¹⁸ These groups are small and consist of ethnic Chechens, a very small number of whom have experience of the Second Chechen War. The key motivation of these pro-Ukrainian Chechens is to undermine Russia and strengthen ties with their Ukrainian allies. Since the 24th of February Russian invasion, a very small group of Chechen fighters who participated in *jihad* in Syria – but who were not aligned with militant organisations - have sought to support UKR forces. These three groups draw on a wide range of supporters from the Chechen diaspora community in Europe, as well as displaced volunteers from the Caucasus and Turkey.¹⁹ This illustrates the complex nature of pro-Ukrainian Chechen volunteerism, as well as the need to move beyond reductionist labels when considering the conflict dynamics.²⁰

Implications

The involvement of *kadyrovtsy* in the Russian invasion in Ukraine could have several consequences both in Chechnya and at the Russian federal level. First, given the specifics of Chechen society, it is impossible to hide losses incurred in the invasion of Ukraine: Chechen society is very traditional and consists of multiple layers of relatedness and a strong sense of belonging to the extended family or kin (Chech. *teip*). The funerals of deceased *kadyrovtsy* will be attended by hundreds or even thousands of their relatives and villagers, which will serve to spread information about the conflict by word of mouth. Losses undermine the credibility of Kadyrov's administration, creating a sense that the Chechen and Russian authorities sent their youth to Ukraine as cannon fodder. One early indication of this waning support is that the commander of the Yug battalion, Huseyn Mezhidov, failed to recruit fresh volunteers for ongoing operations from his ancestral village, Dargo, in the Vedeno district of Chechnya.²¹

Second, lack of success in the conflict in Ukraine undermines Kadyrov's cult of personality, and the strongman image of pro-Russian Chechen units.

For all the projection of power, in fact, since Russian armed forces took control of Chechnya, Kadyrov's administration has never faced a potent adversary. Kadyrov's armed groups certainly played a part in supporting external operations led by Russian forces in Georgia in 2008, in the Donbas in 2014, and in Syria since 2015 –in other words, always as part of an overwhelmingly superior Russian military presence. This raises the further question: How might events in Ukraine affect Kadyrov's total control inside Chechnya? Up until now, backed up by the myths surrounding him, this has allowed Kadyrov to create an effective mechanism to persecute his critics in other regions of Russia and abroad. The credibility of Kadyrov and his paramilitary units is now being probed. For instance, the commander of the pro-Moscow DNR separatist militia group has already publicly questioned the combat skills and capacity of *kadyrovtsy*, stressing their ineffectiveness in the siege of Mariupol.²²

Third, the deaths of dozens of federal service personnel from the North Caucasus might fuel resentment towards local political elites, creating new fissures in the region. Although an organized insurgency no longer exists in the North Caucasus, isolated attacks continue to occur. Nonetheless, local resentment is unlikely to create political instability. Many fighters from the North Caucasus were killed in 2014 in Donbas, and others have also undertaken combat operations in Syria. On both occasions, this did not impact stability in the North Caucasus. Federal administrative leaders were likely wary of sending seasoned veterans or critical local units to support Russian forces in Ukraine because the Kremlin labelled the conflict a 'special military operation.' This has consequences for the units which can be mobilized. To further support this argument, little is known about the exact composition of *kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine, and aside from a few well-known leaders, key figures from Kadyrov's inner circle have not been sent to Ukraine.

Finally, in the post-war period, Kadyrov will attempt to take advantage of the fierce institutional competition within Russian security services on the federal level to strengthen his position. Kadyrov, who refers to himself as "Putin's Infantryman", has full support and protection from the Russian President. He also has good relationships with the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardia*), including with its leader, Viktor Zolotov. On the other hand, multiple reports suggest Kadyrov has tense relationships both with Russia's GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) and FSB (Federal Security Service).²³ Given Putin's further adoption of totalitarian tendencies, some security

practices of Kadyrov's Chechnya such as extrajudicial killings, kidnapping, torture, and the public humiliation of critics might be replicated in Russia on the nationwide level. Hence, Kadyrov views it as a chance to expand his influence on the federal level and become one of the key figures in the Russian security landscape.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In conclusion, some of Kadyrov's paramilitary units have been actively involved in the Ukrainian conflict. Despite their insignificant contribution to combat activities, they have been receiving increasing media attention. Kadyrov will continue to try to use the war in Ukraine to strengthen his position in Putin's hierarchy of power. However, significant casualties from the key ranks of the *kadyrovtsy* are unlikely, given that many essential units have remained in Chechnya. Notable losses from North Caucasian *Rosgvardia*, and negative reports from various fronts, will fuel some local resentment, particularly in Chechnya and Ingushetia, but this will not impact political stability in the region. Lastly, the role and impact of foreign fighters and transnational activists, and volunteers integrated into military units in the Ukrainian conflict, varies considerably. This facet of the conflict requires more detailed work.

Bibliography

1. Ekho Kavkaza (2022). *Kadyrov Dopustil Vozmozhnost Aneksii Drugikh Regionov Ukrainy* [Kadyrov Does not Exclude the Possibility of Annexation of Ukraine's Other Regions]. Available at: <https://www.ekhovkavkaza.com/a/eto-ne-predel-kadyrov-zayavil-o-vozmozhnom-zahvate-drugih-oblastey-ukrainy/31716354.html>.
2. Cerwyn Moore & Paul Tumelty (2008) Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31:5, 412-433, DOI: 10.1080/10576100801993347
3. Mark Youngman (2016) Between Caucasus and caliphate: the splintering of the North Caucasus insurgency, *Caucasus Survey*, 4:3, 194-217.
4. Karim Zidan (2022). Chechnya's Fight Club Joins Putin's War, *New Lines Magazine*. Available at: <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/chechnyas-fight-club-joins-putins-war/>.
5. Kavkazskiy Uzel (2022). Chechentsy na Ukraine: Fakty i Domysly [Chechens in Ukraine: Facts and Conjectures]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/373650/>.
6. Caucasian Knot (2008). "Yug" special fighters from Chechnya are ready to volunteer to South Ossetia. Available at: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/8061/>.
7. Novaya Gazeta (2022). *Zadachi ne Politseyskiye a Boyevyye* [The Mission is Not Policing but Combat]. Available at: <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2022/02/25/zadachi-nepolitseyskiye-a-boevye>.
8. Kavkazskiy Uzel (2022). Khodakovskiy Raskritikoval Chechenskikh Boytsov za Plokhuyu Podgotovku [Khodakovsky Criticised Chechen Fighters Due to their Poor Qualifications]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/374269/>.
9. Y. Krechko (2022). *Pisa Vtrat i PR-Viyny Kadriivtsiv z Ukraini Povernuli v Chechnyu* [Kadyrovtsy Were Sent Back to Chechnya after Losses and PR War]. *Radio Svoboda*. Available at: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/kadyr%D1%96vtsiv-z-ukrayiny-povernuly-v-chechniu/31760938.html>.
10. See Telegram channels 1adat and @Abusaddamshishani.
11. Kavkaz Realii (2022). *Kadyrov Priznal Poteri v Ukraine* [Kadyrov Admitted Losses in Ukraine].
12. Both videos are available on Telegram channel @voynareal.
13. Ingushetia neighbours Chechnya to the west. The statistics on losses and casualties among ethnic Ingush soldiers of the Russian army have been released at Ingush opposition Telegram channel @fortangaorg.
14. Stepan Bandera – a controversial Ukrainian nationalist leader in the 1940-50s, leading an anti-Soviet insurgency. Russian state propaganda often uses term *banderovtsy* to discredit Ukrainian politicians and underline their ideological parallels to Germany's Nazi regime.

15. M. Yermolov (2022). *Kadyrov Obyavil Nagrady v \$500 Tysach za Golovy Komandirov Ukrainiskikh Natsionalistov* [Kadyrov Announced \$500 Award for the Heads of Ukrainian Nationalists]. *Gazeta.ru*. Available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/03/03/17375617.shtml>.
16. *Shaytan* (Arab. Devil/Satan) – a pejorative term used by Kadyrov’s administration for anti-Russian Chechen insurgents.
17. Kavkaz Realii (2020). *Muftiy Chechni Nazval Vtorzheniye v Ukrainu Voynoy za Proroka i Islam* [Mufti of Chechnya Called War in Ukraine a War for the Prophet and Islam]. Available at: <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/muftiy-chechni-nazval-vtorzhenie-v-ukrainu-voynoy-za-proroka-i-islam/31727640.html>.
18. Kavkazskiy Uzel (2022). *Dva Bataliona Chechenskikh Dobrovoltsev Uchastvuyut v Oborone Ukrainy* [Two Chechen Battalions Take Part in Ukraine’s Defence]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/blogs/84796/posts/52765>.
19. Mark Youngman and Cerwyn Moore, “Displaced Conflict: Russia’s Qualified Success in Combatting Insurgency”, *Russia Matters*, (21st April 2021). Available at: <https://russiamatters.org/analysis/displaced-conflict-russias-qualified-success-combatting-insurgency>.
20. Many other volunteers from the Caucasus are also participating in the conflict in pro-Ukrainian units. For instance, one of the authors has collected other data regarding Georgian volunteers which can be developed upon request.
21. Mezhidov’s voice recording has been released at @1adat Telegram channel
22. KP (2020). Aleksandr Khodakovski: *My v Mariupol Dve Nedeli Vgryzayemysya* [We are Trying to Make a Breakthrough in Mariupol for the Last Two Weeks]. Available at: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27377/4558736/>
23. Y. Milashina (2017). *Kadyrov Zapodozril FSB* [Kadyrov has Doubt about FSB]. *Novaya Gazeta*. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/08/21/73545-kadyrov-zapodozril-fsb>