



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

# Security Review

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**The Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian War on the  
North Caucasus and Occupied Territories of Georgia**

2022

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From the first days of the Russian-Ukrainian war, it became clear that the Caucasus region was widely represented in the conflict. Caucasian fighters are fighting on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides. The war also has a great impact on the socio-political situation in the region. We will try to describe the contribution of the peoples of the North Caucasus, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali to this war and the possible long-term effects of the conflict on these regions.

## **Chechnya**

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, units affiliated with the commander of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, have been actively involved in the conflict. The following Chechen units are identified in Ukraine: The Yugi Battalion (commander: Hussein Mezhidov), the Severi Battalion (commander: Magomed Tushaev) and the Ahmad Grozny Battalion (commander: Anzor Bisaev). These units are subordinated to the Russian National Guard (Rossguard). They were used in the north of Kyiv and entered Ukrainian territory from neighboring Belarus along with other Russian regular units.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as yet unidentified Chechen units are taking part in the fighting near Mariupol, led by Adam Delimkhanov, a member of the Russian Duma and Kadyrov's entourage.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Chechen authorities are actively trying to recruit volunteers, sparing no financial resources. According to the Chechen opposition telegram channels, each volunteer is offered 300,000 Russian rubles (approximately USD 3,000) as compensation. According to the same sources, various non-military civil servants in Chechnya are also forced to go to Ukraine.

Reports of casualties among the Kadyrovtsy are mixed. Kadyrov himself admitted to the death of only two fighters.<sup>3</sup> The Ukrainian sources report dozens of killed Kadyrovtsy.<sup>4</sup> Chechen opposition telegram channels report up to 20 dead. According to various sources, the largest Kadyrovtsy loss occurred at the battle near Hostomel Airport.

The contribution of the Kadyrovtsy to the fighting is insignificant. The videos released by them also show that they were mostly located far away from the front line. Numerous Russian military commentators have questioned the combat capability of the Kadyrovtsy. For example, Igor Strelkov (Girkin), one of the authors of the separatist project in Donetsk and Luhansk, does not hide his

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<sup>1</sup> Kavkazkiy Uzel (2022). Чеченцы на Украине [Chechens in Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/373650/>

<sup>2</sup> Kavkazkiy Uzel (2022). Военные эксперты разъяснили цель поездки Делимханова на Украину [Military Experts Explained the Purpose of Delimkhanov's Visit to Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/374249/>

<sup>3</sup> Kavkaz Realii (2022). Кадиров признал потери в Украине [Kadyrov Acknowledged the Loss in Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/kadyrov-priznal-poteri-v-ukraine/31730204.html>

<sup>4</sup> I. Krechko (2022). Після втрат і «PR-війни»: «кадірівців» з України повернули в Чечню [After the Loss and the PR-War, the Kadyrovtsy Were Sent from Ukraine to Chechnya]. Radio Svoboda. Accessible: <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/kadyr%D1%96vtsiv-z-ukrayiny-povernuly-v-chechniu/31760938.html>

dissatisfaction with the low level of training and the incompetence of the Kadyrovtsy. A similar view is expressed by Alexander Khodakovsky, commander of one of the DNR's militant units, Vostok.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, one of the main purposes of the Kadyrovtsy presence in Ukraine is to intimidate the opponent psychologically. Given that the Kadyrovtsy have repeatedly been involved in the torture and inhuman treatment of civilians, it may have been originally intended to sow panic with their presence among the Ukrainian military and civilians; however, the presence of the Kadyrovtsy in Ukraine has had no effect on the Ukrainian fighting spirit.

Kadyrov himself justifies his participation in the war in the same way as Russia's political leadership does. Kadyrov believes that his main target is not the Ukrainian people but the "Banderas" and members of the "neo-Nazi" Azov Battalion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Mufti of the Chechen Republic, Salah Mezhiyev, has declared the war in Ukraine as a jihad in which, in his view, all Muslims should take part.<sup>7</sup> Kadyrov also often mentions the fight against "Shaitan" and "terrorists" which includes Chechen groups fighting on the Ukrainian side.

Chechen units are also on the Ukrainian side. Currently, two Chechen battalions are fighting alongside the Ukrainian Armed Forces: that of Johar Dudayev (commander: Adam Osmayev) and Sheikh Mansur (commander: Muslim Cheberloel). These groups are made up of Chechens living in Europe and have been present in Ukraine since the 2014 Donbas conflict.<sup>8</sup>

In the Chechen Republic, attitudes towards the participation in the conflict in Ukraine are mixed. On Kadyrov's orders, a number of pompous rallies were held across the republic in support of the Russian army, involving even minors. However, video and audio material leaked to telegram channels confirms that there is a dissatisfaction among the people with the mass recruitment of Chechen men and their involvement in the hostilities. This dissatisfaction will increase as the casualties grow.

### **The Rest of the North Caucasus**

Unlike the Kadyrovtsy, other North Caucasians do not have divisions based on their ethnicity. As Russian citizens, they serve in either the contract or conscription army and are assigned to different

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<sup>5</sup> Kavkazkiy Uzel (2022). Хо́даковски́й раскритиковал чеченских бойцов за плохую подготовку [Khodakovsky Criticized Chechen Fighters for Poor Training]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/374269/>

<sup>6</sup> M. Yermolov (2022). Кадыров объявил награду в \$500 тысяч за голову командиров украинских националистов [Kadyrov Sets \$ 500,000 Reward for the Killings of the Ukrainian Nationalist Leaders]. *Gazeta.ru*. Accessible: <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/03/03/17375617.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> Kavkaz Realii (2020). Муфтий Чечни назвал вторжение в Украину войной за пророка и ислам [Chechen Mufti Likens the Invasion of Ukraine to the War for Prophet and Islam]. Accessible: <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/muftiy-chechni-nazval-vtorzhenie-v-ukrainu-voynoy-za-proroka-i-islam/31727640.html>

<sup>8</sup> Kavkazkiy Uzel (2022). Чеченцы на Украине [Chechens in Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/373650/>

units. Information about the casualties from different Caucasian republics is spread on telegram channels. From Ingushetia - 16, from Dagestan - 44 and from North Ossetia - 32.

At the same time, volunteers are actively being recruited in the North Caucasian republics to join the war in Ukraine. For example, member of the Russian Duma, Boris Kantemirov, called on the people of the republic to volunteer to go to Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> All of this caused great dissatisfaction in the Ossetian telegram channels. In addition, local authorities are involved in an information campaign in support of the Russian army. For example, a large banner with the letter Z was displayed on a tower in the center of Magas, the capital of the Republic of Ingushetia. A similar action was held in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Simultaneously, relations between ethnic Russian and North Caucasian militaries are becoming strained in various Russian units. Recordings on the various telegram channels show North Caucasians refusing to carry out orders because they did not want to go to Ukraine as "cannon fodder." The motivation of the North Caucasian fighters is quite low due to the large losses of the Russian army and the lack of emotional connection with the ideology of the "Russian world."

### **Tskhinvali Region**

A large amount of Russian equipment was sent from the Tskhinvali region to Ukraine. It was reported that families of the Russian servicemen also left the military town of Tskhinvali. A small number of volunteers left the Tskhinvali region for Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> However, most of the Tskhinvali Ossetians left with Russian regular forces. After the signing of a document of friendship and cooperation between the de facto government of South Ossetia and Russia in 2017, a large part of the de facto Tskhinvali armed forces disbanded and their personnel joined various units of the Russian 58th Army. As soon as the war in Ukraine broke out, like other Russian forces, they also had to dispatch to Ukraine on a planned rotation. In addition, a small number of volunteers from the Tskhinvali region are also involved in the fighting.

As of today, only one Tskhinvali resident has died in Ukraine. He was buried in Tskhinvali.<sup>11</sup> The Tskhinvali opposition, namely Eduard Kokoity and Davit Sanakoev, are protesting the transfer of Ossetians to Ukraine. They believe that the de facto president, Anatoly Bibilov, has practically dissolved the so-called South Ossetia's armed forces and order in the republic have been completely handed over

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<sup>9</sup> Argumenti.ru (2022). Борис Кантемиров призвал жителей Осетии влиться в ряды добровольцев и отправиться на Украину [Boris Kantemirov Urges Ossetians to Join Volunteers and Go to Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://argumenti.ru/world/2022/03/764802>

<sup>10</sup> Ekho Kavkaza (2022). Россия отправила на войну в Украину югоосетинских контрактников [Russia sent South Ossetian Contract Servicemen to Fight in Ukraine]. Accessible: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/31755470.html>

<sup>12</sup> A. Kvakhadze (2021). Harmonization of Russian and Abkhazian Legislation and its Importance for the Abkhazian Society and Official Tbilisi. Accessible: <https://www.gfsis.org.ge/ge/publications/view/2910>

to Russia which is why he has not been able to avoid the intense involvement of representatives of a small Ossetian nation in the war.<sup>12</sup>

### **Abkhazia**

Although the agreement on military cooperation between the de facto government of Abkhazia and Russia was signed in 2020, the transfer of de facto regular military units of Abkhazia in Ukraine has not yet taken place. According to the videos circulated through the internet, the equipment stationed at the Gudauta 7th military base was transferred to Ukraine by the railway.<sup>13</sup> A small group of Abkhaz volunteers participates in the Russia-Ukraine war. This group is called Piatnashka and is led by Akhra Avidzba, a.k.a Abkhazian. He fights in eastern Ukraine, on the Donbas front. Avidzba has been involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine and he has fought in the ranks of DNR separatists since 2014. In addition to participating in the hostilities, the de facto government of Abkhazia is actively engaged in receiving IDPs from the occupied Donbas.<sup>14</sup>

### **Possible Impact of the Ukraine War on the Region**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have a significant impact on the Caucasus region in several domains. First, despite the outcome of the war, tens of thousands of combat-experienced soldiers will return to the Caucasus region. Given that much of the Chechen command during the first Russian-Chechen war had experience of the Afghan war, it is possible that some of the veterans of the Russian-Ukrainian war would use the experience gained in the conflict against Russia. Second, any large-scale conflict raises the issue of untraceable weaponry that find its way on the black market. This black market may be exploited by rebel groups, precipitating the resurgence of guerrilla hotbeds in the North Caucasus republics. Third, great losses among North Caucasians will not go unnoticed. Unlike the rest of Russia, for the Muslim population of the North Caucasus it is impossible to conceal the body of a slain soldier. According to the traditions of the region, any funeral is attended by hundreds of people and the story of a person's death spreads quickly. Consequently, the great losses will increase the feeling among North Caucasians that they are being sacrificed for "someone else's war" and that the federal center is using them for its own utopian purposes. This will further deepen the antagonism between the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia. As for the occupied territories of Georgia, the issue will be even more acute there as both Abkhazians and Ossetians believe that they are small and endangered nations and

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<sup>12</sup> A. Kvakhadze (2021). Harmonization of Russian and Abkhazian Legislation and its Importance for the Abkhazian Society and Official Tbilisi. Accessible: <https://www.gfsis.org.ge/ge/publications/view/2910>

<sup>13</sup> *The Washington Post* (2022). "Russia Begins to Mobilize Military Reinforcements for Ukraine as Casualties Mount, Pentagon Says." Accessible: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/03/25/russia-reinforcements-georgia-ukraine/>

<sup>14</sup> Realist (2022). Ахра Авидзба: Мы должны обустроить Украину (Akhra Avidzba: We Have to Put Ukraine in Order). Accessible: <https://realtribune.ru/ahra-avidzba-my-dolzhny-obustroit-ukrainu>

the death of young men in foreign lands is an irreparable loss for them. At the same time, the war in Ukraine will inevitably weaken Ramzan Kadyrov's position in the Chechen Republic which is further facilitated by the fact that none of Kadyrov's close relatives participates in the hostilities. Fifth, the impending economic crisis in Russia will affect both the North Caucasus and the occupied territories. In both cases, we are dealing with a subsidized region that exists at the expense of the Russian federal budget. The devaluation of the ruble and other economic problems will severely affect the economies of these regions. Interestingly, the Chechen telegram-channel 1adat published material showing that Kadyrov's family members are building huge palaces during the Ukraine war - and such news further exacerbates public dissatisfaction.