

## The North Caucasus and the Russian War in Ukraine

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the challenges faced by the Russian army have increasingly fed discussions about the political future of Russia, presidential succession, and the danger of a collapse of the Russian state and its economy. In many of those scenarios, the North Caucasus and Ramzan Kadyrov are framed as a growing liability for Moscow and its internal political stability. This policy memo investigates how the war in Ukraine is changing power dynamics in the North Caucasus by looking at Kadyrov's governance methods, his regime's role in Ukraine, and the potential for unrest in the region. Whereas the Chechen leader has used the war, his *Kadyrovite* forces, and [even](#) his teenage sons to display ever-increasing loyalty to the Kremlin, Ukraine's Chechen battalions, portions of the diaspora, and a significant number of North Caucasians are aligned against Moscow, resulting in growing social and political confrontations in the region.

### **Power Dynamics in the North Caucasus**

For years, Kadyrov and the Chechenization process have been described as a guarantee of political stability in Chechnya and in North Caucasus. The Chechen leader has enjoyed a great deal of autonomy within the Russian Federation in exchange for his loyalty to President Vladimir Putin and Chechnya's internal stability. Russia's most recent war in Ukraine reinforced the Faustian bargain between the Kremlin and Kadyrov, expanding it into the realm of Russian federal politics. Kadyrov and his inner circle have seized the opportunity to leverage their military power and loyalty to Putin's regime in exchange for a more prominent role outside of Chechnya. To understand Kadyrov's sudden increase in status, one must look at the functions played by the *Kadyrovites* in Ukraine and their propaganda activities on social media.

Amid the February 2022 special operation in Ukraine, Kadyrov and his forces were identified by the Russian regime as key assets for the invasion based on their combat

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experience and their loyalty. Information [suggested](#) that Kadyrov was aware of the Russian invasion weeks in advance, underlining the role played by his military forces in the invasion plan. In March 2022, Kadyrov boasted on Telegram of being able to mobilize over 70,000 pro-Russia Chechen fighters; however, most assessments place Kadyrovites in Ukraine at a couple of thousand troops, mostly deployed with *Rosgvardiya* (National Guard). Later in the war, the Chechen leader also participated in the creation of “volunteer” battalions to support the tenuous Russian recruitment of professional soldiers. In June 2022, four battalions of Chechen volunteers were [created](#) to support the war effort in Chechnya. According to locals and members of the diaspora, although important financial incentives were provided for the recruitment, Chechen mobilization [resulted](#) mostly from coercive recruitment and pressure on families. Following the Kharkiv counteroffensive, Kadyrov has been critical of the lack of mobilization in Russia. Before the announcement of the federal partial war mobilization, he became the first regional leader to impose mobilization in the region under his administration. Even though Kadyrov declared that the federal mobilization would not apply to Chechnya, forced recruitment continues in Chechnya.

Chechen military roles in the conquest of Popasna, Mariupol, and Sievierodonetsk were advertised across pro-Kadyrov Telegram channels and other social media. They presented the Kadyrovites as Russian patriotic heroes and key figures in the limited success of Russian forces in Ukraine. Along with Wagner mercenaries, the Kadyrovites were described as an elite military force at the forefront of the war in Ukraine. Such framing [sought](#) to recast Kadyrov’s image from an outcast to an integral part of Russian nationalism. Based on a strategy previously deployed in Syria, Kadyrov forces also engaged in so-called humanitarian activities by distributing charitable aid in occupied Ukraine and supporting the reconstruction of destroyed cities such as Mariupol. State-controlled social media advertised the role played by the Akhmat Kadyrov Fund (AKF fund) and Kadyrov’s alleged devotion to the well-being of the Donbas civilian population. Kadyrov went as far as [using](#) the AKF fund to provide armored vehicles to the Donbas’ occupying forces.

Such large-scale propaganda operations were aimed at raising the profile of the Chechen leader in Russia. In other words, the war in Ukraine has offered a springboard for Ramzan Kadyrov’s political ambitions in Russia. He has evolved from a dominant regional actor to an important figure in Russian federal politics. This increased influence has also been extended to his inner circle. For example, Adam Delimkhanov was [awarded](#) the title of Hero of Russia for his military role in Ukraine. Magomed Daudov, chairman of the Chechen parliament, has been [appointed](#) a member of the Presidium of the Council for the Development of Local Self-Government, raising his profile within the Russian federal political system. Overall, Kadyrov and his followers have moved from a regional armed group in Russia to a rising political force in the field of Russian federal politics.

As Kadyrov's political role has [turned](#) toward federal politics and Ukraine, neglecting the power struggle in the North Caucasus, the balance of power in the region might start changing. For a long time, the siloviki – mostly the Federal Security Service and military intelligence – have sought to balance Kadyrov's influence in the North Caucasus by empowering other political actors ranging from Chechen military commanders to federal plenipotentiaries. The most recent attempt was the appointment of Sergei Melikov as Head of the Republic of Dagestan. Melikov's previous experience as the Plenipotentiary Representative of the North Caucasus Federal District and his service as Commander-in-Chief of Rosgvardiya [made](#) him an ideal candidate to mobilize federal and local resources to oppose Kadyrov's regional influence. With the war in Ukraine raging and Kadyrov's forces deployed abroad, Russian security agencies might grab the opportunity to support Melikov in order to restore a balance of power in the North Caucasus. Such actions might first be centered around political questions, including border disputes but could extend to the field of rent-seeking activities and control over federal transfers. At the same time, Melikov is facing a growing popular backlash resulting from the partial war mobilization launched by the federal government with the [objective](#) of mobilizing 13,000 Dagestanis.

### **Political Mobilization in the North Caucasus**

Following the announcement of the partial mobilization, protests [erupted](#) across the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. Violent confrontations between protesters and local police forces lasted several days in Makhachkala, as well as more peaceful protests in Khasavyurt, Babayurt, and Endirei. Protests were accompanied by increased online activities supporting political resistance and insurgent movements challenging the legitimacy of local authorities.

If anti-war protests in Russia had been limited in the North Caucasus before the call for war mobilization, Moscow and regional leaders are now facing a political force they had not witnessed in many years, even under the Caucasus Emirate. Combined with heavy losses sustained by North Caucasians during the first phase of the Russian invasion, the table is set for political instability to grow in the region. Such unrest is also fed by a growing political mobilization outside of the North Caucasus targeted at the region.

Inside the North Caucasus diaspora, the Russian invasion has resulted in a wave of support for Ukraine. Chechens who suffered tremendously during the two Chechen wars have shown their support with public gatherings in European capitals and on social media. For them, atrocities committed by the Russian regime were reminiscent of what happened two decades earlier in Chechnya. Ukraine had become part of a long series of violent struggles against Russian imperialism throughout the former Soviet Union. The Russian invasion also became an opportunity for Chechen politicians in exile and other activists to oppose Russia everywhere they could, as well as to renew the commitment to Chechen independence.

Akhmed Zakayev, former Chechen foreign minister, and Anzor Mashkadov, son of the former Chechen president, [traveled](#) to Ukraine to show their support for Ukrainian resistance, meet with Chechen fighters, and organize Chechen networks supporting the war efforts. European representatives of the Government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria have actively framed the war as a common fight against imperial Russia. Post-Soviet Russia has been presented as a revanchist empire aiming to rebuild its Eurasian empire at the expense of the minorities and their right to self-determination.

For the moment, the mobilization within the North Caucasus diaspora remains much smaller compared to the 2014-2015 war in the Donbas and the civil war in Syria. Such limited mobilization appears to be mostly circumstantial and does not represent the lack of anti-Russian sentiment in the European diaspora. In 2014, Ukrainian officials were openly recruiting volunteers willing to fight against Russia. The lack of preparedness of the Ukrainian army and the defensive nature of the Donbas war created optimal conditions for foreign fighters to support the war effort.

The 2022 war has been mostly fought as a conventional war of attrition where heavy artillery firepower and advanced weapon systems have played a predominant role rather than infantry-based or partisan warfare. Secondly, Ukrainian officials have focused on mobilizing their own population and limited their foreign recruitment to individuals with military experience sufficient to immediately contribute to such a modern conflict. Thirdly, since 2012, the North Caucasus diaspora in Europe has witnessed a growing level of securitization resulting from military activities in Syria and Ukraine. Because of that, many North Caucasus volunteers have also sought to clarify the legal status surrounding foreign fighting activities in Ukraine before joining the fight against Russian forces. Finally, the Islamic State [released](#) a statement framing the war in Ukraine as a war between “infidel” Western nations (crusaders) and condemning Muslims fighting in it. The terrorist groups have [suggested](#) that the war in Ukraine might present an opportunity to strike the West rather than fight against Russia. The silence surrounding IS-affiliated groups in Ukraine might suggest that the European Union represents a safer alternative than fighting or staying in Ukraine.

### **A Renewed Insurgency in the North Caucasus?**

For all the reasons above, even though anti-Russian sentiment is strong across the entire North Caucasus diaspora, the context of 2022 Ukraine makes it difficult for volunteers to mobilize and organize in Ukraine. This situation has prompted a conversation about a renewed insurgency in Chechnya and in southern Russia. The Sheikh Mansur Battalion, a Chechen battalion fighting in Ukraine since 2014, has acted as the leading figure. The group has stated that their presence in Ukraine was not only about fighting the Russians in Ukraine but their objective extended to Chechnya also. For Ichkerian nationalists, the overwhelming Western support for Ukraine is creating a window of opportunity for militants to bring back nationalist claims against Russia. Framing their struggle in the

broad decolonization movement against the Russian empire offers them a way to reclaim the control of the Chechen insurgency lost to jihadist forces as well as challenging Kadyrov's control over Chechnya. The success of the Kharkiv counteroffensive has also supported the idea that Russia is approaching a breaking point.

At the same time, although the timing might be there, the resources to do so remain scarce. Since 2016, the North Caucasus insurgency has been fully eradicated following a brutal counterinsurgency and the outflow of fighters to Syria. Insurgent attacks are mostly the results of isolated individuals or groups without proper organizational cohesion. Furthermore, remaining insurgents in the North Caucasus are facing long-lasting challenges that preclude them from sustaining long-term military activities against Russian forces. No transit routes to the North Caucasus are currently available for weapons and recruits, local support for the insurgency has withered with the mass exodus to Syria and Western Europe, and the current political context in Russia creates a repressive-prone environment where incumbents can more easily repress new insurgent movements. Although a renewed insurgency in the North Caucasus appears highly unlikely, one should not discard how a prolonged war in Ukraine can negatively impact one of the poorest regions of the Russian Federation.

The war in Ukraine has increasingly been feeding the discontent of the North Caucasus population and grievances against the local and federal governments. For years, the North Caucasus has been [providing](#) a steady flow of recruits to the Russian army as military service has acted as a tool of social mobility in a region with a high unemployment rate. In that context, the North Caucasus servicemen, particularly Dagestanis, have [witnessed](#) a very heavy death toll compared to predominantly ethnic Russian regions. Such a fatality rate will feed into the resentment of the local population against the center as well as create the conditions for many war veterans to come back to the North Caucasus, facing traumas, high unemployment, and even potential stigma from their own community. Lack of reintegration and opportunities for war veterans might feed the regional instability as it did in the 1990s with the Abkhaz and the Chechen wars.

### **What Does the Future Hold for the North Caucasus?**

Although it is easy to depict the North Caucasus as a powder keg ready to explode, leading to a domino effect in Russia, the situation on the ground appears more complex. While strong political actors like Ramzan Kadyrov are drawn away from the region and growing grievances and political struggles are fostered across the region, the grassroots forces remained ill-equipped to challenge Moscow's control over the North Caucasus. In the context of Western sanctions and Russia's exclusion from the European Court of Human Rights, Moscow is free to address any existing issues in the North Caucasus through heavy coercive means. Without a clear commitment from external actors, including the European Union and the United States, Russia has the tools to maintain its control over its southern border. However, the fallouts of the war in Ukraine, combined

with the mobilization within the diaspora and the local population, set the table for growing unrest in the region. To take advantage of it and support that mobilization, Western actors should increase resources dedicated to human right advocacy in the region and, most importantly, avoid stigmatizing North Caucasians because of their Russian citizenship. Such collective responsibility will hinder North Caucasians from seeking asylum in Western countries as well as prevent them from fully engaging in the mass mobilization against the Russian state.

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