
Military Mobilization in Russia's Regions: From Protests to Submission

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The partial mobilization announced by the Kremlin in September 2022—six months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—triggered a significant wave of emigration and sparked protests across the country. Whereas these protests were short-lived, the mobilization has had profound and lasting repercussions, particularly in Russia's regions, where ethnic minorities were disproportionately affected.

This policy memo examines how mobilization has been implemented in Russia's ethnic regions, providing a comprehensive analysis of its evolution over three years of war. It highlights how early opposition in the North Caucasus and in the Far East compelled local elites to develop new strategies to suppress dissent and ensure their political survival. The memo also explores shifting patterns in recruitment incentives and strategies, as well as casualties, comparing the North Caucasus, the Volga, and the Far East.

September 2022: Opposition to Mobilization in the North Caucasus

After the announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022, significant regional variations emerged both in the mobilization process and in its acceptance by local populations. The North Caucasus was home to the strongest opposition to mobilization compared to other ethnic regions. Mobilization efforts exposed the deep-seated racism and discrimination within Russian [society](#). Particularly surprising was the pushback local authorities encountered in Chechnya. The protests of several dozen women, demanding that their sons, husbands, or brothers not be drafted, marked a rare instance of public dissent in the authoritarian and highly repressive republic. For the autocratic ruler of the republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, accustomed to absolute submission from the

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population, this represented a deeply unsettling challenge. In an exceptional move—unprecedented even at the federal level—he retreated, declaring that Chechnya had already [overfulfilled its mobilization quota](#) relative to other Russian regions and that no further conscription would be enforced, unless individuals volunteered.

In Dagestan, protests against mobilization erupted across several [cities](#), catching the republic's leaders by surprise. They were probably the biggest in Russia. For decades, military service had been [the only viable path](#) to economic mobility for Dagestani young men. In a striking shift, protesters blocked the Khasavyurt-Makhachkala federal highway and gathered in cities across the republic—not only to oppose mobilization but also to reject Russia's war in Ukraine. Official statistics confirmed that Dagestan and neighboring Kalmykia exceeded [their mobilization quota](#) by a factor of two, sending not just 1% of men liable for conscription, as required, but more than 2.5%. The higher recruitment numbers led to higher casualties proportionally. In the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the North Caucasus republics, particularly Dagestan, suffered some of the highest casualty rates among Russia's regions, especially in the battles around Kyiv and Mariupol. By summer 2022, Dagestan had more military losses than any other region in the country. The disproportionate human cost of the war for Dagestanis was what fueled the protests there.

In the Far East regions of Russia, political activists opposed what was considered to be “[total](#)” mobilization, with [demonstrations](#) organized in Yakutia and Buryatia. Just like in Chechnya, many women gathered in Yakutsk to oppose the war and mobilization. In response, mass arrests were carried out in cities to quell the protests. The Federal Security Service and the Justice Ministry targeted nongovernmental activist organizations to prevent them from organizing further actions against the war and mobilization.

Overall, mobilization efforts exposed the deep-seated racism and discrimination within Russian [society](#). Mobilization disproportionately ensnared social groups unofficially deemed more expendable than “ordinary” Russians, including convicts, migrant workers, stateless persons, and ethnic minorities. The heaviest burden, from the very beginning, fell on the peoples of the North Caucasus, likely because of their perceived long-time disloyalty to Russia. This was one of the reasons why the North Caucasus emerged as the epicenter of protests against mobilization.

The Mobilization Dilemma in Russia's Ethnic Regions

The strong opposition to the war and mobilization forced regional elites to address social discontent, shielding themselves both from popular unrest and from the growing antiwar movement. North Caucasus authorities recognized the need to

adjust their mobilization strategies. They had to demonstrate loyalty to the Kremlin by meeting or exceeding conscription quotas, on the one hand, while maintaining stability in their republics and limiting the expansion of the antiwar movement, on the other.

Filling the ranks with new recruits was no easy task. By then, people had already realized that the war in Ukraine was far from a glorious campaign. The shortage of volunteers was particularly problematic for Kadyrov, who feared losing his privileged status among Russia's governors. Despite his public stance against mobilization, Kadyrov still needed to ensure that [Chechnya remained visibly committed](#) to the war effort. Desperate to prove his loyalty to Putin and reinforce the image of victory projected in his self-congratulatory speeches, he faced a dilemma: He needed to support the war effort, but he was reluctant to sacrifice the troops he had trained for policing functions, which are essential to maintaining his own rule.

To encourage volunteering, Kadyrov [appealed](#) to Chechen traditions and masculinity, publicly shaming Chechen men and framing participation in the war as a form of religious obligation for Muslims. Dagestan and Ingushetia employed similar strategies, playing on Caucasian and highlander traditional values, while North Ossetia leaned into Russian patriotism. Despite such rhetoric, voluntary enlistment in the North Caucasus, with the notable exception of [North Ossetia](#), remained minimal. By and large, the ranks of volunteers were filled by marginalized men who had lost their role as breadwinners in postwar Chechnya, as well as those struggling with substance abuse or individuals seeking redemption.

At the federal level, similar narratives around [masculinity](#) and religious [duty](#) were utilized to boost recruitment. For example, in Tatarstan, authorities resorted to shame and traditional norms of masculinity as mobilization tactics, while the local muftiate offered its blessing for men departing for the front lines. In Buryatia, the recruitment campaign emphasized the importance of defending ethnic [traditions](#), thought to be more compelling than appeals to a broader sense of patriotism.

Boosting Volunteer Numbers by All Means

Dagestan and Chechnya adopted similar strategies to boost coercive and voluntary mobilization while understating and concealing casualties. Each republic formed its own volunteer [battalions](#), offering recruits attractive financial incentives, short-term contracts, and the status of a combat veteran, which entitles holders to insurance and pension benefits. Some units, such as the Caspian [battalion](#) were integrated into larger military formations, while others, like Chechnya's Akhmat battalions, continued operating as independent military units.

Kadyrov's decision to keep his forces independent—in the hope of a quick victory—made it particularly difficult for him to conceal the low levels of volunteer recruitment in Chechnya. This, in turn, undermined the image of strong support for the war and threatened to weaken his standing with the Kremlin, possibly making him replaceable. In response, he devised a new strategy that allowed him to reaffirm his importance. The opportunity emerged naturally when the Akhmat battalions began recruiting beyond Chechnya, which turned the republic into a key hub for volunteers from across Russia. A recruitment center was established at the Russian Special Forces University in Gudermes, Chechnya, an institution that Kadyrov takes particular pride in.

In addition, lower-level local authorities intrusively sent messages in Chechen advertising "[vacancies](#)" in Akhmat. These messages stressed the high salary, assured recruits they will be deployed inside the republic, and suggested that military service is unavoidable anyway. Meanwhile, Kadyrov continued to promote [mobilization](#) to the Russian army, claiming that the war had already reached Chechnya.

To attract more volunteers, [the Gudermes center offered](#) service contracts limited to just four months—far shorter than the Defense Ministry's standard year-long or indefinite contracts. The [incentives](#) included generous bonuses, competitive monthly salaries, compensation for injury or death, and full equipment of much better quality than elsewhere. Although these promises were not always fully [honored](#), they were effective in drawing in a significant number of recruits. As a result, over [70](#) percent of Akhmat battalions are now made up of ethnicities other than Chechen. This new function not only reinforced Kadyrov's relevance to Russia's war effort but also allowed him to obscure the limited number of local volunteers.

Dagestani elites also offered generous short-term contracts to boost recruitment for their newly established military units, targeting primarily older men seeking to make a quick buck. Dagestan's volunteer battalion has an average age of over 40 years old. Other ethnic republics and federal entities in Russia, such as [Tatarstan](#) and republics in [Far East regions](#), offered higher signing bonus for volunteers, funded by local authorities. Mortgage support is regularly offered to new recruits in many Russian regions, not to mention writing down their debts.

Coercive Mobilization: Targeting the Misfits

Kadyrov repurposed mobilization as a tool of political repression, sending disgraced former elites and prisoners to the front lines as a form of punishment for their disloyalty. Another source of recruits came from Chechens who had returned from [Europe to visit their relatives](#). In his regime's eyes, living abroad—unless one had strong ties to the regime—was a sign of opposition. The regime's

propaganda coined the term “EuroChechen” as an epithet meant to humiliate Chechens living abroad. Coercive mobilization served both to suppress this perceived opposition and to punish them for their lower status.

Kadyrov ordered the forced mobilization of individuals who were seen as potential [opposition](#) figures, those reported for expressing dissatisfaction with local governance, and anyone deemed insufficiently submissive. This crackdown extended to [people](#) caught using drugs or alcohol, as well as convicts. By autumn 2024, Kadyrov’s methods had grown even more aggressive: For example, a new directive allowed for individuals violating traffic regulations to be forcibly enlisted as a form of [punishment](#). At the same time, Kadyrov took advantage of mobilization to fortify his private military and expand his security [apparatus](#), sparing it from mass casualties in the war.

Across the North Caucasus, law enforcement officers, motivated by their own desire to avoid being sent to the front lines, carried out coercive recruitment to meet “volunteer” quotas. Opposition channels have reported regular raids conducted by police forces in [Dagestan](#), [Ingushetia](#), and [Chechnya](#) and on [Chechens living in other parts of Russia](#). In [Siberia](#), recruitment officers have gone to homeless shelters to raise volunteers; they have also shamed men to force them to sign up to fight.

Concealing the True Cost of Russia’s War in Ukraine

The primary driver of the protests against “partial mobilization” was the widespread negative perception of the war and its mounting casualties, particularly in ethnic republics. When mobilization was announced, [Dagestan](#) already had more military losses than any other region in the country. Beyond coercion and financial incentives, reducing casualties was the third means of curbing opposition to mobilization across Russia.

The [steady influx of “Cargo 200”](#) – a code word used originally in the Soviet Union to refer to the transportation of military fatalities – raised concerns among local regimes about political stability. Republic leaders grew increasingly wary of potential unrest and recognized the need to reduce casualties to ensure their own political survival. Adopting a Soviet-era approach, they began concealing [the true death toll](#) to downplay the severity of the situation. For these leaders, this became one of the ways to sustain high recruitment levels.

Furthermore, regional leaders started differentiating between those who could be sacrificed in the war and those who were to be preserved. For instance, [Kadyrov](#) encouraged sending those deemed disloyal to the regime to the front lines. Meanwhile, soldiers who had enlisted in Akhmat before the war were kept in safer roles in Ukraine.

A large portion of the [Akhmat battalions](#), to the great annoyance of Russian soldiers and society, was stationed in the relatively safe Kursk Region, before it was attacked by Ukraine. Meanwhile, Ossetian and Dagestani battalions saw limited—relative to other ethnic groups or convict battalions— involvement in costly frontal assaults by infantry in Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Pokrovsk. After September 2022, the number of [casualties](#) clearly increased in Russia’s Volga and Far East ethnic regions, such as Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Buryatia, and Yakutia, compared to the North Caucasus.

Several measures taken at the local level to downplay casualty numbers were further reinforced by an overarching legal framework designed by the Kremlin. In Chechnya, local authorities ordered that [funerals](#) should not be made into major public events. Relatives of those killed in action receive some monetary compensation, along with Russian crosses for bravery, which are of dubious value for Muslim Chechens. The federal government, for its part, tightened control over information coming out of Ukraine with a new censorship [law](#) targeting individuals who “discredit” Russia’s armed forces. A crackdown on social media and independent journalism, along with the persecution of military bloggers (*voenkory*) and soldiers reporting from the front lines, has effectively obscured the true scale of military casualties. In Far East regions, ethnic activists were designated by Moscow as “foreign agents,” and their organizations as “[undesirable organizations](#),” for reporting on the war and losses among non-Russian citizens.

The Impact of Mobilization on Russia’s Regions

In September 2022, the protests against mobilization in the North Caucasus and in the Far East signaled hope that Russia’s periphery might ignite broader opposition to the war in Ukraine, marking the first step toward the unraveling of Putin’s regime. The protests also served as a wake-up call for regional elites, underscoring the dangers of allowing the federal government to dictate recruitment for the war and potential backlash from the local population. So far, heads of republics have managed to keep a lid on the situation and maintain satisfactory numbers of recruits. Moreover, they have used mobilization and recruitment to entrench their power locally, thereby improving their chances of political survival and strengthening their social position in postwar Russia. However, the migration abroad spurred by mobilization, coupled with the war casualties from ethnic regions and the rest of Russia, has sowed the seeds of future long-term economic decline and subsequent widespread dissatisfaction.