

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

Chechens in Ukraine

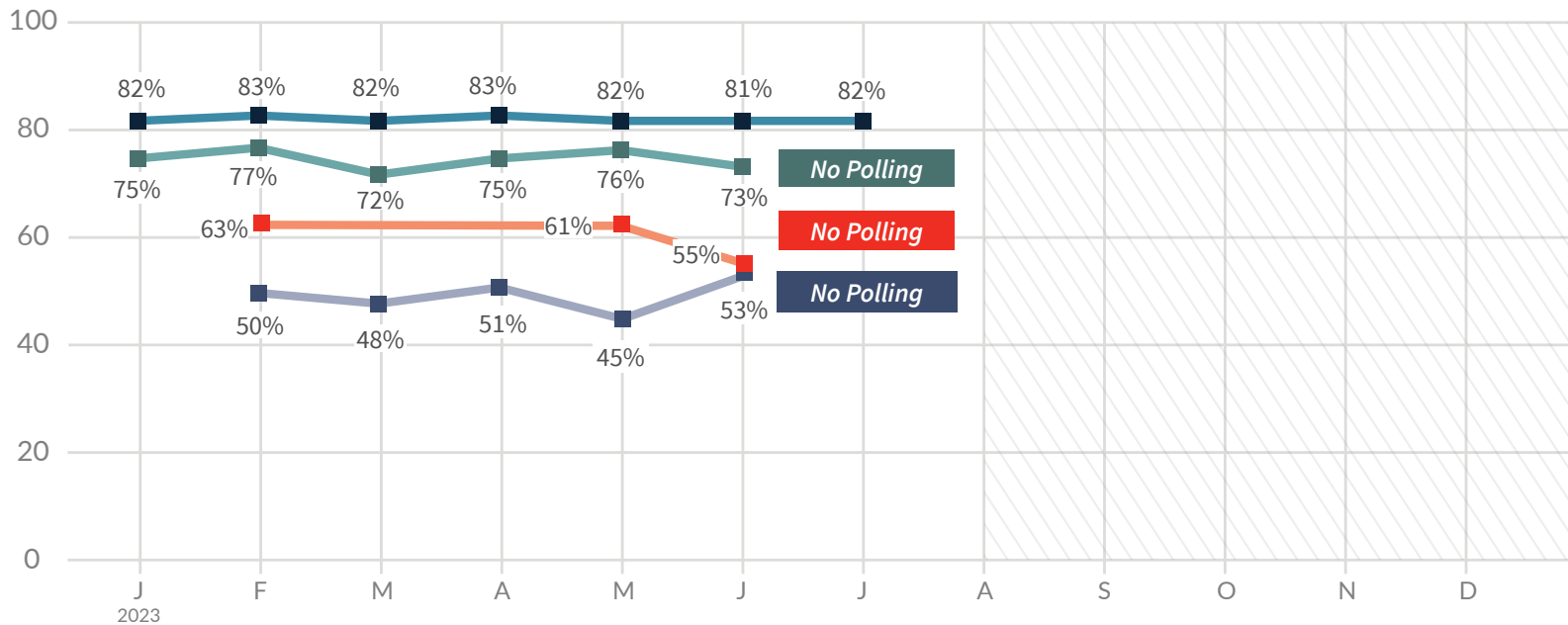


Vladimir Putin with Ramzan Kadyrov (2018)
SOURCE: wikiMedia Commons ¹

In This Running Estimate...

- Russian domestic support for Putin and the Special Military Operation remains high, according to the most recent polling available.
- Despite consistently high levels of Russia domestic support for the Special Military Operation (SMO), there has also been an increase in public support for negotiations. The June Wagner mutiny may have been the catalyst for this, possibly indicating a drop in confidence that the SMO will accomplish its objectives.
- Chechens are playing an intricate role on both sides of the Russia-Ukraine war, though the anti-Russian Chechen contingent is nominal.

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS



NOTE 1: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.²

APPROVE PUTIN

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s approval held firm in the low 80s, despite a marginal one-point dip from May to June and June to July, reflecting the Kremlin’s effective image management of him as a robust leader, and sidelining his critics. While Putin’s subdued response to the Wagner mutiny on 23-24 June might have threatened his standing, Wagner’s sudden retreat from its bold march on Moscow sullied Yevgeny Prigozhin’s image more, leaving Putin’s largely intact.³

SUPPORT SMO

Following the Wagner mutiny, which unraveled the Kremlin’s public claims of success, domestic Russian support for the Special Military Operation (SMO) dipped by 3% from May to June—its first decline since March. TV-loyal viewers (86%), seniors (82%), and men (77%) notably backed the SMO. Contrastingly, Putin skeptics (31%), youth between the ages of 18 and 24 (56%), media doubters (62%), and women (70%) showed the least support.⁴

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In June, public trust in the SMO success dipped by 6% to 55%, straying from earlier enthusiasm despite Ukrainian counteroffensives. This shift likely stems from the unveiled tensions between the Russian military and the Wagner mercenaries, intensifying uncertainties about Russia’s war strategy and the course of the war.⁵

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

June also saw a significant 8% jump in population support of negotiations over further combat, from 45% to 53%, with the Wagner mutiny serving as a probable catalyst. Highlighting deep rifts in the Russian military and unveiling hidden blunders against Ukraine, this event intensified the public’s wariness amidst escalating costs and mounting tensions, driving a stronger push for dialogue.⁶

CHECHENS FIGHTING IN UKRAINE



Figure 2: Chechens in Ukraine, map, GCKN.⁷

Putin's Partners: The Kadyrovtsy

Russia relies on various actors across and beyond the government to conduct the Russo-Ukraine War. The *Kadyrovtsy*^a are a faction of pro-Russian Chechen forces originating from the Russian Republic of Chechnya. The *Kadyrovtsy*'s evolution from a regional militia to a key player in an international conflict underscores the complexity of the Russian war apparatus. Their involvement in Ukraine signifies more than just military assistance; it represents Moscow's reliance on various factions to achieve its objectives. Moreover, the dynamic between the *Kadyrovtsy*, Moscow, and groups like PMC Wagner indicates the multifaceted nature of Russian proxy warfare.

As the conflict progresses, understanding the interplay between these groups will be crucial for grasping the broader strategic picture, including their historical roots, present role, and affiliations.

- The roots of the *Kadyrovtsy* go back to 2004 when Russian President Vladimir Putin was able to turn former separatist fighter and commander *Akhmat* Kadyrov to become the leader of the Russian-backed Republic of Chechnya. Shortly thereafter, *Akhmat* was assassinated in a bombing at Grozny stadium by separatist commander Shamil Basaev. In 2007 *Akhmat*'s son Ramzan came of age and became Head of the

^a *Kadyrovtsy* is a term used to describe the Chechen military and paramilitary units loyal to the late former leader of the Republic of Chechnya, *Akhmat* Kadyrov, and his son, Ramzan Kadyrov, the current leader. The term has gained worldwide recognition because of these pro-Russian Chechen units fighting in Ukraine. The nickname was originally derogatory in nature, implying they were traitors to the cause of Chechen independence from Russia.



Former Chechnya President *Akhmat Kadyrov*, namesake of the *Akhmat* units, in Chechnya before his assassination in 2004.
SOURCE: *Miller KH*¹⁰

Chechen Republic.^b With Putin's support, Ramzan led Russian efforts to crush the remaining elements of the Chechen insurgency that had shifted from a separatist movement to an Islamic jihad. Russia declared victory over Chechen jihadist insurgents in 2009 bringing the Second Russia-Chechnya war to an official conclusion. Initially serving as Ramzan Kadyrov's personal militia, the *Kadyrovtsy* became the cornerstone of the Chechnya security apparatus under Russian patronage and were absorbed into the Russian National Guard in 2016.^{c,8}

- ***Ramzan Kadyrov and his Kadyrovtsy have become an essential part of Russia's war effort in Ukraine by doing the dirty jobs.*** The *Kadyrovtsy* have been involved since the start of the war, often taking orders directly from Putin. They were on the frontline since the conflict's onset, taking on roles ranging from holding critical positions at the line of contact to conducting specialized operations. While their battle prowess has at times been debated, their presence on the battlefield undeniably plays a psychological role. Kadyrov, backed by his loyal *Kadyrovtsy*, is prolific on

social media, promoting a narrative that aligns with Russian interests and caters to traditional Chechen society. The media-savvy approach not only bolsters domestic support but also serves Moscow's broader information warfare strategy. Meanwhile, Kadyrov has built Chechnya into a vital recruiting and training hub for the Russian armed forces.⁹

b The Chechen Republic constitution of 12 March 1992 notes in Article 70 that the minimum age to lead the Chechen Republic is 35, the same age required to become the President of the Russian Federation. The Chechen Republic constitution adopted by referendum on 27 March 2003 revised the age of eligibility to lead Chechnya to 30 years, see entire constitution and Article 66 specifically at https://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/cc00000_.html

c In 2016 the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) was created to bring a variety of semi-autonomous fighting units from across Russia, including the *Kadyrovtsy*, under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Some analysts believe that the move to nationalize paramilitary units previously outside the MoD's control was a direct response to the growing power Chechen units yielded, especially in the North Caucasus.

THE RUSSIAN-CHECHEN PARADOX: HISTORIC MISTRUST AND ITS MODERN IMPLICATIONS

Studying the historical intrigues and conflicts within Chechnya and between Chechnya and Russia is necessary to understanding the power dynamics of the North Caucasus. The labyrinthine history of Russian-Chechen relations, tinged with deep-seated suspicions, is not just an intriguing tapestry of wars, cultural narratives, and sociopolitical manipulations. It's a testament to how longstanding tensions can mold modern geopolitics, military strategies, and alliances. Dissecting this relationship is crucial, not as an academic exercise, but as a compass in navigating the ever-evolving landscape of regional politics and alliances, highlighting the delicate balance of power and trust in the region.

- **Ancient Animosity and Stalin's Shadows:** Russia's attempt to dominate the North Caucasus during the 19th century seeded a deep-rooted mistrust between the two. The Chechen capital Grozny was originally a Russian fortress, part of a defensive belt across the North Caucasus during the Czar's efforts to pacify the region. Stalin's accusations of Chechen collaboration with Nazis during World War II resulted in the entire Chechen nation's exile to Kazakhstan in 1944, a brutal move that heightened already seething animosity. Though they later returned to Chechnya, the shadows of these accusations lingered.¹¹
- **Wars of Independence:** Chechnya's 1991 declaration of independence was initially tolerated and then three years later met with brutal force from Moscow, culminating in two catastrophic wars, starting in 1994 and lasting until 2009 that racked up significant casualties for Russia. These wars not only shattered the region, but also laid bare the mistrust on both sides. Eventually Moscow split the insurgency by coopting two significant clans, the Yamadaevs and the Kadyrovs. Born from the ashes of the Chechen Wars and their internecine power struggles, the *Kadyrovtsy* emerged victorious in the struggle for power with the Yamadaev's and has remained staunchly pro-Moscow. The paradoxical sight of pro-Moscow *Kadyrovtsy* Chechens, some of whom Russian forces had previously battled, as part of the vanguard into Georgia in 2008 only complicated this intricate web. The tumultuous relationship is described in literary works over time, such as Tolstoy's *Hadji Murad* (1912) and Babchenko's *One Soldier's War* (2009), emphasizing the human cost and deeply personal nature of this historic discord.¹²
- **Fragile Alliance and Persisting Skepticism:** The historical mistrust between the two hints at potential fissures in their current partnership, provoking several questions. How deep does the alliance run? Can it withstand external pressures, or will history repeat itself? Kadyrov's militarization, framed as counter-terrorism, is viewed with skepticism by many Russian officials. Many pundits and Chechens agree that the close relations between Russia and its Chechen Republic are totally dependent on the personal relationship between Kadyrov and Putin. Many observers believe that if Putin fails the Kadyrov regime will also fall and the historical animosity between Chechnya and Russia will return. Understanding this dynamic can give insights into potential military operations or strategies both may employ, particularly as the balance of power in the region is intricate.¹³

THE KADYROV-PRIGOZHIN FEUD: POWER, POISON, AND BETRAYAL

The shifting dynamics between Kadyrov and Prigozhin were emblematic of the broader struggle for power and influence between official and semi-autonomous forces fighting for Russia in Ukraine. The backdrop of the Russian war effort in Ukraine is not only shaped by the frontlines of battle but also the dynamics of key players operating behind the scenes. This includes the relationship between Chechnya’s strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, and Yevgeny Prigozhin, the enigmatic figure behind the Wagner group. Their interactions have profound implications, creating further complications in an already complex conflict.

- **Symbiotic Beginnings:** Ramzan Kadyrov was said to have good relations with the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and PMC Wagner until early summer 2023. Initially, it appeared that Wagner and *Kadyrovtsy Akhmat*^d units worked well together on the battlefield. In February 2023 Prigozhin visited *Akhmat* special forces commander, Aпти Alaudinov, in a hospital after an alleged poisoning, gifting him an honorary sledgehammer.^{e,14}
- **The Bakhmut Incident:** In early May 2023 following the Wagner-led Russian victory in Bakhmut, Prigozhin requested *Akhmat* units to relieve Wagner forces occupying Bakhmut, which could be perceived as a slight. Soon after, Kadyrov and Prigozhin engaged in a public war of words when Prigozhin ridiculed the Chechens by reducing their combat achievements to liberating a few villages. Prigozhin refused to meet *Akhmat* leaders on the battlefield, making a thinly veiled reference to the 2009 killing of former Chechen commander and Kadyrov rival Sulim Yamadaev in Dubai, suggesting he might meet the same fate. Kadyrov, however, quickly aimed to quell the public tension, announcing a resolution to their disagreements.¹⁵
- **Mutiny, Outrage, and Sorrow:** However, following the Wagner mutiny and occupation of Rostov in late June,^f Kadyrov lambasted Prigozhin for his insurrection, declaring the Wagner mutiny “a stab in the back.”¹⁶ Ironically, after a suspicious plane crash claimed Prigozhin’s life, Kadyrov’s stance pivoted to one of sorrow. He eulogized his former adversary, describing the death as “a great loss for the whole state.”¹⁷



Kadyrovtsy - Chechen troops on the Russian side in Donbass, July 2022. SOURCE: Gennadiy Dubovoy¹⁸

^d *Akhmat* and *Kadyrovtsy* represent the same Chechen combatants but whereas *Kadyrovtsy* is a nickname for all pro-Moscow Chechen fighters, *Akhmat* is the official unit name given to specific *Kadyrovtsy* units, in honor of *Akhmat* Kadyrov, the late leader of Chechnya. In the later part of 2022 and early 2023, Kadyrov stood up new units—all referred to as *Akhmat* units as in *Akhmat* South, *Akhmat* North, *Akhmat* East, and *Akhmat* West. The *Kadyrovtsy* special forces unit also uses the name and is called *Akhmat* Special Forces. All *Akhmat* units are *Kadyrovtsy*.

^e Wagner has used sledgehammers to execute deserters and traitors: See GCKN War in Ukraine Running Estimate Update 12, *Putin’s Partners: Wagner PMC*.

^f See GCKN War in Ukraine Running Estimate Update 12, *Putin’s Partners: Wagner PMC*.

Battlefield Effectiveness of the “Tik Tok Warriors.”

Kadyrov’s emphasis on social media to boost the reputation of the Kadyrovtsy led to mockery among some, but Putin’s Chechens have proven their combat capability as an asset for Russia. Initially the *Kadyrovtsy* was most known for war crimes and the sardonic nickname given to its soldiers, “TikTok Warriors,” from the numerous videos of their exploits shared across the popular social media platform. However, Putin began relying on the Chechens starting with the invasion, and has often assigned them difficult tasks, including frontline assaults, hunting down Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, eradicating pockets of resistance in occupied territories, and countering incursions into Russia itself.¹⁹

- **Origin of the ‘TikTok Warriors’:** Once notoriously labeled as “TikTok Warriors,” the *Kadyrovtsy* began their journey more as a butt of social media jokes than as a formidable force. The origin of the nickname is nebulous, but a Ukrainian information operations cell takes credit for coming up with the popular moniker.²⁰ Making the Ukrainians’ task even simpler, the *Kadyrovtsy* themselves filled social media with images of their purported combat valor, often while dressed in immaculate uniforms, ironically suggesting more of a photoshoot than actual combat.²¹
- **Behind the Digital Façade:** Despite the derisive label and beneath the veneer of these social media antics lay a force to be reckoned with. By February 2022, the *Kadyrovtsy* played a central role in the invasive surge into Kyiv. They suffered significant casualties when the bid to seize the Ukrainian capital went awry, leading to a forced Russian retreat but also



Chechen troops on the Russian side in Donbass, June 2022.
SOURCE: Gennadiy Dubovoy²⁵

showcasing their frontline status. Their withdrawal alongside beleaguered Russian units in the aftermath of Kyiv’s siege paints a picture of grit and tenacity. Their alleged mission to assassinate Zelenskyy early in the war underscores their perceived value by Russian military commanders.²²

- **Shift to Mariupol:** Weeks later the *Kadyrovtsy* main effort was shifted to Mariupol under the command of senior Chechen General and close Ramzan Kadyrov associate Adam Delimkhanov. Once Russia proclaimed liberation from “Ukrainian terrorist forces,” the *Kadyrovtsy* were tasked with the grim clean-up operations, rooting out lingering Ukrainian combatants from the depths of vast ironworks. Due to their success in Mariupol, the *Kadyrovtsy* have repeatedly been tapped for “mop up” operations. Chechen commanders have been celebrated and promoted for their efforts, including Alaudinov who was named the deputy commander of the 2nd Army Corps of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) in addition to his role as commander of the *Akhmat* Special Forces operating in Ukraine.²³
- **Putin’s Fire Brigade:** After PMC Wagner seized the Russian military headquarters in the Russian city of Rostov during its short-lived mutiny in late June^g, *Kadyrovtsy* were ordered off the eastern frontlines and sent to counter the mercenaries. When PMC Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin ended the mutiny, the *Kadyrovtsy* returned to the frontlines without incident. *Kadyrovtsy* units were later sent to the Russian region of Belgorod to defend the border area against incursions from Ukrainian and anti-Kremlin Russian units. As of late summer 2023, the *Kadyrovtsy* continue to be engaged against Ukrainian forces on both the eastern and southern fronts.²⁴

^g See GCKN War in Ukraine Running Estimate Update 12, *Putin’s Partners: Wagner PMC*.

Special Forces School Extends Chechen Influence

Chechnya's Special Forces school has become an important training hub for the Russian military; this reinforces the perception of Kadyrov's dedication and importance to Russia. Chechnya's Special Forces school in Gudermes has transformed from a mere regional training facility to a symbolic and practical stronghold in the war in Ukraine. Its significance stretches beyond military training, impacting sociopolitical landscapes both domestically and internationally, and becoming a tangible representation of Chechnya's commitment to the Kremlin's objectives in Ukraine. By providing a brief yet intensive training course during the 2022 mobilization, the school offered Russia's volunteers a semblance of preparation, contrasting with those mobilized elsewhere. Beyond training soldiers, the school plays an essential role in Chechnya's public relations strategy, working to improve its image within the broader Russian context.²⁶

- **Founding and Transition to a War Hub:** Founded by Kadyrov in 2013, the Special Forces school's initial purpose may have been to train local Chechen units, and its strategic relevance in the broader Russian conflict matrix was minimal. However, after the invasion of Ukraine the school transitioned into a pivotal recruitment and training center. It catered not just to Chechens but to volunteers spanning the entirety of Russia's ethnic mosaic.
- **The Role of Propaganda:** Kadyrov's media outlets regularly broadcast images of freshly minted soldiers enroute to the Donbas. This serves a dual purpose: showcasing the school's growing importance and underscoring Chechnya's commitment to the Kremlin's cause. The underlying message emphasizes the "multinational" character of *Akhmat* units—a mosaic of Russian ethnicities united under one banner and aiming to win over a traditionally wary Russian populace. The narrative that *Akhmat* units are drawn from a variety of ethnic backgrounds seeks to emphasize

unity behind the Kremlin's objectives. It is also an effort to bridge any ethnic divides and foster broader Russian unity.^h

- **Special Forces School and Akhmat's Rise:** While the *Kadyrovtsy* maiden voyage to Ukraine was driven by existing units beefed up with Chechen volunteers, this training hub has steadily bolstered its ranks. Acting as a funnel, it readies both Chechens and Russians for their Ukrainian deployment, all under the *Akhmat* banner.^{i,27} Kadyrov, known for his penchant for exaggeration, has claimed a significant influx of Russians to the special forces school during the Fall 2022 mobilization. While his numbers might be inflated, the reality remains—the school's 10- to 14-day crash course offers a compelling training route, ensuring trainees step onto the battlefield not as mere cannon fodder but as soldiers with a foundation in warfare.²⁸

Patch worn by members of the Chechen Special Operations Regiment. The Cyrillic letters (ИПОН) are the abbreviated form of its Russian name. SOURCE: Kwasura²⁹



The Narrative Tactic: Harnessing Family and Religious Values in Information Warfare

Kadyrov masterfully employs a strategy of propagating Kremlin narratives alongside traditional narratives of family and religious values to project and protect his interests both within and beyond Chechnya. In the spectrum of information operations, narratives grounded in family and religious values have always held significant sway over targeted audiences. They can rally supporters, cultivate loyalty, and often effectively mask ulterior motives. In the context of the SMO, Kadyrov has adroitly harnessed this strategy to project and protect his interests both within and beyond Chechnya, underscoring the complexities of modern warfare and showcasing the powerful role of information warfare in contemporary conflicts.

^h As per Kadyrov's own social media outlets, there has been an evolution in the formation of units going through the special forces schoolhouse. A recent social media post closes with the following: "For everyone who wants to become a part of the multinational special forces 'AKHMAT' contact: +79256617777, +79253197777, +79253287777. You can also contact the mayor's office of the city of Grozny @grozmerr. You will be fully assisted in this matter. AHMAT-POWER!!!" SOURCE: *Kadyrov_95* (Telegram), 13 July 2023. https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/3754

ⁱ Chechen order of battle is difficult to track. Recent posts from Kadyrov's Telegram channel note the following: "We are proud of the 42nd division from the Chechen Republic, which includes the regiments *Akhmat-Russia*, *Akhmat-Chechnya*, *Sever-Akhmat*, and the battalions *Zapad-Akhmat*, *Vostok-AKHMAT* and *South-AKHMAT*, consisting of Chechen fighters. In total, more than 6,000 Chechen fighters from the 42nd division are now directly in the Zaporozhye region and are destroying the enemy." SOURCE: *Kadyrov_95* Telegram Channel, 10 June 2023. https://t.me/RKadyrov_95/3686

- **Kadyrov’s Confluence of Narratives:** Kadyrov melds religious and familial values with military and political objectives in his social media campaign. He propagates the Kremlin narrative of the SMO as an existential fight for Russia against the West. He adds another layer of messaging by framing his involvement in the SMO as a stand against Western influence—particularly the alleged Western promotion of LGBTQ rights—therefore tapping into existing cultural and religious sensibilities to fortify his position. The narratives also serve a dual purpose domestically. By positioning himself against perceived decadent Western values, Kadyrov ensures alignment and loyalty from his base, especially among the conservative majority whose ideology resonates with his religious and cultural postures.³⁰

- **The Cultural Defense:** Kadyrov and his commanders push a narrative that the SMO is a defense against perceived cultural invasions or erosion. This framing doesn’t just legitimize military actions in Ukraine but also positions Kadyrov as a defender of Chechen and broader Islamic values to galvanize support.^{j,31} Additionally, Kadyrov’s public displays of piety, such as attending Hajj and strategic broadcasts of prayer moments, are calibrated performances aimed at reinforcing his image as a devout protector of Islam in the face of perceived global threats.

j Chechen social media messaging on the topic of the Western destruction of traditional family values is exemplified by the following post: “I suggest not to fight for LGBT flags, for states that do not care about them at all, but to stand with us in the ranks of fighters against Satanism, terrorism and extremism deployed on the territory of Ukraine by NATO and US leadership.” SOURCE: *AptiAlaudinovAKHMAT* Telegram channel, 11 June 2023. <https://t.me/AptiAlaudinovAKHMAT/1533>

ANTI-RUSSIA CHECHENS IN UKRAINE

The diminishing significance of anti-Russia Chechen units to Ukraine’s war effort is a consequence of the fractured state of the Chechen independence movement and highlights the evolution of Ukraine’s modern, unified, state defense apparatus. The narrative of Chechens as fierce warriors opposing Russia has been an intricate part of the geopolitical landscape since the 1990s. From Georgia to Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Chechens were often regarded as pivotal force multipliers, regardless of the actual evidentiary support for such claims. Historically, figures like Shamil Basaev, with his renowned exploits in Abkhazia against Georgia (1992-1993), reinforced the near-mythic aura of Chechen Prowess. Their tactical successes against Russia between 1994 and 1996 only solidified this reputation.³² Thus, when Chechens entered the Ukraine conflict against Russia, similar expectations were naturally levied upon them. However, the current dynamics paint a different picture.

- **Lack of Unity:** Disparate factions and competing loyalties have prevented the Chechens from presenting a unified front in the Ukrainian context.^{k,33}

- **Shift to NATO Standards:** As Ukraine progressively adapts its military to align with NATO standards and involves itself in multinational training programs, the perceived utility of independent Chechen units diminishes.³⁴
- **Rising Ukrainian Expertise:** The continuous evolution of the Ukrainian armed forces and the expertise gained by Ukrainian soldiers over the years has lessened Ukraine’s need for independent Chechen units.³⁵
- **Integration over Ethnic Units:** As the Ukrainian military moves towards more ethnically integrated units, the inclusion of Chechen units’ role is diminished as independent fighting formations.³⁶
- **Scalability Issues:** The pool of Chechens willing and able to fight in Ukraine does not appear to be large enough to make a sizable difference, especially given the other factors at play.³⁷

Recognizing the diminishing significance of anti-Russia Chechens in Ukraine’s broader military strategy is crucial for understanding Ukraine’s evolving defense posture.

k In multiple conversations with former and current Chechen combatants, Dodge Billingsley was frequently told that it was not easy for a Chechen to obey an order from another Chechen. In a December 1997 interview in Grozny, Chechnya, former Chechen field commander Salmon Raduev (1967-2002) and Billingsley that “the Chechens are a million people. One million generals.”

This shift underscores Ukraine’s increasing self-reliance, its commitment to modern military standards, and the complexities of managing ethnically based military units. In the grand tapestry of Ukrainian defense dynamics, the Chechen thread is thinning.

Disunity of Purpose, Disunity of Command

The lack of unity between Chechen independence groups has resulted in scattershot support to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), with little expectation for future change. The Chechen involvement on the pro-Ukraine side presents an intricate web of ideological and political motivations, layered with age-old divisions and rivalries. Their participation is not solely rooted in their opposition to Russia; it’s also deeply tied to their differing visions for the future of Chechnya. The competing visions mirror leadership contention, both unwittingly weakening the Chechen front in Ukraine and showcasing the challenges of aligning diverse groups with longstanding divisions towards a single immediate objective. However, there appears to be continued signs of battlefield unity of purpose against Russia.

- **A Unified Enemy, Divided Visions:** While all Chechens on the Ukrainian side see the war as the first step to destroy Russia, drive Kadyrov out of power, and re-establish an independent Chechnya, their consensus ends there. Their vision for a post-conflict Chechnya varies, spanning from secular governance, a blend of Islam and secular norms, to strict Sharia-based administration. In short, the Chechens fighting Russia in Ukraine are divided by their vision of the future, and not their Russian enemy.
- **Leadership Rivalries:** Akhmed Zakaev’s claim to the leadership of a yet to be realized independent Chechnya amplifies the existing fissures. His leadership is contentious due to several reasons, including his age, underlying principles, and historical clan-based conflicts. As a result, many Chechens are unwilling to align with his military faction in Ukraine.
- **The Impact on the Ground:** These deep-seated ideological and leadership divides have hindered a cohesive and united anti-Russian Chechen front in Ukraine. While Kadyrov hasn’t leveraged these divisions explicitly, their mere existence naturally dilutes the potential strength and unity of the Chechen

fighters arrayed against a common adversary.

Chechen Volunteer Units in Ukraine: The Reality Behind the Numbers

Promises of Chechen volunteers to fight Russia remain unfulfilled, forcing integration with UAF and limiting employment as independent units. Historically, Chechens have played a significant role in conflicts involving Russia. This legacy was evident in Ukraine, where anti-Russian sentiments led many Chechens to take up arms under the Dzhokhar Dudaev Battalion as early as 2014. However, as the situation evolved, the real contribution of these units began to become clearer, including the disparity between projected Chechen involvement and actual numbers on the ground, as the number of pro-Ukraine Chechens fighting in Ukraine is likely far below 1,000 personnel. The overreliance on promises and the subsequent shortfall could result in strategic gaps, underscoring the need for adaptability in military planning.

- **Dzhokhar Dudaev Battalion’s Diminishing Presence:** Once a prominent force fighting against Russian advances, this battalion’s influence waned after its leader, Isa Manaev, was killed in Donbas in 2015. By 2022, even with Russia’s intensified aggression, the battalion’s strength was a fraction of what it once was, and many of its sub-units have been integrated into larger Ukrainian units. Still, the Dudaev Battalion continues to be on the battlefield and conducting joint operations with Ukrainian units like the Ukraine led Adam Reconnaissance Group (which has a small number of Chechens within the ranks), and the Sheik Mansur Battalion, another independent Chechen military unit. The leadership of the Dudaev Battalion is also confusing, as the current battalion commander, Adam Osmaev, now works for Ukraine’s security apparatus.



Dzhokhar Dudaev, first President of Ichkeria (Chechnya) (1991–1996), namesake of the Dzhokhar Dudaev Battalion, in 1991. SOURCE: Dmitry Borko³⁸

- **Lofty Goals, Limited Realization:** The Special Purpose Battalion (OBON (Отдельный Батальон Особого Назначения)), led by exiled Chechen leader Akhmed Zakaev, is said to have promised an infusion of 2,000 Chechen combatants to aid Ukraine. Yet, the reality is starkly different. By mid-May 2023, only 40 of those combatants were on Ukrainian soil, with an effective fighting force of just 50 expected soon. Although Zakaev’s plan includes sourcing volunteers from the Chechen diaspora in Europe and Turkey, the current speed of recruitment is far from promising. With only 40 additional volunteers potentially joining the ranks, OBON seems unlikely to meet its original commitment anytime soon.³⁹

Integration of Chechens into the UAF: A Sign of Evolving Strategies and Professionalism

The absorption of Chechen units into the UAF signals the evolving nature of the Ukrainian conflict and the journey of the UAF from a loosely structured force, augmenting its troops with foreign volunteers, to a professional army with streamlined command structures. This transition also highlights the dynamic nature of warfare and the need for adaptable strategies. Chechens, while now more integrated, continue to have a specialized role, a testament to their unique capabilities. However, as the UAF further evolves, the exact scope and scale of this role will likely undergo changes, reflecting broader strategic and tactical shifts.

- **From Ad Hoc to Organized:** Initially, the UAF relied on foreign volunteers, including Chechens, to fill expertise and manpower gaps. These volunteers were invaluable during the early chaotic phases of the conflict, providing essential skills and on-ground experience. That freewheeling phase of the conflict has largely disappeared as the UAF has become more professional through experience and training by Western partners.
- **Institutional Assimilation:** As the UAF underwent professionalization, driven in part by training from Western nations, the need for separate volunteer

units diminished. Many Chechen units, like the “Mad Pack” special operations unit, were fully integrated into the formal structure of Ukrainian armed forces. While OBON and the Dzhokar Dudaev and Sheik Mansur battalions exist, they increasingly appear to operate within the broader UAF framework. **However, as Ukraine struggles to maintain its numbers on the battlefield and regroups for future operations, it’s possible that Chechen units could see a resurgence as independent units.**⁴⁰

- **Specialized Roles and Operations:** The integration of Chechens into the UAF does not diminish their distinct value. Their unique skill sets, especially in behind-the-lines operations, continue to be vital. The recent exploits of OBON in Russia’s Belgorod region underscore the specialized capabilities Chechens bring to the table. However, with the increasing institutionalization and centralization of the UAF, the specific role and prominence of Chechen and other volunteer groups may diminish. Nevertheless, their potential for specialized operations ensures they will always have a niche role.⁴¹

¹ For more on the importance of vetting consider the case of Major Hussein Dzhambetov who was removed from Akhmed Zakaev’s OBON for mental health reasons in December 2022. Shortly after Dzhambetov was removed he showed up in Grozny pledging allegiance to Ramzan Kadyrov. He now occupies a position within Kadyrov’s security apparatus. Dzhambetov was a volunteer in Ukraine before he was transferred into OBON. Before that he lived in Belgium for more than a decade. Questions remain as to whether or not he was a spy for Kadyrov or simply disgruntled and switched sides as a result. See: “ПРИКАЗ И.О. Верховного Главнокомандующего Вооруженными силами Чеченской Республики Ичкерия (ORDER I.O. Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria), Chechen News, 6 December 2023. <https://thechechenpress.com/developments/17165-embargo-i-potolok-tsen-srabotali-neft-silno-desheveet.html>

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE CHECHEN WARRIOR: GENERATIONAL SHIFTS AND CULTURAL EVOLUTION

Cultural evolution across generations has changed the fabric of the Chechen warrior tradition and precipitated a decline in those willing to engage in combat. Historical conflicts, especially those as brutal and personal as the Russian-Chechen wars (1994 to 2008) tend to shape subsequent generations in unique ways. The experience of the Chechens who endured these wars offers an insightful case study on how past wars shape the current state of a community and its willingness to fight. Generational shifts resulting from cultural evolution have retained the Chechen warrior spirit, particularly within the arena of sports, but contemporary demographic realities indicate reduced interest in engaging in actual combat.

- **The Aging Warrior:** Veterans of the two major Russian-Chechen wars are now advancing in age, with many no longer in the prime years typically associated with combat. Their invaluable experience does not always translate into their ability to participate actively in combat.
- **Generational Disconnect:** Descendants of veterans of the Russian-Chechen wars, the new generation of Chechens raised largely in Europe, have not felt the same pull to the battlefield. With a life distant from the horrors of war, this younger generation has not felt the same urgent call to arms. Their exposure to European values and lifestyles, coupled with the absence of firsthand experience with conflict, means their zeal for direct combat is considerably muted. The lack of direct war experience in this generation poses challenges if they were to be mobilized en masse for combat.^m
- **From Battlefield to Octagon:** The warrior ethos, integral to Chechen identity, has not vanished but has morphed into a different form. Instead of guerilla warfare, many young Chechens now gravitate towards Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), finding in it an avenue to express their warrior prowess. Kadyrov's endorsement of MMA, whether intentional or not, has further entrenched this trend, making the octagon a more appealing arena for the new generation than the actual battlefield.⁴²

^m Akhmed Zakaev's own family serves as an anecdote of the generational disconnect amongst the Euro-Chechens. While Zakaev is the nominal leader of the group--as he is the political leader of his faction--his son Shamil is a member of the unit on the front lines. However, Shamil's son (Akhmed's grandson), in his twenties, is at home in the UK studying design.



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ENDNOTES

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