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The North Caucasus, the Future of Russia, and Foreign Fighters in Ukraine

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Abstract

The article documents the different groups of Caucasian foreign fighters in Ukraine and their relationships with other military groups. It then investigates the potential impact of those foreign fighters on the North Caucasus and the stability of the Russian Federation. It concludes by challenging the assumption that the North Caucasus might become the epicenter of a national movement leading to the collapse of Russia and suggesting that insurgent activities might increase in Western Russia instead.

Since the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the challenges faced by the Russian army on the battlefield and the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy have increasingly fed discussion of Russia's internal collapse (Byk 2023). Russia's periphery and ethnic minorities have been presented as potential fault lines for Putin's regime due to the disproportionate death toll sustained by non-ethnic Russians in Ukraine and economic difficulties in the country (Soufan Group 2023; Motyl 2023). Analogies are often drawn with the Tsarist and Soviet collapses, with the current situation being framed as the last act of a catastrophic trilogy (Bugajski 2023). In the context of an endless supply of weapons, this last act could result in a series of civil wars or violent confrontations between "violent entrepreneurs" (Laruelle 2022). In this scenario, the North Caucasus is often portrayed as a restive region where Russia's disintegration might begin and where unrest is most likely to reignite a decades-long conflict between federal forces and insurgent forces. Such a narrative is also used by Moscow to rally internal support against the "West" and its perceived war against the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The regional situation is, however, certainly more complex; one cannot deny growing structural tensions resulting from the war in Ukraine but should consider many mitigating factors. For one, although anti-Russian forces are organizing in Ukraine, they face tangible impediments on their way to contributing to the downfall of Russia. To better understand this situation, this article investigates the state of Caucasian fighters in Ukraine, their relationship with other military groups, and the challenges they face in bringing their fight back to Russia.

Foreign Fighters from the Caucasus in Ukraine: Accretion and Competition

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, researchers and journalists have focused heavily on ethnic armed battalions composed of Chechens, Georgians, Crimean Tatars, and Dagestanis, to name a few. For-

foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union (FSU) have become an important force supporting Ukrainian armed forces and a growing threat to the Russian Federation. Before the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, most anti-Russian forces were scattered across Syria, Turkey, Western Europe, Georgia, and the North Caucasus. The war created an opportunity to unite many of those groups with the support of Ukrainian military resources. Supporting those groups has offered the Ukrainian forces skilled combatants, as well as creating a future threat to the Russian Federation. This situation appears very different from what was observed during the war in eastern Ukraine.

In 2014, the Ukrainian state never launched a mobilization call for foreign fighters and did not seek to regulate the stream of foreign fighters into the country. An eclectic flow of individuals traveled to Ukraine, ranging from far-right extremists to jihadist fighters and anti-Russian forces. No administrative structures were created to integrate, train, and track those foreign activists. This lack of proper management resulted in suboptimal organic mobilization, which was often based on pre-existing networks rather than a sustained campaign of recruitment and mobilization. In February 2022, President Volodymyr Zelensky issued a call for foreigners with military backgrounds to join the fight against the Russian aggressor. The Ukrainian state created the International Legion of Defence of Ukraine to manage the inflow of combatants, setting up a website and establishing administrative procedures to support incoming fighters. The recruitment process was handled by Ukrainian embassies abroad, where volunteers had to present records of military service and combat experience. Most of the foreign fighters in the current war are thus professional soldiers with combat experience rather than wannabe recruits looking for an adventure or battle experience. The majority of them are closely affiliated with—or even integrated into—the Ukrainian armed forces, giving them access to military hardware and intelligence. Caucasian military units, mostly

Georgian and Chechen groups, have become a hub for integrating and supporting these newcomers.

Hundreds of Georgians joined the fight in 2022, becoming members of the Georgian Legion. Established in 2014, the Legion was integrated into the Ukrainian armed forces in 2016. From the outset, the Legion was designed as a multiethnic structure, with a view to creating tacit alliances between anti-Russian militants. The legion also trained Ukrainian civilians in urban warfare (Hauer 2022). The commander of the group, Mamuka Mamulashvili, has long maintained links with North Caucasus fighters established through his participation in the First Chechen War. If the legion numbered around 200 soldiers prior to 2022, the war quickly boosted their ranks to roughly 1,000 seasoned combatants, including approximately 500 ethnic Georgians. Early in the war, prior to Ukraine's creation of the International Legion, the Georgian legion became a hub for foreign fighters rushing to Ukraine. Even ethnic Ukrainians joined the Georgian legion to avoid the military bureaucracy and immediately join the fight against Russia. The legion has been one of the most active military formations in the Russo-Ukrainian war, fighting in such key battles as Hostomel, Kyiv, Izyum, and Bakhmut. Its combatants have also vowed to continue the fight against Russia after the end of the war in Ukraine. Strictly on the military and political level, they have shown the highest level of cohesion among members and a great ability to network with the Ukrainian armed forces. However, their logistical challenges remain acute, as most of them cannot easily engage in sabotage and resistance activities on Russian territory. In addition to the Georgian fighters, over 1,000 Chechens have gathered in Ukraine to fight Russian forces. This represents a significant increase compared to the last years of the Chechen insurgency in the North Caucasus, when a few dozen fighters were barely surviving in the Caucasus mountains.

Following the collapse of the Chechen insurgency in the North Caucasus, Western Europe and Turkey served as a safe haven for Chechen and other North Caucasus fighters. While Chechens in Turkey joined the fight in Syria, refugees in Europe gravitated more toward Ukraine. Chechen fighters first became involved in Ukraine in 2014 with the Dzhokhar Dudayev and the Sheikh Mansur battalions. The two Chechen battalions were created at the beginning of the war in the Donbas and remained mobilized for years after the end of the acute phase of the conflict. Both the war in Syria and the 2014 war in the Donbas revitalized the Chechen insurgency, helping to facilitate recruitment and mobilization activities. At the same time, the anti-Russian resistance remained scattered across many countries and with a very different agenda. Many of its fighters were constantly tracked abroad by Russian security services

and Ramzan Kadyrov's forces, falling victim to targeted assassinations. Such transnational repression made it difficult to organize effectively against Moscow.

As the 2022 invasion affected the Russian security services' resources dedicated to tracking and targeting North Caucasian fighters abroad, it also provided a unifying narrative against Russia. Ukraine became the most important hub of North Caucasian fighters, creating a window of opportunity to unite an already highly fragmented resistance. The Dzhokhar Dudayev and Sheikh Mansur battalions have grown significantly since the beginning of the war in February 2022. They have also increasingly integrated Ukrainian fighters and Crimean Tatars into their units. Many non-Chechen combatants have vowed to continue the fight in Russia, starting with Chechnya (Hauer 2023).

The military activities in Ukraine have provided an opportunity to revamp the fight against Russian forces in the North Caucasus (Chambers 2023). Chechen fighters who favored Syria over Ukraine—such as Ajnad al-Kavkaz and their military commander, Rustam Azhiev—traveled to Ukraine in the summer of 2022. Over 25 veterans of the Second Chechen war and the Syrian civil war joined the forces loyal to Akhmed Zakayev (Ratelle 2023). Azhiev obtained Ukrainian citizenship after his arrival in Ukraine and was named the deputy commander of Zakayev's military formation (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2023). However, rather than unifying the Chechen forces under one leadership, the war has deepened existing tensions between factions. Three different organizations have asserted themselves as the legitimate heir of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and created military formations in Ukraine (Chambers 2023). So far, the political tensions have resulted in debates over the future of an independent Chechen republic, the role of religion within its constitution, and competing political agendas. However, as shown by the interwar period in Chechnya, such ideological tensions can rapidly dissolve temporary battlefield alliances and lead to infighting.

Foreign fighters tend to set aside their ideological tensions to unite against a common enemy, but such unholy alliances rarely survive for a long period. The fight against imperial Russia in Ukraine has united often antagonistic parties with drastically different ideologies. For example, traditionalist Chechens and Salafi-oriented combatants have joined forces against Moscow and its invading forces; far-right Ukrainians and Islamist-based groups fight in the same unit. Opposing a particular evil or enemy is often underlined as the overarching factor for foreign fighters themselves. Enmity toward Russia and the importance of uniting to save Ukraine have subsumed the ideological differences between those groups. However, existential and ideological tensions

tend to resurface as early war objectives are reached or difficulties arise. A military victory in Ukraine might result in the operational conditions to recommence the fight in Russia, but might also, as history suggests, lead to internal strife and infighting between different factions. Such tensions will inevitably weaken the cohesion of the anti-Russian front in Ukraine.

A Multinational and Multiethnic Force in the Making in Ukraine

Ukraine has also become a sanctuary for several other ethnic groups, including ethnic Russians from the Russian Federation, who now coexist with Caucasian groups and participate in the fight against the Russian invader alongside them. Although most of them have never violently mobilized in Russia—the exceptions being far-right groups like Legion “Svoboda Rossii” and Russkii Dobrovol'cheskii Korpus (RDK), which has been active in Ukraine since 2014 and gained public attention following its appearance on Russian soil during military operations in the Bryansk and Belgorod regions—the war in Ukraine has created the conditions to engage in more active anti-colonial discourse and partisan activities. The Ukrainian state has assisted these groups by procuring visas for activists, providing them with logistical support, and giving them the resources to organize. Although most volunteers could not join the Ukrainian armed forces for administrative and security reasons, they have engaged in sabotage within Russia and carried out mobilization activities as well as networking on Ukrainian soil.

Unlike Chechen and Georgian groups, some groups have organized loosely against a common enemy, welcoming any Russian citizens willing to fight against the current Russian administration. For example, Grazhdanskii Sovet (GS) has assembled individuals from Dagestan, Siberia, Tatarstan, the Russian Far East, and other regions willing to fight against the Putin regime. Many of them are currently training in Ukraine with the goal of returning to Russia to confront the Russian army. One can observe different groups networking and establishing working relationships with each other (among them the Crimea battalion and Grazhdanskii Sovet), as well as with the Security Service of Ukraine and the military intelligence. These groups represent a clear breakthrough in the resistance against Russia and a concrete threat to the Russian Federation due to the support they receive from Ukraine. However, just like Caucasian foreign fighters, one of their main challenges is maintaining cohesion between individuals and groups who often have different political agendas.

Multinational political and insurgent organizations have shown themselves to be volatile in other historical contexts. In the 1990s, the Confederation of Moun-

tain Peoples of the Caucasus sought to unite politically Abkhazians, Circassians, and Chechens, among others, under the leadership of Musa Shanibov. The Confederation played an important role in the 1992–93 Abkhaz war but was subsequently weakened dramatically by infighting between the various factions and ethnic groups. The Caucasus Emirate, a terrorist organization aimed at uniting Muslims in the North Caucasus, also fell victim to internal feuds between the different ethnic groups and factions within it, leading to a schism between the organization and supporters of the Islamic State. Furthermore, the North Caucasus insurgency has struggled for years to recruit fighters outside the North Caucasus, as well as to establish military fronts in the Ural and the Volga regions. Despite being part of the Caucasus Emirate's strategic plan, its expansion of its militant activities to Central Russia has never materialized. Given all those examples, one should be careful not to assume that a multiethnic insurgent force can automatically maintain a strong level of organizational cohesion against Russian military forces. Although they represent a threat for Russia, the risk should not be overstated. These armed groups are comprised of at most a few thousand fighters, a fraction of the more than 200,000 soldiers in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Thus, they represent a military threat not in the conventional sense—on the battlefield—but due to their ability to use occasional raids and insurgent tactics on Russian territory to force the general staff of the Russian armed forces to remove troops from the front. As in southern Ukraine in late 2022, a well-organized insurgency can wreak havoc behind enemy lines and complicate military operations, including deployment and logistics. These armed groups also represent a political threat, as bringing the war home will directly affect how Russian citizens understand the war in Ukraine and will increasingly challenge Moscow's grip on the war narrative.

Bringing the Fight Back to Russia: Western Russia over the North Caucasus

In addition to the internal cohesion problem, foreign fighters face a series of additional challenges in their efforts to bring the fight back to Russia. The topic of returnees and the obstacles they face to returning to Russia has been discussed at length with regard to Syria, Iraq, and the Islamic State. Even in a favorable geopolitical context and amid the potential collapse of the Russian army in Ukraine, getting from Ukraine to the North Caucasus is an operational and geographical nightmare. It involves traveling to Georgia or Azerbaijan with military equipment, crossing the difficult terrain of the Caucasus mountains, and setting up a whole new insurgent organization. If such an option was the only one for insurgents fighting against Russian forces

in the early 2000s, the war in Ukraine has expanded their tactical options. Recent Ukrainian and far-right nationalist attacks in the Bryansk, Kursk, and Belgorod regions have shown that most fighters will choose to launch attacks from Ukrainian territory. Postulating that an insurgency is most likely to develop in the North Caucasus rather than the Bryansk-Kursk-Belgorod axis mistakenly focuses on social grievances rather than looking at opportunity and feasibility. Access to Ukraine territory as a haven and the porosity of the Russian-Ukrainian border, much of which is covered by dense forests, compared to the Caucasus mountains support the idea that Caucasian fighters will opt for logistical ease rather than focusing on the liberation of a particular region. In other words, the rise of acute political and social grievances in the North Caucasus cannot be used to predict the risk of political violence in the region.

About the Author

Jean-François Ratelle is an affiliated researcher and professor with the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa.

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Although some Chechen fighters might opt to travel through the Pankisi region and return to Chechnya, the bulk of the resistance will focus on the Bryansk-Kursk-Belgorod axis until a peace treaty is signed between Kyiv and Moscow. Only in that context might the North Caucasus receive an outflow of foreign fighters seeking to bring the fight back to Russia. In light of the infighting between groups and their lack of a cohesive ideology, it appears doubtful that the North Caucasus will spark the disintegration of the Russian Federation and act as a catalyst for the mobilization of non-Russian ethnic minorities. Although unrest cannot be ruled out—as underlined by sporadic insurgent attacks—one should be wary of labeling the region as the future epicenter of a national uprising. As the dissolution of the Soviet Union showed, revolutions and mass movements often start where they are least expected.