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# The Chechen Kadyrovtsy's Coercive Violence in Ukraine

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**ABSTRACT:** Russia pioneered exploiting civilian inequalities to maximize military effectiveness in Chechnya, contributing to the Kadyrovtsy blocking detachments observed in Ukraine. Kadyrovtsy, pro-Russian Chechens, are drawn from a unique political order enabling this specialized military role. Military inequality literature typically ignores how minority-ethnic forces often serve in specialized combat roles. Understanding the Chechen Wars, the Kadyrov regime, and living standards in Russia helps explain these minority-ethnic blocking detachments in Ukraine. Analysis of this vital section of Putin's regime offers actionable recommendations for Western actors to undermine Russian military efforts and identifies the potential risks of those actions.

**Keywords:** Chechnya, Russia, Kadyrov, military inequality theory, blocking detachments

**M**ultiple sources have corroborated pro-Russian Chechen forces called Kadyrovtsy deploying coercive fratricidal violence in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon describes soldiers organized into blocking detachments or anti-retreat forces that discipline their comrades to maintain military order.<sup>2</sup> Kadyrovtsy are documented using physical discipline, torture, and executions against unmotivated or retreating Russian forces. Coercive violence in any context is worthy of analysis as a tactic of desperate commanders who regard their troops as expendable.<sup>3</sup> Today's Kadyrovtsy, however, break significantly with existing coercive violence literature. Typically, core ethnic troops coerce disadvantaged and expendable minority ethnic troops, whereas Kadyrovtsy are from Russia's Chechen population.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the Chechen conflict clarifies this reversal and why the Kadyrovtsy play this unique role in Russia's military.

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1. Mia Jankowicz, "Ukraine Claims Ramzan Kadyrov's Troops Killed 3 Russian Troops Who No Longer Wanted to Fight," *Business Insider* (website), April 21, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-says-kadyrov-troops-killed-russia-soldiers-refuse-fight-2022-4>.

2. Jason Lyall and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Fratricidal Coercion in Modern War," *Social Science Research Network* (website), November 4, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3956923>.

3. Lyall and Zhukov, "Fratricidal Coercion."

4. Jason Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (February 2010): 1–20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27798537>.

More generally, the Ukraine conflict has created an urgency to understand how Russia deploys its military forces to pursue the political ends of war. The Chechen Wars, as the largest post-Soviet conflict besides Ukraine, provide the most analogous comparison. In Chechnya, Russian military and political strategies evolved to create an effective collaborator regime by exploiting ethnic divisions. The pro-Russian Kadyrov dictatorship and its military forces, the Kadyrovtsy (meaning “followers of Kadyrov”), provided effective and expendable fighters essential to Russia achieving its political goals.<sup>5</sup> The complex Kadyrov-Russia relationship was engineered by Vladimir Putin, including through Putin’s personal relationship with current Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Analyzing Chechnya and the Chechen Wars provides insight into how Russia’s sitting government approaches military engagements, clarifies the Kadyrovtsy’s actions in Ukraine, and enables the creation of actionable strategies to counter Russian aggression.

## Theory

Jason Lyall’s research on military inequality and its relationship to coercive violence provides an ideal theoretical framework to understand Kadyrovtsy performance. In *Divided Armies*, Lyall examines the relationship between civilian ethnic divisions and military specialization, arguing that existing civilian inequalities can create privileged core ethnic troops and contrasting minority ethnic troops who experience greater discrimination and exploitation. The latter receives worse training and equipment, is classified as more expendable by commanders, and demonstrates less motivation to fight for their oppressors.<sup>6</sup> Lyall establishes that these exploited minority ethnic forces generally perform worse and experience more coercive violence than core ethnic forces. Lyall’s research has its critics, but it is consistent with existing research on divisions and discrimination in militaries.<sup>7</sup>

Lyall’s work especially focuses on coercive violence, in this context referring to the application of fratricidal violence to motivate or punish underperforming allied units. Coercive violence has a strong history in Russia, including blocking detachments authorized to execute retreating units during World War II.<sup>8</sup> Fratricidal violence is typically employed in desperate circumstances when commanders lack alternative solutions to motivate troops, with blocking detachments almost invariably consisting

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5. Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2005).

6. Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), <https://doi-org.usawc.idm.oclc.org/10.2307/j.ctvn96h88>.

7. Douglas M. Gibler and Steven V. Miller, “An Appraisal of Project Mars and the *Divided Armies* Argument,” *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (June 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac011>.

8. Lyall and Zhukov, “Fratricidal Coercion.”

of trusted core ethnic forces.<sup>9</sup> The value commanders place on their troops impacts their willingness to deploy coercive violence, which contributes to minority ethnic troops disproportionately experiencing coercive violence.<sup>10</sup> These historical trends are challenged by minority ethnic Kadyrovtsy applying coercive violence against ethnic Russian troops in Ukraine.

## Chechnya and the Kadyrovtsy

The contemporary Russo-Chechen relationship demonstrates core and minority ethnic inequality as described by Lyall, and these cultural and material differences impact Kadyrovtsy military deployments. Unlike Russia, Chechen society is Islamic and tribal, with *teip* (clan) values and a traditional code of ethics reinforcing family-tribal loyalty.<sup>11</sup> These values influence warrior traditions, including *ch'ir* (blood feud), which obliges clansmen to avenge wronged members.<sup>12</sup> Historically, Russia has exploited these cultural differences to demonize Chechens as radical Islamic warriors, contributing to genocidal violence, which contribute to today's uneasy Russo-Chechen relationship.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent Russo-Chechen conflict began with the Soviet Union's collapse. Chechnya declared independence from Russia, leading to the First Chechen War (1994–96) and the Second Chechen War (1999–2009/disputed), which ultimately reestablished Russian Federation control.<sup>14</sup> These conflicts featured conventional Russian victories followed by Chechen insurgencies, where Russian-led counterinsurgency efforts were ineffective.<sup>15</sup> Russia adjusted by working closely with collaborators in the Second Chechen War, installing the Kadyrov family to control Chechnya and manage the insurgency.<sup>16</sup> The wars deeply affected Chechen society, killing hundreds of thousands, destroying living standards, and contributing to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. This fundamentalist movement, commonly called Wahhabism, would radicalize the separatist movement and link

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9. Lyall and Zhukov, "Fratricidal Coercion."

10. Lyall, *Divided Armies*.

11. Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Sufism in Chechnya: Its Influence on Contemporary Society," in *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 220–35.

12. Mikhail Roshchin, "Kidnapping and Hostage Taking between the Two Chechen Wars (1997–1999)," in *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 118–32.

13. John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 101–116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993766>.

14. Elina Driscoll, "Insurgency in the North Caucasus: Lessons of the First Chechen War," *Small Wars Journal* (website), July 26, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/insurgency-north-caucasus-lessons-first-chechen-war>.

15. Driscoll, "Insurgency in the North Caucasus."

16. Svante E. Cornell, "The War against Terrorism and the Conflict in Chechnya: A Case for Distinction," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 27, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2003): 167–84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45289246>.

Chechnya with terrorism.<sup>17</sup> The threat of extremism played an important role in dividing Chechnya politically, helping the Kadyrov family rise to power, and serving Russian interests.

The Kadyrov family belongs to *teip* Benoy, one of the largest in Chechnya, providing them significant clan-based political support.<sup>18</sup> In the First Chechen War, Akhmad Kadyrov was an anti-Russian Chechen warlord. During the interwar period, Akhmad served as Chechnya's grand mufti and was an outspoken opponent of Wahhabism, making him a well-known, respected, and relatively moderate religious and military leader.<sup>19</sup> Kadyrov's opposition to Chechnya's growing Wahhabi politics contributed to his criticisms of independent Chechnya, influencing his 1999 defection to Russia with other disaffected warlords. Russia then selected Akhmad Kadyrov to lead its pro-Russian Chechen government, as he had both the political and material means for the role. Installing the Kadyrovs meant the Kadyrovtsy could manage the conflict and form a reintegrated Chechen government to achieve Russia's political war goals.<sup>20</sup>

After Akhmad's 2004 assassination, his son Ramzan Kadyrov inherited command of the Kadyrovtsy. With Putin's support and Kadyrovtsy intimidation, Ramzan became Chechnya's leader by 2007 and remains in command today.<sup>21</sup> Despite Putin's personal relationship with Ramzan, Chechnya maintains a unique position in Russia, exercising unique autonomy and even defying Federation laws. This autonomy extends to the Kadyrovtsy, who are primarily loyal to the Kadyrov family, not the Russian state.<sup>22</sup> Kadyrov's Chechnya ranked among the Federation's poorest provinces and the world's most repressive and corrupt regimes, far worse than Russia individually.<sup>23</sup> Rule of law is extremely limited as policing revolves around Kadyrovtsy torture and reprisals, despite the conflict's official end.<sup>24</sup> To appeal to nationalist and religious supporters,

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17. Miriam Lanskoj, "Daghestan and Chechnya: The Wahhabi Challenge to the State," *SAIS Review (1989–2003)* 22, no. 2 (Summer–Fall 2002): 167–92, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26996418>.

18. Ekaterina Sokirianskaya, "State and Violence in Chechnya (1997–1999)," in *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 93–117.

19. Emil Souleimanov, "An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: Kadyrovtsy and Russia's Policy of Chechenization," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2015): 91–114, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2014.900976>.

20. Nicolas Werth, "The 'Chechen Problem': Handling an Awkward Legacy, 1918–1958," *Contemporary European History* 15, no. 3 (August 2006): 347–66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20081316>; and Cornell, "War against Terrorism."

21. John Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov's 'Illiberal' Peace in Chechnya," *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 133–51.

22. Liz Fuller, "Kadyrov's Chechnya Appears Exempt from Russian Funding Cuts," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (website), July 30, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-kadyrov-chechnya-exempt-funding-cuts/28648698.html>.

23. Freedom House, *Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies, 2009* (report, Washington, DC, and New York: Freedom House 2009), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline\\_images/WoW2009.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/WoW2009.pdf).

24. Aldamova, "Chechens Suffer Torture Hell."

Kadyrov ignores Federation laws governing conscription and state secularism.<sup>25</sup> Kadyrovtsy intimidate and assassinate regime critics abroad, especially targeting the Chechen diaspora in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Although Kadyrov's political and military structures defy Moscow, the Putin administration tolerates this dysfunctional situation because Kadyrov effectively suppresses Chechen separatism.

## The Chechen Wars

In both Chechen Wars, Russia's overwhelming advantages in numbers, weaponry, and firepower led to conventional victories but struggled to address subsequent Chechen insurgencies. In the First Chechen War, Russian leadership anticipated military action would crush disorganized resistance, but they instead faced a protracted insurgency due to significant Russian military deficiencies and active Chechen preparation for unconventional war.<sup>27</sup> To bolster its forces, the Chechen government authorized raising local militias, among them the Kadyrovtsy.<sup>28</sup> Warlord militias were augmented by local and tribal support networks.<sup>29</sup> From the beginning of both wars, Russia faced intense guerrilla resistance that hampered its advance. Importantly, Chechnya in the First Chechen War was politically united against Russia, despite internal divisions. Although Chechnya's secular nationalist government faced significant opposition, especially from Wahhabi factions, opposition dissipated to ensure Chechnya's independence.<sup>30</sup>

In both wars, Russia relied on collective civilian reprisals, specifically filtration camps and *zachistka* (cleansing) operations, which only solidified Chechen resistance.<sup>31</sup> Filtration camps separated the general population from insurgents through mass arrests and detention, while *zachistka* describes military sweeps of areas featuring or suspected to host partisans.<sup>32</sup> These tactics featured organized looting, rape, mass hostage-taking, torture,

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25. Maria Brock and Emil Edenborg, "‘You Cannot Oppress Those Who Do Not Exist’: Gay Persecution in Chechnya and the Politics of In/visibility," *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 2020): 673–700, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/glq/article/26/4/673/166742/You-Cannot-Oppress-Those-Who-Do-Not-Exist-Gay>.

26. Zhalavdi Geriev, "Revenge without Borders: How the Kadyrov Regime Makes Its Social Media Critics Disappear," openDemocracy (website), October 22, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/chechnya-social-media-critics-persecution/>.

27. Dale R. Herspring, "The Russian Military: Three Years On," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 1995): 163–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45301927>.

28. Stephen Shenfield, "Chechnya at a Turning Point," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 63–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24590175>.

29. Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (London: Pan Original, 1997).

30. Dianne Leigh Sumner, "Success of Terrorism in War: The Case of Chechnya," in *Chechnya Revisited*, ed. Yu. K. Nikolaev (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, 2004).

31. Yuri M. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency in a Non-Democratic State: The Russian Example," in *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn (New York: Routledge, 2012), 286–300.

32. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency."

housing destruction, and reprisal killings.<sup>33</sup> Russian counterinsurgency policy, mirroring methods used by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, was for civilian repression to disincentivize popular support for insurgents.<sup>34</sup>

Violence against civilians, however, risks encouraging resistance if civilian mistreatment motivates insurgent support and recruitment.<sup>35</sup> In both wars, Russia failed to target civilian insurgent support networks selectively, causing cycles of Chechen insurgent action and Russian reprisals.<sup>36</sup> There was effectively no Chechen language fluency in Russian forces, and troops were ignorant, hostile, or prejudiced against Chechnya's religious and cultural organizations—making reprisals indiscriminate. Russian action has been characterized as genocidal, killing approximately one in four Chechens between 1994 and 2005.<sup>37</sup> Post-conflict studies indicate more Chechens—bolstered by *teip* honor and *ch'ir*—were motivated to fight by Russian reprisals than by the cause of independence itself.<sup>38</sup> Indiscriminate Russian actions motivated insurgent growth instead of intimidating the population.

The First Chechen War ended due to opposition by the Russian public, though Russia still possessed ample military forces.<sup>39</sup> Mid-1990s Russian media freedom increased public demoralization, as it publicized casualties, reported on Russian-conducted atrocities, and contradicted official government narratives of progress.<sup>40</sup> The then Russian president Boris Yeltsin's popularity dropped below 10 percent, largely due to the Chechen crisis, and in 1996, insurgents recaptured Chechnya's capital, Grozny.<sup>41</sup> This final humiliation and absence of a political mandate for war motivated Russia's subsequent withdrawal agreement.

In the Second Chechen War, Russia's strategy relied on Kadyrovtsy collaborator fighters, enabling the "Chechenization" or indigenization of the war.<sup>42</sup> Several changes within Russia and Chechnya allowed for this approach. Shortly after the Second Chechen War began in August

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33. Amandine Regamey, "Rereading Human Rights Reports: Material Violence in Chechnya, 1999–2001," *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 201–19.

34. Joss Meakins, "The Other Side of the COIN: The Russians in Chechnya," *Small Wars Journal* (website), January 13, 2017, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-other-side-of-the-coin-the-russians-in-chechnya>.

35. Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents?"

36. Aglaya Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin: A Critical Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2014), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780203559390/russia-security-policy-putin-aglaya-snetkov>.

37. Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*.

38. Meakins, "Russians in Chechnya."

39. Ben Fowkes, "Introduction," in *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis – Essays on Russo–Chechen Relations*, ed. Ben Fowkes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 1–24.

40. Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*.

41. Olga Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1289.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1289.html).

42. Souleimanov, "Ethnography of Counterinsurgency."

1999, Yeltsin resigned, and Putin became Russia's leader. Initially unproven, Putin's pledge to handle Russia's Caucasian problems helped secure his position.<sup>43</sup> Putin instituted a wartime media blackout, limiting the war's impact on public support.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, interwar Chechnya was a failed state featuring armed internal conflict.<sup>45</sup> This environment encouraged dissatisfied warlords to collaborate with Russia as they became Chechnya's new ruling class and enjoyed Russian support in their disputes. Russia, in return, received local partners to combat the Chechen insurgency. In June 2000, Akhmad Kadyrov was appointed leader of Chechnya, and his Kadyrovtsy and other collaborator forces then joined the fight against separatists.<sup>46</sup>

As Russia faced a pronounced lack of human intelligence, Chechen collaborators, including the Kadyrovtsy, served as police and military auxiliaries to the Russian Army. Their leading roles as translators and guides helped Russia avoid attacks, located insurgent strongholds, and increased overall counterinsurgency effectiveness.<sup>47</sup> Both Russian-led and Kadyrovtsy-led counterinsurgency tactics featured similar *zachistka* sweeps and collective punishments methods.<sup>48</sup> The Kadyrovtsy, however, spoke Chechen, understood cultural dynamics, and could appeal to local allies for intelligence and material aid. The Kadyrovtsy served as a force multiplier in counterinsurgency operations that directed civilian intimidation productively, accurately targeting insurgent supporters and families rather than the general population.<sup>49</sup>

In 2001, Russia officially adopted a policy of Chechenization, explicitly committing to withdrawing troops and making Chechens responsible for their governance and security.<sup>50</sup> By this stage, Kadyrov rule through Kadyrovtsy military power was sufficient for withdrawals not to destabilize Chechnya. Removing Federation troops directly addressed Russia's public support problem, as casualties became contained to ethnic Chechens in Chechnya rather than uniformed majority ethnic Russians from across the Federation. Until 2004, Kadyrovtsy formations were not part of official Russian units,

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43. Dasha Nicolson, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters from the North Caucasus: Understanding Islamic State Influence in the Region," *Connections* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 69–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26867927>.

44. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency."

45. Vladimir Shlapentokh, "The Terrorist Basayev as a Major Political Actor in Russia," *World Affairs* 167, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 139–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672721>.

46. Mark Kramer, "Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian-Chechen Conflict," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 2 (March 2005): 209–90.

47. Kramer, "Guerrilla Warfare."

48. Lyall, "Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents?."

49. Zhukov, "Counterinsurgency."

50. Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*.



and many paramilitary fighters remain unofficial to this day.<sup>51</sup> This quasi-official status aided Russia's ability to understate conflict casualties, as these deaths were easily concealed and rarely investigated.

Chechenization has been described as a success in "normalization," that is, making conflict palatable to a war-adverse public.<sup>52</sup> Politically, Chechenization transformed the conflict from a military occupation into civilian policing and counterterrorism, technically equivalent to anywhere else in the Federation. Militarily, Kadyrovtsy action defeated a population-centric insurgency with the effective deployment of violence to disincentivize civilian insurgent support.<sup>53</sup> When Chechnya's secular government-in-exile disbanded in 2007, the insurgency became absorbed by jihadists, who later become Daesh affiliates, further undermining civilian sympathy for insurgents.<sup>54</sup>

While 2009 is often cited as the conflict's end date, certain jihadi factions were not defeated until 2017. Low-level violence and Kadyrovtsy brutality continue today, though this is officially classified as civil unrest and counterterrorism.<sup>55</sup> Combined with media censorship in Chechnya, Russia's narrative of progress and normalization matched low official casualties and declining conflict incidents. There is no large-scale Russian public outcry against violence contained to an ethnic-minority provincial backwater, especially since Kadyrov rule replaced open warfare.

## Ukraine

Russia's goals and challenges in Ukraine bear strong similarities to those of the Chechen conflict. In Ukraine, Russia claims to fight for the defense of co-ethnics and control of rightful or historical territory. Russia's major concern has been maintaining popular support, hence its classification of the conflict as a "special military operation" and its limitation troop deployments.<sup>56</sup> To help address these challenges, Kadyrovtsy have been present in Ukraine since 2014.<sup>57</sup> Since February 2022, Kadyrovtsy deployed in Ukraine have acted as blocking detachments against Russian forces and those of the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR-LPR).

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51. Darrell Slider, "Putin's 'Southern Strategy': Dmitry Kozak and the Dilemmas of Recentralization," *Journal of Post Soviet Affairs* 24, no. 2 (2008): 177–91, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2747/1060-586X.24.2.177>.

52. Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*.

53. Souleimanov, "Ethnography of Counterinsurgency."

54. Julie Wilhelmsen, "Exclusion and Inclusion: The Core of Chechen Mobilization to Jihad," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 2 (April 2020): 27–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26910405>.

55. Nicolson, "Foreign Terrorist Fighters."

56. Karolina Hird et al., *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 28* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, September 28, 2022), <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-28>.

57. Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2019).

Allegedly, the Kadyrovtsy have beaten and executed DPR-LPR and Russian Army troops retreating or deserting in response to military setbacks in Ukraine.<sup>58</sup> That Russians (ethnic core) are among the Kadyrovtsy's (ethnic minority) victims is a reversal of military inequality theory's assumptions.

The victims of Kadyrovtsy coercive violence in Ukraine are Russian Army recruits or separatist militiamen with the lowest levels of training, arming, and motivation.<sup>59</sup> Separatist mass conscription since February 2022 has affected all parts of the regional population, pressing both ethnic Russians and ethnic Ukrainians into separatist service.<sup>60</sup> Evidence indicates the DPR-LPR militaries struggle to manage this significant increase in numbers, worsening pre-2022 logistical strains.<sup>61</sup> The recent DPR-LPR conscripts, with minimal training, poor equipment, and questionable loyalty, unsurprisingly exhibit poor combat performance. As DPR-LPR forces are drawn from an unrecognized separatist government in Ukraine, separatist losses easily concealed and minimally affect Russian war support relative to Federation troop deaths. Before 2022, DPR-LPR forces served as the conflict's primary combatants and were essential to Russia's war justification of liberating co-ethnics. Since 2022, Donbas collaborators are no longer needed, as the Russian Army manages combat and as cultural and linguistic similarities mean local collaborators are not needed, as in Chechnya. These facts incentivize Russia to use separatist forces disposably, despite Russia's stated aim to protect Donbas co-ethnics.

The other element of Russian forces in Ukraine, the Russian Army, does not reflect the Russian population. It disproportionately includes poor and rural ethnic Russians and Federation minorities from impoverished backgrounds similar to Chechnya.<sup>62</sup> The poorest Russian provinces source a disproportionate number of conscripts in Ukraine, providing up to six times their per capita share of recruits.<sup>63</sup> This heavy burden has contributed to protests and draft riots across Russia's North Caucasus and Far East regions.<sup>64</sup> Other literature establishes how brutal hazing (*dedovshchina*), corrupt officers, and low pay contribute

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58. Special Operations Forces Report (SOFREP), *Chechen "Kadyrovtsy" Unit in Bucha Killed Wounded Russian Soldiers along with Civilians*, Special Operations Forces Report, May 2, 2022, <https://sofrep.com/news/chechen-kadyrovtsy-unit-in-bucha-killed-wounded-russian-soldiers-along-with-civilians/>.

59. Hird, *Russian Offensive Campaign* (2022).

60. Hird, *Russian Offensive Campaign* (2022).

61. Daniel Flynn, ed., "Insight: Conscripts Sent to Fight by Pro-Russia Donbas Get Little Training, Old Rifles, Poor Supplies," Reuters (website), April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/conscripts-sent-fight-by-pro-russia-donbas-get-little-training-old-rifles-poor-2022-04-04/>.

62. Michael Lokshin and Ruslan Yemtsov, *Who Bears the Cost of Russia's Military Draft?*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3547 (research report, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02490>.

63. Sonya Savina and Katya Bonch-Osmolovskaya, *Kakie regiony otdali bolshe vsego muzhchin na voynu* [Which Regions Gave the Most Men to the War], trans. from Russian, ed. Alesya Marakhovskaya, *iStories* [Important Stories] (website), October 5, 2022, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/stories/2022/10/05/kakie-regiony-otdali-bolshe-vsego-muzhchin-na-voynu/index.html>.

64. Savina and Bonch-Osmolovskaya, *Kakie regiony*.

to low reenlistment rates.<sup>65</sup> Reforms have sought to improve these issues, but military corruption remains endemic.<sup>66</sup> While military service offers material benefits and advancement to poor Russians, including significant enlistment bonuses since 2022, these benefits must be contextualized with low civilian living standards.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Russian prisoners have been released in exchange for service in Ukraine.<sup>68</sup> Recruits from underprivileged populations, in Russia, and in general, are more likely to be treated as expendable by their military leaders.

Evidence indicates Russia's leadership treats such forces as expendable. The June 2023 Kakhovka Dam explosion—presumably caused by Russia—flooded Russian positions, caused significant casualties, and serves as an extreme example of Russian commanders' belief in troop expendability.<sup>69</sup> This attitude, however, is reflected primarily toward low-quality Russian forces, particularly separatists, who have been deployed in high-casualty probing attacks and initial assault roles.<sup>70</sup> There are undoubtedly high-quality Russian forces that are well-trained, motivated, and capable in combat. Russia also possesses unreliable and unmotivated troops; these troops are disproportionately represented by underserved civilians, especially from minority ethnic backgrounds. Kadyrovtsy coercive violence has only been reported to target low-quality DPR-LPR and Russian Army troops who refuse to attack or retreat, rather than Russia's professional contract soldiers who reliably follow orders.<sup>71</sup>

Comparatively, the Kadyrovtsy are an essential military force to Russia, both for their domestic capabilities in Chechnya and for their blocking detachment abilities in Ukraine. The Kadyrovtsy are critical to Russian control in Chechnya, incentivizing Russia to minimize their losses. Additionally, Chechnya's political environment makes the Kadyrovtsy ideal

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65. Margarete Klein, "Military Implications of the Georgia War: Russian Armed Forces in Need of Reform," SWP Research Paper, in *The Caucasian Crisis: International Perceptions and Policy Implications for Germany and Europe* ed. Hans-Hennings Schröder, trans. Deborah Bowen (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2008), 12–18, [http://www.swp-berlin.org/common/get\\_document.php?asset\\_id=5524](http://www.swp-berlin.org/common/get_document.php?asset_id=5524).

66. Barndollar, "Best or Worst of Both Worlds?"

67. Todd Prince, "Sweetening a Bitter Pill: Russia Offers Debt Breaks, Other Benefits to Entice Draftees," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (website), September 28, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-mobilization-incentives-draft-ukraine-war/32056473.html>.

68. Guy Falconbridge, ed., "Russia's Wagner Mercenaries Halt Prisoner Recruitment Campaign – Prigozhin," Reuters (website), February 9, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-wagner-mercenaries-halt-prisoner-recruitment-campaign-founder-prigozhin-2023-02-09/>.

69. Karolina Hird et al., *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 6, 2023* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, June 6, 2023), <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-6-2023>.

70. Stanislav Kibalnyk, "Donbas Youth Exploited by Russia in War against Ukraine," Geneva Solutions (website), May 18, 2022, <https://genevasolutions.news/ukraine-stories/donbas-youth-exploited-by-russia-in-war-against-ukraine>.

71. SOFREP, *Chechen "Kadyrovtsy" Unit*.

blocking detachments. Chechnya is relatively isolated from the rest of Russian society.<sup>72</sup> Kadyrovtsy veterans will return to Chechnya after Ukraine, where lack of interaction with the troops they brutalized, plus the Kadyrov regime's power, protects them from reprisals. Russian soldiers in a blocking detachment would not enjoy similar post-conflict protection, making them potentially less willing to apply coercive violence. Kadyrovtsy are already experienced in using coercive discipline in their ranks, and Russo-Chechen enmity reduces reluctance to apply this violence.<sup>73</sup> The Putin regime's deployment of Kadyrovtsy as blocking detachments is logical, as these Chechens are reliable and experienced users of coercive violence. For these reasons, ethnic minority Kadyrovtsy are deployed in low-casualty blocking detachments roles despite military inequality theory's assumptions about minority ethnic troops.

As an authoritarian state, Russia may not desire reforms for combat effectiveness, preferring a divided but loyal military.<sup>74</sup> Additional strategies for this control include domestic repression, widespread media manipulation, and censorship to maintain war support, as seen before in Chechnya. Regardless of the outcome in Ukraine, Russia's strategy shows a willingness to deploy naked violence against less-than-loyal troops and to repress domestic opponents, an intensification of policies used while fighting in Chechnya. The future of Putin's regime likely depends on this continued repression. Intensifying domestic repression may motivate further ethnic separatism in the Federation's minority regions, promoting more secession wars or the empowerment of local strongmen in the style of Kadyrov.

Russia has not fielded a united force in Ukraine, deploying Russian Army units alongside Kadyrovtsy, DPR-LPR separatists, and Wagner Group mercenaries. There is an observable hierarchy within these forces, designated into expendable and nonexpendable categories. The former group, including separatists, ex-convicts, mercenaries, and fresh conscripts, has low levels of training and equipment and is used for probing attacks and first-wave assaults on Ukrainian positions.<sup>75</sup> The nonexpendable troops, including professional contract soldiers, Airborne Forces (VDV), Spetsnaz units, and other well-armed and competent elements, then attack softened Ukrainian positions with intelligence on exploitable weaknesses. As expendable troops are aware of their high-casualty role, Kadyrovtsy blocking detachments are essential to ensuring their motivation.<sup>76</sup>

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72. Werth, "The 'Chechen Problem.'"

73. Aldamova, "Chechens Suffer Torture Hell."

74. Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt20d89pv>.

75. Olivia Yanchik, "Human Wave Tactics Are Demoralizing the Russian Army in Ukraine," *Ukraine Alert* (blog), Atlantic Council (website), April 8, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/human-wave-tactics-are-demoralizing-the-russian-army-in-ukraine/>.

76. SOFREP, *Chechen "Kadyrovtsy" Unit*.

Russia maximizes battlefield effectiveness by deploying poor-quality troops in high-casualty roles to preserve its competent forces.

The divisions in Russia's forces extend to Russia's commanders. Additionally, to Kadyrov, Wagner Group owner Yevgeny Prigozhin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov, separatist commanders, and other military figures have competed to offset blame for Russian military failures. The noted Prigozhin-Shoigu feud culminated in the June 2023 Wagner Group rebellion. Kadyrov has increasingly praised Putin's war direction and reiterated this support during the rebellion.<sup>77</sup> Without Prigozhin—an important Putin lieutenant—Kadyrov's relative importance and influence will increase. Wagner, as a private military contractor, offered Russia plausible deniability for international military actions. With Wagner's elimination, unofficial Kadyrovtsy formations will likely fill this gap. Kadyrovtsy have previously been documented in such quasi-official deployments in Syria supporting the Assad regime and in Ukraine before 2022.<sup>78</sup>

### Strategic Proposals

Observed Russian infighting and military shortcomings offer opportunities for Western actors. Disaffected commanders and fighters, particularly ex-Wagner members, can be enticed to defect with the correct offer of material benefits, personal protection, and amnesties for possible war crimes. Russian defectors would add to Ukrainian strength and offer important military intelligence. Attritional warfare is not an optimal Ukrainian strategy given Russia's numerical advantages. As expendable Russian troops already exhibit severe morale problems, offering amnesties and evacuation from combat zones is a viable strategy to cause mass Russian desertions. Propaganda reinforcing poor living conditions and high casualties would be extremely effective. Such strategies conserve Ukrainian military resources for more determined Russian units, such as the Kadyrovtsy. Forcing Kadyrovtsy desertions is more challenging. Should Kadyrov lose power, Kadyrovtsy fighters would lose state protection and face reprisals from the Chechen people, reinforcing fighter loyalty to the political order that protects them.<sup>79</sup>

The Kadyrovtsy, as a crucial pillar of the Putin regime, must be destroyed as a military force. Deliberately targeting these essential Russian military elements is a maximally effective use of Ukrainian force. Ukrainian missile and drone attacks, including those going into Russia,

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77. Hird, *Russian Offensive* (2023).

78. Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*.

79. Meakins, "Russians in Chechnya."

already pursue the high-value infrastructure and personnel targets that direct the Russian military.<sup>80</sup> Targeting Kadyrovtsy units and commanders in Ukraine and military installations in Chechnya is an actionable extension of this policy. Russian air defenses are unlikely to focus on Chechnya relative to major population zones.

Western support for a Kadyrov alternative in Chechnya would open a second front against Russia, diverting resources from Ukraine. In 2022, Ukraine recognized Chechnya as a state occupied by Russia.<sup>81</sup> The previous failure of Chechen independence is related in large part to its inability to gain recognition, thus, Western states should join in recognizing a secular, independent Chechnya. Anti-Russia Chechens have been fighting with Ukraine since 2014. Existing military aid to Ukraine should be extended to these groups. Battlefield experience would contribute to the legitimacy of the government-in-exile these Chechens represent. The significant Chechen diaspora, which emerged primarily from the two Chechen Wars, is a source of support and manpower for these efforts.<sup>82</sup> However, they generally experience lower living standards typical of other refugees in Western states and live in fear of Kadyrovtsy reprisal violence.<sup>83</sup> Eliminating Russian and Kadyrovtsy agents abroad is essential to ensuring the Chechen diaspora's security. The Ukrainian refugee crisis has already brought the importance of refugee support into focus, and extending this support to exiled Chechens would improve their pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian orientation.

Potentially, such groups could be inserted into Chechnya to reignite the anti-Russia insurgency, similar to the May 2023 Belgorod incursion.<sup>84</sup> The situation in Chechnya, however, is unlike Belgorod, and such an operation is not currently feasible. Chechnya is far from the front, there is not an organized resistance for them to reinforce, and fighters living aboard for many years would struggle to build a popular insurgency. Removing Kadyrov requires the destruction of Kadyrovtsy fighting power, which is best achieved in Ukraine through high-value target hunting.

Regions of Russia similar to Chechnya could be targeted for equivalent secessionist support. North Caucasus regions populated by Islamic non-Russians, which have previously exhibited armed separatist movements, may prove the most responsive.<sup>85</sup> There are, however, significant risks attached to supporting Russian separatists. Russia would interpret such support as an existential threat, and rather

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80. Hird, *Russian Offensive* (2023).

81. Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Ukrainian Lawmakers Recognize Independence of Chechen Republic of Ichkeria," Warsaw Institute (website), November 1, 2022, <https://warsawinstitute.org/ukrainian-lawmakers-recognize-independence-of-chechen-republic-of-ichkeria/>.

82. Alice Szczepanikova, "Chechen Refugees in Europe: How Three Generations of Women Settle in Exile," in *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne Le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 257–72.

83. Szczepanikova, "Chechen Refugees."

84. Hird, *Russian Offensive* (2023).

85. Driscoll, "Insurgency in the North Caucasus."

than inspire separatism, aid to separatists could rally government support. Russian diplomatic condemnation is certain. Russian proxy support in Western military peripheries is possible but unlikely for the duration of the Ukraine War. Even if these separatist movements achieve independence, there is no guarantee they would be Western-aligned. Russia today exerts significant influence in former Soviet Central Asia. Although Russian influence in Central Asia has declined due to Ukraine, there is now growing Chinese influence rather than Western orientation in this region.<sup>86</sup>

Blowback, meaning explicitly negative unintended consequences from covert operations, is a further risk of supporting Russian separatists. Western support for the Afghan mujahideen is an analogous example. Military aid was provided to anti-Soviet forces, but no economic aid was provided to rebuild after Soviet withdrawal, creating an environment for the Taliban's rise and the war on terrorism.<sup>87</sup> Devastated interwar Chechnya followed a similar path, descending into warlordism and extremism and falling to renewed Russian aggression. Chechnya is a deeply conservative and Islamic society like Afghanistan, with a recent history of Islamic extremism. Support for separatists, in Chechnya or elsewhere, must not stop with military aid but must extend to rebuilding economies and transitioning fighters to civilian employment. Integrating new states into Western economic and defense blocs prevents domestic deterioration and extremism, protects those states from renewed Russian aggression, and minimizes the influence of actors like China.

Essential Russian units in Ukraine, especially the Kadyrovtsy, should be eliminated immediately. Building a program to support Chechens and other Russian separatists would severely complicate Russian war efforts. However, ensuring such regions remain free, stable, and Western-oriented in the long run demands multi-decade investment and far deeper strategic analysis than this article can offer.

## Conclusions

The war in Ukraine is ongoing, and Russian strategy continues to adjust. However, the Chechen Wars offer lessons for observed Russian action and possible avenues to complicate Russian efforts. Russia today is a neo-imperial state, defined as a place where a political core dominates a periphery. For empires to rule effectively, they engage in divide-and-rule policies that pit dominated peripheries against each other. Ethnic Russians dominate cultural, economic, and political power, suppress other groups from accessing power, and deploy a divided military to expand their rule

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86. Carla Freeman, Gavin Helf, and Alison McFarland, "China Looks to Fill a Void in Central Asia," United States Institute of Peace (website), May 25, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/china-looks-fill-void-central-asia>.

87. George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

over exterior groups. This divisive neo-imperial system makes the Russian Federation susceptible to balkanization, much like the Soviet Union.

Russia's authoritarian politics, endemic corruption, and mobilization policies have created many underequipped, badly led, and poorly motivated troops, in contrast to its competent forces. Russia's problems in Ukraine are not solely due to its divided military, as the invasion strategy and troop commitments were unsuitable for a major conventional war. Addressing Russia's overall military problems requires fundamentally reforming Russia's military and society, which could take decades and could not improve the lack of planning and logistics evident in Ukraine. The simpler solution, immediately deployable in Ukraine, is to coerce poor-quality troops into battle with Kadyrovtsy blocking detachments.

The Kadyrovtsy's unique deployment and use of coercive violence must be understood within the Russo-Chechen relationship and military inequality theory. However, existing military inequality literature overestimates the core minority relationship as dichotomous. In practice, states and societies consist of multiple ethnic groups with varying levels of equality, which is reflected in a divided military. Under certain conditions, the typical core minority relationship can be reversed, as with the minority ethnic Kadyrovtsy applying coercive violence.

Future research should expand on military inequality theory and the layered complexity of core minority relationships. Historical counterexamples relevant to expanding military inequality theory include nineteenth-century ethnic partisans, the recruitment of martial races, and American Buffalo Soldiers, groups that received special armaments, privileges, command independence, or fought by specialized in-group standards. The last example featured soldiers designated as second-class citizens who were deployed to fight other ethnic groups considered to be of even lesser value, highlighting the tiered element of civilian-military divisions. These examples and the Kadyrovtsy demonstrate that a minority ethnic civilian status does not necessarily prevent specialized or elite military statuses.

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