

## Analysis

# The Role of Chechens in the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict

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## Abstract

Battalions of Chechens, accustomed to difficult mountainous terrain, have helped to ensure the victory of Russia against Georgia in the August 2008 conflict. The Chechen military engagement is likely to complicate the fragile balance of forces in the Caucasus and could have incalculable, even dramatic, consequences for Chechnya's relations with Russia.

## Consequences from the Fighting

After the end of Russia's military operations in Georgia, one can draw several conclusions: First, Georgia has lost the war against Russia and also lost its two regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia for good. Georgia is very likely to win the diplomatic war against Russia and has NATO and the West firmly on its side, for the time being in terms of strong moral support. If the prospects for Georgia becoming a NATO member remain somewhat unclear and depend not least on the outcome of the US presidential elections, Georgia can, in any case, expect strong military help from the West in the future.

Second, Russia is victorious in a war which it did not really want – this is clear by its initial hesitation to intervene after the Georgian attack on South Ossetia. At the moment, Russia is rather isolated both within the CIS and within the international community, which is threatening to sanction the country (exclusion from the G8, postponing its admission to WTO). The West has already cancelled the dialogue with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council. Yet the West has few real possibilities to pressure Russia and now that Moscow has officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the West will have to accept this fact accompli whether it likes it or not.

Third, Russia's Georgian policy, which is not led by diplomats but by those within the Kremlin who are in charge of relations between Moscow and the former Soviet republics, was largely dictated by one imperative: to prevent Tbilisi from joining NATO at any cost. This goal was achieved by making sure that the tensions within Georgia's border regions remained high – a dangerous game that has provoked the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, but might backfire on Russia with regard to the stability of its own North Caucasus.

## The Triumph of Ramzan Kadyrov

Observers who visited the breakaway republics of Georgia before the hostilities began noticed a significant increase in the presence of Chechen fighters, which

were most probably sent into Georgia with the blessing of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. The inhabitants of the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi, for example, claimed that the Chechens were responsible for a series of attacks that shook the city during the month of July, openly speaking of deliberate provocations in order to heat up the tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia.

With Russia's victory over Georgia, Ramzan Kadyrov thus also emerges on the winning side in this last Caucasus war. However, Kadyrov's victory may create problems for Chechen stability and Russian-Chechen relations.

History seems to repeat itself. Already in the early 1990s, volunteers from the North Caucasus helped the South Ossets and the Abkhaz in their conflicts with the Georgians. In the case of Abkhazia in particular, the Chechens played a large role under their then little-known commander Shamil Basayev. The same Basayev who fought very successfully on the Abkhaz side with Moscow's blessing later turned into one of Russia's greatest foes.

In the August 2008 Caucasus war, the Chechens might have again somewhat redeemed themselves in the eyes of the Kremlin by helping the Ossets and Abkhaz. Yet the same problem as in the early 1990s emerges, namely, that the Chechen forces are also increasingly less under the control of Moscow. At the same time, the Chechen republic experiences more frequent clashes among the different Chechen clans and armed groups, including clashes between the "official" forces of Kadyrov and Chechen Islamist rebels. In addition, clashes between rebel fighters and republican forces have also become more frequent in Chechnya's neighboring republics, particularly Ingushetia and Dagestan.

Not only has the situation inside Chechnya become less stable, but Kadyrov could also eventually lose support in the Kremlin. Putin has so far protected Kadyrov and the two are known to have good relations. Yet Russia's new president Dmitry Medvedev has

so far shown little sympathy for the Chechen ruler. An indication of this was the fact the Medvedev invited to his inauguration Vostok Battalion Commander Sulim Yamadaev, whom Kadyrov detests and was trying to get rid of. Also, when Putin was president, then Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov and some of Russia's generals repeatedly warned the Kremlin about Kadyrov's unpredictable nature and "devouring ambitions." Finally, the "siloviki" (members of the FSB and other security structures) have only half-heartily supported the idea of giving power to Kadyrov. During the so-called Chechenization campaign, most of the control for security in Chechnya was handed over to Kadyrov, which meant that Russia's law enforcement agencies were largely deprived not only of their power, but also of profits which they gained from illegal sales of weapons and oil.

Although there are no exact figures, it is assumed that several thousand Chechens participated in the recent Caucasus war: Even before the outbreak of the war, Chechnya contributed its fighters as border guards for Russia's peacekeeping forces along the interior Georgian borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These guards were supposed to help maintain peace and stability, yet they have in fact helped the Abkhaz expel the remaining Georgian forces from the Kodori valley in the recent conflict and took part in the fighting against the Georgians in South Ossetia. At least some of the Chechens were directly recruited by the South Ossetian and Abkhaz authorities. In particular Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh is known to have always maintained cordial relations with the Chechens and has never made a great effort to hide his sympathies for Chechen independence. In an interview with the French journal *Politique internationale* Bagapsh said "certainly, Chechnya will be independent one day, as will the other republics of the Caucasus. The time of empires is over."

There have been some reports in the Chechen press that some Chechens have also been fighting on the Georgian side, yet these remain unconfirmed and may be directed against some of Kadyrov's enemies inside Chechnya.

### Chechen-Russian Relations

Up until recently, the majority of Chechnya's military forces depended to a large degree on the Russian Ministry of the Interior, with the exception of the two battalions, Vostok and Zapad, which are under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense, as well as those armed units directly responsible to Kadyrov.

According to a senior officer with the FSB, who wishes to remain anonymous, "the Chechens in the conflicts along Russia's southern periphery are in fact partisans, not controlled by Russia's Ministry of Defense."

He expressed fear that the same might happen as in the early 1990s, when Shamil Basayev, who was initially supported by Russia, later turned against Russia. Moreover, the Russian military fears that this development destabilizes the situation throughout the Caucasus as it gives Kadyrov even more power. According to the FSB officer, it was Putin who took the risk when empowering Kadyrov, who is now increasingly taking matters into his own hands, not coordinating his actions with Moscow.

In the context of the Russian-Georgian conflict, the head of Chechen republic has managed to kill two birds with one shot. On the one hand, he sent his Chechens to Georgia's breakaway republics, thus representing his Chechens as loyal Russian citizens ready to defend their compatriots abroad (most Abkhaz and South Ossetians were given Russian citizenship over the past few years). Chechnya's involvement in the Georgian conflict has increased their reputation inside Russia. The terrorists, whom Putin until recently wanted to "drown in the toilets," have proven true patriots when they fought along the Abkhaz and Ossets and contributed to the defeat of the Georgian army, which was armed by the US. According to unconfirmed sources, Russian military especially admired the fighting moral of members of the Vostok battalion, which has suffered heavy losses (the battalion lost up to forty men, according to unconfirmed source). Official Russian media has also covered the operations of the Vostok battalion during the war and showed it in a positive light.

On the other, Kadyrov managed to tighten his control over the Vostok and Zapad battalions, which had so far enjoyed some degree of independence from him. In particular, at Kadyrov's insistence, Putin agreed to remove Yamadaev from the leadership of the Vostok battalion, even though Yamadaev was involved in the fighting in Ossetia. Yamadaev, who had during the 1990s fought in the ranks of those supporting Chechen independence, later turned pro-Russian when he successfully fought against the Chechen Islamists. He was also close to Akhmed Kadyrov, the father of Ramzan. After the death of the elder Kadyrov, Yamadaev soon came into conflict with his son who sought control over all the armed forces in Chechnya. During the war operations against South Ossetia, on 11 August, Yamadaev lost command of his battalion, which later was officially dismantled and put into reserve. Putin's decision was driven by his need to maintain good relations with Kadyrov given the new situation in the Caucasus.

### Will Chechnya's Fragile Balance Hold?

Kadyrov has managed his entry into the realm of high politics as he played a role in the victory of the Russian forces in Georgia. He has indicated his readiness to

provide ten thousand men to the federal authorities to maintain peace. But the result of his machinations depends primarily on his ability to maintain civil peace at home while pursuing efforts to improve stability and living conditions in his republic. Yet the situation in Chechnya and in the whole Caucasus does look particularly favorable. Clan struggles over power and resources, combined with the existence of a radical Islamic threat, could quickly turn the region into a battlefield.

The Chechens living in the bigger cities want peace and stability above everything else and most Chechens in general approve of Kadyrov's policy, which has done a lot to improve living standards and rebuild the republic.

Yet the Chechens are also surprised that Moscow would grant independence to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while refusing Chechnya this right. Moscow's move might thus encourage the rebels' cause for independence and in fact, we do see an activation of the rebels' movements. This movement is recruiting young people who feel disenfranchised by Kadyrov's government – for example those from the former Vostok battalion. In a conversation shortly before his disgrace, Yamadev said that “combatants who are in the mountains are trained by Wahhabis financed by Saudi Arabia” and these men could eventually cause problems.

*About the author*

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