



RUSSIAN REGIONS UPDATE

■ ANALYSIS

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The North Caucasus, the Future of Russia, and Foreign Fighters in Ukraine 6
Jean-François Ratelle (University of Ottawa)

Regional Governors, Moscow, and the War

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Abstract

The model of center-regional relations fully developed in Russia before the war has worked practically flawlessly to date. Current regional elites are just as interested in maintaining the stability of Putin's personal rule as the Kremlin itself. Neither unprecedented sanctions nor the transfer of additional responsibilities to the regions has produced a demand for institutional changes on the part of governors. The war against Ukraine has been publicly supported by regional authorities in all Russian regions without exception, even if the degree and specific forms of support by regional executives have varied across Russia. Moreover, the war has served to increase the cohesion of the country's population across regional borders. As any scenario of future change carries threats and risks for regional incumbents personally, it is unlikely that the governors will break away from Putin and inaugurate the transformation of the system.

During the first year of Russia's war against Ukraine, the main principles governing center-regional relations and the incentives for regional governors remained consistent. The system of institutions in Russia operates in such a way that the current regional elites are just as interested in maintaining the stability of Putin's personal rule as the Kremlin itself.

The West has imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russia and continues to intensify them. To date, however, these sanctions have not forced regional governors to distance themselves from Moscow. The war has not caused the political or economic fragmentation of Russia. Instead, Moscow has effectively portrayed the war and sanctions as a national challenge that inextricably links elites to the entire nation.

As during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kremlin has delegated new areas of responsibility to the regions in response to the war. As Andras Toth-Czifra (2022) writes, "the federal government is again outsourcing a growing number of tasks—along with the political responsibility and the fiscal consequences—to the regions. These tasks range from maintaining local economies and supply chains to equipping draftees and providing social payments." This time, however, the main political "message" is different. During the pandemic, the governors had to protect Putin's approval rating from the impact of necessary but unpopular measures. The message to the governors was "handle COVID on your own as best you can." As a result, the national challenge was transformed into a series of regional ones, while Moscow retained *carte blanche* to shift blame and responsibility onto the governors.

Following the outbreak of the war, the Kremlin conveyed a different message to the governors: "You represent Russia, which is waging a righteous war, and your

interests align with Russia's interests." At the same time, since the war is exclusively a federal concern and the governors have limited means to influence it, they can only compete with each other in displays of patriotism and loyalty. Consequently, the war has further diminished the regions' desire for institutional changes or more autonomy, effectively eliminating any intentions they might have had of bargaining with Moscow. The volume of federal assistance that the regions can now expect to receive depends not only on their political loyalty, but also on their role in the war effort and the nation's ability to withstand economic sanctions.

The Incentives of Regional Governors in the Current System

A crucial feature of relations between the center and the regions today is that regional governors are essential and inextricable components of Putin's personalized rule. He has established a system of loyalty where incumbent governors rely heavily on Putin for their political survival. Lacking their own legitimacy, governors tend to follow Moscow's directives, thus maintaining the stability of the existing regime. Furthermore, regional politicians are interested in maintaining Putin's approval ratings, as in the Russian personalistic autocracy the entire political system depends on the ruler's popularity.

In Russia, regional governors formally serve the interests of two principals: Moscow and their local population. In practice, however, only Moscow matters for their political survival; given the current non-democratic system, the local population is much less important. Indeed, the stability of the Russian federal model is maintained by minimizing the influence of the local population.

The key instrument for sustaining such stability is strict undemocratic control of regional elections and

political competition at national, regional, and local levels. The tight control of electoral competition in the regions means that Moscow entirely determines the fate of regional politicians: their term in office, transfers to other positions, resignation, or even arrest and conviction for crimes (corruption, financial fraud or hiring a hitman). For instance, two-and-a-half months after the war began, on May 10, 2022, the Kremlin replaced five governors at once. The rotation of governors has long been a step on the path to the September regional elections, although this was historically done at the beginning of the year so that the new appointees would have enough time to take control of their regional political machines and ensure sufficiently high election results. One explanation for the delay in 2022 is that, after the failure of the blitzkrieg in Ukraine, the Kremlin was discussing the cancellation of that September's regional elections (Petrov 2023).

Another important instrument that supports the Russian model of center-regional relations is the mechanism for selecting those who will serve as Moscow's agents in the regions. As Alexey Gusev (2013) points out, regional governors "since Sergei Kiriyenko's appointment as the Kremlin's deputy chief of staff in 2016 have looked more and more alike, from their surnames to their faces to their biographies. The selection of governors has become personnel policy rather than public politics."

Perhaps most significantly, without competitive elections, incumbent governors have little incentive to advocate for greater autonomy or prioritize their regions' interests over those of the central government. Most incumbents do not face the same pressure to address local issues or respond to regional demands as they would in a system with competitive elections. The regional governors do not expect to face competitive elections; instead, they hope to be selected, retained, and promoted by the Presidential Administration, their ultimate principal.

This is not to suggest that the governors are entirely uninterested in their local populations. After the war began, Putin made them personally responsible for maintaining social and political stability in their regions, which increased their concern for their populations. However, this does not mean that the population became a principal; social stability is just one criterion of accountability to the governors' real principal—Moscow.

Before the war, Moscow primarily assessed governors' performance on the basis of their ability to deliver the "right" results in federal elections, fulfill Putin's "May Decrees" and twelve "national projects," and, later, to successfully combat the pandemic. While the war has not changed the basic rules of the game, it has shifted priorities. Regions now concentrate on implementing the federal agenda (the war) and reporting to Moscow

accordingly. The previous tasks remain, but the regions must also be involved in the war and contribute to the nation's defense capabilities.

In 2023, the war is the main theme of the regions' political agendas. Key elements include supporting the mobilized and their families, shaping public opinion in favor of the "people's war" with the West, and mobilizing specific sectors of the economy and businesses to participate actively in strengthening the country's defense capabilities. In addition to all this, demonstrating their regions' support for the president in the form of the highest possible approval ratings for Putin will be a critical task for governors in the run-up to the 2024 elections. That being said, Kremlin-backed gubernatorial candidates will not actively use the topic of the war in Ukraine in their election campaigns. The hostilities are to be only the "background" of the campaigns, with the focus on measures to support "veterans of the armed forces and their families," as well on material aid to the front. The aim of this strategy is to show that all is calm in the country (Verstka 2023).

Importantly, while shifting new responsibilities to the regions, the Kremlin remains preoccupied with maintaining domestic political stability. This is pursued, in particular, by deliberately implementing a territorially asymmetric call to war. Clearly, the higher the number of people mobilized from a region, the greater the expected death toll. Military fatalities, which cannot be concealed, could lead to increased discontent and protests, particularly in the capital and larger cities. While fatalities cannot be avoided, it is possible to concentrate them in weaker and poorer regions far from Moscow. Alexey Bessudnov's (2023) study reveals significant disparities in military fatality rates between Russian regions, with the highest mortality observed among soldiers from impoverished areas in Siberia and the Russian Far East, and the lowest among those from Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The Impact of Sanctions

After the start of the war and the imposition of international sanctions, many experts thought that Russia would in some way repeat the fate of Iran or Venezuela and suffer a macroeconomic disaster. As Sergei Guriev expressed it, because the sanctions were truly unprecedented, they gave rise to unprecedented, unrealistic expectations (Kelli 2023). But no nationwide economic catastrophe has occurred. Nor have individual regional economies collapsed or the scope of inter-regional inequalities grown.

Experts and scholars studying whether—and how—sanctions affect a territorially giant, diverse, and asymmetric Russia have concluded that sanctions have not led to a sharp and rapid rise in inequalities between regions.

For instance, Shida empirically examined the economic impact of the sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, paying particular attention to interregional heterogeneity. He found no regional variation in the impact of the sanctions. The sanctions targeted the entire nation, exerting a significant but geographically uniform impact. No region—even those located very far from the European part of Russia, as in the Far East, and with strong economic ties to Asian countries—managed to avoid the impact of sanctions. Nor did the sanctions increase the heterogeneity of the Russian territory (Shida 2020).

Furthermore, according to Natalya Zubarevich, the logic of a crisis caused by sanctions is simple: stronger, economically advanced regions that are better integrated into the global economy suffer much greater losses. They pay dearly for their earlier development, while peripheral and structurally weaker regions suffer less (TVK6 2022). Logically, therefore, it follows that sanctions should not increase territorial inequality, but rather mitigate it by lowering the national “common denominator.” Just as globalization increases interregional inequality, deglobalization resulting from sanctions should reduce it.

So far, sanctions have not required the introduction of emergency measures in most Russian regions. Manifestations of gubernatorial opposition to the sanctions have boiled down to the signing of official documents on cooperation between the regions (Artem'ev and Vasin 2022); public statements by governors that the Russian economy “is stronger and more stable now than it was a few years ago. We have long ago worked out mechanisms that allow us to withstand sanctions and successfully develop” (*Den' vo Vladimire* 2022); and calls for unity in the face of difficulties (*Nevskie Novosti* 2022).

Not only that, but the war has served to increase the cohesion of the population across regional borders. Even before the war, the population of most of Russia's regions shared the same basic values and attitudes—a phenomenon known as “aspatiality”—and as Alexey Gusev (2023) argues, “the outbreak of war has sooner closed the values gap between Russia's provinces than widened it.”

Conclusion: What Next?

The model of center-regional relations fully developed in Russia before the war has worked practically flawlessly to date. Neither unprecedented sanctions nor the transfer of additional responsibilities to the regions has produced a demand for institutional changes on the part of governors. On the contrary, the behavior of regional governors is becoming more uniform.

In 2023, amid high uncertainty regarding the war in Ukraine, the Russian budget is expected to see a further increase in military spending, which could lead to a sequestration of budget expenditures, primarily in the

regions of the country. It is highly unlikely that sanctions against Russia will be lifted; indeed, their further tightening is more likely. But will this lead to the collapse of the current model of center-regional relations? It is very unlikely to do so.

The absence of competitive elections and the existence of centralized control over regional politics combine to minimize the risk of regional challengers and opposition movements gaining traction. There is limited space for alternative political forces to emerge and challenge the status quo in the regions.

Under the current conditions, any individual deviation from official lines is tantamount to political suicide. The governors have had no choice but to support the war. Indeed, the war has been publicly supported by regional authorities in all Russian regions without exception, even if the degree and specific forms of support by regional executives have varied across Russia. Despite differences in the behavior of governors, not one of them would cross the threshold of the Presidential Administration doubting their loyalty. Each governor has a keen sense of where this threshold lies. Even approaching the threshold could be fatal. Unless they coalesce into a critical mass or a new post-Putin system begins, the governors will not oppose or betray Moscow. Maintaining their position—being re-elected or re-appointed—depends on it.

There are two broad ways in which the Russian system could feasibly change. The first is that another undemocratic leader could replace Putin. The second is that a sequence of reforms could lead to the democratization and liberalization of the country. For incumbent governors, both alternatives reduce their chances of remaining in office. A new undemocratic leader would undoubtedly appoint new loyalists to the regions. In the event of an awakening of genuine democratization, there would be a revival of competitive politics and governors would have to go through competitive elections, reducing their chances of retaining their positions while exacerbating elite divisions.

The Russian authoritarian model of center-regional relations serves the interest of Moscow and, no less importantly, of Russian governors. Neither the pandemic nor the war has created incentives for the model to be reformed. It is unlikely that the governors will break away from Putin and inaugurate the transformation of the system, as any scenario of change carries threats and risks for them personally. There are conditions (e.g., an attempt to launch political reforms) under which it might collapse, but so far these have not arisen.

The Russian opposition and some researchers are now debating how to reform center-regional relations and federalism in Russia after Putin. Among other things, they are discussing at what stage of democratic reforms the

rules of “true federalism” should be implemented—at the beginning or after a fairly long transitional period during which the central government would have to exercise significant control over the regions (see, for

instance, *Holod* 2023). We, however, consider the question of under what conditions the current model might collapse to be much more pressing (and more difficult).

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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.

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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.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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