



# Russia

*Recruitment of Chechens to  
the war in Ukraine*



This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The report at hand does not include any policy recommendations. The information does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

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## Executive summary

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The Information space in Chechnya is tight, and has been further tightening after the invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, the flow of information out of Chechnya is very limited.

Recruitment in Chechnya to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been different from the rest of Russia. The Chechen authorities are recruiting in three different ways: patriotic reasons, financial incentives and by coercive recruitment.

While almost no one has been willing to sign up for patriotic reasons, recruiting Chechens by offering recruits comparably high salaries has been more successful. Most Chechens posted in Ukraine have signed contracts for financial reasons.

Coercive recruitment of Chechens has been ongoing since February 2022. Coercive recruitment in Chechnya peaked around the end of September 2022, when Putin announced a partial mobilisation. Although it is difficult to assess the scale of coercive recruitment in Chechnya, most corroborated cases has come from the city of Grozny.

The Chechens most at risk of being coercively recruited are critics of the authorities, family members of vocal critics, drug and alcohol users as well as members of the LGBT community. The Chechen authorities have used coercive recruitment to get rid of what they call the undesirables. In general, any deviation from the norms and rules of Kadyrov's leadership could be used to coercively recruit Chechens. In this regard, the Chechen authorities use forced recruitment as a form of punishment in Chechnya. Although certain groups can be identified as being more at risk than others, there is also a high degree of unpredictability and arbitrariness in the actions of Chechen authorities in regards to coercive recruitment.

It is difficult to assess whether there are any actual exemptions for recruitment in Chechnya, as the Chechen authorities largely ignore the formal exemptions for recruitment to military service in Russia.

Paying a bribe can exempt a person from recruitment. However, even after a person had paid a bribe, the Chechen authorities could return for this person after a while in order to recruit him.

It would be very difficult to resist coercive recruitment in Chechnya, as the Chechen authorities would likely use violence and physical abuse, resort to threats of a prison sentence based on fabricated criminal charges or would beat the person to death if he refuses to comply.

There has been no recorded cases of coercively recruitment to the war in Ukraine of Chechens residing in other parts of Russia than Chechnya, except for Chechens living in Dagestan. Furthermore, the Chechen authorities has not recruited Chechens outside of Russia to the war in Ukraine.

The Chechen authorities have recruited Chechens serving time in Chechen prisons for the war effort in Ukraine. They primarily recruited from Chechen prisons in the second or third month

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of the full-scale invasion. However, there were not many prisoners from Chechnya to recruit, as many Chechen prisoners serve their time in other parts of Russia.

Chechens serving their prison sentence in other parts of Russia has been subject to recruitment to the war in Ukraine. However, the number of recruited Chechen prisoners is unclear.

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## Introduction

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This present report is a product of a joint mission to Tbilisi, Georgia and the United Kingdom undertaken by Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) from 17 February to 1 March 2024. The purpose of the mission was to collect updated information on the recruitment methods of ethnic Chechens to the Russian armed forces during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The report covers Chechen military recruitment in a wider context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as known Chechen armed formations previously or currently present in Ukraine. Furthermore, the report focuses on the various recruitment methods and tactics employed by the Chechen authorities, including coercive recruitment. Finally, the report covers recruitment of Chechens from the Chechen and Russian prison systems.

DIS and SMA drew up the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the mission after consultation with the defined target users of the report, in particular the Secretariat of the Danish Refugee Appeals Board and the Asylum Division of DIS as well as a Danish advisory group (Referencegruppen) on COI. ToR is included in Annex 1 of this report. In the process of compiling this report, the delegation interviewed 12 sources comprising nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), journalists, think tanks, human rights defenders, analysts and researchers. The delegation selected the sources interviewed based on their expertise, merit and experience relevant to the mission.

Multiple sourcing is implemented to ensure that the collected data is precise and balanced. The objective is to present a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the issues relevant to ToR at the time of publication. The minutes of the meetings with the consulted sources are listed in Annex 2. In addition to the information gathered from the interviews, the report is also based on available reports as well as articles of relevance for ToR. The interviews were conducted in either English or in Russian with an interpreter present. Some interviews were conducted during meetings in Tbilisi and the United Kingdom, while others were conducted via Skype.

Prior to the interviews, all interlocutors were thoroughly informed about the purpose of the mission and the fact that their statements would be included in a report made publicly available. The interlocutors were asked how they wished to be introduced and quoted, and all sources are introduced and quoted according to their own wishes. 6 out of 12 sources preferred anonymity. All meeting minutes were forwarded to the interlocutors for their approval and amendment, allowing them the opportunity to offer corrections or make comments on their statements. All sources responded and approved their statements.

Care has been taken to present the views of the interlocutors as accurately and transparently as possible. For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the minutes of the interviews in Annex 2 have been numbered in a consecutive order, used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes. The quotation marks

(“) are not used in the report whenever the text is a copy of the meeting minutes, however, a reference is made in the footnotes to the paragraphs where the text is cited from.

During the interview, the source may have highlighted issues that are not addressed in the ToR. As these issues could be relevant to refugee status determination, they are included in the meeting minutes in Annex 2, but not in the report.

The report has been externally peer reviewed by the Norwegian COI-unit, Landinfo, in accordance with the EUAA COI Report Methodology.<sup>1</sup> The research and editing of this report was finalised on 10 April 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> EUAA, *Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology*, February 2023, [url](#)

## Abbreviations

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COI	Country of Origin Information
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
FSB	Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service)
FSIN	Federalnaya Sluzhba Ispolneniya Nakazaniy (Federal Penitentiary Service)
HRW	Human Rights Watch
KIA	Killed In Action
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MVD	Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del (Ministry of Internal Affairs)
NEDC	Natalia Estemirova Documentation Center
NGO	nongovernmental organisations
OMON	Otryad Mobilnyy Osobogo Naznacheniya (Special Purposes Mobile Unit)
PMC	Private Military Company
SMA	Swedish Migration Agency
SOBR	Spetsialnyy Otryad Bystrogo Reagirovaniya (Special Rapid Response Unit)
ToR	Terms of Reference
UFSIN	Upravlenie Federalnoy Sluzhby Ispolneniya Nakazaniy (Office of the Federal Penitentiary Service)
WIA	Wounded In Action

## 1. Access to information

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The Information space in Chechnya is tight, and the flow of information out of the republic is very limited.<sup>2</sup> Under the rule of Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen authorities has cracked down on independent journalists<sup>3</sup> and ushered public threats against relatives of Chechen activist.<sup>4</sup>

All the oral sources consulted on the topic of access to information in Chechnya for this report stated that the information space in Chechnya has been gradually shrinking in recent years.<sup>5</sup> The Georgian activist added that he knows of journalists from Chechnya who has been arrested due to their work.<sup>6</sup> As such, many bloggers and journalists has left Chechnya, and are now covering the area without presence in Chechnya.<sup>7</sup> Two journalists elaborated that Chechnya is a much closed society and Chechens are not always willing to talk to people from outside Chechnya due to fear of repression from local and federal authorities.<sup>8</sup>

On top of this already tightening information space in Chechnya, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has brought about a general tightening of the civic space throughout the Russian Federation, which means that there are now legal implications connected to covering the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> According to Open Caucasus Media, many journalists and researchers covering the North Caucasus from abroad has been advised against travelling to the areas since the launch of the full-scale invasion.<sup>10</sup> A journalist covering Chechnya further stated that since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, residents of Chechnya has been afraid even to give information anonymously, because they fear that they or their relatives would be sent to the war as a consequence.<sup>11</sup> Due to these circumstances, the most likely way for this source and others like him to obtain information from the field in Chechnya in 2024 would be through family connections.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 1; Georgian Journalist: 1; Journalist covering Chechnya 1; Georgian activist: 1

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera, *Prominent Russian journalist and lawyer attacked in Chechnya*, 4 July 2023, [url](#); BBC, *Chechnya Milashina attack: Armed thugs beat up Russian journalist and lawyer*, 4 July 2023, [url](#)

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, *Russia: Politician threatens to decapitate family members of Chechen activist*, 2 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>5</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 1; Georgian Journalist: 1; Journalist covering Chechnya 1; Georgian activist: 1

<sup>6</sup> Georgian activist: 1

<sup>7</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 1,2; Open Caucasus Media: 1; Georgian activist: 1

<sup>8</sup> Georgian journalist: 1; Journalist covering Chechnya: 1

<sup>9</sup> HRW, *Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents'*, 1 December 2022, [url](#); NPR, *Russian law bans journalists from calling Ukraine conflict a 'war' or an 'invasion'*, 5 March 2022, [url](#); HRW, *Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests*, 7 March 2022, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 1

<sup>11</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 2

<sup>12</sup> Georgian Activist: 1

## 2. Chechen military recruitment in context

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When exploring patterns of military recruitment in Chechnya, the following should be taken into account; conflict dynamics as well as decisions made, methods used and related administrative set-up on the federal level in Russia concerning the supply of military personnel. It is also of importance to consider the relationship between federal and Chechen authorities and some characteristics of the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov.

### 2.1. The full-scale invasion

Military build-up on Crimea and in Belarus and Russian regions bordering Ukraine preceded the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>13</sup> Although there was ample evidence of conscripts among Russian troops in Ukraine during the first months<sup>14</sup>, there was later in 2022 no indications that conscripts were used on any massive scale.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the Armed forces, military units of the National Guard and the federal security service FSB, as well as private military companies (PMCs) and units (now integrated into the Russian armed forces) from the Ukrainian breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk have been part of the Russian invasion force.<sup>16</sup>

It is not possible to make any precise estimates of Russian military personnel losses during the full-scale invasion. It is, however, clear that they have been very high; a declassified U.S. intelligence report reported in December 2023 that the Russian losses in Ukraine amounted to 315,000 dead and injured troops.<sup>17</sup> However, numbers vary depending on sources.

Already after the first phase of the invasion, analysts identified a Russian need for reinforcement and related recruitment of personnel. According to some sources, the issue of mobilisation was raised and considered by the Russian political leadership already in March 2022, but was opted out in favour of other recruitment campaigns.<sup>18</sup> These campaigns included

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<sup>13</sup> Washington Post, *Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns*, 3 December 2021, [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> EUAA, *The Russian Federation - Military service*, 15 December 2022, [url](#), p. 38; Denmark, Udlændingestyrelsen, *Rusland - Militærtjeneste*, 8 July 2022, [url](#), p. 18

<sup>15</sup> Bladel, J. Van, *Russian Spring 2022 Recruitment Cycle – Putin’s Camouflaged Referendum?* Egmont Policy Brief 284, July 2022, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>16</sup> EUAA, *The Russian Federation - Military service*, 15 December 2022, [url](#), p. 37. Galeotti et al, *Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, Morale, and the Ukraine War*, 15 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, *U.S. intelligence assesses Ukraine war has cost Russia 315,000 casualties*, 23 December 2023, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *Time is the Hidden Flank in Assessing Russia’s Mobilisation*, 23 September 2022, [url](#)

advertised voluntary recruitment campaigns<sup>19</sup> to the Armed forces of Russia as well recruitment to and use of PMCs<sup>20</sup>.

On 21 September 2022, in what was at the time seen as a response to continued Russian personnel losses and Ukrainian battlefield advances<sup>21</sup>, president Putin decreed a partial mobilisation.<sup>22</sup> The published decree did not specify any target number, but Minister of Defence, Sergey Shoigu, stated that 300,000 would be mobilised<sup>23</sup> (although other sources at the same time claimed significantly higher numbers<sup>24</sup>). Following the decision on mobilisation, there were numerous reports of deviations from both statutory procedures and from what had been communicated, related to *who* was subject to mobilisation as well as *how* individuals were called up.<sup>25</sup>

After the mobilisation in the autumn of 2022, the main mode of ensuring the supply of military personnel has been continued recruitment campaigns. This even though the presidential decree on partial mobilisation is still in force and various sources have expressed expectations of another mobilisation wave after Putin has been re-elected as president.<sup>26</sup>

Regions<sup>27</sup> play a key role in implementing both mobilisation and other forms of recruitment. With regard to mobilisation, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) gives the regions quotas for how many people are to be called up.<sup>28</sup> The highest officials of regions are chairing draft commissions on regional level, while heads of local administrations chair local commissions, also called Voenkomat, and the regional level ensures mobilisation and manage the local

<sup>19</sup> Washington Post, *Russian army ramps up recruitment as steep casualties thin the ranks*, 16 June 2022, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> Galeotti et al, *Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, Morale, and the Ukraine War*, 15 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, *What Does Russia's 'Partial Mobilization' Mean?*, 26 September 2022, [url](#); Foreign Affairs, *What Mobilization Means for Russia - The End of Putin's Bargain With the People*, 27 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> Russia. Presidential administration, *Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.09.2022 № 647 "Об объявлении частичной мобилизации в Российской Федерации"*, 21 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>23</sup> Reuters, *Russia calls up 300,000 reservists, says 6,000 soldiers killed in Ukraine*, 21 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Meduza, *Russia to conscript 1.2 million people*, 23 September 2022, [url](#); Novaja Gazeta Europe, *Источник: засекреченный пункт указа о мобилизации позволяет Минобороны призвать один миллион человек*, 22 September 2022, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> Denmark, Udlændingestyrelsen, *Russia - An update on military service since July 2022*, 9 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 15-16; Norway, Landinfo, *Temanotat Russland: Militærtjeneste og mobilisering*, 21 November 2022, [url](#), pp. 23-24; EUAA, *The Russian Federation - Military service*, 15 December 2022, [url](#), pp. 30-32.

<sup>26</sup> HRW: 20; The New York Times, *Russians Know Putin Will Be Re-Elected, but Many Worry What Comes Next*, 17 March 2024, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> In a legal Russian context oblast, republics, krai, okrug etc. are referred to as "federal subjects". In this report we refer to them as regions.

<sup>28</sup> Chikov, Pavel, 21 September 2022, [url](#)

level.<sup>29</sup> Regional leaders have no influence on the size of quotas given to them, but are given a degree of liberty in how to fulfil them. A similar responsibility is reportedly placed on the regional level when it comes to voluntary recruitment.<sup>30</sup>

## 2.2. The local Chechen leadership

### 2.2.1. *The relationship between Moscow and Grozny*

The relationship between the Kremlin and the leadership of Kadyrov is often described as being based on the latter guaranteeing stability in exchange for funding and a high degree of autonomy from the former.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the influence of federal authorities in Chechnya is limited and the power of Kadyrov to suppress dissent and resistance unchecked.<sup>32</sup> Security forces in Chechnya are solely accountable to Kadyrov and, at best, only under limited control by federal authorities.<sup>33</sup> Harold Chambers, an analyst focusing on the political and security dynamics of the North Caucasus, underlines that Kadyrov seeks to have well beyond monopoly on the use of force in Chechnya and recalls a threat from Kadyrov in 2015 according to which any federal security official or troops that would come to Chechnya without permission would be shot.<sup>34</sup>

### 2.2.2. *Kadyrov and the “undesirables”*

Chechen authorities are targeting those it perceives as “undesirable”<sup>35</sup>, using a wide range of serious human rights abuses, including extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detentions, physical attacks, and prison sentences based on bogus charges.<sup>36</sup> Groups exposed include but are not necessarily limited to the following:

- **Opponents or critics.** Local authorities are silencing those expressing any form of dissent or opposition to the authorities. Civil society organisations and individual

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<sup>29</sup> Russia, *Федеральный закон от 26.02.1997 N 31-ФЗ (ред. от 14.07.2022) "О мобилизационной подготовке и мобилизации в Российской Федерации"*, [url](#), article 8, 20

<sup>30</sup> Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *The New Boyars? How Russia’s Governors Facilitate Mobilisation*, 7 December 2022, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 4; Russia Analyst: 3

<sup>32</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2024*, 2024, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> US Department of State, *Russia 2022 Human Rights Report*, 20 March 2023, [url](#), p. 1

<sup>34</sup> Harold Chambers: 6; The Guardian, *Chechen leader tells soldiers to fire on unapproved Russian troops in region*, 23 April 2015, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Submission by Human Rights Watch on Russia to the Human Rights Committee*, 15 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>36</sup> US Department of State, *Russia 2022 Human Rights Report*, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 3-15; UN Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in the Russian Federation - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova*, 15 September 2023, [url](#), p.

activists involved in human rights work, as well as independent journalists, are targeted for their work.<sup>37</sup>

- **LGBT-persons.** Several purges targeting LGBT-persons, the first one in 2017, orchestrated by local authorities has been widely reported. It should be emphasised that LGBT-persons are continuously targeted based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>38</sup>
- **Women not conforming** to “traditional values”. The local authorities are not only tolerating and leaving violent, family-based crimes unpunished, but also playing an active role.<sup>39</sup>

These and other human rights abuses are committed without any known reactions on the federal level, and thus with impunity.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.2.3. *Social life and Adat*

Family plays a central role in the organisation of social life in Chechnya. In the rural parts of Chechnya, clan structures are still strong and important, but in the more urbanised areas of Chechnya, these structures have been less important in recent years. These social structures, known as *Adat*, is a form of customary rules that defines the fabric for social relationships in Chechnya. Amongst these customary rules is the notion of collective guilt and collective punishment within families. This means that if a son or a daughter has committed perceived wrongdoings, the other family members can be punished for their relatives’ actions. The punishments would depend on the severity of the wrongdoings of the family member.<sup>41</sup>

Because the notion of guilt and punishment are collective in Chechnya, it is common for families to engage in vigilantism amongst their own family members as a form of control and to avoid punishment themselves.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Submission by Human Rights Watch on Russia to the Human Rights Committee*, 15 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>38</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Submission by Human Rights Watch on Russia to the Human Rights Committee*, 15 February 2022, [url](#); US Department of State, *Russia 2022 Human Rights Report*, 20 March 2023, [url](#), pp. 3-4

<sup>39</sup> Council of Europe. Parliamentary Assembly, *The continuing need to restore human rights and the rule of law in the North Caucasus region*, 23 May 2022, [url](#), pp. 1-2, 11-12

<sup>40</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in the Russian Federation - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova*, 15 September 2023, [url](#), p. 17; Human Rights Watch, *Submission by Human Rights Watch on Russia to the Human Rights Committee*, 15 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> Russia Analyst: 1; Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытать» [“They told the mother: if he doesn't go voluntarily, we will take him and torture him.”], 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> Russia Analyst: 2; Open Caucasus Media: 11

Open Caucasus Media highlighted that what on paper could seem like a punishment over political or religious views could also easily be grounded in a dispute between families and/or clans. Chechnya is a small society where families and clans are constantly engaged in power struggles with one another over influence and power within the Chechen society. Whenever a feud or dispute with another family or clan emerges, it is not uncommon for one part in the dispute to report the other part to the Chechen authorities over alleged religious and political offenses.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 8

### 3. Known Chechen armed formations with current or previous presence in Ukraine

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Individual ethnic Chechens could serve in almost any military formation within the armed forces of the Russian Federation or the security forces of regions. The focus of this report is however exclusively recruitment to units with a more direct connection to the Chechen Republic. Within the scope of this report, “Chechen armed formations” are defined as formations that have participated on the Russian side<sup>44</sup> in the war in Ukraine. They are either:

- garrisoned in Chechnya;
- part of the local security apparatus in Chechnya, commonly referred to as “Kadyrovtsy” or Kadyrovites;
- units formed primarily from Chechen volunteers (including coercively recruited individuals – see [chapter 4](#));
- multi ethnic units that are trained in Chechnya.<sup>45</sup>

#### 3.1. Units under the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation

##### *3.1.1. Regular Units of the Ministry of Defence*

The 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Division is a regular Russian army mechanised infantry division garrisoned in the cities of Khankala, Shali and Borzoy in the Chechen Republic.<sup>46</sup> This unit is not comprised exclusively of ethnic Chechens. The 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Division is part of the Southern Military district and subordinate to the MoD of the Russian Federation. Among the sub units are 70<sup>th</sup>, 71<sup>st</sup> and 291<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Regiments as well as the 50<sup>th</sup> Self Propelled Artillery Regiment.<sup>47</sup> The unit was part of the Southern grouping that pushed into Ukraine from Crimea and was particularly heavy engaged in countering the Ukrainian counter offensive South Eastern Ukraine during the summer of 2023.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> There are also several formations made up of Chechen volunteers participating on the Ukrainian side in the conflict.

<sup>45</sup> Chambers, Harold, The Rise of the Russian Spetsnaz University, 30 March 2023, [url](#)

<sup>46</sup> Federation of American Scientists – Intelligence Resource Program, Directory of RF Defense Related Agencies and Personnel, 2003, [url](#); Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, В ЮВО на территории Чечни завершается формирование 42-й мотострелковой дивизии [In the Southern Military District in Chechnya, the formation of the 42<sup>nd</sup> motorised rifle division is being completed], 7 December 2016, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> Federation of American Scientists – Intelligence Resource Program, Directory of RF Defense Related Agencies and Personnel, 2003, [url](#)

<sup>48</sup> Ukrainska Pravda, Liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka could lead to degradation of Russian ranks – ISW, 19 September 2023, [url](#)

### 3.1.2. Units formed from Chechen volunteers

Akhmat “direction” Units, consisting of at least two battalions, Akhmad Yug (south) and Akhmad Sever (north)<sup>49</sup>, not to be confused with previously existing units with the same denomination, as well as the Akhmat Rossyia and Akhmat Chechnya battalions.<sup>50 51</sup> These units are formally subordinate to the MoD. Although organisational details are difficult to access, the battalions seemed to have been organised as a regiment (the 78<sup>th</sup> Motorised Rifle Regiment “Akhmad Kadyrov”) of the above-mentioned 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Division.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.1.3. Units that are formed and trained in Chechnya

Referred to as the Akhmat Group and constituted of Russian citizens with various ethnic backgrounds. A majority of the soldiers in these units are of other ethnicity than Chechen.<sup>53</sup> The units are raised and trained by, or have their skills honed by, Chechen commanders at the Russian Spetsnaz University located in the city of Gudermes in the Chechen republic. Formally contracted by the MoD, but deployed to Ukraine under Chechen commanders. Since the dismantling of the Wagner PMC, the Akhmat group has taken over many of the tasks that previously were allocated to Wagner, especially in the Donbas.<sup>54</sup>

## 3.2. Units of the Chechen Ministry of Internal Affairs and Rosgvardia

So called “Kadyrovites” are paramilitary and law enforcement units from the Chechen Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and Rosgvardia. Chechen Rosgvardia Units were part of the assault on Kyiv and suffered heavy losses, in particular the 141<sup>st</sup> Special Motorised Regiment.<sup>55</sup> The Rosgvardia units have been less involved over the course of the war, as they are part of Ramzan Kadyrov’s private security apparatus and not disposable. MVD units have been involved in a lesser extent and has primarily remained away from the frontlines. Securing rear areas and serve as block troops.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Harold Chambers: 2

<sup>50</sup> Harold Chambers:

<sup>51</sup> Most Chechen armed formations, regardless of what primary missions they have or within what structures they are organised carry the name “Akhmat/Akhmad ” as a compliment to other name or designation.

<sup>52</sup> Harold Chambers: 2; Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *The Chechens: Putin’s Loyal Foot Soldiers*, 4 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>53</sup> Novaya Gazeta Europe, Akhmat to the rescue: how do Chechen special forces operate?, 28 June 2023, [url](#); Rondeli Foundation: 3; Harold Chambers: 4.

<sup>54</sup> Harold Chambers: 4-5

<sup>55</sup> The Times of Israel, *Ukrainian forces destroy convoy of 56 Chechen tanks, kill general near Kyiv – report*, 27 February 2022, [url](#)

<sup>56</sup> Harold Chambers: 2

At the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine the following Chechen units of the Rosgvardia were deployed<sup>57</sup>;

- OMON<sup>58</sup> Akhmat-Grozny
- SOBR<sup>59</sup> Akhmat
- 249<sup>th</sup> Separate Special Motorised Battalion
- 141<sup>st</sup> Special Motorised Regiment

### 3.3. Aspects of command structures

On paper, there exist three different chains of command:

1. Units under the MoD are subordinated to military district commands and ultimately to the Minister of Defence and the Commander in Chief of the armed forces of the Russian Federation;<sup>60</sup>
2. Units of the Chechen MVD are organisationally subordinated to the head of MVD of the Chechen Republic who in turn is subordinate to the head of the Chechen Republic (in practice not the federal MVD);<sup>61</sup>
3. Rosgvardia is not incorporated under the MoD and has a different mission and command structure. Rosgvardia reports through the director of the Rosgvardia to the president of the Russian Federation in his capacity of commander in chief and chairman of the Russian Security Council.<sup>62</sup>

In theory, the command structure appears straightforward; however, the reality in the case of Chechen formations is much more complicated.<sup>63</sup> This can be seen as a central aspect of the contract between Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov, which allows Kadyrov to exercise full control over Chechnya, including monopoly of force, in exchange for loyalty and keeping any potential local disturbances under control.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *The Chechens: Putin's Loyal Foot Soldiers*, 4 November 2022, [url](#); Journalist covering Chechnya: 4

<sup>58</sup> Special Purpose Mobile Unit (in Russian: Отряд мобильный особого назначения)

<sup>59</sup> Special Rapid Response Unit (in Russian: Специальный отряд быстрого реагирования)

<sup>60</sup> Russia. Ministry of Defence, *Leadership*, [url](#)

<sup>61</sup> Chechnya's boss and Putin's foot soldier: How Ramzan Kadyrov became such a feared figure in Russia (theconversation.com)

<sup>62</sup> The Rosgvardia (National Guard of Russia): Russia's Internal Guard (greydynamics.com)

<sup>63</sup> Galeotti et al, *Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, Morale, and the Ukraine War*, 15 November 2022, [url](#)

<sup>64</sup> Foreign Policy, *Why the World Should Be Worried About Chechnya*, 19 October 2022, [url](#); Harold Chambers: 6

The only units of the above-mentioned that are not under full or partial control of Ramzan Kadyrov are the pre-war regular military units.<sup>65</sup> In practice, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Division.<sup>66</sup> Units that have been created since the full-scale invasion and formally under the MoD command structure and thus subordinated higher commands are in practice largely autonomous and primarily serve the interests and orders of Ramzan Kadyrov.<sup>67</sup>

Regardless of the full ethnic composition of these units, they have Chechen commanders and strict hierarchies where Chechen soldiers receive preferential treatment and are not being put at risk to the same extent as other service members.<sup>68</sup>

The Chechen Rosgvardia and the units of the Chechen MVD are an integral part of Ramzan Kadyrov's power base. In the case of the Rosgvardia Units, this means that they in practice do not operate under the formal Rosgvardia chain of command, but take their orders directly from the Chechen government.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Harold Chambers: 2

<sup>66</sup> Rondelli Foundation: 1

<sup>67</sup> Harold Chambers: 6

<sup>68</sup> Harold Chambers: 4

<sup>69</sup> Galeotti et al, *Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias, Morale, and the Ukraine War*, 15 November 2022, [url](#); Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *The Chechens: Putin's Loyal Foot Soldiers*, 4 November 2022, [url](#)

## 4. Recruitment of Chechens to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Recruitment in Chechnya to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been different from the rest of the Russian Federation, both structurally and methodologically.<sup>70</sup> This chapter unfolds how the Chechen authorities has recruited ethnic Chechens to the war effort in Ukraine, including the methods and tactics employed and the scale and patterns over time.

### 4.1. Overall on Chechen recruitment

The recruitment strategy of the Chechen authorities can be broken down into three different tactics, which have evolved during the course of the war:

- True belief
- Financial incentives
- Coercion<sup>71</sup>

The sources did not agree on the scale of recruitment due to financial incentives and coercive recruitment respectively. Most Chechens deployed in Ukraine have voluntarily signed contracts with the Russian MoD.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, a journalist covering Chechnya assessed that around half of the Chechens in Ukraine were there against their will.<sup>73</sup> According to estimates from February 2024, around 10-15 Chechens per month were sent to Ukraine by the use of force.<sup>74</sup> According to official statistics from the Chechen authorities, 36,000 soldiers from Chechnya has been sent to Ukraine, of which 16,000 were alleged volunteers.<sup>75</sup> However, this number includes volunteers from elsewhere in Russia, who has received military training in Chechnya.<sup>76</sup> In the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, Chechnya was the only region in Russia where volunteers from Russia could sign contracts.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 1; Harold Chambers: 2, 6

<sup>71</sup> Harold Chambers: 8

<sup>72</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 4

<sup>73</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 12

<sup>74</sup> Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытаться» ["They told the mother: if he doesn't go voluntarily, we will take him and torture him."], 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>75</sup> Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытаться» ["They told the mother: if he doesn't go voluntarily, we will take him and torture him."], 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>76</sup> Important Stories, Чечня собирает людей на убой со всей России [Chechnya gathers people for slaughter from all over Russia], 13 October 2022, [url](#)

<sup>77</sup> Important Stories, Чечня собирает людей на убой со всей России [Chechnya gathers people for slaughter from all over Russia], 13 October 2022, [url](#)

## 4.2. Recruitment dynamics in Chechnya

### 4.2.1. *Recruitment and the relationship between Grozny and Moscow*

The relationship of interdependency between the Kremlin and the local Chechen leadership ([see chapter 2](#)) has created a dynamic in which coercive recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine has emerged.<sup>78</sup> Details on the practice of coercive recruitment is unpacked [in chapter 5.3.3.](#)

By delivering men to the war in Ukraine, Kadyrov can show his loyalty to the Kremlin while simultaneously getting rid of potential obstacles to his government in Chechnya. By delivering men to the war effort, Kadyrov shows the Kremlin that he is indispensable. At the same time, Kadyrov has publicly stated that there would be no partial mobilisation in Chechnya as happened in all other regions of Russia. According to the Russia Analyst, excluding Chechnya from the partial mobilisation was a way for Kadyrov to tell both the Kremlin and the population in Chechnya that he is master of his own house.<sup>79</sup>

Harold Chambers elaborated that Kadyrov saw the partial mobilisation as a potential threat to his authority and legitimacy. Rather than taking part in a public partial mobilisation, Kadyrov had to deliver the required quota of fighters to Moscow by coercing people to fight in Ukraine.<sup>80</sup> Galeotti suspected that the cases of coercive recruitment is happening in part because the local voenkamat<sup>81</sup> has failed to meet the quotas from higher up the chain of command.<sup>82</sup>

### 4.2.2. *Collective guilt and recruitment*

In relation to recruitment of young men to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the notion of collective guilt and punishment as well as taking justice into the hands of the family ([see chapter 2.2.3](#)) has resulted in families pressuring young males into volunteering, as they fear harsher punishments from the surrounding society if they do not take action. As such, pressuring male family members into ‘volunteering’ can be seen as a pre-emptive measure in order to secure the family as a unit.<sup>83</sup>

Mark Galeotti noted that although the power of the clans (teip) has diminished in Chechnya, the teip still matters – especially in the rural parts of Chechnya. In these parts of Chechnya, the need of meeting a certain quota can present itself as an opportunity for the local clan leaders to get rid of unwanted members of the community by making them sign up to the war in

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<sup>78</sup> Russia Analyst: 3

<sup>79</sup> Russia Analyst: 3

<sup>80</sup> Harold Chambers: 12

<sup>81</sup> Voenkamat: military registration and enlistment office

<sup>82</sup> Mark Galeotti: 3

<sup>83</sup> Russia Analyst: 2; Open Caucasus Media: 11

Ukraine. In these instances, the Chechen authorities have effectively succeeded in outsourcing coercive recruitment without ever getting involved.<sup>84</sup>

### 4.3. Types of Recruitment

Three types of recruitment can be identified, differing in incentives and methods.<sup>85</sup> In practice, however, it can be challenging to distinguish between them. This is especially true when it comes to coercive recruitment.<sup>86</sup>

#### 4.3.1. *True belief*

In the initial phase of the war, the Chechen authorities tried to recruit Chechens by appealing to a shared patriotic idea and by putting well-known Chechen commanders in charge of the recruitment process. According to Chambers, this recruitment tactic failed as almost nobody wanted to sign up for patriotic reasons.<sup>87</sup>

#### 4.3.2. *Financial incentives*

Realising that the appeal to this shared patriotic idea yielded very few Chechen recruits, the Chechen authorities then switched recruitment methods of Chechens by offering recruits rather well-paid contracts.<sup>88</sup> Chechnya is a relative poor region in Russia, and the money made by signing contracts with the Russian MoD are significant compared to standard salaries in Chechnya.<sup>89</sup> According to two researchers at the Rondeli Foundation, most Chechens posted in Ukraine, have signed contracts and are thus deployed for financial reasons. They further elaborated that Chechen contractors receive monthly salaries of around 3,000 USD along with other benefits such as free housing and social services. These added benefits only apply to ethnic Chechens.<sup>90</sup> Mark Galeotti further elaborated that Chechens who voluntarily sign contracts are more likely to have influence over the place of deployment and what tasks they are going to perform..<sup>91</sup>

Voluntary recruitment from Chechnya has been more prevalent in the rural parts of Chechnya, where the population generally are poorer than in the urban areas.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4.3.3. *Coercive recruitment*

Coercive recruitment of ethnic Chechens to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been ongoing since February 2022 but it has ebbed and flowed in terms of scale and intensity throughout the duration of the full-scale invasion. According to Harold Chambers, the extent of coercive

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<sup>84</sup> Mark Galeotti: 4

<sup>85</sup> Harold Chambers: 8

<sup>86</sup> Russia Analyst: 6-7

<sup>87</sup> Harold Chambers: 9

<sup>88</sup> Harold Chambers: 10

<sup>89</sup> Russian journalist: 5; Georgian journalist: 5; Harold Chambers: 10

<sup>90</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 4

<sup>91</sup> Mark Galeotti: 7

<sup>92</sup> Mark Galeotti: 3

recruitment in Chechnya peaked around the time of the announcement of the partial mobilisation in Russia at the end of September 2022.<sup>93</sup>

There are many unknown variables regarding coercive recruitment in Chechnya, including the scale.<sup>94</sup> Chechens who are coercively recruited are forced to sign contracts with the MoD and according to HRW and Mark Galeotti this means that the paper trail of coercively recruited Chechens looks as if they volunteered for the Russian war effort.<sup>95</sup> Galeotti further elaborated that most of the corroborated cases of coercive recruitment has come from Grozny.<sup>96</sup>

All sources consulted on the topic of coercive recruitment stated that coercive recruitment in Chechnya has been directed at certain groups of the local population.<sup>97</sup> Critics of the authorities are at most risk of being coercively recruited.<sup>98</sup> Harold Chambers assessed that even being a member of the ‘wrong’ Telegram-channel could put a person at risk of being recruited, and he added that the Chechen authorities possess the necessary software to monitor social media platforms.<sup>99</sup> HRW stated that activists and members of civil society organisation could risk being recruited. They further elaborated that cases of recruitment of ad due to their activism is not limited to Chechnya and Chechens but has also been documented in the rest of Russia.<sup>100</sup>

Family members of vocal critics of the Chechen authorities also risk being recruited. The brother of a well-known Chechen dissident, Khassan Khalitov, had been forcefully sent to the frontline in Ukraine.<sup>101</sup> Alexander Kvakhadze of the Rondeli Foundation added that he had heard of other similar cases.<sup>102</sup>

In Chechnya, HRW had seen examples of persons being recruited because they were a part of the LGBT community. These persons were given a choice: either they would to be outed so that their LGBT identity would be known in the public and by their families – which would entail the risk of them being killed – or they could sign a contract with the MoD.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Harold Chambers: 11

<sup>94</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 2

<sup>95</sup> HRW and NEDC: 19; Mark Galeotti: 3

<sup>96</sup> Mark Galeotti: 3

<sup>97</sup> Harold Chambers: 11-15; Russia Analyst: 8; Mark Galeotti: 5, 6; Rondeli Foundation: 6; HRW and NEDC: 3; Georgian journalist: 6; Russian journalist: 3; Journalist covering Chechnya: 7

<sup>98</sup> Russia Analyst: 8; Mark Galeotti: 5; HRW and NEDC: 3

<sup>99</sup> Harold Chambers: 16

<sup>100</sup> HRW and NEDC: 3

<sup>101</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 7; Harold Chambers: 16; The Insider, «*Threatening mothers and sisters.*» *How Chechen «volunteers» are forcibly sent to fight in Ukraine*, 15 June 2022, [url](#)

<sup>102</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 7

<sup>103</sup> HRW and NEDC: 4

Users of illegal drugs and alcohol has also been forced to sign contracts with the MoD.<sup>104</sup> Harold Chambers stated that the authorities used coercive recruitment to get rid of what the Chechen authorities has labelled ‘undesirables’. HRW noted that any deviation from the norms and rules of Kadyrov could be used to force persons to sign contracts with the MoD or the National Guard. The Chechen authorities use forced recruitment to Ukraine as a form of punishment in Chechnya.<sup>105</sup>

Although certain groups can be identified as being more at risk than others it should be noted that there is a high degree of unpredictability and arbitrariness in the actions of Chechen authorities in regards to coercive recruitment. Sources have indicated that any contact with Chechen authorities can involve risks from a recruitment perspective.<sup>106</sup> According to Chambers, this type of seemingly random recruitment seemed to be most prevalent during the autumn of 2022. At that time, the authorities coercively recruited most Chechen men they came into contact with without regard for their physical and/or mental condition. Chambers knows of cases where people involved in car accidents were recruited and sent to Ukraine.<sup>107</sup> Three sources also noted reports of Chechens trying to obtain external passports have been coercively recruited.<sup>108</sup> Chambers further elaborated that Chechens trying to avoid recruitment by leaving Russia at the Astrakhan border crossing into Kazakhstan have been recruited at the border by Chechen authorities.<sup>109</sup>

#### 4.4. Exemptions from recruitment

The Russian legislation describes the formal exemptions for recruitment to military service.<sup>110</sup> However, the Chechen authorities largely seem to ignore these exemptions from military service. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether there are any actual exemptions for recruitment in Chechnya. As the processes of coercive recruitment is extrajudicial, there are no

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<sup>104</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 6; Harold Chambers: 19

<sup>105</sup> HRW and NEDC: 5

<sup>106</sup> Russian Journalist: 8; Georgian Activist: 2; Harold Chambers: 13

<sup>107</sup> Harold Chambers: 11, 13. See also <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-chechnya-ukraine-war-recruitment-kadyrov-shaming/32124093.html>

<sup>108</sup> Russian Journalist: 8; Georgian Activist: 2; Harold Chambers: 13

<sup>109</sup> Harold Chambers: 14

<sup>110</sup> Decree nr. 664). Указ президента российской федерации о предоставлении отсрочки от призыва на военную службу по мобилизации [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on rules for exemption from conscription for military service upon mobilisation], 24 September 2022, [url](#); Law on mobilisation. федеральный закон о мобилизационной подготовке и мобилизации в российской федерации (Federal law nr. 31-FZ ) [The Federal Law on Preparation for Mobilization and Mobilization in the Russian Federation], 13 February 1997, [url](#)

identifiable legal exemptions.<sup>111</sup> Sources have mentioned old age and poor health conditions as factors that could have influence on recruiter's decisions to target individuals.<sup>112</sup>

Furthermore, exemption on health grounds based on different medical conditions is also in place.<sup>113</sup> Although, there has been numerous cases from across the North Caucasus where the authorities have ignored medical conditions and even sent people labelled as 'invalids'/disabled to Ukraine.<sup>114</sup> One source opined that medical exemption would only be applied in Chechnya if the person in question is in such a bad health condition that it is physical impossible for him to fight.<sup>115</sup>

If a person is closely connected to Kadyrov and to people in his government – such as law enforcement officials and other officials – they would be exempted from being forcefully recruited to Ukraine.<sup>116</sup>

On the other hand, if the person is perceived as being in opposition to Kadyrov, the person could be recruited regardless of his age.<sup>117</sup> In this regard, one should see recruitments as a form of punitive measure.<sup>118</sup> Therefore, one source opined that medical issues or age limit would not exempt a person from coercive recruitment.<sup>119</sup>

Paying a bribe to the Chechen Recruitment officers can also exempt a person from recruitment.<sup>120</sup> According to one source, it has become a much-used resort for persons who wish to avoid recruitment to pay a bribe.<sup>121</sup> The price for exemption by bribe ranges from 300-500,000 rubles<sup>122</sup> (3,013-5,022 EUR) per person or even up to 5,000,000 rubles (50,565 EUR). One source pointed out that an ordinary Chechen is unlikely to have 5,000,000 rubles that they can spend on bribes.<sup>123</sup> However, even after a person had paid a bribe, the Chechen authorities could return for this person after a while in order to recruit him.<sup>124</sup>

If a person was unable to pay the bribe, required to be exempted, then he would be forced to sign a contract and would be sent to Ukraine. Furthermore, not all persons are presented with

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<sup>111</sup> Georgian Journalist: 10

<sup>112</sup> Harold Chambers: 23; Journalist covering Chechnya: 9; Russian journalist: 9-10; Open Caucasus Media: 13-14; Activist: 14

<sup>113</sup> Harold Chambers: 23; Russian journalist: 10; Activist: 14

<sup>114</sup> Harold Chambers: 23

<sup>115</sup> Russian journalist: 10

<sup>116</sup> Georgian journalist: 11; Activist: 13

<sup>117</sup> Activist: 14

<sup>118</sup> HRW and NEDC: 15; Rondeli Foundation: 11

<sup>119</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 11

<sup>120</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 9; Activist: 13+17; HRW and NEDC: 18

<sup>121</sup> Activist: 13

<sup>122</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 9; Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытать» ["They told the mother: if he doesn't go voluntarily, we will take him and torture him."], 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>123</sup> Activist: 17

<sup>124</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 9

the possibility to try to bribe his way out: If a person has expressed harsh criticism of the Chechen government, then he could be sent to Ukraine without any possibility for paying a bribe.<sup>125</sup>

## 4.5. Consequences of refusing

The interviewed sources assessed that it would be very difficult to resist coercive recruitment in Chechnya.<sup>126</sup> The Chechen authorities would likely use violence and physical abuse against people who refuse until they accept recruitment.<sup>127</sup> The person could also face a prison sentence based on fabricated criminal charges.<sup>128</sup> A third option possible is that the Chechen authorities would beat the person to death if he refuses to comply.<sup>129</sup>

The person who refuses recruitment could try to escape to another Russian region. However, it would still be possible for the Chechen authorities to find him. The authorities would track the person via his relatives. The Chechens are known for having a high level of connection to their relatives. This makes it easier for the authorities to identify the relatives and to subject the members of the extended family to collective punishment, if the Chechen authorities believe that a person from a particular family has done something punishable.<sup>130</sup>

One source had heard of cases where Chechens had fled abroad in order to avoid recruitment. However, the Chechen police then took mothers or sisters hostage in Chechnya so that the person in question would return and sign a recruitment contract with the MoD.<sup>131</sup>

## 4.6 Recruitment of Chechens residing outside of Chechnya

### 4.6.1. Recruitment of Chechens from other parts of the Russian Federation

The interviewed sources have not heard of any cases of coercively recruitment of Chechens residing outside of Chechnya in the Russian Federation to the war in Ukraine, except for Chechens living in Dagestan..<sup>132</sup>

Formally, the Chechen authorities can only recruit ethnic Chechens who reside within the Republic of Chechnya. Recruits from Chechnya would have to register at the Chechen

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<sup>125</sup> HRW and NEDC: 18

<sup>126</sup> Mark Galeotti: 14; Rondeli Foundation: 12; Georgian journalist: 10; Journalist covering Chechnya: 10; Russian analyst: 10; Activist: 17; HRW and NEDC: 18; Russian journalist: 11

<sup>127</sup> Mark Galeotti: 14; Russian analyst: 10; Activist: 17; Rondeli Foundation: 12; HRW and NEDC: 18

<sup>128</sup> Georgian journalist: 10; Journalist covering Chechnya: 10; Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытаться», 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>129</sup> Russian journalist: 11; Activist: 17

<sup>130</sup> Russian journalist: 11-12; Journalist covering Chechnya: 10

<sup>131</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 11

<sup>132</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 5

*voenkomat*.<sup>133</sup> In this light, it is unclear to what extent Kadyrov is allowed to use force outside of Chechnya.<sup>134</sup>

Recruitment of Chechens by Chechen authorities in other regions of Russia is unlikely to take place, as it is much easier to recruit Chechens residing in Chechnya. In this regard, it would have to be a very vocal critic of the Kadyrov government for the Chechen authorities to make the effort of recruiting that particular person.<sup>135</sup>

On the other hand, there has been cases where the family have exerted pressure on activists and critics of Kadyrov residing elsewhere in Russia to stop their activities.<sup>136</sup> In some cases, the Chechen authorities have worked together with local law enforcement in e.g. Moscow to bring Chechen critics back to Chechnya.<sup>137</sup> The Chechen authorities could also themselves get a hold of a particular person, if they wanted.<sup>138</sup> One source mentioned an old case where the Chechen police had taken and subsequently beaten a couple of Chechens from St. Petersburg back to Chechnya.<sup>139</sup>

The Chechen authorities could also recruit a Chechen if they were visiting relatives in Chechnya. In such a case, the authorities could coerce the person in question into joining the army.<sup>140</sup>

Although, no cases of recruitment other than in Dagestan has been known, this does not mean that recruitment of Chechens could not occur in other regions of Russia, according to HRW and NEDC.<sup>141</sup>

### *4.6.2. Recruitment of Chechens living outside of the Russian Federation*

The interviewed sources assessed that the Chechen authorities did not recruit Chechens outside of Russia.<sup>142</sup> The Chechen authorities have not invested much in recruitment outside of Russia, as it would be much easier for them to recruit the Chechens living in Chechnya proper.<sup>143</sup>

One source knew of cases from Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, where the Chechen authorities had tried to recruit local Kists to the war in Ukraine. However, these cases were recruitment attempts to go fight for the Ukrainian side in order to infiltrate the Ukrainian forces.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Mark Galeotti: 11

<sup>134</sup> Harold Chambers: 24

<sup>135</sup> Mark Galeotti: 12

<sup>136</sup> Mark Galeotti: 13

<sup>137</sup> Harold Chambers: 24; Activist: 15

<sup>138</sup> Activist: 15

<sup>139</sup> Activist: 16

<sup>140</sup> Mark Galeotti: 11

<sup>141</sup> HRW and NEDC: 10

<sup>142</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 15; Activist: 22; Russian journalist: 13

<sup>143</sup> Russian journalist: 17

<sup>144</sup> Activist: 19

On the other hand, if a Chechen freely travelled to Chechnya, they could be subject to recruitment.<sup>145</sup> Although, a Chechen family would probably not lure a man to Chechnya for recruitment to the army.<sup>146</sup> However, there has been different cases of family members luring Chechens back to Chechnya from Europe. This has happened if the family had wanted to force a female Chechens family member to return, if for example they found her behaviour to be against, the local Chechen customs or religious rules.<sup>147</sup>

The Chechen authorities have established a network of informants and defenders of Kadyrov within the Chechen diaspora in Western Europe with the task of persuading Chechens in Western Europe to actively support Kadyrov and even sometimes to return to Chechnya to voice their support for Kadyrov.<sup>148</sup> These activists would face no problems upon their return to Chechnya.<sup>149</sup>

Furthermore, there are Chechens who moved to Europe during the first and second Chechen wars. It happens quite often that these Chechens will return to Chechnya. However, as they left the country, during these wars, they are not perceived as traitors and therefore not necessarily in more risk than others. If persons do not criticise the Chechen government, they would probably not face any problems upon return.<sup>150</sup>

#### 4.7. Recruitment of Chechens in prisons

The sources interviewed to this report hold different perspectives on recruitment of Chechens from prisons in Russia. However, only one source stated that they have not heard of recruitment of Chechens to the war from prisons anywhere in Russia, including from prisons inside Chechnya proper.<sup>151</sup>

In Chechnya, there are two types of prison systems, between which there is a lot of transfer and mobility:<sup>152</sup>

- Secret prisons: Regularly physically abuse of prisoners and use of the prison as a way of forcing people to deliver witness statements, in order to implicate other suspects or to get confession prior to their transfer to legitimate facilities or court. There are reports of beating prisoners with truncheons, electric shocks and cases of water boarding.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Georgian journalist: 9; Russian journalist: 13

<sup>146</sup> Russian journalist: 16

<sup>147</sup> Russian journalist: 15

<sup>148</sup> Open Caucasus Media: 15; Activist: 20, 22

<sup>149</sup> Activist: 20

<sup>150</sup> Russian journalist: 14

<sup>151</sup> Rondeli Foundation: 13

<sup>152</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 24

<sup>153</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 27

- Official prisons: There are very few official penal facilities in Chechnya. This absence is partly due to concerns from the prison authorities on Islamic radicalisation. Therefore, the Chechen authorities have continuously tried to move Muslim prisoners deep into the heart of Russia. According to prof. Pallot, the local Chechen population who are ordinary offenders – common criminals – would serve their time in Chechen correctional institutions.<sup>154</sup>

#### *4.7.1. Recruitment from Chechen prisons*

The Chechen authorities have recruited Chechens serving time in Chechen prisons for the war effort in Ukraine.<sup>155</sup> As it was not possible to recruit from remand prisons when the Wagner group recruited from prisons,<sup>156</sup> there were not many prisoners from Chechnya to recruit, as many Chechen prisoners serve their time in the heartlands of Russia.<sup>157</sup>

The Chechen authorities primarily recruited from Chechen prisons in the second or third month of the full-scale invasion. This was because the Chechen units had suffered heavy losses during the first month and they needed to replace the loss of manpower quickly. It is unclear whether the Chechen authorities relaxed the practice of recruiting from prisons or whether they ran out of undesirables to recruit from the prisons.<sup>158</sup>

Recruitment of Chechens serving prison time in Chechnya has been another way for the authorities to get rid of drug and alcohol users, or other categories of people which the authorities have labelled as ‘undesirables’.<sup>159</sup> Prisoners from Chechen prisons have been recruited as cannon fodder for offensive initiatives at the front line in the so-called Storm Z or Storm V units.<sup>160</sup>

The recruitment efforts have not necessarily taken place inside the official prisons in Chechnya, but through the secret prison system in Chechnya. There is a Chechen idiom in Russian referring to this system as the ‘Kadyrovite Basements’. These basements are not comparable to the prisons in Russia proper and are completely extrajudicial.<sup>161</sup> However, there have been very few reports about the phenomenon in general. This has not been a large-scale effort by the Chechen authorities, but an effort to get rid of these so-called ‘undesirables’.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 30+34

<sup>155</sup> Mark Galeotti: 15

<sup>156</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 77

<sup>157</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 30+77; Mark Galeotti: 15

<sup>158</sup> Harold Chambers: 21

<sup>159</sup> Harold Chambers: 19

<sup>160</sup> Mark Galeotti: 15; Harold Chambers: 19

<sup>161</sup> Harold Chambers: 20

<sup>162</sup> Harold Chambers: 19

#### 4.7.2. Recruitment from prisons outside of Chechnya

Chechens serving their prison sentence outside of Chechnya has been subject to recruitment to the war in Ukraine.<sup>163</sup> However, the number of recruited Chechen prisoners is unclear.<sup>164</sup>

Under Russian legislation, a person should be tried either in the place where the crime has been committed or where the person has permanent residency.<sup>165</sup> In this regard, any Chechen who has committed a crime or has residence in other regions of Russia and therefore are serving time in other Russian prisons outside of Chechnya could be recruited as any other Russian prisoners could.<sup>166</sup> The Chechens from other Russian prisons would probably be deployed to regular Russian army units not only the Chechen units.<sup>167</sup>

Since June 2022, the private military company (PMC), named the Wagner Group, started to recruit Russian prisoners, as new soldiers to replace the killed in action (KIA) and wounded in action (WIA) in Ukraine were needed.<sup>168</sup> The Wagner group focused on recruiting from the big loyal penal regions, since recruitment required an agreement with the head of the regional prison authorities called UFSIN.<sup>169</sup>

The recruitment was not very popular among the UFSIN officers, because recruitment from their prison would mean a loss of approximately 200 prisoners, which the prison authorities needed for their industrial production. Therefore, the chosen for recruitment was mainly the most loyal colonies.<sup>170</sup>

Consequently, PMC Wagner did only recruit prisoners from the correctional colonies in the Russian heartland.<sup>171</sup> Furthermore, the Russian authorities have continuously tried to move Muslim prisoners deep into the heart of Russia. This concerns any Muslim that the authorities would think could be radicalised or is already radicalised or extremist.<sup>172</sup> There have e.g. been cases of Chechens serving time in Russia proper having links to foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>173</sup>

In the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian authorities avoided sending prisoners who were serving time for extremism and terrorism to war, as the authorities considered them unreliable and disloyal.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, the authorities were afraid of handing over weapons to persons they perceive as their enemies,<sup>175</sup> fearing that the extremists would turn their

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<sup>163</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 16; Mark Galeotti: 15

<sup>164</sup> Mark Galeotti: 15

<sup>165</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 37

<sup>166</sup> Russian journalist: 23; Prof. Judith Pallot: 78

<sup>167</sup> Russian journalist: 23

<sup>168</sup> DIS, *Russia: An update on military service since July 2022, December 2022*, [url](#), p. 21

<sup>169</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 78

<sup>170</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 78

<sup>171</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 81

<sup>172</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 30

<sup>173</sup> Harold Chambers: 22

<sup>174</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 16; Harold Chambers: 22; Prof. Judith Pallot: 81;

<sup>175</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 16

weapons against the Russian soldiers, and not the Ukrainians.<sup>176</sup> However, in recent months, the authorities have now begun to send perceived religious extremists to the Ukraine as well.<sup>177</sup>

Recruitment of prisoners is still ongoing and in fact, the MoD has expanded the scope of recruits, which now includes recruiting from the remand prisons.<sup>178</sup>

There are reports of various forms of pressure put on prisoners for them to volunteer and sign a contract with the MoD. This could be turning off the heating, cutting back on their food rations, saying no one is going to get parole unless there are some volunteers found etc.<sup>179</sup>

According to prof. Pallot, every prisoner is at some risk of being recruited. However, the likelihood depends on how much a person can resist the pressure they endure. Many of the prisoners who have a sentence of more than 20 years would be more inclined to accept recruitment as they are probably going to die in prison, so in that light recruitment may seem as a better option.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытаться», 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>177</sup> Journalist covering Chechnya: 16; Important Stories, «Сказали матери: если добровольно не поедет, заберем и будем пытаться», 14 February 2024, [url](#)

<sup>178</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 80

<sup>179</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 82

<sup>180</sup> Prof. Judith Pallot: 83

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## Annex 1: Terms of Reference

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- Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine
- Types of recruitment of Chechens
- Prevalence of coercive recruitment of Chechens fight in Ukraine? (self recruitment)
- Recruitment methods of the Kadyrovites
- Prevalence of recruitment from Chechen prisons to the war in Ukraine
- Prevalence of recruitment of Chechens serving prison time outside Chechnya to the war in Ukraine
- Recruitment methods in Chechen prisons

## Annex 2: Meeting minutes

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### Open Caucasus Media

*Open Caucasus Media covers the North and South Caucasus, with in-depth analysis of the issues, movements, conflicts, and people shaping the region.*

*Tbilisi, 22 February 2024*

#### Access to information

1. The information space in the North Caucasus, including in Chechnya has been shrinking in recent years. Many journalists and bloggers has left the area and this naturally has dampened the flow of information. Furthermore, many journalists and researchers covering the North Caucasus from abroad has been advised against travelling to the areas since the launch of the full-scale invasion.

#### Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine

2. Generally, there are two types of Chechens who are recruited to the war in Ukraine. There are those, who join the army voluntarily for financial reasons, and there are those who are coerced and blackmailed into joining the army. According to the source, there has been many reports of Chechens being coerced into joining war in Ukraine. The scale of both types of recruitment is unclear to the source, but they have seen examples of both types.
3. Chechens are primarily recruited to serve in units formed in Chechnya under the command of the Kadyrovites. In principle, it is the source's understanding that all Chechen units, including the Kadyrovites, are under the command of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD). However, the Chechen units, including the Kadyrovites operate with at large degree of autonomy as compared to the rest of the regular forces under the Russian MoD.
4. According to the source, the Kadyrovites are a de facto army of Chechnya, and this has historical explanations. Putin wants stability in Chechnya and as long as Kadyrov can deliver this, he gets a high degree of autonomy, including on security. However, this does not mean that Moscow is without a say in what could be labelled 'internal Chechen affairs'. The source stated that FSB has been involved in persecutions of Chechen human rights activists as well as Chechen LGBT persons, within Chechnya and beyond human rights activists and LGBT activist in Chechnya.
5. The source assessed that it would be unlikely that ethnic Chechens would be recruited to serve under ethnic Russian command directly under the MoD. This also includes the ethnic Chechens who are coercively recruited, because they are coercively recruited by the Chechen authorities. Generally, Chechens want to be amongst other Chechens. This is also why Chechens wants to serve prison time amongst other Chechens rather than amongst ethnic Russians.

6. The source did not know whether recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine has been stable throughout the war, but they stated that the visibility of Chechens fighting in Ukraine has declined compared to the first year of the war. This could be an indication that there are less Chechens deployed in Ukraine, although, the source did not know this for a fact.

#### **Coercive recruitment in Chechnya**

7. Coercive recruitment in Chechnya serves as a form of punishment. This could be punishment for following another strand of Islam than the official Chechen strand of Islam. It could also be for difference even the smallest difference of political opinion. According to the source, the threshold for when such differences are punished has been gradually lowered in recent years, meaning that even the smallest ‘offenses’ can now be punished.
8. The source highlighted that what on paper could seem like a punishment over political or religious views could also easily be grounded in a dispute between families and/or clans. Chechnya is a small society where families and clans are constantly engaged in power struggles with one another over influence and power within the Chechen society. Whenever a feud or dispute with another family or clan emerges, it is not uncommon for one part in the dispute to report the other part to the Chechen authorities over alleged religious and political offenses. This was common practice during the LGBT pogroms in Chechnya in 2017. As such, the source assessed that this dynamic is currently taking place in relation to coercive recruitment.
9. Common forms of coercion in Chechnya are blackmail against the individual of concern of the family. Examples of common forms of blackmail in Chechnya are threats of violence, abduction, trumped up charges based on allegations of drug use as well as allegations of extremist behaviour.
10. The source explained that extremism is a broad concept in Chechnya and includes both perceived religious extremism, political extremism and even taking interest in Chechen culture and history. The person in question is then faced with the false choice of having the content of the blackmail realised or joining the army.

#### **Chechen customary laws and norms and coercive recruitment**

11. If a woman in Chechnya commits any wrongdoing in the eyes of the Chechen authorities, such as having the wrong religious beliefs, it is likely that her male relatives would be punished for this. In contemporary Chechnya’s Chechen culture, a woman is always subject to a male family member who has the responsibility of this woman. If she is then perceived to have transgressed the norms and values of the Chechen culture, the male guardian then has to be punished for her perceived wrongdoing. The source has not seen any such cases where male family members have been coercively recruited to the war in Ukraine based on the woman’s actions, but the source assessed that it could likely be happening.

12. Generally, the concept of collective punishment is commonplace in Chechen culture. This means that individual members of a family – or even the entire family – can sometimes be punished for one individual's perceived wrongdoing. One of the harshest punishments in Chechen culture is for the entire family to be expelled from the Chechen Republic due to the actions of one individual. Since the war in Ukraine broke out in 2022, coercive recruitment has been added to the list of collective punishments.

#### **Exemptions for recruitment**

13. The source assessed that elderly people would generally not be coercively recruited to the war in Ukraine. They further assessed that this would likely be the only form of exemption since coercive recruitment serves as a punitive measure.
14. The Federal Russian legal system is generally applied arbitrarily and selectively in Chechnya generally does not apply in Chechnya. Therefore, the exemptions regarding recruitment to the war in Ukraine listed in the Federal Russian law does not apply in Chechnya. Rather it is the customary law of Adat, which regulates social norms and rules in Chechnya, where a small group of elderly men decides in individual cases. According to the source, the Adat in a Chechen context is perceived as de facto lawlessness — an arbitrary justification serving the interests of the ruling class — and thus many people turn to sharia when seeking justice.

#### **Recruitment of Chechens living outside of Russia**

15. The source assessed that it is unlikely that Chechens living in Western Europe would be subjected to recruitment to the war in Ukraine. However, the source stated that the Chechen authorities have developed a network of informants and agents within the Chechen diaspora in Western Europe. These are often tasked with persuading Chechens in Western Europe to actively support Kadyrov and even sometimes to return to Chechnya to voice their support for Kadyrov.

## Georgian journalist

*Tbilisi, 19 February 2024*

### Access to information in Chechnya

1. According to the journalist, Chechnya is a very closed society and Chechens are not always willing to talk to people from outside Chechnya due to fear of repression from local and federal authorities. As such, reporting on Chechnya can at times be challenging.

### Recruitment in Chechnya

2. Recruitment of ethnic Chechens to the Russian invasion of Ukraine takes place although it is difficult to assess the scale of this practice. Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was uncommon for the Russian authorities to recruit Chechens to the Russian army because Chechens – as well as Dagestanis and Ingush people – were perceived as outsiders and not trustworthy.
3. Kadyrovites are also present in Ukraine but they are not taking part in the actual war. According to sources the journalist interviewed, the Kadyrovites are merely in Ukraine as a PR operation. Because of this, they are also referred to as the so-called TikTok Army.

### Types of recruitment

4. The journalist distinguishes between two types of recruitment of ethnic Chechens to the war in Ukraine: Recruitment for socio-economic reasons and coercive recruitment. It is very hard to tell how many who have joined the army for financial reasons and how many who are coerced.
5. Chechnya is a poor region and therefore some choose to join the army as a way of securing one self and their family. Furthermore, joining the army can be a way of climbing the social ladder in Chechnya.

### Prevalence of coercive recruitment of Chechens to fight in Ukraine

6. Coercive recruitment are usually aimed at social outcasts such as users of drugs and alcohol but it has also been used towards members of the Chechen LGBT community as well as critics of the Kadyrov regime. The source has heard of cases where Chechens has been abducted to basements inside Chechnya where they have been threatened with long prison sentences unless they signed a contract to join the war in Ukraine. These prison sentences could be due to anything from drug or alcohol usages to running a red light. The fact that people are detained in basements rather than regular prisons cells tells the source that these ways of recruiting Chechens are extrajudicial without regards to the rule of law in Chechnya. It is also a form of punishment for the

family members of critics. There are reports of sending the relatives of critics to the frontlines in Ukraine.

7. The source has also heard that girls and women in Chechnya have been coerced into making male family members join the army. These females were targeted by the Chechen authorities because they allegedly done something wrong. The source has also heard that girls and women in Chechnya have been pressured. For instance, a girl detained in a different region of Russia was tasked with identifying "three Chechens" involved in drug use. In another instance, detained girl faced threats that her brothers would be located and sent to the frontline if she failed to comply with the demands of the security forces.
8. To the source's knowledge, there has not been incidents of ethnic Chechens being pressured into joining the army in other regions of the Russian Federation. The sources speculates that considering Kadyrovs authority this could be possible.
9. The source has not heard about forced recruitment abroad to Chechen forces. It would of course be possible for a person to travel to Russia/Chechnya and volunteer

### **Consequences of refusing to be recruited**

10. Coercive recruitment is a punitive measure and therefore critics and social deviants can in theory be forced to sign a contract and sent to the front, even if they are exempted by law. The whole processes is extrajudicial and no legislation is relevant. As such, the consequences of refusing this coercive recruitment would most likely be physical abuse and/or a long prison sentence. In reality, it is not possible to refuse coercive recruitment. According to the journalist, it is difficult to assess the scale of this coercive recruitment, because people are afraid that even saying that they were coerced can have consequences for themselves or their relatives.

### **Exemptions for recruitment**

11. According to the journalist, people who are close to Kadyrov – such as law enforcement and bureaucrats – are the only ones who are exempted from being forcefully recruited to the army.

### **Military service (conscription)**

12. The source is not aware whether regular conscription still takes place in Chechnya.

## Journalist covering Chechnya

Tbilisi, 26 February 2024

### Access to information

1. Journalists have always had problems accessing information from Chechnya. Chechens often do not respond to journalistic inquiries at all, including because the laws of Russia are interpreted very loosely there. The Journalist has had to use many sources anonymously in order to ensure their safety.
2. Since the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, residents of Chechnya has been afraid even to give information anonymously, because they fear that they or their relatives would be sent to the war as a consequence.

### Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine

3. According to the journalist, there are several thousand soldiers from Chechnya permanently stationed in Ukraine. Sources tell the journalist that, unlike other regions of Russia, they can return home after a few months if they survive. At the moment, according to the official version, there are now 7,000 people from Kadyrov's Chechnya in Ukraine. Recruitment is proceeding systematically through municipal government structures, district police officers, local security forces and even through imams in mosques.
4. Ethnic Chechens primarily serve in the Akhmat units, e.g. South-Akhmat, West-Akhmat and East-Akhmat, which were formed in 2022 in Gudermes. OMON<sup>181</sup> "Akhmat Fortress" is a mobile special purpose detachment (on transport), a unit within the Rosgvardiya. OMON "Akhmat-Grozny" is a mobile special purpose detachment, a unit within the Rosgvardiya.
5. Recruited Chechens tend to obey the Chechen leadership (Kadyrov, Delimkhanov, Apti Alaudinov, Magomed Daudov) more than the chiefs from the Federal Ministry of Defence. According to the journalist, Chechens serve on better terms than other Russians do and their units are better equipped. In addition, Chechen units often come into conflict with other units of the Ministry of Defence.
6. When asked who would typically be the subject of recruitment in Chechnya, the journalist stated that first; the authorities would hire those who served in the army, or the police, or in any paramilitary unit.
7. Relatives of critics of the regime have been subjected to forced recruitment. This includes relatives of Akhmed Zakayev, the Yangulbayev brothers, and relatives of

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<sup>181</sup> OMON: Special Purpose Mobile Unit (in Russian: Отряд мобильный особого назначения)

Khassan Khalitov etc. As well as those who express dissatisfaction with the authorities inside the Chechen republic, then forcibly leave for the front.

8. When asked to what extent recruitment of Chechens happened in other Russian regions than Chechnya, the source stated that recruitment was underway in all regions, but so far, it has only been in Chechnya that torture and death threats have been used to get a person to agree to sign a contract and go to war.

### **Exemptions for recruitment**

9. Regarding whether some parts of the Chechen population has been exempted from recruitment, the journalist assessed that there is an age limit, as pensioners are not accepted. Furthermore, the security forces temporarily leave alone those who have bribed the authorities not to be recruited. The price ranges from 300-500,000 rubles (3,013-5,022 EUR) per person. However, even after a bribe, after a while, the Chechen authorities can return for this person.

### **Consequences of refusing to be recruited**

10. The journalist stated that it is impossible to refuse recruitment. Sometimes it is possible to bribe one's way out of recruitment, but as previously stated, this is no guarantee. If a person should refuse recruitment, they would likely be met with physical abuse and/or prison on the basis of fabricated criminal charges. Furthermore, the relatives could be subjected to various kinds of repression.
11. If a Chechen has fled abroad in order to avoid recruitment his relatives may be threatened. The source was aware of cases when a mother or a sister was taken hostage by the Chechen police so that a person would return and go to war.

### **Prevalence of coercive recruitment of Chechens to fight in Ukraine**

12. According to the journalist's estimates, about half of all people from Chechnya sent to Ukraine went there against their wishes. They are typically blackmailed into recruitment. Examples include blackmail in fake criminal cases, a term in prison, blackmail that the authorities will publish any information of an intimate nature about a person. For example, the fact that he is in a relationship with some woman outside of marriage.
13. The journalist stated that the situation regarding coercive recruitment began to change a few months after the outbreak of the war, by the summer of 2022, due to the fact that there were many people killed in the war, wounded, and maimed. Heavy losses have drastically reduced the number of volunteers.

14. Fabricated/trumped up charges as a means to coerce Chechens to self-recruit is a widespread method because it works. The journalist does not have the exact number of people recruited in this way. However, the source noted that this was common practice in all districts of Chechnya.
15. Abduction is also used as a method. In this case, kidnapping is an instrument of pressure on a person to agree to go to war. This also applies to real offenders who committed a crime and chose to go to war instead of prison. The journalist opined that this was widely practiced by the Chechen police, but the source could not give an exact number of abductees for this purpose.

**Prevalence of recruitment from Chechen prisons to the war in Ukraine**

16. The source did not possess information as to what extent the Chechen authorities recruit persons to the war in Chechen prisons. Chechens serving their prison sentence outside of Chechnya has been subjected to recruitment to the same extent as other prisoners. However, the authorities try not to send those who are serving time for extremism and terrorism to war, as the Chechen authorities are afraid of handing over weapons to what they perceive as their enemies. In Chechnya, too, for a long time, the authorities tried not to recruit those who were accused of extremism, or considered unreliable by the authorities, not loyal to the regime. Recently however, the authorities have now begun to send extremists to the war, according to a human rights activist the journalist spoke to.

## Alexander Kvakhadze and Gela Khmaladze of the Rondeli Foundation

*The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) is an independent, non-profit policy think tank dedicated to helping improve public policy decision-making in Georgia through research and analysis, training of policymakers and policy analysts, and public education about the strategic issues, both domestic and international, facing Georgia and the Caucasus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The activities of the Foundation are aimed at promoting democracy and enhancing regional cooperation.*

*Tbilisi, 22 February 2024*

### **Recruitment of ethnic Chechens to the Russian invasion of Ukraine**

1. Ethnic Chechens are recruited either through the regular system operated by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) or through Ramzan Kadyrov's own system, The Kadyrovites. Chechens who serve under the Russian MoD are primarily recruited to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Unit. At the launch of the full-scale invasion, these units were deployed in Belarus and they took part in the initial attacks on Kyiv. Mostly as part of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Rifle Regiment which is stationed in Chechnya peace time. These troops are not connected to Kadyrov. Both combat and support staff. Suffered heavy casualties. Chechens who serve under the MoD do not serve under Russian led command.
2. The Kadyrovites are made up of several different units who perform different tasks. Some of the units are under the Ministry of Interior and some are under the National Guard (Rosgvardia) Command. In total, it is estimated that the Kadyrovites consist of between 12,000 and 14,000 men.
3. According to Khmaladze, the vast majority of Chechens deployed in Ukraine is serving under the Kadyrovites. There are around 10,000 soldiers deployed in Ukraine in so-called Chechen units, but only around 20 % of these units comprise ethnic Chechens. The other 80 % have other ethnicities and come from other regions in the Russian Federation. Many Russian soldiers prefer serving in these so-called Chechen units, because they are rarely operating at the front line and usually have better equipment. Furthermore, Kvakhadze stated that Chechens generally look down on ethnic Russians. Hence, Chechens are deployed in the Chechen units. The source further added that MoD units are ethnically mixed and they have never had all-Chechen units. Regarding Rossgvardia-linked Chechen groups (especially those that had been created before the war), they are monoethnic and consist of Chechens.
4. Most Chechens serving in Ukraine have signed contracts voluntarily. Chechnya is a poor region, and Chechen contractors receive a monthly salary of around 3,000 USD as

well as other benefits such as free housing and social benefits. Furthermore, Chechens who have served in Ukraine also gain social status. As such, signing a contract with the MoD and serving in Ukraine is for many Chechens an economic and social opportunity. These additional benefits of free housing and social services only apply to ethnic Chechens, according to Khmaladze. Kvakhadze stated that the Chechen contractors are not likely to be sent to areas of intense fighting such as Avdiivka or Bakhmut.

5. Khmaladze and Kvakhadze stated that every police officer in Chechnya has to serve three months per year in Ukraine. This is because the lines between police and soldier is blurred in Chechnya. According to Khmaladze, Chechens residing in other Russian regions than Chechnya are not recruited except for in Dagestan.

### **Coercive recruitment**

6. Khmaladze stated that there are four types of Chechens who are coercively recruited: Drug users, alcohol users, islamists and relatives of members of the political opposition in exile in Europe. They are usually approached by the Chechen police who asks the person in question to join the army. If they refuse, they are taken into custody where they are abused into joining the army.
7. The famous Chechen blogger and harsh critic of Ramzan Kaydov, Khassan Khalitov, has had his brother recruited and sent to the front lines in Ukraine, because he had been outspoken against Kadyrov. Kvakhadze has also heard of other such cases, but it is difficult to assess the scale of this practice. Khmaladze added that sometimes, the relatives of the political opponents in Chechnya are able to pay bribes to the Chechen authorities to avoid being coercively recruited.
8. Regarding the coercive recruitment of Islamists, Kvakhadze and Khmaladze stressed that the radical Islamists who e.g. were convicted of terror, were not sent to Ukraine as this group were not trusted by the Chechen authorities. However, the authorities in the North Caucasus, including Chechnya, have a prophylactic list of Islamists, and people on this list risks being coercively recruited.
9. Kvakhadze stated that most of these coercively recruited Chechens were deployed during the siege of Mariupol in the spring and summer of 2022, because it was difficult for them to defect. the source further elaborated that to his knowledge, the practice of coercively recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine peaked during the siege of Mariupol. Khmaladze estimated that around 540 ethnic Chechens have been killed since the start of the full-scale invasion. After the siege of Mariupol, the practice of coercively recruiting Chechens has declined, in part because many voluntarily sign contracts. Therefore, there is little need to coercively recruit Chechens.

10. Both analysts stated that Chechens who are coercively recruited serve under the Kadyrovite system because this practice is extrajudicial. Since many of them have no formal military training they primarily work behind the front lines in logistics etc.

#### **Exemptions for recruitment**

11. According to Kvakhadze, there are no conditions that would exempt one from being coercively recruited. The recruitment is meant as a punitive measure and therefore medical issues or age limit will not exempt one from being coerced into recruitment.

#### **Consequences of refusing to be recruited**

12. The analysts had not heard of concrete examples of people refusing to be recruited to the war in Ukraine. However, Kvakhadze stated that in Chechnya, even the slightest critique or public disagreement with the Kadyrov government will be punished. As an example of this lack of toleration of other opinions, the source mentioned that he had heard of a person who complained about the conditions of the roads near his village in Chechnya. He was taken into custody by the Chechen police who physically abused him and made him release a new video in which he now explained that the Chechen roads were in fact in excellent condition. As such, this example shows Kvakhadze that there is no room for even the slightest dissent or difference of opinion in Kadyrov's Chechnya. Therefore, the source assessed that anybody who would at first refuse to be recruited would be detained and abused into accepting recruitment.

#### **Recruitment of Chechens from prisons**

13. The analysts had not heard of Chechens being recruited to the war from prisons anywhere in Russia, including Chechen prisons. They had not heard of fabricating charges in order to coercively recruit Chechens either.

## Mark Galeotti

*Kent, 29 February 2024*

### **Kadyrovites and recruitment of regular Chechens to the war in Ukraine**

1. During the initial phase of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Chechens deployed in Ukraine were primarily the elite and exclusively ethnic Chechen units such as the Akhmat and the Kadyrovites. These were the so-called TikTok Army as they displayed a lot of pretence but did very little actual fighting. These units comprise the backbone of Kadyrov's security apparatus in Chechnya and Kadyrov is thus dependent on them. Therefore, as Kadyrov clearly did not want those units in Ukraine. This reluctance to be deployed in Ukraine led to serious problems with the chain of command, because orders given to these Chechen units in Ukraine were only obeyed if and when they had been given the green light by Grozny. This behaviour had made these units unpopular amongst the rest of the Russian military. As such, the Akhmat and Kadyrovites were in Mariupol' during the siege of Azovstal, however, they barely took part in the actual fighting.
2. Chechens who have been recruited by force are deployed in units without any political stake. These recruits serve primarily in Chechen units. However, these units can also contain other ethnic groups. Chechen forced recruits can also be deployed in regular Russian multi-ethnic units. Kadyrov is only concerned with his elite units. The main point of engaging in recruiting Chechens by force is to show Kadyrov's indispensability to the Kremlin. On the other hand, excluding Chechnya from the partial mobilisation that took place across Russia was a way of telling his own population that Kadyrov is taking care of Chechens and that Moscow is not in control in Chechnya.

### **Recruitment dynamics in Chechnya**

3. There have been cases of both voluntary and coercive recruitment from Chechnya. Chechnya is a relatively poor region in Russia, and hence many Chechens view deployment in Ukraine as an opportunity to provide for the family or build a new house in the village etc. Most of the corroborated cases of coercive recruitment has come from Grozny, which is the most prosperous region of Chechnya. As such, Galeotti suspects that these cases of coercive recruitment is happening in part because the local voenkomat has failed to meet the quotas from higher up the chain of command. These quotas are based in population size, and as people from the poorer and rural parts of Chechnya are more willing to sign up, coercive recruitment is likely more prevalent in the urban areas in order to meet the demands.
4. Although the power of the clans (teip) has diminished in Chechnya, the teip still matters – especially in the rural parts of Chechnya. In these parts of Chechnya, the need of meeting a certain quota can present itself as an opportunity for the local clan

leaders to get rid of unwanted members of the community by making them sign up to the war in Ukraine. In these instances, the Chechen authorities have effectively succeeded in outsourcing coercive recruitment without ever getting involved.

5. Kadyrov's government has always been repressive, and it has always persecuted critics. In this relation, the full-scale invasion in Ukraine has presented itself as an opportunity of the Chechen authorities to kill two birds with one stone: By forcefully recruiting regime critics – or people who express different world views – the Chechen authorities can both fulfil the quotas imposed by Moscow and get rid of the person in question. In the past, they would have had to employ other punitive measures.

### **Coercive recruitment**

6. After the initial phase of full-scale invasion, it became apparent to the Russian MoD that the need for fighters in Ukraine was greater than initially anticipated. This created a new dynamic where forced recruitment of ethnic Chechens arose. Forced recruits from Chechnya has not been recruited to the above listed elite units. This is because being a part of these elite units is a career path, which has required years of training. Furthermore, members of the elite units are well paid and enjoy a high degree of social status in Chechnya.
7. According to Galeotti, coercive recruits are not recruited to perform specific tasks in Ukraine. Rather, they are deployed in areas in need of manpower and perform tasks where it is needed. Given the current situation on the battlefield, this means that coercive recruits are likely to become infantry, because this is needed. On the other hand, if a Chechen signs up voluntarily, he has likely more influence over where he will be deployed and what tasks he is going to perform. As an example of this, Galeotti mentioned a case from March 2023, where a Chechen was arrested for an offense in Chechnya and was given the choice between four years in prison or deployment in Ukraine. This man had done military service and was a technical specialist, but because he had been coercively recruited, he ended up in the infantry.
8. Chechens who are coercively recruited to the war in Ukraine are likely to end up in multi-ethnic units under ethnic Russian command within the Russian MoD. In the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, radical Islamists were not recruited, as they were believed to pose a security threat. However, as the dynamics of the war has shifted and the need for infantry has emerged, there has been examples of Islamists being recruited to perform infantry-like tasks at the frontline. The so-called Islamists are likely to end up in multi-ethnic units under ethnic Russian command within the Russian MoD
9. Technically speaking, those who are coercively recruited are forced to sign contracts. This means that on paper, it all looks like a voluntary recruitment. This also means that

the ones who are coercively recruited are deployed in Ukraine on open-ended contracts.

10. There has been a tendency from Moscow to recruit people from the Russian periphery, because it is believed that these are less likely to pose demands and ask questions. Furthermore, many of the people officially recruited from the Moscow are actually ethnic minorities from the periphery persuaded to sign up in Moscow because they are able to pay better than elsewhere in Russia.

### **Chechen residing outside Chechnya**

11. Formally, the Chechen authorities can only recruit ethnic Chechens who reside within the Republic of Chechnya. Recruits from Chechnya would have to register at the Chechen voenkomat. However, if a Chechen living elsewhere in the Russian Federation is caught by the police whilst visiting relatives in Chechnya, they could be coerced into joining the army.
12. Galeotti has not heard of any cases of ethnic Chechen residing outside of Chechnya in the Russian Federation being coercively recruited to the war in Ukraine. He further assessed that this practice is unlikely to take place, as it is much easier to recruit Chechens residing in Chechnya. As such, it would have to be a very vocal critic of the Kadyrov government for the Chechen authorities to make the effort of recruiting that particular person. Galeotti opined that this same dynamic would also be true for Chechens living outside of Russia for example in the European Union.
13. There has been cases where the family have exerted pressure on activists and critics of Kadyrov residing elsewhere in Russia to stop their activities.
14. Galeotti assessed that it would be very difficult to resist coercive recruitment in Chechnya, because the authorities are willing to use violence and physical abuse towards people who refuse.

### **Recruitment from Chechen prisons**

15. The Chechen authorities have recruited Chechens serving time in Chechen prisons for the war effort in Ukraine. Some of these recruits have been deployed as the so-called Storm Z or Storm V units. However, it is unclear how many Chechens prisoners who has been recruited. Galeotti assessed that Chechen inmates had also been recruited to other parts of the Russian war in Ukraine. There is a pre-trial detention centre in Chechnya as well as a high security prison, but there are not many prisoners serving time in Chechnya.

### **Military service in Chechnya**

16. Regular military service in Chechnya has been conducted, according to schedule during the Russian full-scale -invasion of Ukraine. Chechen men who are conscripted to undertake military service do so in Chechen units serving in Chechnya. As such, the formal structures of conscription in Chechnya looks like elsewhere in Russia, but in fact, Kadyrov has more or less full control over the Chechen conscripts.

## HRW and NEDC

*Human Rights Watch (HRW) has not been in Chechnya since 2020.*

*Natalia Estemirova Documentation Center (NEDC) a project under the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. The centre was founded together with Russian and international human rights organisations to document violations of human Rights and war crimes committed under the Chechen wars. In 2015-2016, the centre also conducted FFM in the Donbas to document violations.*

*Tbilisi, 20 February 2024*

### **Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine**

1. According to NEDC, there is no official mobilisation taking place in Chechnya, as of February 2024. However, unofficial recruitment of Chechens in Chechnya occurs. Even though Chechnya is within the Russian Federation, the Chechen authorities do not abide by the Russian laws and the source described it as a totalitarian enclave. The Chechen Republic is therefore under de facto control of one person: The head of the republic, Mr. Ramzan Kadyrov, and the only real authority above him is the president of Russia.
2. To NEDC's knowledge, there was an ongoing recruitment of Chechen men in Chechnya. According to this source, there are three levels of recruitment in Chechnya:
  - I. Recruitment to the so-called 'The Kadyrovites' working under the Ministry of Interior. They are the foundation of Kadyrov's power. Members of The Kadyrovites' work within the official structure of the Chechen Ministry of Interior. These units could be called upon and send to Ukraine, Syria etc. if and when Kadyrov orders it.
  - II. Recruitment of ordinary Chechens, who Kadyrov does not value. These people are blackmailed or forced to sign contracts. It is not possible for these people not to sign a contract with the armed forces of the Russian Federation. Once a person has been ordered to sign, they have to abide. On paper, he would be signing a contract as a volunteer with the MoD. These persons are being enrolled into the Russian armed forces.
  - III. Chechnya provides certain training centres, so-called institutes for the Spetsnaz troops within the Republic of Chechnya. Some soldiers from all over Russia come to these centres to train. Kadyrov's men – the Kadyrovites, train them together with Russian military instructors.

### **Groups subjected to recruitment in Chechnya**

3. According to HRW, political and civic activists from different regions of Russia can be sent to the Russian army against their will. HRW has seen such examples. However, these examples were very specific cases of retaliation by the Russian authorities against people who have engaged in activism or dissenting positions.

4. In Chechnya, HRW has seen examples of men recruited because they were perceived as gay. These men were given a choice: either they would be outed so that their sexual orientation would be known to the public and their families – which would entail the risk of them being killed or subjected to persecution– or they could sign a contract with the MoD.
5. Other cases from Chechnya of forced recruitment have been also reported to HRW. People who are perceived as social deviant from the norms of Kadyrov’s Chechnya are likely to be at risk of recruitment. Recruitment could be the punishment for using drugs, drinking alcohol or of committing petty theft, etc. Recruitment can be also used a tool against critics of the government. Even more so, if some neighbours have been quarrelling and one of them feel the need to inform about this to the authorities, accusing the neighbour of slandering Kadyrov. This could be enough to get the person recruited for the war in Ukraine. HRW noted that any deviation from the norms and rules of Kadyrov could be used to force persons to sign contracts with the MoD or the National Guard.<sup>182</sup> The Chechen authorities are using forced recruitment to Ukraine as a form of punishment.
6. According to HRW, the Chechen law enforcement and security agencies have also been kidnapping/detaining local residents, and turning to their families and demanding a bribe of 10,000 US dollars. However, if the family is not able or willing to raise 10,000 US dollars, the detained individual is forced to sign a contract. According to the documents, such contracts would be signed as if the person in question was a volunteer.
7. Ramzan Kadyrov is himself a major general within the National Guard, which is why many Chechen recruiters from Chechnya are actually winding up serving as part of the National Guard. The forces of Kadyrov fought in Mariupol. (For more detail, see: “Russian Chain of Command” chapter in HRW’s recent report [“Our City Was Gone”: Russia’s Devastation of Mariupol, Ukraine’ \(hrw.org\)](#)).
8. The number of recruitments from Chechnya is very difficult to assess. However, NEDC got information from Chechen sources of various types that recruitment was ongoing and widespread. Before the full-scale invasion began, it was possible for Chechens to move to other parts of Russia, but right now Chechens fleeing Chechnya could be easily

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<sup>182</sup> The **National Guard of the Russian Federation** or **Rosgvardiya** ([Russian](#): Росгвардия) is the [internal military force](#) of [Russia](#), comprising an independent agency that reports directly to the [President of Russia Vladimir Putin](#) under his powers as Commander in Chief of the [Armed Forces of the Russian Federation](#) and Chairman of the [Security Council](#). The National Guard is separate from the [Russian Armed Forces](#). A law signed by [President of Russia Vladimir Putin](#) established the federal executive body in 2016. The National Guard has the stated mission of securing [Russia's borders](#), taking charge of [gun control](#), combating [terrorism](#) and [organised crime](#), protecting public order and guarding important state facilities

found by Chechen security forces, according to this source. Even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the situation was difficult for the Chechens. Formally, Kadyrov's security forces are part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. If they needed to identify someone on Russian territory and get help in detaining a particular person, then they received it. At the same time, even if they acted completely illegally, actually kidnapping a person (as, for example, in the case of Zarema Musaeva in Nizhny Novgorod), the local, regional security forces gave them complete freedom to do this.

9. However, before the war, people from Chechnya, especially if a person was not very known to the Chechen authorities, then they had some opportunities to "dissolve" in another region, especially in other republics of the North Caucasus, or in a large multinational city. At least for a while. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the nature of the police in the Russian state has significantly intensified. In cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, a facial recognition system operates effectively. Therefore, a person wanted by the Chechen authorities will not be safe anywhere in Russia. In small and medium-sized cities, he will inevitably attract the attention of neighbours as a stranger. In large cities, he risks finding himself caught by automated identification systems. However, this does not mean that there were no risks before, but now all Chechens are at risk. It is more that the risks were quite high before the war and now, by the estimation of NEDC, they leave practically no reasonable chance for the fugitive. Well, unless the person is a trained intelligence officer or a conspiracy genius.
10. HRW mentioned cases of young women from Chechnya who fled their abusive families to other cities in Russia such as Makhachkala, Moscow or St. Petersburg and were forcibly returned to Chechnya with the assistance of the Russian police. HRW opined that if this could happen to young women, then it could also be done for men who are fleeing recruitment.
11. If a person from Chechnya decides to flee the republic, then their family could be targeted by the Chechen authorities to force the individual to return. Therefore, if the authorities want to send a man to the frontlines and he flees, this should be sufficient for them to try to get him back.
12. The two sources had no knowledge of Chechens being recruited by Chechen authorities in other regions of the Russian Federation besides Chechnya. This does not mean that recruitment of Chechens would not occur in other regions of Russia. NEDC noted that it would be rather difficult to research the scope of such a phenomenon in Russia at this point.

13. NEDC noted that in Chechnya, torture in detention is widespread and brutal, therefore there are cases where detainees under torture have given names of people who were allegedly gay or have spoken up against Kadyrov. These persons did not necessarily have to be critics or gay, but the mere accusation could be sufficient for the Chechen authorities to go after these individuals, including with forced recruitment.

14. According to NEDC and HRW, some of the people who are connected to the Chechen government and have been working within the Chechen security agencies are also sent to Ukraine. However, they serve at another level than those persons who are perceived as social deviants who are essentially used as nothing but cannon fodder. Many of the well-connected serve in the National Guard; some were deployed in the siege of Mariupol.

15. So-called Kadyrovites are well equipped, trained and perceived as an elite. Those serving in the elite units, such as Akhmat battalion, enjoy a range of privileges and are less likely to die at the front lines. NEDC opined that the chances of dying while fighting, as a Kadyrovite is 3-5 times smaller than in other Russian units. Kadyrov protects people from his personal guard and does not allow his elite units to be used as cannon fodder. By “personal guard” is meant the armed formations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which are de facto under the personal effective control of Ramzan Kadyrov. As a rule, he is not at all concerned about the fate of military personnel and police officers from other units, even if ethnic Chechens serve there.

### **Exemptions for recruitment**

16. According to both interlocutors, there are no strong exemptions for recruitment in Chechnya. One should see recruitments such as these as a form of punishment. NEDC added that such punishments were a clear feature of a totalitarian state.

17. NEDC stated that before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started in 2022, a person who was perceived as Kadyrov’s opponent would be typically disappeared and tortured. Now these people – following on torture – could also be sent to Ukraine and serve as cannon fodder. The war in Ukraine has become a new instrument for Kadyrov to eliminate his opponents in Chechnya and at the same time show himself useful to president Putin.

18. NEDC advised that Kadyrov appears to have aspirations for a federal level post and the more useful he can be in the eyes of Putin, the better are his chances of obtaining a post as minister or something else at this level. This is why Kadyrov is so keen on showing Putin that Chechens are good soldiers who fight for Russia. Furthermore, Kadyrov is completely dependent on Putin and the subsidies that the Kremlin are sending to Chechnya. In this way, Kadyrov also needs to show the Kremlin that he is worth all the money that is allocated to Chechnya from the federal budget.

### Consequences of refusing to be recruited

19. HRW stated that if a person or his family pay a bribe to government officials, he can get away from being sent to Ukraine. HRW opined that if a person who is not in a position to pay the bribe still refuses to sign the contract, the authorities would likely threaten to kill him and retaliate against his family. Hence, in practice there are no way of refusing to sign a contract if you have no money to buy yourself out. Furthermore, HRW stated that it is not always possible to pay a bribe. If a person has expressed harsh criticism of the Chechen government, then he could be sent to Ukraine without the option of paying a bribe.

### Military service

20. According to the HRW, there are conscription points (*'voenkomaty'*) operating in Chechnya like anywhere else in Russia. Recruits sign contracts with the MoD, so the paper trail is flawless. How people are coerced to sign these contracts is another matter. HRW added that official mobilisation in Chechnya is not happening and did not even happen during the Russia-wide partial mobilisation in the autumn of 2022 (at the time, Kadyrov argued that he had supplied many Chechen soldiers prior to the mobilization, and Chechnya had therefore paid its dues). One may expect another wave of mobilisation in Russia after the so-called presidential elections in March 2024, which may also affect Chechnya.

21. NEDC mentioned that officially the mobilisation has never been terminated. The president never signed a decree to stop the mobilisation. Thus, the Russian authorities do not need to issue another decree for mobilisation as the mobilisation was never completed but only suspended. Therefore, the preparation time for a new wave of mobilisation could be very short compared to the first wave in 2022.

## Russia Analyst

United Kingdom, 29 February 2024

### **Chechen family structures and *Adat***

1. Family plays a central role in the organisation of social life in Chechnya. In the rural parts of Chechnya, clan structures are still strong and important, but in the more urbanised areas of Chechnya, these structures have been less important in recent years. These social structures are known as *Adat*, which is a form of customary rules, which defines the fabric for social relationships in Chechnya. Amongst these customary rules is the notion of collective guilt and collective punishment within families. This means that if a son or a daughter has committed perceived wrongdoings, the other family members can be punished for their relatives' actions. The punishments would depend on the severity of the wrongdoings of the family member.
2. Because the notion of guilt and punishment are collective in Chechnya, it is common for families to engage in vigilantism amongst their own family members as a form of control and to avoid punishment themselves. In relation to recruitment of young men to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this form of taking justice into the hands of the family has resulted in families pressuring young males into volunteering, as they fear harsher punishments from the surrounding society if they do not take action. As such, pressuring male family members into 'volunteering' can be seen as a pre-emptive measure in order to secure the family as a unit.

### **Recruitment of Chechens and Kadyrov's relationship with the Kremlin**

3. The source stated that Kadyrov and the Kremlin have engaged in a mutually dependant relationship. Kadyrov depends on the Kremlin for legitimacy and funding and the Kremlin depends on Kadyrov to uphold stability in Chechnya. Kadyrov can also deliver some form of legitimacy to the Kremlin in Chechnya. This relationship of dependency has created a dynamic in which coercive recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine has emerged. By delivering men to the war in Ukraine, Kadyrov can show his loyalty to the Kremlin while simultaneously getting rid of potential obstacles to his government in Chechnya. By delivering men to the war effort, Kadyrov shows the Kremlin that he is indispensable. At the same time, Kadyrov publicly stated that there would be no partial mobilisation in Chechnya as happened in all other regions of Russia. According to the Russia Analyst, excluding Chechnya from the partial mobilisation was a way for Kadyrov to tell both the Kremlin and the population in Chechnya that he is master of his own house.

### **Recruitment from the North Caucasus**

4. The Russia Analyst stated that the North Caucasus are generally a rather poor region within the Russian Federation. They did not have any hard data concerning Chechnya

specifically, but they are aware that in the neighbouring Dagestan there has been quite a lot of voluntary signups to the war in Ukraine, because serving in Ukraine is an opportunity to earn a substantial amount of money. As Dagestan and Chechnya are comparable both in economic and cultural terms, the source suspected that this dynamic was also taking place in Chechnya.

5. This means that there are both people who sign up voluntarily and people who are coerced into signing up. The Russia Analyst suspected that coercive recruitment in Chechnya could in part be explained by local officials needing to fulfil quotas coming from above, they turn to coercive recruitment.
6. The source stated that there are different forms of coercion and different degrees of coercion, and this makes it difficult to draw the line between what is coercion and what is not coercion. Furthermore, people are often wary of telling relatives that they have been coercively recruited because they are afraid that this could get the family into trouble.
7. There are clear examples of coercive recruitment of Chechens. The source mentioned one example, where a person was threatened that his brother would be tortured if he did not sign up to the war in Ukraine. Another less obvious example of coercive recruitment was the case where a young man signed up because the authorities threatened to show his family pictures of him together with a girl. Then there are examples of recruitment where it is less clear that actual coercion has taken place. To illustrate these cases, the analyst mentioned a case of a man signing up for the army, because he knew that his uncle, who is part of the local law enforcement, would take it out in the family unless someone from the family “volunteered”. Such cases would probably not be reported as actual coercion.
8. The source pointed out that vocal critics of the Kadyrov government would likely be first in line to be coercively recruited.
9. In the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, the Chechen authorities would shy away from recruiting people who are perceived as radical Islamists as this group of people is not trusted by the Chechen authorities. Part of Kadyrov’s role in Chechnya is to ensure that rebellious elements are kept quiet. However, as the demand for more men at the frontlines has increased, the source assessed that Kadyrov’s government has had to cut corners in order to fulfil the quotas.
10. The Chechen authorities are more authoritarian than elsewhere in Russia. Therefore, the source assessed that it is unlikely that a Chechen would be able to refuse coercive recruitment to the war in Ukraine. In general, Chechen authorities are more willing to engage in violence to get what they want than in other parts of the Russian federation.

## Harold Chambers

Harold Chambers specialises in comparative politics and International Relations, researching the intersection of power, identity, and violence in Central Eurasia and Southeast Asia.

Chambers has also been working as a freelance analyst, focusing on the political and security dynamics of the North Caucasus, particularly in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

*8 March, online meeting*

### **Access to information in Chechnya**

1. Chambers stated that Chechens in Russia generally sticks to themselves and rarely shares information with non-Chechens. As such, it is generally difficult to get valid information from Chechnya, but occasionally information still leaks out.

### **Chechen units observed in Ukraine**

2. Chechen-led units in Ukraine are cycling in and out of the battlefield. As such, it is difficult to assess which units are at any given moment present in Ukraine. However, there are five different types of Chechen units in Ukraine:
  - First, there are the ‘old’ Ministry of Defence (MoD) units formed prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
  - Second, there are the ‘new’ MoD units that have been formed during the course of the war. Chambers refers to these units as the Akhmat direction battalions (Akhmat Sever (North), Yug (South), etc). These have been formed in 2022, and in 2024, the Akhmat Rossiya and Akhmat Chechnya regiments were formed. Chambers stated that it is very difficult to assess the real scale of these units, as the Chechen authorities manipulate with the official numbers. Ramzan Kadyrov has more control over these new MoD units compared to the old MoD units, as the new units are not as integrated into the regular Russian MoD command structure. As such, these new MoD units resemble the Kadyrovtsy and the Rosgvardia in their structure and chain of command.
  - Third, there are the Akhmat Group. This started out as a volunteer group and is now on MoD contracts, which was launched as a part of a prelude to the mutiny attempt by the Wagner PMC.
  - Rosgvardia units have been heavily involved since the Kyiv assault, but have been involved to a lesser degree over the course of the war. This is because they form the core of Kadyrov’s forces in Chechnya
  - MVD units have been involved as well, but to a lesser extent than other types of units. They have remained away from the frontlines, but were notably used to “secure” Belgorod Oblast in the wake of Ukraine-supported raids by GUR-aligned Russian and Chechen units.
3. Over the course of the war, there has been a notable change in the presence of Chechen units in Ukraine. In February-March 2022, Chechen so-called elite units took

part in the assault on Kyiv among other things. This did not go well for these units. In the April 2022, some Chechen units took part in the siege of Mariupol, but in fewer numbers than the assault on Kyiv. Since then, the number of Chechen elite units present in Ukraine as well as their level of eliteness has declined. The big factor in this development is the aforementioned Akhmat Group.

4. The Akhmat Group is not a majority Chechen group and it has not been so for a long time—while it is difficult to know the exact timeline of demographic shifts within the unit, the decrease in the number of Chechens was noticeable after about the first month of its existence, so around late April 2022. The group has been used as a way to gather Russians with different ethnic backgrounds from all across Russia, and train them at the Russian Spetsnaz University in Gudermes, Chechnya under the command of ethnic Chechens. This façade of Chechenness has given Kadyrov a way to show Putin that he is actively contributing to the war without actually putting any of his own men at risk. Since the dismantlement of the Wagner PMC, the Akhmat Group has largely taken over the tasks previously performed by Wagner in Ukraine. This has especially been true in Donbas. Furthermore, Chambers pointed out that there is a rather strict ethnic hierarchy within the Akhmat Group. This has meant that Chechens in the Akhmat Group have not been at the frontlines taking part in any actual fighting and this – along with the promise of a decent paycheck – has been part of the concerted recruitment pitch from the Akhmat Group to Chechens, especially Chechens residing in other regions of Russia than Chechnya.
5. Chambers added that the new MoD Chechen units are made up of ethnic Chechens. It is only the Akhmat Group, which is not majority ethnic Chechen group.

### **Kadyrov's grip on power in Chechnya**

6. The distinction Chambers makes between 'old' and 'new' Chechen MoD units is important because it helps to explain the overarching trend of Kadyrov's rule in Chechnya. According to Chambers, Kadyrov seeks not only to have a monopoly on the use of force in Chechnya – as any given state power seeks to – but having well beyond the monopoly on the use of force. In 2015, Kadyrov stated that if any federal security official would come to Chechnya without the permission of the Kadyrov regime, they would be shot. Since then, Chechnya has been fully under Kadyrov's control, even though Chechnya is officially a republic within a federation. The only forces in Chechnya not directly under the command of Kadyrov is these 'old' MoD units. Kadyrov has even been brought into the Rosgvardia chain of command structure in an effort to try to contain the potential scandal that the Chechen Rosgvardia units report to Kadyrov rather than the regular Rosgvardia chain of command. This manoeuvre has not been possible within the regular MoD units, because it would cause too much uproar within Russian elite circles and this is why these 'old' MoD units have not been under Kadyrov's command.

7. Kadyrov has used the war in Ukraine to have new Chechen MoD units created. These are not part of the regular MoD structure and are not called “*N Motorised Rifle Unit*”, these are the so-called Akhmat units. This means that the new Chechen MoD units are only formally under the MoD. Chambers added that these new Chechen MoD units looks more impressive on paper than in reality, as there is a lot of manipulation with the official numbers.

### **Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine**

8. The Chechen recruitment strategy can be broken down into three different tactics, which have evolved during the course of the war.
  - a. True belief
  - b. Financial incentive
  - c. Coercion
9. True belief: In the initial phase of the war, the Chechen authorities tried to recruit Chechens by appealing to a shared patriotic idea and by putting well-known Chechen commanders in charge of the recruitment process. According to Chambers, this recruitment tactic failed as almost nobody wanted to sign up for patriotic reasons. Reports of this recruitment tactic in Chechnya had ceased by the end of spring 2022.
10. Financial incentive: Then, the Chechen authorities switched recruiting Chechens by offering recruits rather well-paid contracts. Chechnya is a relative poor region in Russia, and the money that can be made by signing contracts with the Russian MoD are significant compared to standard salaries in Chechnya. This tactic has long been used in Chechnya to incentivize joining Rosgvardia or MVD units, as well as presumed safety from such units.
11. Coercion: This recruitment tactic has being ongoing throughout the full-scale invasion, but it has ebbed and flowed in terms of scale and intensity. The extent of coercive recruitment in Chechnya peaked around the time when the partial mobilisation in Russia was announced at the end of September 2022. When the partial mobilisation was announced, there were protest in Grozny against the mobilisation order, where a few dozen mothers went out into the main square and begged Kadyrov not to take their sons to die in Ukraine. The response of the authorities was to detain the protesters along with their husbands, who were ordered to beat their wives for protesting. Furthermore, all the sons of the protesters were arrested and deployed to the battlefield in Ukraine.
12. According to Chambers, this event is very important because this was where the Chechen authorities realised that they were unable to go about mobilising Chechens in a public way as it was done in the rest of Russia, as it would bring Kadyrov’s authority

and legitimacy inside Chechnya in jeopardy. Rather, Kadyrov decided that the mobilisation in Chechnya had to be done in what Chambers labelled the style of Kadyrov's regime: In the weeks following the protests in Grozny, Chechen civil society groups reported the highest number of kidnappings in Chechnya since they began keeping track of these numbers in April 2020. Over 400 cases was reported, but according to Chambers, this is an undercount.

13. In the autumn of 2022, the authorities coercively recruited most Chechen men they came into contact with without regard for their physical and/or mental condition. Chambers know of cases where people involved in car accidents were recruited and sent to Ukraine. There were many reports of people who were trying to obtain their external passports would walk through the front door at the passport office to claim their passport. Instead, they would be pulled through the back door and shipped off to Ukraine.
14. The news of this practice quickly spread within the Chechen community, and many who were only in possession of their internal passports would head for the border with Kazakhstan in order to try to avoid being recruited.<sup>183</sup> However, the Chechen authorities set up border patrols as far away as the border crossing with Kazakhstan at Astrakhan – but also at border crossings closer to Chechnya – and recruited Chechens who were trying to get out of Russia. Chambers further assumed that these Chechen security officials were also posted at the border crossing between Poland and Belarus, as these has been the main border crossings for Chechen asylum seekers for years.
15. Since the autumn of 2022, coercive recruitment of Chechens has been steadily ongoing, and any form of contact with the Chechen authorities could put a male Chechen at risk of being coercively recruited from the autumn of 2022 onwards. Chechens who commit even the smallest wrongdoings risk being faced with the choice of being detained and physically abused or being deployed in Ukraine. Chambers stressed that although this practice is still ongoing, it is not as intensive as in September 2022.
16. Chambers elaborated that family members to Chechen opposition members in exile have been coercively recruited. The brother of the famous Chechen blogger Khassan Khalitov was coercively recruited to Ukraine, but there have also been others similar cases. Even being a member of the wrong Telegram-channel could mean that you would be recruited. It was recently discovered that the Chechen authorities have the software necessary to monitor activities on social media platforms. As soon as the authorities manage to detain one member of a dissident Telegram-channel, they can

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<sup>183</sup> Russians citizens are able to travel to Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia etc. on their internal passports

find out who the other members are by physically abusing the detained. This was also one of the tactics the Chechen authorities used during the LGBT purges in 2017.

17. It is not always clear to what units forced recruits are being deployed because the Chechen authorities do not want to disclose this information. However, there has been cases of Chechens falling out with Kadyrov, then disappearing for a couple of months before resurfacing in videos from the battlefield in Ukraine, succeeded by evidence that they had been killed at the front. To Chambers, this illustrates that the coercive recruitment practiced by the Chechen authorities serves as a 'convenient' way to eliminate opposition or even undesirables in a 'clean way' while simultaneously delivering numbers for Moscow.
18. It is not always clear whether the Chechen authorities issue summonses and use the regular Russian recruitment apparatus when recruiting people. Chambers has observed irregularities regarding the issuance of summonses throughout the North Caucasus. However, Chambers noted that the Chechen authorities could easily fabricate a summons retrospectively, should they need to.

### **Recruitment from prisons**

19. Recruitment of Chechens serving prison time in Chechnya has been another way for the authorities to get rid of drug and alcohol users, or other categories of people which the authorities have labelled as 'undesirables'. These have been recruited primarily as cannon fodder for offensive initiatives at the front line. However, there have been very few reports about the phenomenon in general. This has not been a large-scale effort by the Chechen authorities, but an effort to get rid of these undesirables.
20. The recruitment efforts have not necessarily taken place inside the official prisons in Chechnya, but through the secret prison system in Chechnya. There is a Chechen idiom in Russian referring to this system as the 'Kadyrovite Basements'. These basements are not comparable to the prisons in Russia proper and are completely extrajudicial.
21. The Chechen authorities primarily recruited from Chechen prisons as early as the second or third month of the full-scale invasion. This was because the Chechen units had suffered heavy losses during the first month and they needed to replace the loss of manpower quickly. It is unclear whether the Chechen authorities relaxed the practice of recruiting from prisons or whether they ran out of undesirables to recruit from the prisons.
22. Chechens serving prison time elsewhere in Russia are generally not recruited to the war in Ukraine. This is because Chechens who are sent to serve time in other parts of Russia are generally seen as a potential extremist and these are not trusted by the FSB.

There have been cases of Chechens serving time in Russia proper having links to foreign fighters in Syria.

### **Exemptions**

23. It is difficult to assess whether there is any actual exemptions for recruitment in Chechnya. Chambers assessed that age could be a valid exemption, but it is unclear. Officially, some medical conditions could qualify as an exemption, but Chambers has seen numerous cases from across the North Caucasus where the authorities have ignored medical conditions and even send people labelled as ‘invalids’ to Ukraine.

### **Recruitment of Chechens from other parts of Russia**

24. It is unclear to what extent Kadyrov is allowed to use force outside of Chechnya. In some cases, the Chechen authorities have worked together with local law enforcement in e.g. Moscow to bring Chechen critics back to Chechnya. However, Chambers has not seen any such cases related to recruitment to the war in Ukraine.

### **Military Conscription in Chechnya**

25. For roughly a decade, Kadyrov has signed the annual orders for the twice-yearly conscription, but it was seemingly not followed through on prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022. The MoD over the years has denied this fact, but Chechen sources contradict Moscow’s assertion. It is unclear whether these circumstances have changed over the course of the invasion, as information is generally limited.

## Russian journalist

*Tbilisi, 19 February 2024*

### Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine

1. According to this source, the recruitment of Chechens living in Chechnya is widespread, as there are reports of Chechens who are being killed in Ukraine. Although, the source did not have specific information on which military unit Chechens would end up in, the source stated that there are military structures within Chechnya that are somewhat independent from the regular army of Russia. Sometimes Chechens can be recruited to the regular Russian army, but there also exists a Chechen battalion under the name of Shaik Manzur (not to be confused with the Ukrainian battalion of the same name). This battalion is deployed to the fights in Ukraine.
2. To the knowledge of this journalist, Chechens are both fighting under Kadyrov (in purely Chechen units) and in regular Russian military units, which comprise of both Chechens and soldiers from other Russian regions.

### Groups subjected to recruitment in Chechnya

3. The recruitment would depend on which social group the person in question belongs to. For example, if a person is working for Kadyrov and his government, he will most likely join the Kadyrovites in Ukraine in the so-called 'TikTok army'. These persons would not be sent to places in Ukraine, where their lives would be at risk by joining these units. There could be a considerable number of volunteers from this group, as participating in war would be perceived as a social lift for this group.
4. Then there are Chechens who are recruited into the regular Russian army. They are deployed to fighting under the same conditions as any other Russian soldiers, which means that their risk of being killed is higher than in the Kadyrovites' units, especially if they wind up in the so-called meat grinder waves.
5. The source opined that many Chechens chose to be recruited voluntary for financial reasons in order to make a living, because the salary they receive as a soldier was approximately 10 times higher than a regular salary in Chechnya. However, the source did not have any particular information to corroborate this information. In contrast to voluntary recruitment, there are also recruitment by threats: it is common that recruiters in Chechnya would threaten a person to join the army. Therefore, the Chechen authorities would probably use a mixture of both threats if a person would be reluctant to be recruited and promises of a high salary to recruit new soldiers.
6. The source opined that there are certain groups of men in Chechnya that are more exposed to being recruited in Chechnya than others. First of all, persons that Kadyrov

has negative feelings about, for example family members of his rivals or relatives to persons who criticise the Chechen government, would be more likely to be subjected to recruitment. In Chechnya, people usually have many relatives, so there could be a considerable large number of persons who are fitting this description.

7. There is a training centre for soldiers going to war in Ukraine in the city of Gudermes, Chechnya. Many recruits from other Russian regions are coming to this centre to receive training.
8. If a person is trying to obtain a passport in order to leave Russia and such a person is registered as living in Chechnya, then the Chechen authorities could attempt to get in touch with that person in order to recruit him to the war in Ukraine. The source noted that Kadyrov treats all Chechens as his subjects. This means that Kadyrov finds it to be his prerogative to treat them as he pleases. This also applies to Chechens living outside of Russia. If Kadyrov does not like a particular person, he could issue an order and see to that this person is executed without any trial.

### **Exemptions for recruitment**

9. The rules, which regulate exemption for recruitment, are found in the Russian legislation. These exemptions are largely ignored by the Chechen authorities. However, the source opined that at this point there is no need for recruiting elderly men, which is why they are not recruited. However, if such a need will arise, elderly Chechens would also be subjected to recruitment.
10. The medical exemption would only be applied if the person in question is so sick, that it is physical impossible for him to fight.

### **Consequences of refusing to be recruited**

11. A person in Chechnya cannot refuse if he is recruited by the Chechen authorities, as the authorities would most likely beat the person to death if he refuses to comply. The person could try to escape to another Russian region, but it would still be possible for the Chechen authorities to find him there.
12. Chechens have a high level of connection to their relatives, which makes it easier for the authorities to identify the relatives and to subject the members of the extended family to collective punishment, if the Chechen authorities believe that a person from a particular family has done something punishable. Then family members could be killed, beaten to death or the authorities may force them to say on tape that they regret doing whatever the authorities are accusing them or the family member of having done. Once

the authorities have received the video tape they can kill the person, and no one will ever find out about it. This practice is widespread, according to the source. However, it does not mean that ‘everyone’ is killed, but it means that everyone may live in constant fear of being killed.

### **Recruitment of Chechens living outside of Russia**

13. The source noted that the Chechen authorities are not able to recruit Chechens living outside of Russia. However, if they return to Chechnya, they could be recruited. According to this source, a Chechen can never be safe. A person could also be killed by the Chechen authorities in Germany or in another country of the EU. This has happened before.
14. During the first and second Chechen war, many Chechens left Russia and moved to other places in Europe. Therefore, it happens quite often that these Chechens will return to Chechnya. This does not put these persons in more risk than others. These persons are not perceived as traitors only because they left the country during these wars. If persons do not criticise the Chechen government, they would probably not face any problems upon return.
15. In a different type of situation, the source explained that there has been examples of Chechen families who deliberately tried to lure one of their own family members living in Europe back to Chechnya using different types of false explanations (e.g. by saying that a family member got sick). This has happened if the family had wanted to force a female Chechens family member to return, if for example they found her behaviour to be against, the local Chechen customs or religious rules.
16. The source opined that a Chechen family would probably not lure a man to Chechnya for recruitment to the army. On the contrary, families would usually try to hide persons from the authorities.
17. Generally, the Chechen authorities have not invested a lot in recruiting Chechens outside of Russia, as there are still a lot of people living in Chechnya, who can be recruited and hence be much easier for the authorities to recruit such persons.

### **Prevalence of coercive recruitment of Chechens to fight in Ukraine**

18. One of the most prevalent coercive methods used by the Chechen authorities is planting illegal drugs on a person, and afterwards threatening the person with punishment such as prison, if he would not let himself self-recruit. Consuming drugs is illegal, according to the law, but it is also perceived as a capital sin within the Chechen religious rules, which

is why many Chechens would prefer the army than being a disgrace in the eyes of his family and the wider community.

19. Bribing is a possibility for those Chechens who can afford it when the authorities try to recruit them. Sometimes the Chechen officials need to recruit someone, and they can place drugs on a person to coerce him to be recruited. He can then choose to go to jail on trumped up charges or go to Ukraine. The authorities could also choose just to threaten a person without planting drugs on the person. This would in many ways be enough to push the person to let himself self-recruit.
20. Abduction could also be a possibility for recruiting persons to the war in Ukraine. However, the source had not heard of any documented cases where abductions were used as a method of recruitment. Nevertheless, as abductions happens fairly often in the region, the source would not exclude that such methods were used to recruit persons.
21. Common people, who are forced to join the armed forces, would probably be placed in the regular Russian army 'to give Kremlin a lot of meat for their grinder'. If you do not have any connections with Kadyrov this would highly likely be the scenario for a common Chechen.

### **Recruitment methods in Chechen prisons**

22. The source did not have any particular evidence that could explain whether the Chechen authorities would be likely to recruit persons from Chechen prisons. However, the source would not be surprised if such recruitment was a method the Chechen authorities would use as well.
23. According to this source, there is a real need for more soldiers on the front, so it would be possible for Chechen prisoners serving in other Russian prisoners outside of Chechnya to be recruited as any other Russian prisoners would. The Chechens from other Russian prisons would probably be deployed to regular Russian army units not only the Chechen units.

## Georgian activist

*Tbilisi, 23 February 2024*

### Access to information in Chechnya

1. The source was in Chechnya last time in 2015. The activist noted that it had become gradually more difficult to get information out of Chechnya in the last couple of years. The source knew of journalists working in Chechnya 10 years ago. However, they had been arrested and thus could not continue their work in Chechnya. The source opined that the most likely way to obtain information from the field in Chechnya in 2024 would be through family connections and personal relations in general. It is not possible anymore for journalists to work independently in the field and to get reliable information from Chechnya through the media.

### Recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine

2. According to the source, there are three types of recruitment, of which the Chechen authorities are using to draft Chechens to the war in Ukraine.
  - I. People can be recruited as volunteers. The volunteers are likely to be motivated by a wish to make money. These persons typically already work closely with Kadyrov's collaborators and are a part of the so-called Kadyrovites. Furthermore, the use of volunteers was more widespread in the beginning of the full-scale war, as many volunteers thought that the war would be finished rather quickly and hence it was an easy way to earn money and show that one is useful for the Kremlin. However, this type of recruitment has decreased considerably as the war has dragged on.
  - II. Another of recruitment is forced recruitment, which can occur randomly of any persons who can be used in the war in Ukraine. These persons could be from various groups. There are cases of fighting in the streets in Chechnya, which resulted in that the parties involved were recruited to the MoD. Other cases of recruitment could be forced recruitment of persons who commit and are arrested for minor violations of the law, e.g. of speeding in a car. According to this source, this would be enough for the person in question to be recruited to sign a contract with the MoD.
  - III. Finally, men who try to leave the country may be intercepted and recruited. The source noted that the Chechen authorities would monitor the Chechens who are seeking to obtain new passports, as this could indicate that the person is about to flee Chechnya. Therefore, recruitment officers could wait for the person who had applied for a new passport, and force him to sign a contract with the MoD. In this way, it makes it hard for Chechens to flee if they do not already have a valid passport.

3. According to this source, most of the recruits from Chechnya are deployed in Chechen controlled units. However, there are also many Russians within these Chechen controlled units. As an effect of this, there are several reported cases of fights within such groups that has resulted in soldiers within the same unit had been killed by each other.
4. Chechens are mostly sent to units that will support the frontline. Hence, Chechens would seldom wind up fighting at the actual forefront. These are the more elite units. There are also Chechens fighting in the so-called ‘meat wave’ attacks; that sends scores of poorly trained soldiers to die on the front lines against Ukraine to clear a path for the Kremlin's more valuable elite units.
5. The source knew of a number of Chechens who had fled to Kazakhstan, as Russian citizens can easily enter Kazakhstan on their internal passport without being stopped at the border. However, all of those people that the source knew of had been beaten, and the following day they were sent back to Chechnya, and afterwards recruited to Ukraine.
6. According to this activist, the peak of recruitment in Chechnya occurred during the partial mobilisation in the autumn of 2022. After this mobilisation, the recruitment had to some extent slowed down. However, the source noted that the recruitment of Chechens to the war in Ukraine was still ongoing. Kadyrov had to show Putin that he is a good patriot and therefore, he needed to show that he could find troops for the Russian army, when Putin needed it. This explained the peak during the mobilisation in 2022.
7. Regarding voluntary recruitment, the Chechen authorities have sought to recruit new soldiers by promising potential soldiers important amounts of money or they would try to fix problems the particular person has – get a person of interest out of prison somewhere in Russia in exchange for a signed contract with the MoD. Whether the recruitment has been forced or voluntarily, every Chechen recruit has to sign a contract with the MoD. In this way, the paper trail would indicate that the person had willingly sign the contract even in cases where this was incorrect.
8. According to the source, the Chechen authorities would not resort to fabrication charges against a person, as threats of beatings or killings, etc. are perceived as adequate to “persuade” a person to sign a contract with the MoD.

### **Groups subjected to recruitment in Chechnya**

9. The source noted that family members of vocal critics of the Kadyrov government are likely to be recruited to the war. As an example, the source mentioned the case of Akhmed Sakayev. Sakayev's brother's son was recruited because of his connection to Sakayev. Furthermore, the source noted that there are reported cases of imams supporting the Ichkeria movement in Chechnya who have been arrested due to an informant that had told Kadyrov all about their whereabouts and their affiliation with the Ichkeria movement.
10. According to this source, there are many young people in Chechnya, who supports the Ichkeria movement. However, they do not display their support in the public and they hide any symbols of Ichkeria that they might have. It was the source's opinion that these Chechens were ready to take on the fight for independence when the time is ripe
11. In the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the source mentioned that there was ongoing protests in Grozny, where women were protesting against the invasion of Ukraine. However, Kadyrov send the husbands to the protesting women to Ukraine stating, that it is the man's job to keep track of their women, and if the man cannot do that, then Kadyrov will teach them to do that by sending them to Ukraine.
12. People who show extreme religious opinions and behaviours have already been put in prison and hence these persons would not be subjected to recruitment to the war in Ukraine. The religious extremists that are not in prison in Russia would most likely live outside of Russia – mostly in Turkey.

### **Exemptions for recruitment**

13. If a person is rich enough, they can pay the Chechen officials to avoid being recruited. According to the activist, it has become a much-used resort to pay a bribe not to be recruited. However, the one percent of the Chechen population that are close to Kadyrov will not be recruited by the authorities. These persons are exempted from signing contracts with the MoD.
14. The source stated that there is an age limit for recruitment in Chechnya. The authorities would not recruit a person that is too old. However, if the person is a political enemy to Kadyrov, for example a relative to Zakayev, then the person could be recruited disregard his age. According to the source, medical conditions could also be a reason for exemption.

### **Recruitment of Chechens living in other regions of Russia**

15. According to the source, Kadyrov and his close collaborators would be able to bring back Chechens living in other parts of Russia to Chechnya, if the Chechen authorities want to get a hold of a particular person, then they would find him.
16. The source mentioned an example from St. Petersburg, where there was a sports event. During this event, they played the Russian anthem and everybody had to stand up during the anthem to show their respect. A couple of Chechens were also at the event. They had lived all their lives in the city. However, they did not stand up during the anthem and were subsequently taken to Chechnya by the Chechen police and beaten. Afterwards, they were forced to make a video where they apologised. The source noted that this was an old story and happened prior to the full-scale invasion. The source had not heard of specific cases where the Chechen authorities had recruited Chechens outside of Chechnya.

### **Consequences of refusing to be recruited**

17. The source opined that it was impossible to refuse recruitment in Chechnya, as the Chechen authorities would beat the person in question if he would not sign a contract with the MoD when asked to do this. The source explained that a person would be given two options: you can die or you can go to Ukraine. However, the source also noted that it was possible to pay a bribe. The amount would be very high, according to this source, at approximately 5,000,000 rubles (the equivalent to 50,565 euro). The source stated that ordinary Chechens do not have 5,000,000 rubles that they can spend on bribes. The only Chechens who have these types of money are Kadyrov's men.

### **Recruitment methods in Chechen prisons**

18. According to the source, Kadyrov tries to appear as strong like Prigozhin, and thus recruits different types of persons from the Russian prisons, for example from Dagestani prisons. The source knew of Chechens fighting in one of the units under the Akhmat battalion, where approximately 70 % of the soldiers were non-Chechens. This could be explained by the recruitment of different prisons around Russia, according to this source.

### **Recruitment of Chechens outside of Russia**

19. The source stated that the Chechen authorities also tried to recruit Chechens outside of Russia. The activist had heard of cases from Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, where they had tried to recruit local Kists to the war in Ukraine. The source emphasised that the cases he had heard of was recruitment attempts to go fight for the Ukrainian side, infiltrate them and subsequently kill Akhmed Sakayev who is allegedly fighting in Ukraine.

20. The Kadyrovites are spreading information/propaganda in Chechnya about Chechen activists from Europe – from Germany or Sweden – these activists have no issues when they return. The source knew of a case where one woman who had openly talked about how good Kadyrov is. Such persons are trying to recruit Chechens living in Europe to come to Chechnya.
21. The source mentioned the case of the MMA fighter Khamzat Chimaev – Chechen with Swedish citizenship – who is openly Kadyrov's person. There are also cases from Germany and Austria where Chechens openly support Kadyrov and his government. The source opined that they also openly tries to persuade other Chechens to go back and live in Chechnya.
22. The source noted that the Chechen authorities were not recruiting Chechens living in Europe to go fight in Ukraine, but more to persuade them to support Kadyrov and/or come back to Chechnya. This their mission in the European countries.

## Prof. Judith Pallot

28 February 2024, Oxfordshire

### Islam in Chechnya

1. Prof. Judith Pallot described that there co-exist two types of Islam in Chechnya: one is the extremist Wahhabism, which emerged a force among the separatist, in the 1990s and the other is what she referred to as 'the Kadyrov Islam'. The latter is hard to define. However, 'Kadyrov Islam' is expressed as loyalty to Kadyrov as well as to the officially-accepted 'traditional Islam' (Sufi Islam). Sometimes this form of Islam practice also draws on element from Salafi traditions. Thus, it is very difficult to grasp.
2. The ethnic Tatars<sup>184</sup> is the largest Muslim population in Russia. The Tatars are generally perceived by the FSIN as 'good Kremlin loyalist'. The Tatars practice one of the four official state religions which are commonly described as 'traditional' (Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism) Traditional Islam does not challenge the state, is theologically Russified and some people ever describe it as semi-secular.<sup>185</sup> Kadyrov's Islam does not fit the definition of 'traditional Islam as popularly and officially understood in Russia. The Chechens have long been perceived as the most dangerous Muslims and potential extremist by the authorities and continue to be so, even given Kadyrov's loyalty to the Kremlin. Furthermore, immigrants from primarily Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are the 2<sup>nd</sup> most vulnerable group in terms of being radicalised besides the Chechens, according to Pallot.
3. Pallot explained that the Russian government perceives any Chechen as potentially vulnerable to being radicalised, and set on the path to extremism and terrorism. Furthermore, if a Chechen, or another Russian citizen, has chosen to live in a country outside of Russia then he would be suspected of being unpatriotic, as this would indicate that the person was anti-Russian.

### The Russian prison system - FSIN

4. There is a systemic problem in terms of the way the Russian prison system treats Muslims. Many Muslim prisoners who practise Islam actively, pray five times a day, eat only halal food sent in parcels into prison, fast during Ramadan, will be labelled as radicalised, and, therefore, potentially extremist by the prison authorities. Especially if

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<sup>184</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> largest ethnic group in Russia, while Chechens being the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest, [url](#)

<sup>185</sup> Laruelle, M., 2021. Russia's Islam: balancing securitization and integration; Di Puppò, L., 2019. The paradoxes of a localised Islamic orthodoxy: Rethinking Tatar traditional Islam in Russia. *Ethnicities*, 19(2), pp.311-334..

the person happens to be ethnic Chechen as well. The Chechens are at the top of the danger list as far as the Russian prison Service (FSIN<sup>186</sup>) is concerned.

5. The Russian prison system is highly centralised and managed by the FSIN. FSIN is organised with a series of regional authorities under the federal administration. These regional administrations are known as the UFSINs Administrative department of FSIN). In the region of Krasnoyarsk Krai, as well as in other of the larger regions, the regional administrations are called GUF SIN (Main administrative department of FSIN).
6. The power structure in the Russian prison system is vertical. Therefore, none of the regional prison authorities or prison facilities are accountable to any local or regional government structures. In this regard, the UFSIN and GUF SINS receive their orders from the federal FSIN located in Moscow. For example, if the Sverdlovsk regional parliament does not accept the GUF SIN's way of handling the prisons in the region, there is not much they can do about it other than to complain to the federal FSIN in Moscow.
7. All the funds allocated to FSIN come from the federal budget and FSIN comprises the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> largest spending department in Russia. FSIN employs more than 225,000 personnel. The FSIN is also a militarised institution in Russia and thus, when Russia joined the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1996, the FSIN had to relocate from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to be subordinated the Ministry of Justice and it promised to demilitarise the institution in accordance with the regulation of the CoE.
8. This move of the penitentiary services from Ministry of Interior to Ministry of Justice happened in most but not all East and central European countries after the fall of the USSR. However, although the CoE wanted it, Russia did not demilitarise the FSIN. So-called attested personnel have military ranks "of the internal service" that mirror those in the armed forces. There are also a minority of civilian employees who work in the rear offices, or are professionals, such as teachers, and some, but not all, medical personal.

### **Remand prisons - SIZOs**

9. Russia comprises approximately 210 remand prison and 71 remand blocks in correctional colonies penal facilities. Remand prisons are mainly located in the metropolitan and urban centres. Most of these pre-trial detention centres were built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They have a cellular type of accommodation. In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to have 40 people in one cell, although they are built to accommodate approximately 8-12 persons. Overcrowding is still a problem in a large minority of

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<sup>186</sup> FSIN: The Federal Penitentiary Service (Russian: Федеральная служба исполнения наказаний (ФСИН))

regions. IN 2012 The CoE passed a pilot judgement identifying SDIZOs as constituting a risk to prisoners' article 3 rights under the CCHR. Russia was still under supervision for the conditions of detention in SIZOs when it was expelled in 2020 for the invasion of Ukraine. This means that it can be assumed that conditions in SIZOs are inhumane, unless Russia can prove otherwise for a particular facility.

10. Remand prisons are designed to confine remand prisoners for a short period – and a maximum of 18 months. However, in Russia a remand prisoner can be confined for far longer if a case is still under investigation or the case has been submitted to the court. Once this has happened a prisoner can continued to be detained until the case is completed.
11. Pallot mentioned that there is no probation service in Russia at all. There are plans to set a probation service before 2030.FSIN has a penal inspectorate that supervises non-custodial senteces. After release, a person must sign in at the local police station, sometimes once a week and sometimes once a month.

### **Correctional colonies - IKs**

12. A Russian prisoner serves their sentence in a correctional colony (IK<sup>187</sup>). These were built during the Soviet era and therefore have a completely different architectural design and management structure. The Russian government has said several times that they intend to change this old soviet system. However, it has not happened yet. As in the Soviet era, IKs have an industrial zone and farms on which prisoners of working age and who pass fitness test have to work. Labour is compulsory and together with strict discipline viewed as the main way of rehabilitating offenders.
13. In the Soviet prison system, prisoners were kept in dormitories. This was not only a place where the prisoners slept. This was meant to be a complete social system, so the prisoners were meant to identify with one another and participate in socialist competitions against other dormitories. They were known as detachments called *otryady*.The system was carried over into post-Soviet Russia. The whole vocabulary of the prison system in the Soviet Union was taken from the military. Dormitories are criticised both by UNCAT and the CoE because of the prison-on-prisoner violence they afre associated with. In Russia the dormitories are breeding place of prison sub-culture - the Thieves-in-Law (*Vory-v-Zakone*)
14. As of March 2024, 74 people in Russia have had commuted their execution sentences, as the Russian government has suspended the death penalty in order to become a member of the CoE. However, since Russia left the CoE after the full-scale invasion of

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<sup>187</sup> Corrective colony (in Russian: исправительная колония/ispravitelnaya koloniya (ИК/ИК))

Ukraine, various Russian politicians have openly discussed the possibility of reinstating the death penalty in Russia.

### Colony settlements<sup>188</sup> - KPs

15. The Russian authorities refer to these settlements as open prisons as we know from the Western jurisdictions. However, these are not exactly the same as open prisons in the West. The prisoners are allowed to go and work out of the colonies, however, the work is decided for them and they are usually escorted to and from work. The prisoners are not allowed to go into shops on their way back, and they have to come back to the colony at night.

### General regime colonies

16. In the general regime colonies, prisoners are living in dormitories up to 100 adults and 120 juveniles in one a dormitory, but in the past, these numbers were often exceeded. These colonies are organised as labour camps. Although the Russian prison service employs a high number of staff, at night when most of the prison personnel leave, the prisoners are left to discipline themselves. This is why the dormitory system has become so dominated by the prison sub-culture known as the thieves-in-law or vory-v-zakone.<sup>189</sup>
17. Not so long ago, the Russian authorities introduced what in law is described as “forced labour as a alternative to the deprivation of freedom” as a of punishment. According to the Russian authorities, forced labour is not seen as imprisonment even though the people sentenced to this punishment or who at the end of a long sentence are transferred to this punishment have to live in a secure dormitory often located inside a correctional colony. Through this practice, the Russian government can reduce the number of prisoners in the statistics, which has been used to appease the CoE in their rulings that the number of prisoners was disproportionately high in Russia. The number of prisoners in Russia was at highest - over 1 million -in the late 1990s but has dropped since to the current 433006 on 1<sup>st</sup> Jan 2023. The opportunity for forced labour has helped get the statistics down, but this is not the sole explanation for the decline in the number of incarcerated persons in Russia. The new punishment uses inmates of correctional centres (IKTs) to work on public projects and construction projects; previously people from Uzbekistan and the Tajikistan had been used to work on those projects. Forced labour was also presented as a way to replace such migrant workers by the head of FSIN, Mr. Kalashnikov. However, this scheme does involve incarceration, as the Russian authorities have transformed the dormitories of the general regime colonies into labour dormitories for these non-prisoners.

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<sup>188</sup> Colony settlements (in Russian: Колония-поселение/ Koloniya-poselenie)

<sup>189</sup> Thieves within the law (in Russian: Воры в Законе/Vory v Zakone)

18. Pallot opined that it is positive that these non-prisoners are able to leave the correctional centre to which they are assigned and work. On the other hand, it is a stretch to call it open prisons when compared to the West, where a person is living at home at go out and do community labour. The Russian system is not like this.

#### **Strict regime<sup>190</sup> colonies**

19. In ‘strict regime colonies’, every prisoner is living in dormitories. The source mentioned that political prisoners such as Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin etc. would be serving in strict regime colonies.

#### **Special regime colonies**

20. ‘Special regime colonies’ are built for recidivist, extremists and prisoners perceived as being very dangerous. In special regime colonies, a prisoner can live in a cell together with another prisoner, or in a dormitory. This is where the Russian authorities placed Aleksey Navalny, when he was serving his sentence. Aleksey Navalny started serving his sentence at a strict regime in the region of Vladimir, but in December 2023, he was transferred to a special regime colony IK-3 in the Northern region of Yamalo-Nenets where he died.
21. In special regime colonies, a prisoner could be living in a dormitory, if they serve under so-called privileged conditions of detention. However, if a person were serving under strict conditions of detention, they would be living in a cell.

#### **Conditions of detention**

22. Within each of the above mentioned regimes, a prisoner is put so called ‘conditions of detention’, which determines the person’s level of privilege. This level determines how many visits a prisoner may have, how many parcels one can receive parole, which is called UDO<sup>191</sup> in Russian.

There are three forms of conditions of detention in Russia. Every prisoner enters a prison on standard conditions. If a prisoner behaves well, then they can be transferred to privileged conditions. However, if a prisoner behaves badly or the prison officers find that the prisoner is a bad person, then they can place that person on strict conditions of detention known as the SUS.<sup>192</sup> The disciplinary cells are planned with a disposal of space of up to 2m<sup>2</sup> which is condemned as violating article 3 rights by the CoE. In theory, prisoners should spend no more than 15 days in a disciplinary cell.

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<sup>190</sup> Strict regime (in Russian: строгий режим/strogiy rezhim)

<sup>191</sup> Parole (in Russian: Условно-досрочное освобождение от наказания (УДО/UDO)

<sup>192</sup> SUS (in Russian: строгие условия содержания (СУС/SUS)

23. According to the prison officers, Aleksey Navalny was found to behave badly in prison, as he allegedly broke the prohibitions within the prison system. There are more than 40 prohibitions in the Russian prison system, which a prisoner has to learn by heart. If a prisoner violates any of them, they can end up in solitary confinement in a disciplinary cell also known as the SHIZO<sup>193</sup> or cell-type confinement, known as PKT<sup>194</sup> for up to 15 days. But quite often a prisoner can be released for one day and then, under some pretext, be returned for another 15 days. This is what happened to Navalny. Parts of the disciplinary punishment is that the prisoner cannot wear his usual clothes, is given less food and may be under constant surveillance.

### **The Chechen prison system**

24. In Chechnya, there are two types of prison systems, between which there is a lot of transfer and mobility.

#### *Secret prisons*

25. The 'secret prisons' dates back to two Chechen wars. The secret prisons were established by the military detachments that were fighting as a system to deal with the prisoners from the other side. In the Second Chechen War, opposition Chechens were also fighting against Chechens who had thrown in their lot with the Russians.

26. These facilities were created during the two wars. Some of them were located in the cellars of local public schools or the like. These prisons were operated by the secret service (FSB) of Chechnya. The cells would be 2\*2 metres for a single cell and 10\*5 metres for more people in the cell. According to Pallot, Chechens being deported to Chechnya from the EU would probably be placed in such cells.

27. In the secret prisons, former prisoners and NGO organisations have reported that prisoners are regularly physically abused and the prisons are used as a way of forcing people to deliver witness statements, in order to implicate other suspects or to get confession prior to their transfer to legitimate facilities or court or simply for retribution for opposing the leadership. There are reports of beating prisoners with truncheons, electric shocks and cases of water boarding. There are also case of people simply disappearing

28. These prisons are used as a part of the repression apparatus to keep the Chechen population under control. The secret prisons are a means of controlling opposition, non-loyalists or members of the LGBTQi community.

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<sup>193</sup> Solitary cell (in Russian: Штрафной изолятор/Shtrafnoy Izolyator (ШИЗО/SHIZO))

<sup>194</sup> PKT (i Russian: помещение камерного типа (ПКТ/ПКТ))

29. The source mentioned two cases of Chechens, living in Germany, who had been deported to Russia. Apparently, they were promised by the Russian prosecutor general's office that the two persons would not be sent to Chechnya. However, they disappeared shortly after their arrival in Moscow.

*The official penal facilities in Chechnya*

30. There are very few official penal facilities in Chechnya. This absence is partly due to the Chechen wars, but also because President Putin and FSIN are worried about Islamic radicalisation. Therefore, the Russian authorities have continuously tried to move Muslim prisoners deep into the heart of Russia. This concerns any Muslim that the authorities would think could be radicalised or is already radicalised or extremist.
31. When a potential radicalised person is convicted in Chechnya, the authorities would move them out of Chechnya into what Prof. Pallot calls 'the penal heartland of Russia'. It covers an area formed as an arc starting in Arkhangelsk, passing through Kirov then Vladimir, the Urals and ending up in southern Siberia. This is also, where the Crimean Tatars ended up after being arrested and tried in Crimea.
32. In Chechnya, there are two SIZOs (remand prisons). The first, SIZO 1 is located in Grozny, and the second, SIZO 2, is located north of Grozny. The remand prisoners in these SIZOs actually have relatively good conditions, which is partly due to the 'Chechenization' that has been ongoing since Kadyrov took power after the second Chechen war. This means that all the civil services including security personnel in Chechnya are recruited by the Kadyrov government, and not by Moscow.
33. The capacity of SIZO 1, which is the large remand prison in Chechnya, is only for 205 remand prisoners. This is a relatively low capacity compared to other SIZOs elsewhere in Russia. There are SIZOs in Russia, which can accommodate thousands of remand prisoners. SIZO 2 has a capacity of 50 places..
34. If a prison facility has personnel, who are from the same clan as the prisoners, they would be likely to treat those prisoners better than the average and to make the conditions better for anybody who is locally arrested for an offence such as being a common thief. According to prof. Pallot, the local Chechen population who are ordinary offenders – common criminals – would serve their time in Chechen correctional institutions.
35. Chechnya has only one correctional colony, the IK-2, which is located in in the city of Chernokosovo, just north of Grozny in small rural settlement. IK-2 was established in 1956 as a strict regime colony for 1,050 prisoners. However, nowadays it is a general regime for only 350 prisoners sentence to a general regime. IK-2 has also imbedded

within it a KP - colony settlement - for 50 people and has a strict regime corpus for 250 persons. Its total capacity is therefore 650.

36. There is another colony settlement in the city of Argun. Furthermore, there is a correctional centre, which is a place for forced labour – an alternative to deprivation – correctional centre №1. This centre has a capacity for 200 people.

#### **Determination of place of trial**

37. Under Russian legislation, a person should be tried either in the place where the crime has been committed or where the person has permanent residency, which in Russian is referred to as PMZh<sup>195</sup> or Propiska<sup>196</sup>. However, there are Chechens who offend elsewhere in Russia, who are then transferred back to the SIZOs in Chechnya. This is happening, if the Chechen government has an interest in these particular persons, or if they are registered as living in Chechnya, then they will subsequently be tried in Chechnya.
38. Recently, an ethnic Russian citizen burned a Quran in the city of Vladimir. Ramzan Kadyrov then requested the FSIN for this person to be transfer to a SIZO in Chechnya to be prosecuted there, although the crime was not committed in Chechnya or the person in question did not reside in Chechnya. He was nevertheless transferred to be brought to trial in Chechnya.
39. Furthermore, if a radical Islamist is being transferred for trial in Chechnya from another Russian region, the person would most likely be sent out of Chechnya again to serve their sentence.

#### **Transfer of prisoners**

40. When prisoners are transferred from SIZO to a colony or between different types of colonies, they are transferred in so-called Stolypin wagons, which are wagons without any windows and are towed behind regular passenger trains. The duration of a prisoner in transport can last for a very long time (sometimes up to two weeks), and often would relatives not be advised where a prisoner is taken prior to their arrival.<sup>197</sup> The CoE also made a pilot judgement against Russia (*Tomov v Russia*) concerning the inhumane conditions amounting to torture in prison transports of all kinds. Russia was still under supervision when it was expelled from the CoE. Like Anayev on SIZOs, this

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<sup>195</sup> Permanent residency (in Russian: Постоянное место жительства (ПМЖ))

<sup>196</sup> Propiska is the old Soviet residence permit system; the word is still used in Russia to describe a person's permanent residence. For more information on Propiske please read here: HRW, the residence permit system (propiska), [url](#)

<sup>197</sup> For more information on transportation of prisoners, please see: AI, *Prisoner Transportation in Russia*, 2017, [url](#)

meant that Russia had not rectified the problems or shown to the CoE that it had a satisfactory action plan to do so.

### **Military courts**

41. According to the Russian legislation, Chechens who have committed crimes in accordance with the Russian military laws, should be trialled at a military court. As Chechnya is a part of the Southern military district, such persons should be trialled at the military court in the city of Rostov on Don.

### **Persons at risk of being targeted by the Chechen authorities**

42. The source explained that the persons who would be at the highest risk of being targeted by Kadyrov's government would be:
  - Opponents of Kadyrov and his government
  - Human rights activists
  - Members of NGOs
  - Members of the LGBTQi community
  - Chechen who has fled abroad
43. Prof. Pallot noted that the question of radicalism is complex, as it is difficult to know what Kadyrov thinks and hence what the Chechen authorities would perceive as an extremist Islamist. However, it is rather easier to find out what the Russian prison service thinks about extremist Islamists.
44. If a Chechen has fled abroad, they would automatically be of interest for the Chechen authorities. The interest towards Chechens would be much higher than for example the case of an ordinary Russian who had fled the country.
45. If a member of the Kadyrov clan or the clan that controls the detention facilities in Chechnya would return to Chechnya from abroad, they would most probably have fewer problems than others with the Chechen authorities upon return.
46. If a person of interest for the Chechen authorities returns to Chechnya from abroad, they would likely start of in one of the secret prisons. After the person has made a confession, they would most likely be transferred into one of the formal remand prisons under the FSIN.

### **Monitoring of prisons in Russia**

47. In Russia, there is generally no effective and independent monitoring of the Russian prison facilities. Even more so in Chechnya. There exist public monitoring bodies in

Russia known as ONK<sup>198</sup> and ombudsman institutions. However, these bodies are completely integrated into the vertical hierarchy both on the federal level but also in Chechnya. The most reliable monitoring over the past two decades has been by the Committee for Prevention of Torture (CPT) of the CoE that had to make repeated visits to prisons in the north Caucasus and especially Chechnya. The Russian government only allowed 4 of 27 of these reports to be published (two shortly after accession to the CoE in the 1990s, one in 2012 when Putin wasn't president and one in 2019 that didn't concern FSIN facilities.) Since Russia was expelled from the CoE CPT visits have ceased.

48. Nevertheless, the existing level of public monitoring of the Russian prisons means that the investigators or the police would prefer to take a person of interest out for example in the forests beat them up or give the person electric shock treatments before they are put into the formal system in order to avoid troubles.

### **General treatment of prisoners**

49. There is a lot of violence in the Russian prison system as in the Russian military and in society as a whole. This violence has been legitimised by President Putin as a way of solving problems, as a means of repression and to disciplining the population. Furthermore, there is a history in Russia going back to the violence committed in the GULAG system and their treatment of prisoners.
50. Prisoners across Russia, including the Chechens, are subjected to humiliating and demeaning treatment by the prison officers. The prisoners are forced in a ritualistic way to show that they are inferior subjects. This treatment goes back to the idea of militarisation of the prison system, as the prison officers, who all go through the military academy view prisoners as the enemy.
51. According to several interlocutors, with whom prof. Pallot had spoken and interviews conducted by her research team with 12 Chechen prisoners (by telephone) and former prisoners, it is only if the prisoners are taught to obey the rules down to the last button, that they would have understood how to live in society once they have left prison. The prison officers genuinely believe that strict discipline and forced labour are the way to re-educate the prisoners. The FSIN still uses the notion of re-education rather than rehabilitation and return them into society.
52. However, it is important to stress that not all Russian prison officers act like sadists. The officers have learned to behave in this manner. There are some so-called penal

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<sup>198</sup> Public monitoring commission ONK (in Russian: Общественная наблюдательная комиссия (ОНК))

fiefdoms, which are very large prison authorities that would have 12-20 facilities under them with 40-50,000 prisoners in them. These were setup during the GULAG in the 1930s in northern Russia and in regions as Sverdlovsk, Mordovia, Irkutsk, Krasnoyarsk and Kirov etc.

53. The prison officers from these fiefdoms, which are called dynastic families, are the great grandchildren of the original prison officers in the GULAGs. Therefore, the penal culture is passed down from one generation of prison officers to the next. However, that does not mean that just because great granddad shot people in the GULAG, that their grandchildren would do the same today, but these are hermetically sealed regions, which are populated by former prison officers, existing prison officers and to some degree by previous prisoners.
54. The UFSINS and GUFINS with the worst record of torture within the prison system are these large fiefdoms, which have been there since the 1930s. Even though the prison system in Russia is centralised, some of these large prison authorities do not automatically follow instructions issued from the centre. There have also been attempts to reform the system. However, such attempts have been resisted by these large prison authorities.

### *Treatment of Chechen prisoners*

55. According to 12 interviewed Chechens who has been to prisons in Russia, Chechens are subject to more scrutiny and surveillance than other inmates. There have been cases of prison guards who have stamped on the Quran, that break up prayers or schedule head counts and calisthenics exactly when the sun comes up, and fail to produce *halal* food in the canteen and give no alternative to pork on the menu. The authorities build mosques in any correctional colony with a large number of Muslims. These colony mosques and prayer rooms a record on cctv the Muslim prisoners who regularly go to the mosque which automatically makes them subject of interest and vulnerable to radicalisation towards terrorism. How Muslims are treated tends to depend upon how many there are. Prisoner who emerge charismatic leaders are removed to colonies where they can be isolated from other prisoners.
56. There is a variety of measures in which the prison officers would discriminate against Muslims. In this regard, it does not even matter whether the Chechen prisoner is serving time in a Russian correctional colony. If a Chechen identifies with the Muslim *jamaat* in a colony, the person would be under suspicion.
57. There are also some Chechens who are involved with the Vory-v-zakone, which is a way to align with the criminal gangs to be able to get weapons after they are realised.

### **Classification of prisons (red, black and green)**

58. The popular classification of Russian prisons goes back to 1990s, the period which is known as *bespredel* (chaos). In the 1990s, there was a collapse of the penal economy. Previously, the penal system used to get orders from the state, which it then fulfilled. However, in the 1990s this system broke down, which meant that many prison officers were not being paid and so many left their jobs. This led to a hollowing out of penal power and many prison officers at that time went off into private security companies or Western firms, as they were allowed to wear firearms. In this new power void, the Vory-v-zakone – the prison gangs – in reality took over the running of the prisons in that time.
59. The Chechen prisoners in the 1990s and early 2000s were treated particularly roughly, according to prof. Pallot. According to her this ill treatment was explained as a reaction to the numerous reports from Chechnya at that time of for example beheadings, etc. Therefore, Chechens in Russian prisons were subject to severe physical abuse by the Russian prison officers and other prisoners of ethnic Russian decent.

It is important to stress, that the vory were already in control of the detachments/dormitories prior to the *bespredel*. However, in the 1990s, the control of the gangs became quite widespread. The vory decided who would sleep in which bunk, 'disciplined' prisoners who did not obey their rules or failed to pay gambling debts, insulted the gang leaders, and collected tribute – the *obshak* – from all prisoners so they could have a comfortable life in prison. This period was associated with a high level of violence as other gangs fought for supremacy. There was a high rate of murdered prisoners.

60. The vory also organised card games at night and they ran the informal market economy within prisons, in particular the illegal drug market, rose with the influx of transnational prisoners, cigarettes and mobile phones. The only recourse the administration had was to lock the prisoners up or put them in isolation cells. They exercised harsh 'penal backup', allowing themselves to use disproportionate and sexualised physical violence against the prisoners. After 2002 and onwards, the prison service tried to claw back power from the prison gangs.
61. As a way to regain authority, the prison officers recruited prisoners, known colloquially as the activists (*aktivisti*), with promises of early release and possibilities to have more visits or better food to do the beatings of other prisoners.
62. There are now parallel hierarchies in the prisons, where the old Vory-v-Zakone have been replaced by new generation gangs of prisoners. These gang leaders are called *avtoritety*<sup>199</sup> or authority figures who are at the apex of prison status hierarchy. The parallel hierarchy is of prisoners appointed by the administration as *aktivisti* who hold

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<sup>199</sup> Authorities, new generation crime bosses.

various formal positions, such as the “head prefect” of a detachment (the *zavkhoz*), and who chair of prisoner self-organisation committees. The *aktivisti* do the dirty work for the prison officers. These are responsible for opening the gates between the domestic zone and the work zone; for lining up prisoners for the heads count in the morning, supervising exercise period and so on etc. There are also secret informants who are recruited by the operational and regime department who report back on suspect prisoners.

63. In popular culture and among prisoners correctional colonies are divided as follows:
- The ‘black colonies’, which are controlled by the vory (the gangs).
  - The ‘red colonies’, which are controlled by the official prison officers. These colonies are called red, as they are named after the NKVD<sup>200</sup> who ran the GULAGs, as the NKVD officers had red epaulets. In the very red colonies, the vory are neutralised or now cooperate with the administration.
  - The ‘green colonies’ are colonies with a large proportion of Muslims (according to our interviews in some up to 30 % of the prisoners in a dormitory or colony). The green colonies would usually comprise of various Muslims – typically a mixture of prisoners from North Caucasus, Tatars, Bashkirs and immigrants primarily Uzbeks and Tajiks. The title Green colony is a misnomer, although often used in Russia, because the Muslim jamaats are not a power hierarchy - Muslims are not charge it is simply that together they , is a large number of Muslim prisoners.
64. Prof. Pallot had knowledge of a colony where the leading vory was a Chechen. He had then negotiated with the prison authorities and had obtained to conditions during Muslim prayers for the prisoners. However, in return he helped the colony authorities by identifying the ‘properly radicalised’ Muslims in the colony. That being said, in general, the Muslim prisoners prefer not to negotiate with the prison authorities in the colonies.
65. Among the prison officers, there is a group called the *operativniki* (the operational officers). These are working as criminal search officers within an internal security service (ORD) in prisons that can be traced back to the GULAGs. The *operativniki* is not only monitoring prisoners finding out what they are up to, what crimes have the prisoners committed, will they commit new crimes, etc. but they are also surveilling the prison officers. Any prison officer who is getting too close to particular prisoners will then get in trouble with the ORD.

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<sup>200</sup> The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (in Russian: Народный комиссариат внутренних дел (НКВД))

66. The FSB is not legally present in prisons. However, the ORD officers do have a relationship with the local FSB. The second in command in every colony is an ORD officer. According to a number of NGOs, this department (ORD) should be abolished because of the abusive practices of the ORD officers.
67. The prison service is corrupt from top to bottom. Therefore, the prison officers are part of this shadow economy/parallel economy in the prisons. This means that the prison officers are bringing in mobile phones, etc. The corruption goes right to the top. For example, Aleksandr Reimer who was one of the reforming directors for FSIN was arrested accused of fraud, as he had allegedly pocketed a large EU grant for buying a tagging system.
68. According to FSIN, the prison authorities have identified 300 radicalised Islamist jamaats in the Russian prisons. This has convinced FSIN that prisons actually are a site of radicalisation. However, these are only going to be extremists if one believes that there is a linear progression of being born a Muslim and becoming violent and an Islamist terrorist. According to Prof. Pallot, this is quite a big jump and she was thus quite doubtful that this theory of radicalisation in prisons would explain why a person would become a terrorist. Radicalisation is more likely in most cases to be associated with seeking shelter and support while in prison, which is true also of prisoners of other faiths. The evidence for that does not exist, as this is very difficult to research and we do not know how many former Muslim prisoners have gone in Russia to commit terrorist acts.

#### **Determination of place of detention**

69. After a person has been tried and found guilty in a crime, the location of where the person will serve their punishment will depend on the person in question. If it happens to be a person such as Aleksey Navalny, then the Director of FSIN, Arkady Gostev, would discuss the location directly with president Putin.
70. According to the penal correctional code, prisoners should be located in the same region as where the crime has been committed, if possible. If this is not possible, they should be placed for imprisonment in the neighbouring region, etc. However, the penal state is still something Russia has inherited from the Soviet Union. This means that the penal regions in Russia with a very high density of correctional colonies in remote regions of Russia. This is way beyond what is needed given the number of custodial sentences handed out by the courts in these regions. The Perm region is not a very populated region. However, it is the largest penal region in Russia.
71. A prisoner and their relatives have the right to ask to be moved closer to where the prisoner lives. However, it is not necessarily realised by the FSIN. In the 1990s, there

were a very high percentage of prisoners being sent to serve their sentence in the peripheries of Russia. However, now the percentage is smaller and most people sentenced to general regime colonies will serve their time in the region where there are from. The exception to this rule are Chechens if sentenced to strict or special regime colonies who are moved out of the republic.

72. A female prisoner or a prisoner going to a strict or special regime are far more likely to be sent out of the region to serve, compared to if a prisoner should be serving time in a general regime colony. Prof. Pallot noted in extradition cases, people has always been sent off as far away as possible from Moscow or St. Petersburg or anywhere one would find active NGOs.
73. There are some colonies that has been selected to hold many Muslim prisoners, so when the authorities in Moscow or other big cities sentence immigrants from Uzbekistan or Tajikistan to prison, they would end up in this special designated colonies e.g. in the Siberian region of Kurgan.
74. Now FSIN has started to send recidivists and first-time offenders to different colonies. They used to be mixed up together at the same colonies.
75. In regards to political activist, they would be sent as far away from Moscow as possible. The case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky is a good example on this. He was sent to the region of Chita. FSIN said at the time that that the chose a colony in Chita, as there were not any space left in any of the colonies nearby Moscow. Crimean Tatars are being sent to northern colonies and the same is true of Chechens convicted for belonging to extremist organisations or under suspicion of holding extremist beliefs.
76. Therefore, unless the Chechen government wishes to hold on to them, the Chechen prisoners are likely to be sent to the interior of Russia.

### **Recruitment of prisoners to the war in Ukraine**

77. The Chechen forces are made up of loyalist to Kadyrov. Wagner recruited Chechens from Russian correctional colonies to fight in Ukraine. Prisoners were not recruited from remand prisons. Therefore, there were not many prisoners from Chechnya to recruit, according to the Russian legislation.
78. Consequently, Wagner did only recruit prisoners from the correctional colonies in the Russian heartland. Wagner was mainly recruiting from the big loyal penal regions, because what the recruitment required was an agreement with the head of the regional prison authorities UFSIN.

79. The recruitment was not very popular among the prison administrations as they could lose around 200 prisoners, which they needed for their industrial production. Therefore it was mainly the most loyal colonies were chosen.
80. Once the leader of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, died, the recruitment of prisoners was taken over by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Prof. Pallot noted that the recruitment of prisoners was still ongoing – in fact, the MoD has expanded the scope of recruits. Now they are also recruiting from the SIZOs. Today all penal institutions have to keep a registry of prisoners of the age eligible for mobilization if a general mobilization is called. Prisoners can currently sign to become contract (professional) soldiers with the MOFD. They have to serve until the end of the war with Ukraine, they reach retirement age now 65 or are invalided out. At the end of this they are free on licence, not pardoned as before, and so are liable to return to prisons if they reoffend or break the terms of the licence.
81. In the beginning of the recruitment of prisoners, the Kremlin did not allow recruitment of anybody who was responsible of mild and medium crimes; offenders convicted of serious and very serious crimes could not be recruited (although Wagner ignored this). Today the only prohibition of recruitment applies only to people convicted of terrorist and extremist offences and some terrorists or extremists and prisoners convicted of certain ‘crimes against the body’ such as children.

### **Coercive recruitment of prisoners**

82. There are reports of various forms of pressure on prisoners for them to ‘volunteer’ and sign a contract with the MoD. It is things like turning off the heating, cutting back on their food rations, saying no one is going to get parole unless there are some volunteers found etc.
83. According to prof. Pallot, everybody is at risk of being recruited. However, it depends on how much a person can resist the pressure they endure. Many of the prisoners who have 20+ years sentences would be more inclined to be recruited as they are probably going to die in prison anyway, so why not die in Ukraine.