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## **THE INFLUENCE OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR ON NORTH CAUCASIAN SEPARATIST AND JIHADIST MOVEMENTS**

### **Abstract**

In 2022, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the beginning of full-scale war gave new impetus to North Caucasian separatist and jihadist forces. This process contributed to the deepening of cooperation among a number of groups, the emergence of new political entities, and the formation of units fighting on the side of Ukraine. In some cases, the new alliances include forces with a jihadist past, who agree to employ not only religious but also national ideology in the struggle against Russia. This tendency may be assessed as an adaptation of part of the North Caucasian national movements to Islamism.

The present study is one of the first attempts to examine and analyze the influence of the ongoing war in Ukraine on Caucasian separatist and jihadist movements. The theoretical basis of the research relies on an interdisciplinary approach that combines elements of social constructivism and social movement theory. For data collection, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of North Caucasian separatist movements. In addition, research was carried out on separatist and jihadist media resources in the online space using the method of digital ethnography.

The study analyzes the common goals of North Caucasian national-liberation movements, their political projects, the process of forming associated combat units, online activities, and the growing influence of Islamism on pro-independence groups. Separatist movements consider national independence and, in the long term, different models of a common Caucasian state. By contrast, for the terrorist organization Caucasus Emirate, the only acceptable model is a unified, independent Sharia-based North Caucasus, which is why it categorically rejects cooperation with democratic separatist forces. At the same time, the Caucasian branch of the Islamic State views the region solely as one province within the global caliphate.

**Keywords:** *North Caucasus, Jihadism, Separatism, Russia, Ukraine, War.*

After the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 and the beginning of full-scale war, North Caucasian separatist and Islamist forces became active. Cooperation is taking place among certain groups, as well as the formation of new political movements and of units fighting on the side of Ukraine.

Since the 2010s, separatist forces that were in a process of decline in fact received a new impetus to renew and activate political struggle, in which representatives of jihadist groups who in the past were competitors, appeared as allies. In some cases, in the new alliance together with separatists are represented forces with a jihadist past, who reached a consensus to use not only Islamic but also national ideology in the struggle against the

Russian Federation. The ongoing process can in fact be considered as an adaptation of part of the North Caucasian national movements to Islamism.

Separatist movements and jihadist groups in the North Caucasus have been studied by both local and foreign researchers: M. Vatchagaev, Vakhit Akaev, Emil Suleymanov, Igor Dobaev, Akhmet Yarlykapov, Gordon Hahn, Svante Cornell and others. Despite the relevance of the issue, the process of activation of North Caucasian separatist and jihadist movements have not been properly studied in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. The present work is one of the first attempts to study and analyze the influence of the ongoing war in Ukraine on Caucasian movements.

The aim of the research is: to show what influence the Russia-Ukraine war has on North Caucasian separatist groups and jihadist movements, including the intensification of their cooperation, the formation of common goals and mobilization strategies; to study the views of the Caucasian separatist movement, the reasons and circumstances of their rapprochement with part of the jihadist movements in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. From the aim of the research the tasks are: observation of the process of activation and transformation of North Caucasian separatist and jihadist movements; study of the influence of the war in Ukraine on the ideology, tactics and strategy of separatist and jihadist groups; research of the reasons determining the rapprochement of certain groups that form part of the Caucasian jihadist and separatist movements; study of the influence and role of digital technologies, especially with regard to the mobilization of supporters on social platforms, the conducting of dialogue between different groups, and the carrying out of information campaigns.

As the theoretical basis of the research an interdisciplinary approach is used, which combines elements of social constructivism and social movement theory. By means of these theoretical approaches it is possible to study and analyze the circumstances of the formation of political and religious approaches of North Caucasian separatist and jihadist movements, as well as the process of ideological transformation, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and under the conditions of the emergence of new military-political opportunities. According to constructivism, identities are not fixed and they undergo changes through interactions and the influence of the international environment. Social movement theory, specifically the political opportunity concept and framing, provides us with the opportunity to analyze how changes in the international environment (in this case, the Russia-Ukraine war) act and what conditions they create in the formation of new coalitions, the harmonization of ideological views, and mobilization. For the collection of data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of North Caucasian separatist movements. The interviews were recorded with the leaders of Chechen, Dagestani and Circassian groups during the period of November-December 2023 in Warsaw, Poland and Kyiv, Ukraine.

In addition, during the research, Caucasian separatist and jihadist media resources in the internet space (Telegram, YouTube, Facebook) were studied by using the method of digital ethnography, which form mobilization platforms in the internet space for the struggle against the Russian Federation. The processing of data was carried out using thematic analysis. The main themes and patterns in the interviews and online materials were distinguished mechanically, with consideration of recurring motives, differing positions among respondents, and contexts.

In parallel with the beginning of the full-scale war of Russia in Ukraine in February 2022, representatives of the national independence movements of Chechnya, Circassia, Dagestan and Ingushetia living in Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, France, Poland, Turkey and other countries became active, and new movements were also founded. Ukraine, being in a state of war with the Russian Federation, is interested in encouraging and supporting separatist movements on the territory of the Russian Federation.

Some part of the Caucasian political groups cooperate, while other part is in conflict over certain issues, but all of them, in perspective, consider both configurations of separate independent states and in the future a unified Caucasian state. Within these forces, active discussions are taking place on the arrangement of statehood and on its foundations in the case of achieving independence.

Shortly after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the Dagestan National Center was formed in Kyiv, which, after the weakening of Russia, considers the creation of an independent state on the basis of Islamic and national ideology. The movement supports the federal or confederal unity of sovereign republics in the North Caucasus, with preservation of the borders of 1991. Renunciation of territorial claims and rejection of conflict among Muslims are presented as ways of preventing crisis.

In September 2022, in Warsaw, Poland, Circassian diaspora organizations and activists based in Europe, Turkey, the USA and Jordan founded the movement Free Circassia. For its financial support they established the fund Nart. The main goal of the movement Free Circassia is the international recognition of the Circassian genocide (1864) organized by the Russian Empire, which should become the basis of national mobilization. The movement in the future considers the creation of a united Circassian state - Cherkassia - on the territory of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Krasnodar. It evaluates Islamism negatively and excludes participation in a Caucasian union based on Sharia. According to their position, Islamism damaged the national movement and was used by the Russian special services for their own goals.

In parallel with the beginning of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, Ingush separatist forces also became active and formed a new public movement, the Ingush Independence Committee. The organization aims at preparing the separation of Ingushetia from the composition of the Russian Federation, the return of seized territories, and the international recognition of the genocide carried out during the deportation of Ingush in 1944 and the ethnic cleansing in the Prigorodny District in 1992. The organization condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine and cooperates with other separatist movements active in Ukraine. The Ingush Independence Committee aims at the arrangement of an independent Ingushetia on Islamic foundations.

In November 2022, in France, a united congress of Chechen diasporas was held, where the movement United Force was formed. It sees the chance of achieving the independence of Chechnya and the North Caucasus in the case of Russia's defeat in Ukraine. The organization, in parallel with the building of state institutions and the process of so-called "de-Kadyrovization," considers the development of local Islamic education, while distancing itself from the role of political Islam. At the same time, it considers different forms of state arrangement: a federation of tukkhums, a Sharia-based, or a unitary state. It plans to resolve territorial disputes through negotiations. In the future it sets as its goal the

creation of a Caucasian federal or unitary union together with other peoples of the North Caucasus.

At present, three groups active in Europe claim legitimacy over the government of Ichkeria: the Government of Ichkeria / Cabinet of Ministers of Ichkeria headed by Akhmed Zakayev; the Parliament of Ichkeria headed by Zhaloudi Saraliapov; and the Presidium of the Government of Chechnya headed by Akhyad Idigov. Among these political groups, the most influential and organized is the Government of Ichkeria, which is opposed by the other two groups; however, the conflict between them is mainly personal and not ideological in character. The legitimacy of the Government of Ichkeria is not recognized by United Force and by other small Chechen groups (among them the political party Voice of Chechnya, founded in 2022, which cooperates with the Parliament of Ichkeria).

In 2022, on the accusation of strengthening the Sharia course of the Government of Ichkeria, former members of the same political group, who are against the Sharia amendments to the Constitution of Chechnya in 2002 and the transformation of Chechnya into an Islamic state, opposed it. They formed the Chechen Democratic Party, whose declared goal is the restoration of Ichkeria's independence and the achievement of international recognition, the establishment of a democratic and legal secular state on the basis of the 1992 Constitution.

The Government of Ichkeria does not consider the diversity of Chechen groups as a condition preventing their unification around the idea of Islam and freedom at a critical moment. The political goal of the movement is, at the initial stage, the independence of Chechnya and (in 2022 Ukraine recognized Chechnya as a sovereign territory occupied by the Russian Federation) the restoration of statehood on the basis of the Constitution of Ichkeria, integration into the international community, and only at a later stage the discussion of the model of the state. For this approach the opponents criticize the Government of Ichkeria, which emphasizes the important role of Islam in the Constitution. The Government of Ichkeria aims at the development of relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus and is conducting negotiations on the re-creation of Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus on a common cultural and religious basis. Part of the Circassian separatist organizations oppose the project of the Republic of Mountain Peoples, which does not take into account the issue of the return to the Circassians of the historical Black Sea coastal lands, the present Russia's Krasnodar region.

For the Caucasian movements disputed territories are a particularly acute issue: for example, the Ingush Independence Committee wants to return control over Vladikavkaz and Upper Lars in order to connect with Georgia by highway. The mentioned North Caucasian movements attach special importance to the role of Georgia in the achievement of their independence and in the establishment of international relations; they support the territorial integrity of Georgia. For the further development and success of the North Caucasian movements, Georgia's geographical location and political position represent defining factors. At the same time, it should be noted that the attempts of Caucasian groups to use the territory of Georgia may be perceived as a hostile step by the authorities of the Russian Federation, and may cause the initiation of direct military aggression.

Alongside carrying out socio-political activity, North Caucasian separatist movements are also interested in strengthening the military component, and are trying, under the conditions of the ongoing war in Ukraine, to form, train and provide fighting units with

combat experience, which in perspective they will use in case of returning to the region. For example, the declared goal of the Government of Ichkeria is the formation of a Chechen regular army. Ichkerian units in Ukraine are trying to share the combat experience of the Ukrainian army with the Russian Federation as much as possible, as their opponent, and to master modern equipment, organizational principles, as well as to develop skills of conducting modern warfare. They seek to adapt knowledge and experience with consideration of religion and of Chechen cultural particularities.

Since 2014, after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by the Russian Federation, and the beginning of military actions in southeastern Ukraine, former commanders and fighters of the Ichkerian army in exile became involved in the conflict and formed the volunteer battalions named after Dzhokhar Dudayev and Sheikh Mansur, and the 34th Assault Battalion “Mad Pack” within the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The units participated in combat operations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions during 2014–2022. From 2022, the number of units in Ukraine staffed by Caucasian fighters increased, and the battalion named after Hamzat Gelayev, the SOG Special Operations Group, the reconnaissance-sabotage group “United Caucasus” (formerly known as the Muslim Corp “Caucasus,” the unit includes fighters with an Islamist past) were formed. Caucasian fighters are also enlisted in the Battalion Crimea and in various units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In the same year, the Government of Ichkeria established a separate Special Purpose Battalion and the Military Intelligence Department of Ichkeria, while the Dagestan National Center formed a volunteer battalion named after Imam Shamil, staffed with Dagestani volunteers. The formation of a Circassian battalion has been announced, with the current involvement of about 40 Circassian volunteers fighting in Ukraine.

The volunteer battalion named after Sheikh Mansur is connected with the movement United Force. The Ingush Independence Committee formed the military wing of the organization, the Ingush Liberation Army, which unites fighters in Ukraine and a unit based in Syria with a jihadist past, considering the liberation struggle in the context of jihad. It carries out attacks on the infrastructure of the Russian Federation’s law enforcement structures in Ingushetia and calls on the population to cooperate. At the same time, one of the commanders of the grouping in Syria makes statements about returning to the Caucasus and continuing the struggle. Ethnic Ingush are also enlisted in other Caucasian units fighting on the side of Ukraine.

Among the Caucasian units participating in the war against the Russian Federation appeared former fighters of the Caucasus Emirate and/or other Islamist groups active in Syria, who are not noted for having carried out terrorist acts against the peaceful population. The armed wing of the Government of Ichkeria was joined and headed, together with comrades-in-arms, by Rustam Azhiev, also known as “Abdul-Hakim Shishani,” a veteran of the Russo-Chechen war, one of the former commanders of the Caucasus Emirate and later the leader of the Caucasian jihadist group Ajnad al-Kavkaz active in Syria. He was appointed Deputy to the Acting Commander-in-Chief of the military forces of Ichkeria and at the same time heads the Military Intelligence Department of Ichkeria. The alliance of a popular military commander with a jihadist past and a leader of the national independence movement was followed by sharp critical assessments from radical Islamists.

According to the explanation of a representative of the Government of Ichkeria, the Separate Special Purpose Battalion (ОБОН) is staffed by ethnic Chechens living in Ukraine,

who have been involved in combat operations since 2014, as well as by representatives of the Chechen diaspora who arrived from Europe after 2022. The participation of Ichkerian units in the Russia–Ukraine war is considered as a part of the national-liberation struggle, since they want to inflict damage on the enemy on the territory of Ukraine and afterward carry out the liberation of Chechnya from the Russian Federation. The members of the unit declare that they act in accordance with the norms of Sharia; accordingly, they fight not for Ukraine but against the Russian Federation, expressing solidarity with Ukraine and opposing the war, along with its military and civilian casualties. One of the commanders of the battalion, Khavaji Amaev, is a veteran of combat operations against the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus; he previously commanded one of the units of the Caucasus Emirate and later the jihadist group Kataib Ibd ar-Rahman, also known as Tarkhan’s Jamaat (the grouping of Tarkhan Gaziev, one of the former leaders of the Caucasus Emirate), which participated in the Syrian conflict.

Units associated with the Government of Ichkeria have several times carried out successful diversionary-type operations deep in the territory of the Russian Federation. It should be noted that along with Chechens, Georgian fighters are also enlisted in the unit.

The mentioned Caucasian movements and groups actively cooperate within the formats of the Anti-Imperial Bloc of Peoples, the League of Free Nations, the Forum of Free Nations of Post-Russia, and others. Most separatist movements seek to deepen their relations with European structures. Certain Caucasian units also cooperate within the framework of the Caucasian Union, which brings together Georgian organizations as well as units fighting in Ukraine. The Caucasian Union formed the Department of Peacekeeping Forces of the Caucasus, which is headed by Georgian national Lado Gamsakhurdia, the commander of the unit Caucasian Legion fighting against the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

In parallel with separatist movements and the combat units connected with them, Caucasian Islamist groups have also become active, which, under the conditions of the Russia–Ukraine war, are trying to use the tense situation for their own interests. The leaders of the Caucasus Emirate regard Caucasians fighting on either the Russian or Ukrainian side as belonging to the same category- as groups aligned with “infidels.”At the present stage their goal is to form a future strategy and to mobilize resources for activation at the appropriate time. The Chechen wing of the Caucasus Emirate - Vilayat Nokhchicho - draws attention to the necessity of consolidation of groups fighting for independence in Chechnya on the basis of Sharia, and the creation of a united council – shura - in which Chechens living in different countries will participate, including representatives of the diaspora in the Middle East and in Georgia’s Pankisi Gorge. Representatives of the Caucasus Emirate consider any separatist project only in accordance with Sharia. This group strictly criticizes Caucasian ethnic separatism and nationalism as sources of ethnic-territorial conflicts and considers only the model of a united North Caucasian Islamic state established on the basis of Sharia. The Taliban’s rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021 and the jihadists’ victory in Syria in 2024 serve as a new example and source of motivation for the Caucasian jihadist movement, demonstrating a “successful” armed struggle.

During the Russia–Ukraine war, terrorist attacks have been periodically recorded in the republics of the North Caucasus. Particularly notable for their scale and casualties were the coordinated attacks of 2024 in the cities of Makhachkala and Derbent in the Republic of Dagestan, which targeted synagogues and Christian churches and resulted in the deaths

of 4 civilians and 15 law enforcement officers. To this day, it remains unknown on behalf of which terrorist organization the attackers acted.

Information is periodically disseminated about terrorist attacks carried out by the Islamic State in the republics of the North Caucasus, as well as about counter-terrorist operations conducted against them. For the Caucasus Wilayah - the Caucasian branch of the organization - any manifestation of nationalism or the existence of other Islamist or jihadist groups is ideologically unacceptable; therefore, it accuses them of unbelief and regards them as enemies.

North Caucasian separatist and jihadist movements actively mobilize like-minded individuals and attract supporters in the online sphere - particularly on social platforms - with the support of Caucasian media activists. Primarily via Telegram channels, these groups regularly hold audio conferences and discussions, disseminate analytical articles and video clips, and raise funds through cryptocurrency.

In the internet space, a tendency of rapprochement between certain Caucasian groups supporting Islamist and national ideology is also observed. In Caucasian separatist groups, which traditionally shared democratic principles, support for the Islamic model of the state has noticeably increased. For example, surveys conducted on internet resources associated with the Government of Ichkeria show that the idea of arranging the state on the basis of Sharia enjoys great popularity among supporters of independence.

At the same time, new groups of media activists working on the theme of independence from the Russian Federation have been formed, with the involvement of leaders possessing a qualified Islamic education, who share the ideas of achieving national independence and establishing Sharia. Among these groups, the Chechen opposition media group NYSO is particularly active, which mainly covers information received from Chechnya on social networks, and conducts lectures and discussions on de-occupation and Islamic issues.

In conclusion, it can be said that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has contributed to the activation and, in some cases, rapprochement of North Caucasian separatist and jihadist groups on the basis of a common anti-Russian ground. This process has led to, in some measure, a reconsideration of ideology, and has made possible pragmatic alliances despite sharp ideological differences in the past. In the created situation both sides are trying to strengthen military and mobilization resources, since in perspective a large-scale military confrontation with the Russian Federation is considered. In this context, the geographical location of Georgia acquires special strategic importance, which is confirmed by the experience of the Russo-Chechen wars, when attempts to use the territory of the country for logistical purposes significantly aggravated the national security environment.

Despite differing views on models of statehood and territorial borders, most separatist movements envisage, following the declaration of national independence, the gradual introduction of Sharia adapted to cultural specificities, and ultimately the formation of a united Caucasian union. The convergence of positions between Caucasian separatists and Islamists is largely driven by the younger generation of independence supporters, many of whom favor a system of governance based on Sharia.

For jihadists supporting the Caucasus Emirate, a united independent Sharia-based North Caucasus is the only model and cooperation with democratic separatist forces is

categorically unacceptable. Meanwhile, the Caucasian branch of the Islamic State considers the Caucasus only as one of the provinces within the global Caliphate.

Unlike Caucasian jihadist groups, which periodically carry out attacks in the North Caucasus, at this stage the actions of separatist forces are mainly limited to joint operations with the Ukrainian army and to activities in the virtual space.

Digital technologies play a crucial role in the mobilization efforts of Caucasian movements. They create a communication space for representatives and supporters of different groups to hold discussions and narrow differences, while also facilitating the coordination of future actions and the collection of financial resources under conditions of anonymity.

Despite the activation of Caucasian movements abroad, the ideas of separation from the Russian Federation and the formation of an independent state are not popular in the North Caucasus. On the contrary, a solid part of the region's population supports the policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, the conduct of military actions in Ukraine, which is also indicated by the number of those who went voluntarily to the war and those who were killed. By the summer of 2025, the slow but gradual advance of the units of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation presents to the population of the North Caucasus as unrealistic the perspective of a possible defeat or disintegration of the Russian Federation in the near future.