

Chechen Rebels Step Up Attacks

A battle between rebels and security forces took place in Chechnya's Urus-Martan district on May 6. Kavkazky Uzel on May 7 quoted a Chechen Interior Ministry source as saying of the incident: "Yesterday at around 1400 in a forest tract at the village of Komsomolskoe in Urus-Martan district servicemen from a Defense Ministry unit who were carrying out intelligence-reconnaissance activities discovered a gang-formation unit numbering up to 15 people that was concealed at a temporary base. After a short shootout, the bandits retreated and left, presumably in the direction of the mountains (the village of Komsomolskoe is located in the foothills). There were no casualties or wounded among the servicemen. An operation to find and neutralize that gang group is continuing at the moment." According to Kavkazky Uzel, Chechen rebel websites claimed that the battle lasted more than one and a half hours but did not report on whether any rebel fighters were killed or wounded.



The shootout in Urus-Martan closely followed one of the deadliest presumed rebel attacks against security forces in Chechnya in recent months. Five policemen were killed and two wounded by a bomb detonated by unknown attackers in Grozny late on May 4. Russia's Channel One state television and Interfax, citing sources in the Combined Group of Forces in the North Caucasus, reported that the incident took place around 11 p.m., Moscow Standard Time, on May 4, on a roadside in the village of Tashkola in Grozny's Staropromyslovsky district, as a police unit comprised of ten people was passing by. According to the sources, the bomb was stuffed with metal elements that acted as shrapnel. "Five policemen died from the explosion at the scene, another two received shrapnel wounds," a military source said, adding that the remaining policemen received minor contusions. These same sources said that the number of police patrols had been increased in Grozny in connection with possible terrorists acts and that one of these additional police patrols was the target of the bombing.

Kavkazky Uzel on May 5 quoted a Chechen policeman who provided further details of the incident. "A reinforced police detachment consisting of staff of the Akhmat Kadyrov regiment of spetsnaz from the republic's Interior Ministry and members of the local police (ROVD), numbering 10 people, was on duty at a mobile post that had been set up at the intersection of 8th Line Street and Borodino Street in the village of Tashkala in Grozny's Staropromyslovsky district," the unnamed policeman said. "Around 23:10 at night a powerful explosive device planted on the side of the road went off. As a result of the explosion, five policemen were killed at the scene of the incident, including three members of the Interior Ministry spetsnaz regiment. Another two people—an officer and a policeman—received serious wounds. The remaining [servicemen] escaped with light contusions and injuries."

On May 4, a commander of a police patrol-sentry service (PPSM) regiment was shot by unidentified gunmen at the gate of his home in Vedeno district and died later in the hospital. Kavkazky Uzel on May 5 quoted an Interior Ministry officer who gave details of the incident. "Unknown criminals in the Vedeno district village of Dyshne-Vedeno shot up an automobile on Ushaev Street in which PPSM unit staffer Khavazhi Bekbulatov was located," the source said. "After he returned fire, the attackers escaped. Bekbulatov died later in the hospital, where he had been taken by relatives. The fact that the bandits laid an ambush in immediate proximity to the policeman's home shows that it was a premeditated and carefully planned action by participants in NVFs [illegal armed formations]. Despite the measures that have been taken, it has not been possible so far to get on the trail of these bandits, unfortunately."

Kavkazky Uzel reported that on the evening of May 4, another policeman was killed when unidentified attackers fired on a UAZ automobile on the Grozny-Argun road in the suburbs of the Chechen capital. On May 2, a shootout between security forces and around 30 members of "illegal armed formations" took place in a forest tract at the village of Roshin-Chu in southern Chechnya, Chechen Interior Ministry sources told Kavkazky Uzel. A contract serviceman with the military commandant's office of the Internal Troops and Isa Akhmedov, a member of an Urus-Martan police department PPSM battalion, were killed in the exchange, while another policeman was wounded.

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<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374154>

Kadyrov Keeps the Heat on the Yamadaevs

In what appears to be an ongoing campaign by Chechnya's pro-Moscow administration against the Vostok Battalion of the GRU (Russian military intelligence), investigators with the republic's law-enforcement bodies are looking into the battalion's possible involvement in the murder of the Arsamakov brothers (Chechnya Weekly, April 17 and 24; May 1). Kavkazky Uzel on May 8 quoted a Chechen law-enforcement source as saying that investigators who are looking into the Vostok Battalion's activities have information about the possible involvement of battalion members in the kidnapping and subsequent brutal murder of Yusup and Yunus Arsamakov and their driver, who disappeared in early February of 2007.

"Investigators have testimony from several former servicemen of the GRU's spetsnaz battalion Vostok that sheds light on the fate of Yusup and Yunus Arsamakov, brothers of the Moscow Industrial Bank president Abubakar Arsamakov, and their driver Khamzat Magomadov, who disappeared last year on the territory of the republic's Shatoi district," a Chechen law-enforcement source told Kavkazky Uzel. "They [the ex-Vostok servicemen-CW] claim that the Arsamakovs and Magomadov were murdered by spetsnaz and that their bodies were taken out of Vedeno district and burned. That information is being checked."

As Kavkazky Uzel reported, in addition to the disappearance and murder of the Arsamakov brothers and their driver, investigators this past week charged that Vostok Battalion members were involved in several other crimes. On May 7, the website quoted a Chechen law-enforcement source as saying that remains found the previous day on the outskirts of Gudermes were those of a Vostok serviceman who had been killed by other battalion members on suspicion of "treason." The unnamed police officer said that there was strong reason to believe that the Vostok serviceman was killed by his fellow battalion members on suspicion that he had a hand in the death of Dzhabrail Yamadaev, a brother of the Vostok Battalion's current commander, Sulim Yamadaev, who earlier headed the unit and then became Chechnya's deputy military commandant before being killed in a bombing in the Chechen village of Dyshne-Vedeno in March 2003.

"Yesterday, the remains of a person were found during operational-reconnaissance activities on the outskirts of Gudermes around two kilometers from the grounds of the city hospital," the source said. "The location of the remains was learned from a former serviceman with the battalion. According to available information, the deceased was Vakhsolt Zakaev, who several years ago was a contract serviceman in the unit of Dzhabrail Yamadaev and headed a platoon. Lt. [Dzhabrail] Yamadaev (he was posthumously awarded the rank of Hero of Russia) was killed in March 2003 in a private home in the village of Dyshne-Vedeno by an explosion caused a homemade bomb that had been placed under a couch. The spetsnaz had for a long time tried to figure out who was involved in that murder which, it is believed, was organized by Shamil Basaev. In 2004, Zakaev disappeared. According to available information, Vakhsolt Zakaev was killed on suspicion of having been involved in the death of Dzhabrail Yamadaev, since only a few specially trusted associates of the murdered [commander], one of whom was the platoon commander Zakaev, could have placed the bomb in the carefully guarded home."

On May 4, a mass grave was discovered in Gudermes containing the remains of people whom Chechen authorities believe were victims of extra-judicial killings by the Vostok Battalion. According to one report, the mass grave included the remains of a young woman. Kavkazky Uzel on May 5 quoted a Chechen law-enforcement source as saying that the grave contained the remains of six people. On May 6, Kommersant quoted investigators as saying that they had been led to the mass grave site by a former member of the Vostok Battalion who was removed from the unit in the wake of the conflict between its commander, Sulim Yamadaev, and Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov that erupted on April 14 following an armed confrontation between members of the unit and forces loyal to Kadyrov. Kommersant also reported that a total of seven bodies were in the mass grave and that the deceased were all males. The newspaper quoted Sulim Yamadaev's brother, former State Duma deputy Ruslan Yamadaev, as saying in reaction to the latest allegations against the Vostok Battalion: "I am tired of commenting on all of this nonsense coming out of Chechnya. In actual fact, the whole republic knows where the real graveyards of victims of zachistki [security sweeps] and repression are located."

In an interview broadcast by Ekho Moskvyy radio on April 19, Sulim Yamadaev charged that 75 percent of the amnestied rebels who are working for the Chechen police force under Ramzan Kadyrov are still rebels and involved in

murders and kidnapping in the republic (Chechnya Weekly, April 24). Kadyrov, for his part, has accused Vostok members of involvement in a number of murders and kidnappings, including the case of the Arsamakov brothers and the murder of the well-known Chechen singer Milana Balaeva and her mother.

Kavkazky Uzel on May 7 quoted an anonymous Chechen political scientist as saying that the latest accusations against the Vostok Battalion are part of the ongoing battle between Kadyrov and the Yamadaev brothers. "After Movladi Baisarov (former commander of the FSB's Gorets special unit, who was killed in Moscow in November 2006 by officers of the Chechen MVD), got into a conflict with the president of the republic and ran off to Moscow, the same scenario played out," the source said. "Baisarov—who, by the way, had the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Russian special services—was also accused of murdering civilians; graves were found where some of his victims were buried and he was put on the wanted list. He was then shot practically in the center of the Russian capital, supposedly for attempting to resist [arrest]. Something similar is being repeated with the Yamadaevs."

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Relatives of Fatima Tlisova Threatened

The Regnum news agency reported on April 18 that on April 11, a cross was drawn in chalk on the gate of the home in Karachaevo-Cherkessia of the parents of journalist Fatima Tlisova, who worked for Regnum and the Associated Press before leaving Russia for the United States. According to Regnum, together with the cross, was a note declaring: "We cannot get to Fatima, but we can get to you." Along with Tlisova's parents, her brother and sister, sister-in-law and seven nieces and nephews (the oldest is 13) live in the house.

Four days later, on April 15, a car pulled up to the Tlisovas' home, the news agency reported, after which a man called over Fatima Tlisova's oldest nephew and told him that his father had gotten drunk and asked him to go pick up the boy. The boy, who knew all of his father's friends but did not recognize the man behind the wheel, could also not recall a time when his father had drunk too much. He decided, however, that he had to obey his father's order and go with the man. Yet as soon as he got into the car, his mother shouted to him and he got out, after which the car quickly drove off. The boy's father (Tlisova's brother), who returned home an hour later—completely sober—said he had not sent anyone to pick up his son.

"This is not the first case," Regnum quoted Tlisova's sister-in-law as saying. "Last year they tried to kidnap my younger son. When he was on his way to school, a car pulled up to him. A man behind the wheel demanded that the boy get in the car. My son ran away, but was very frightened—since that time he has refused to go to school on his own; we accompany him there and pick him up after lessons." Tlisova's sister-in-law added that an acquaintance had come by not long before and inquired about what Tlisova was doing in the United States. According to Tlisova's sister-in-law, at the end of the conversation, the acquaintance said he was not simply curious but had been asked to find out details about Tlisova by a "person from the office"—he used the word "kontora," the nickname for the Soviet KGB—and advised her that "it would be better for you to disown such a relative."

The journalist and commentary Yulia Latynina wrote about the threats to Fatima Tlisova—and others—in a piece published by *Yezhednevny Zhurnal* (Ej.ru) on May 8. Latynina noted that Tlisova became "Enemy Number One" for her coverage of the October 13, 2005 uprising in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria.

"Fatima was constantly threatened, searches were carried out in the home of her parents, in newspapers appeared the denunciations that characteristically precede disappearances without a trace," Latynina wrote. "Ultimately, Fatima was poisoned: by the time she reached Moscow it was impossible to establish the substance [that was used to poison her]. I spoke a while later with one high-ranking federal official who was then responsible for the North Caucasus. He intoned an entire ode to Tlisova's professionalism and objectivity, and then said: 'Yes, I know that she has difficulties with the FSB. I ordered them to leave her alone'. A month after that, Fatima was poisoned again (neither time to death; they apparently wanted simply to intimidate), and in the end she left Russia."

"And then, after she left, this inscription appeared on the gates," Latynina added, detailing the apparent attempts to kidnap Tlisova's nephews.



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Briefs

Multiple Attacks Take Place in Ingushetia...

A "participant in illegal armed formations" was killed in Ingushetia on May 8, Interfax reported. The news agency quoted a source in the headquarters of the Temporary Group of Forces as saying the suspected rebel, who was hiding in a private house in the village of Kantyshevo near Nazran, was killed by spetsnaz commandos when he resisted capture during a special operation. According to Itar-Tass, a pistol and grenades were found at the scene. The news agency identified the dead gunman as Isa Arsaev, 23, who, it said, "was a member of the gang involved in several sabotage and terrorist acts, including shootouts and murders of law enforcers." According to Itar-Tass, Arsaev's "gang" was "planning to commit several sabotage and terrorist acts in Ingushetia during the celebrations on Victory Day." Victory Day is celebrated in Russia on May 9. On May 7, a car belonging to an employee of the Federal Security Service (FSB) branch in Ingushetia, Ibragim Tsaroev, was bombed in Nazran. The car was damaged but no one was hurt in the attack, Itar-Tass reported. On May 6, unidentified attackers fired on car in which an officer of the Ingush branch of the Federal Narcotics Control Service (FSKN), Col. Azid Galaev, was traveling. He was not hurt, but a woman traveling in a car nearby was wounded. On May 5, gunmen twice fired on units of the Interior Ministry's Internal Troops in Ingushetia, wounding one serviceman. In one of the incidents, the attackers fired on a unit that was carrying out a reconnaissance mission on the Nazran-Kantyshevo road. On May 5, unknown gunmen fired on a group of servicemen in Nazran, wounding one of them, Ingushetiya.ru reported. The opposition website reported that the incident was not officially recorded because the republic's Interior Ministry has been ordered not to register such attacks.

...As Police Raid a Nazran Mosque

Kavkazky Uzel reported on May 5 that parishioners of a mosque in Nazran's Plievsky municipal district were detained that day by unidentified gunmen. "As we were finishing post-midday prayers, 6-7 armed people in masks burst into the mosque, not identifying themselves and not explaining anything, and screamed: 'Whose cars are parked outside?' They literally interrupted our prayer and detained three of the cars' owners – me, Plievsky municipal district resident Yusuf Pliev and Malgobek resident Murad Albakov – without explanation," one of those detained, Gardanov Khamzat, told the website. The raiders presented no IDs. "These armed people without any respect for a place of worship walked in the mosques with dirty shoes," he said. "The most interesting thing is that they, as it turned out, were employees of local law-enforcement organs, which became clear from their conversations and the place where they took the three detainees – the Nazran police department [GOVD]. That is, they are Ingush - they must be Muslims - who all the same displayed disrespect for a place of prayer." According to eyewitnesses, the raid was carried out by 15-20 law-enforcers who arrived at the mosque in several vehicles without license plates and detained the three car-owners. The detainees were released and their cars were returned to them by the following day. According to Kavkazky Uzel, parishioners of the mosque and the mosque itself have since 1999 been under pressure from authorities, who have accused it of spreading "Wahhabism" and tried to close it.

Chechnya's Mufti Discusses Islamic Television, the Hajj and Bride Abductions

Itar-Tass, quoting the press service of Chechnya's president and government reported on May 6 that Chechen authorities plan to open an "independent Islamic television channel." According to the news agency, the issue was discussed during a session of the Council of Ulemas of the Chechen Republic under the chairmanship of the republic's mufti, Sultan Mirzaev. Participants in the meeting said that a television channel devoted to Islamic themes "would promote the spiritual development of society." The press service noted that at a recent event celebrating the Day of the Chechen Language, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov said that by "propagandizing spiritual-moral values, traditions and, correspondingly, the Chechen language, we will be able to preserve the culture and customs of our people." During the same Council of Ulemas session, the issue of Chechen pilgrims traveling to this year's Hajj in Saudi Arabia was discussed. Mirzaev said that more than 5,000 pilgrims will go this year, up from more than 3,000 last year, and that they will be led by fluent Arab-speaking officials from the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Chechnya. Meanwhile, RIA Novosti on May 6 quoted Mirzaev as saying that religious leaders in Chechnya plan to eradicate the century-old tradition of bride abductions. "Abductions of brides contradict the norms of Sharia law and the traditions and customs of the Chechen people," Mirzaev said, adding that the tradition should be abolished.

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Dagestan's Jamaats Widen Their Theater of Operations

By Mairbek Vatchagaev

Dagestan's Interior Minister Adalgirei Magomedtagirov recently admitted that the government expects rebel fighters to strike over the May holidays. The projected spread of rebel attacks mentioned in his statement was quite intriguing:

"Makhachkala-based groups of bandits are planning to commit acts of terror in several Dagestani cities, including Makhachkala, Khasavyurt, Kizilyurt, Kizlyar, Buinaksk, Kaspiisk and Derbent," he said. Yet as inclusive as that list was, Magomedtagirov had to add that terror acts elsewhere in Dagestan could also not be ruled out (Grani.ru, April 30).



It is easy to see that the locations of anticipated rebel attacks span almost all of Dagestan, from Kizlyar in the north to Derbent in the south. The reality that the government has been trying to deny for a long time is that the entire territory of Dagestan has become a theater for operations staged by rebel fighters of several jamaats (the Sharia Jamaat, Jenet Jamaat, Buinaksk Jamaat, Khalif Jamaat and numerous subdivisions of these groups, including Jarullah, Taimaz of Gubdent, Seifullah and others) (Chechenpress.org, October 13, 2007). The new Dagestan front commander Emir Abdul-Majid has become a worthy replacement of his predecessor, and while the rebels have suffered significant losses inflicted by the police and Federal Security Service (FSB) operations during the last six months, anti-government attacks continue to occur across Dagestan consistently at the rate of several times a week.

The Russian army and special services expected that the assassination of the previous underground resistance commander Emir Rabbani (aka Rappani) Khalilov in the Kizilyurt district village of Novy Sulak in Dagestan on September 17, 2007 (Kavkaz-memo.ru, September 18, 2007) would disorient the rebels who have been fighting in Dagestan under his leadership. Khalilov's successor, however, turned out to be so similar to him that, unlike in Chechnya, the change of leadership caused neither apparent losses nor major disruptions for the resistance movement in Dagestan.

The longest ongoing "mop-up" operation in the village of Gimry, the birthplace of two famous imams (Gazi-Magoma, aka Gazi Mullah, and Shamil), has been underway for almost six months since it started on December 16, 2007. Army and FSB special services units have been called to the area; the village has been cut off from the rest of the world by a total blockade, with the army demanding that the residents give up the active fighters of the local jamaat.

The original purpose of the Gimry operation was to apprehend the killers of Gazimagomed Magomedov, the local representative from the Untsukul district in Dagestan's parliament. It is worth noting that before the war in Chechnya broke out, Magomedov was an avid supporter of Dagestani radical leader Bagautdin of Kizilyurt (Magomed Kebedov), who left Dagestan in 2000 and remains underground somewhere in the Middle East (Novaya Gazeta, January 21).

The government is at a loss to understand the reluctance of Gimry's residents to give up the jamaat fighters; arrests, threats and almost daily searches carried out in different blocks of the village are certain to have taken a toll on the mental health of the villagers. At their request, Dagestan's Ministry of Health arranged for the visit of a group of physicians to provide outpatient services on February 6, which appeared to be indirect proof that the residents were banned from leaving the village even for medical reasons.

It should also be noted that the village of Gimry, home to less than 1,000 households and 3,500 people, has been a pebble in the government's shoe for a long time due to the strong influence of the jamaat in the village. For example, the villagers have been living under virtual Sharia rule for a number of years, and all the disputes have been reviewed by the Sharia courts only (Novaya Gazeta, March 24), which stood in sharp contrast to the government's loud claims that the shootouts in the villages of Karamakhi, Chabanmakhi and Kadar put an end to radicalism in Dagestan once and for all (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, December 21, 1999). Interestingly, there are dozens of villages like Gimry across Dagestan, but there is no way to come up with an accurate count because the government makes every effort to

suppress the relevant information in fear that their influence will grow.

At the same time, anti-Sufi sentiment in Dagestan has been rising in direct proportion to the relentless promotion of less-than-popular Sufi sheikhs. It comes as no surprise that the Sharia Jamaat web site (www.jamaatshariat.com) contains so much criticism about the Sufi philosophy that sometimes it is difficult to discern whether the Jamaat considers Sufism a worse enemy than the Russian army.

The official website of Sharia Jamaat (an umbrella group for all other jamaats in Dagestan except the Nogai Jamaat, which consists of ethnic Nogais of Dagestan, Stavropol, Chechnya and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and serves as a separate unit of the Caucasus Front outside of the Sharia Jamaat) continues to publish the writings of its fugitive leader Magomed Kebedov (Bagautdin Magomedov), including his book and his advice on the art of warfare, along with his judgments on those who have been “good Muslims” and not-so-good ones.

In essence, Dagestan leads a life of its own; Russia maintains a list of entertainers banned from performing in the republic, which includes all artists suspected of being homosexual. Clan-driven and criminal infighting continues to rip the republic apart (Chechnya Weekly, July 12 and September 13, 2007), and it would not be an overstatement to call Dagestan a weakest link in the chain of North Caucasus republics.

Societal tensions fuel the continuing flight of ethnic Russians out of Dagestan who see no future in the region, where the armed opposition has been battling the government for many years. For example, Dagestan was home to 121,000 ethnic Russians according to the 2002 census numbers, compared with 150,000 Russians in 1989 (Rossiiskaya Gazeta—Yug Rossii, #4650, April 29). In all likelihood, the 2002 numbers include the permanently stationed military personnel and numerous staff of the FSB training center (the FSB opened a Specialized Training Center in Dagestan in March 2007) but not the military forces stationed in Botlikh.

In light of the above, the government’s efforts to organize various anti-terrorism drills cause nothing but concern because they are perceived as half-hearted attempts to maintain the party line that the government remains in control. One such spectacle was recently staged at the Tchirkey Hydrological Power Station to practice defense against the rebel raids, a hot topic in Dagestan today (Eng.riadagestan.ru, April 29).

In conclusion, Dagestan remains one of the most dangerous and tense regions in the North Caucasus, where the rebels’ resources and capabilities are far superior to all other regions, including Chechnya. That state of affairs is certain to keep Minister Magomedtagirov busy; indeed, he will likely have to keep announcing upcoming rebel attacks across Dagestan to the public, again and again.

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Chechen Rebels Offer to Help Georgia in Its Standoff with Russia

By Andrei Smirnov

On April 29, Movladi Udugov, an envoy of the Chechen rebels outside the Caucasus, declared that the North Caucasian insurgency could help Georgia in its standoff with Russia. Relations between Georgia and Russia have significantly deteriorated since the Russian government decided to establish direct official relations with the secessionist authorities of Abkhazia, the region that is de-facto independent but officially is part of Georgia. At the end of April, additional Russian troops were deployed to Abkhazia under the pretext of increasing the number of peacekeeping troops in the breakaway republic in order to guarantee security. The Georgian authorities regarded these steps by the Kremlin as aggression against Georgia. On May 6, Georgia's State Minister for Issues of Reintegration, Temur Iakobashvili, declared that Georgia and Russia were "very close to war" (Interfax, May 6).



Apparently the rebels in the North Caucasus who are fighting for the region's independence from Russia could not ignore the situation and not try to use it in their interests. Movladi Udugov who calls himself "the Head of the Informational-Analytical Service of the Caucasus Emirate," told the Kavkaz-Center rebel website that two months earlier the Amir of the Caucasus Emirate, Dokka Umarov, had ordered the creation of a special monitoring group with the task of monitoring the situation surrounding Russian-Georgian relations because "these events are taking place directly at the borders of the Caucasus Emirate and directly affect our interests." According to Udugov, the group has informational and operational departments and monitors the activities of Russian troops near the border with Georgia, including "movements of troops and equipment, visits to the region by high-ranking military officials, and the activities of intelligence services, including the Russian Defense Ministry's military intelligence." Movladi Udugov also declared that the rebels had "agents in South Ossetia [another breakaway region of Georgia] and Abkhazia."

Just three days before Udugov's statement, Kavkaz-Center reported that the situation around Georgia was discussed at the most recent meeting of top rebel field commanders, which took place in early April in southwestern Chechnya. "The military leadership of the Caucasus Emirate has made certain decisions regarding this issue, which were not disclosed," the website reported (Kavkaz-Center, April 26).

Movladi Udugov's declaration could be described as a direct offer from the rebels to the Georgian government to establish a kind of an anti-Russian military alliance—an objective the Chechen rebels have been trying to achieve since the beginning of the second Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1999. Udugov particularly stressed in his statement that the Georgian authorities had not yet asked the rebel leadership to share intelligence that they have or to render military assistance "in case of a real Russian aggression." This phrase could be interpreted as advice from the rebels to the Georgian authorities not to hesitate to get in touch with them.

This is not the first public proposal made by the Chechen rebels to Georgia to fight together against Russia. In August 2004, then Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov said in an interview with Georgia's Mze TV channel: "I know what Russia is and how to resist it." In that interview, Maskhadov expressed his full support for Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in his struggle to defend Georgia's interests and independence (Grani.ru, August 28, 2004). Three years before this statement by Makhadov, Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev, in an interview to Kavkaz-Center, called on Georgia to provide the rebels in Chechnya with anti-aircraft missiles (Grani.ru, May 17, 2001).

Such declarations by Chechen rebel commanders helped the Georgians blackmail Russia by threatening to help the Chechen separatists the same way the Russian authorities help separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the peak of the crisis in South Ossetia in summer 2004, Koba Davitashvili, a Georgian parliamentary deputy, called on the Georgian government to recognize Chechnya's independence (Grani.ru, August 28, 2004).

Nevertheless, there is no real proof that the Georgian government has ever actually helped the rebels in the North Caucasus with weapons or ammunition. The shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles that were brought to Chechnya by militants loyal to Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelaev in 2002 were reportedly purchased from Russian officers in Russian military garrisons then stationed in Georgia, Batumi and Gudauta.

In fact, Georgia is in a much more advantageous position than Russia when one considers the relative strength of separatist forces in the breakaway regions of Georgia and Russia. No matter how significant the Kremlin's help to Abkhazia or South Ossetia might be, the two separatist regimes are unable to confront Georgia without the Russian armed forces' direct involvement. As for the rebels in the North Caucasus, even small financial assistance from Georgia can double their capability to fight Russian forces in the region. The ability of Caucasian insurgents to move across the North Caucasian range from Sochi (Krasnodar Krai) in the west to Makhachkala (Dagestan) in the east make them potentially very helpful to the Georgian authorities in case of an open armed conflict with Russia.

"I want to say that the mountain area of the Caucasus Emirate from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea is under Mujahideen control, and it is the zone in which the Armed Forces of the Caucasus Emirate are active," Udugov said in his appeal to Georgia.

It is also interesting to note that while the Kremlin is threatening to send volunteers from the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeya) to help Abkhazia, it is not clear that such volunteers actually exist. Many Kabardinians who are ethnically very close to the Abkhaz are now in the anti-Russian camp fighting for the independence of the North Caucasus from Russia. If a Russian-Georgian war breaks out, nobody knows who will have more North Caucasians on its side, Georgia or Russia.

At the first glance, Russia looks dominant in the Russian-Georgian standoff. Neither Georgia nor its allies like the United States or the European Council can really do anything to change the political course of the Kremlin towards further recognition of the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nevertheless, if we include in the equation a war that may break out in the Russian rear, the North Caucasus, Russian superiority does not appear so obvious. It is hard to say what the rebels in the North Caucasus can really do to disrupt Russian control over Abkhazia, but any violent actions in the northwest Caucasus could damage Russian influence in the southern flank of the Caucasian Range.

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