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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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On 21 September in his highly anticipated address to the nation, Russia's President Vladimir Putin announced a partial mobilisation according to which military service applies to approximately 300,000 men. The decree has predominantly covered the personnel with prior military experience or other relevant professions¹ although there has been reported cases of mobilising inexperienced and unmotivated citizens.² The whole process of partial mobilisation is designed to support the existing armed units in Ukraine suffering from heavy losses and thus, maintain numerical superiority over the adversary. Despite the fact that the exact number of mobilised individuals by regions has not been disclosed, many believe that the mobilisation has disproportionately affected a number of underdeveloped and peripheral provinces of Russia, especially the predominantly Muslim-populated North Caucasus. Although the anti-mobilisation protests took place in more than 50 Russian cities, the most fierce and controversial contentious events were held in the North Caucasus.³ This paper seeks to overview the anti-mobilisation protest events in the region, analyse their nationwide and regional contributory factors and discuss the future trends of protest activism.

Dagestan

The largest and perhaps the most volatile demonstrations took place in the Dagestan republic. The first spontaneous protest broke out in rural areas. Nearly 110 inhabitants of the village of Endirey of the district of Khasavyut blocked the federal highway connecting Dagestan with Chechnya. Despite the ultimatum given by the riot police forces to unblock the road, protestors refused to do so even after some shots were fired into the air.⁴ Very similar protest events occurred in some villages of the district of Babayurt as well.⁵

The rural demonstrations were followed by the meetings in republic's capital of Makhachkala. On September 25, a group of local activists, consisting largely of middle-aged women and young men, rushed to the central square of the city to confront the process of mobilisation. Local law enforcement bodies reacted to the protests which resulted in mass arrests and clashes with the protestors.⁶ Several prominent local activists, including journalists Idris Yusupov and Sergey Ainbinder, were detained. The events of Makhachkala echoed in the third largest city of Dagestan, Khasavyurt, where locals also marched against the process of mobilisation. By September 27, the protest wave had been declined and those protesters who were detained were released.⁷

The remarkable characteristic of the protests in Dagestan is that they were leaderless. Despite the attempt by local authorities to label the protest movement as events coordinated by the “country’s enemies from Ukraine” or “international terrorists in exile,” the demonstrations did not have any leadership.⁸ Even though the Telegram channel *Utro Dagestana* was claiming to be in charge of the demonstration and was releasing the guidance on how to target Dagestan’s state-owned infrastructure (e.g., blocking the federal highways by lighting fires on them), the general audience largely ignored these messages.⁹

The demonstrations in Makhachkala sent an alarming signal to the local authorities. For instance, pro-Moscow loyalists, such as the wife of the Head of Dagestan’s Spiritual Directorate (DUM), Aina Hamzatova, released a statement in which she asked President Putin to postpone the mobilisation in Dagestan and give the republic six months to provide recruits with relevant training.¹⁰ This statement was followed by the address by the Head of the Dagestani Republic, Sergei Melikov, criticising the methods of recruitment in the region.¹¹

The partial mobilisation is a highly sensitive and painful issue for Dagestan. Over three thousand residents of Dagestan were recruited during the first wave of the mobilisation.¹² According to the official statistics, Dagestan is not only one of the largest contributors of manpower for the Russian armed forces but also has the highest death toll from all of the other regions of Russia.¹³

There are several interlinked possible explanations for the protest events in Dagestan. The first and foremost is the cultural sensitivity and the social fabric of the region. Dagestan, as a multi-ethnic republic, is populated by over 20 ethno-linguistic groups with a strong sense of ethnic identity among them and numerous kinship networks. The decades of instability and sizable human losses during counter-insurgency operations had a deep imprint on local society. Thus, the high death toll in Russia’s war against Ukraine reopens old wounds for Dagestanis and reinvigorates their historical trauma. Secondly, the protests in some rural areas of Dagestan have an ethnic dimension as they took place in Kumyk-populated regions of the republic. Ethnic Kumyk activists believe that their ethnic community has been disproportionately targeted by the mostly Avar-dominated local administration which includes bodies responsible for conscription.¹⁴ Thirdly, another factor facilitating the protests is the demographic and economic trends in Dagestan. While the majority of the Russian provinces

have been suffering from an ageing and shrinking population, Dagestan has a high birth rate far above the replacement level. Moreover, the republic's capital of Makhachkala is one of the fastest growing urban areas in the Russian Federation. On the other hand, Dagestan is among the poorest regions of Russia with a high unemployment rate. Consequently, such socio-economic conditions create a large share of newly urbanised unemployed young people. As social movements and events such as the Arab Spring show, such a socio-demographic landscape creates fertile soil for the creation of protest movements.

Chechnya

Contrary to expectations, anti-mobilisation protests have also reached Chechnya where the local authorities are known for their intolerance to all such events. Several Chechen social media platforms were calling on the mothers of Chechnya to join the anti-mobilisation protest demonstration at the central mosque in Grozny which was planned for September 21. Nevertheless, the local administration took some pre-emptive measures and police cordons encircled the territory of the mosque, thereby preventing people from gathering en masse.¹⁵ Earlier that day, several women were detained on their way to the demonstration. The Head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, confirmed the detention of the women and commented on the dialogue between the local government and some of the potential participants. According to Kadyrov, among these protestors were 20 women of which three had sons fighting with the Russian forces against Ukraine. On the other hand, Kadyrov warned the population of the republic to stay away from the anti-war demonstrations. He labelled the organisers of the protests as “enemies of the people” and threatened to send them to fight in Ukraine.¹⁶ On the other hand, understanding the potential consequences related to the involuntary mobilisation of civilians from Chechnya, Kadyrov refrained from issuing supportive statements for mobilisation. As he noted, the Chechen republic had started a partial mobilisation straight from the beginning of the war and had a larger contribution than the other regions of Russia. Kadyrov's words are supported by numerous reports on the forceful mobilisation of some vulnerable social groups of Chechnya, such as public servants, people dealing with debts in banks or those with criminal convictions.¹⁷

Compared to the small-scale protest attempts at home, the Chechen diaspora in Europe was more vocal against Kadyrov's policy. Kadyrov was

mostly criticised for treating those men who were eligible for conscription as an expendable resource in battle. Some Chechen activists also brought up the issue of the limited representation of Chechen elites on the battlefield. The main rhetoric of Telegram channels was “while your children are dying in Ukraine, Kadyrov’s sons are living in mansions.”¹⁸ As the response to these accusations, Kadyrov revealed that he had sent his three teenage sons, Eli, Adam and Ahmat, the youngest of whom was 14 years old, to fight in Ukraine.¹⁹ Despite Kadyrov’s claim about the contribution of his sons to the war, there is no evidence of their participation in combat.

These small-scale protests are somewhat surprising given the fact that Kadyrov’s administration mercilessly thwarts any attempt at non-state activism, peaceful or violent. Nevertheless, several factors explain the protest attempts in Grozny. First, the traditionally patriarchal Chechen culture does not encourage the excessive use of violence against women, especially if they are older. As long as the organisers of the protests were mothers of mobilised adults, the local authorities did not go beyond warnings and threats. Secondly, the war in Ukraine reinvigorates the traumatic experience of two Chechen wars in which ethnic Chechens experienced colossal losses among civilians. Although Chechen officials do not disclose the exact number of casualties among Kadyrovites and mobilised foot soldiers, social media platforms have revealed over 100 proven facts of deceased pro-Moscow Chechen combatants. To that end, Chechen society painfully reacts to the large number of deaths of its young men.

The attempted demonstrations in Chechnya and Kadyrov’s softened rhetoric illustrate how sensitive the mobilisation is for Chechen society. Despite the pro-active information campaign in favour of the Russian invasion, the population of Chechnya does not show enthusiasm to support Putin’s military campaign. Moreover, the deaths of young men on the foreign soil revitalises the trauma and the wounds of war for the also war-thorn Chechen society. Thus, in the event of the further increase in casualties of Chechen recruits in Ukraine, the protests voices in the republic could become louder.

North Ossetia

North Ossetia remains one of the larger contributors of manpower to the Russian armed forces. Serving in Russian troops and building a military career has been a long-lasting tradition and considered prestigious in Ossetian

society. Compared to other regions of the Caucasus, Ossetian society rarely engages in contention against the federal centre. Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine triggered the mobilisation of civic activists in Ossetia. However, Ossetian activism was a response to the humanitarian situation at the Russian-Georgian border rather than a show of any anti-war sentiments.

Putin's decree of mobilisation has led to the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of eligible Russian men. Given the tightened visa policy of the EU states for Russian citizens and the rapidly increased flight costs, the majority of Russian immigrants decided to flee the country by crossing the land border. Georgia was among the most desirable destinations and since the Lars border crossing point was the only legally operating route along the Russian-Georgian border the mountainous highways in North Ossetia experienced several kilometre-long traffic jams. Russian families which found themselves stuck in these long queues desperately needed essentials such as water and food.²⁰ For several days, a group of North Ossetian volunteers was operating around the Georgian military highway and passing out food and other essentials to the stranded travellers. Later on, a small group of Ingush volunteers also independently joined the solidarity action.²¹ Furthermore, a group of Chechen, Ingush and Dagestani activists were trying to assist residents of the North Caucasus who were stuck in the neutral zone of the Georgian-Russian border or denied entry by Georgian border police.

The absence of anti-mobilisation protests in North Ossetia does not stem from the public support of Putin's efforts. The users of large Ossetian Telegram channels, such as @iron_bonvarnon and @ossetiaFB, have been actively complaining about the death tolls among Ossetian soldiers and perceive a mass-mobilisation of Ossetian men as an imminent threat to the small and endangered ethnic group. Despite the non-existent confrontation with Moscow and the republic's relative peacefulness, North Ossetian society is concerned with the ongoing affairs and has a potential for protest mobilisation. Remarkably, the republic has no prior experience of contentious collective action. The environmentalist protests against Electozinc plant in Vladikavkaz are the clear illustration of a hidden protest potential.²² The high death toll could also potentially undermine the prestige of making a career in the Russian army.

Kabardino-Balkaria

Anti-war protests also took place in the Kabardino-Balkaria republic. On September 25, a group of 100 women, consisting of relatives of mobilised men, held a demonstration against the mobilization in the republic's capital of Nalchik. Unlike the protest events in neighbouring republics, the local administration of Kabardino-Balkaria attempted to establish a dialogue with the demonstrators instead of engaging in confrontation. However, the reaction of the local women to this dialogue attempt was harsh and negative. Some of the phrases said by the women were: "Even if you shoot me, I won't let you to take my husband from me," "Have we been attacked by anyone? Ukraine didn't invade us!" and "Those men who can't protect our sons from this [war] deserve to wear skirts!" Simultaneously to the situation in Nalchik, several hundreds of locals also protested the mobilisation in the central square of the republic's provincial town of Baksan. The local police forces did not confront the protestors and no one was arrested.²³

Similar to Dagestan and Chechnya, the residents of the multi-ethnic Kabardino-Balkaria perceive mobilisation as highly damaging to their demography. Circassians, representing the majority of the republic, have already lost over 80% of their original population as the result of Russia's conquest in the 19th century and thus are worried about further human losses. Furthermore, unlike Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria has a low birth rate coupled with the increasing migration of locals to different parts of Russia.²⁴ All of these factors combined trigger the anti-mobilisation sentiments in the republic.

Other Republics of the North Caucasus

Protests have not been reported in the Ingushetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygea republics. The passivity of Ingushetia can be explained by the exhaustion of its local civic activists after unsuccessful protests against transferring the republic's territories to neighbouring Chechnya. Many local leaders capable of organising protest events have been either detained or fled the Russian Federation. Considering Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygea, the absence of demonstrations can be explained by their relatively weak civil society and their lack of protest experience.

Conclusions

The recent protests in the North Caucasus have failed to reach their objectives and hinder the process of mobilisation of the indigenous male population. The sole achievement of these collective efforts was adjusting conscription strategies at the municipal level. Despite the existing protest sentiments, local social movements are not capable of challenging the existing status quo and affect the decision-making process neither at the federal nor the local levels. Local activists are not capable of competing with the overwhelming superiority of the local security apparatus. Moreover, all protest events were suffering from the lack of organising bodies responsible for resource mobilisation, informational campaigns and network organisation. Hence, the North Caucasian society does not have high expectations for achieving success by protests and these demonstrations could be understood as spontaneous desperate acts of protests rather than well-organised events.

The anti-war protests across the Caucasus have revealed several remarkable trends in the region's multi-ethnic societies. First and arguably the most important is the existence of protest sentiments among North Caucasian peoples. Despite the absence of political life and the overwhelming pressure from local security services, protests occurred in several republics, including Chechnya. Second, contrary to the popular opinion of the "oppressed" and "socially passive" women in the North Caucasus, they have shown the capacity to be in a vanguard of the protest events. This female activism reveals that the role of women in the contemporary North Caucasus requires further examination. And finally, in the light of the absence of political leaders, local traditional networks play a central role in organising and managing leaderless demonstrations. It is known that clans, extended families and religious brotherhoods can be an effective mobilising tool in the Caucasus. Similar dynamics have been observed during the protest events in Ingushetia. Overall, the latest anti-war protests demonstrate that it is the dignity and the life of the local people in the North Caucasus and not poverty and political discourse that are the most potent contributing factors spurring the start of protest movements in the region.

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