

# Outsourced Combatants: The Russian State and the Vostok Battalion

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## **Abstract**

Shortly after the February 2014 Euromaidan revolution which ousted pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, Russia orchestrated a rapid and mostly bloodless annexation of the Crimea. Following the removal of Ukrainian authority from the peninsula, the Kremlin focused simultaneously on legitimizing the annexation via an electoral reform in Crimea and fermenting political unrest in the Donbas. As violence broke out in the Donbas, anti-Ukrainian government militias were formed by defecting Ukrainian security forces members, local volunteers, and volunteers from Russia. The Kremlin provided extensive support for these militias which sometimes even came in the form of direct military intervention by conventional Russian forces. However, the use of state-sponsored militias by Russia is not a new phenomenon. Since the end of the Cold War, the Russian Federation has been relying on militias to help stabilize local security environments, and more recently, achieve foreign security policy objectives in the Near Abroad. By tracking the history of Vostok (East) Battalion during its two distinctly different iterations, first as a militia for the Yamadayev family which operated primarily in Chechnya as well as briefly in South Ossetia and Lebanon and then as separatist formation in Eastern Ukraine, my thesis seeks to examine why Russia uses militias. Using the theoretical frameworks of principle-agent relations and organizational hierarchy, my thesis examines post-Soviet military reforms to contextualize the Kremlin's rationale for utilizing militia groups as well as analyzing the costs and benefits Moscow ultimately incurs when it leverages militias as force projection assets domestically and in the Near Abroad.

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## **General Audience Abstract**

This thesis is an examination of Russia's relationship with its proxy militias. Proxy militias are paramilitary formations comprised of a mix of civilians and military veterans which states use to carry out acts of coercive violence without having to rely on regular military forces. Specifically, the thesis is divided into two case studies of a unit known as Vostok Battalion. Vostok has existed in two distinctly different iterations; first as a Chechen based militia operating throughout the Caucasuses and later as a rebel militia fighting the Ukrainian government in the Donbas region. In both cases, Vostok received support and varying levels of guidance from Russia. The case studies of this thesis are attempting to contextualize why Russia utilizes proxy militias and identify the challenges Russia faces when its ability to control them is degraded.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review, Hypothesis, and Methods**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The Russian Federation, as it stands economically and militarily today, is a fading power aspiring to restore positioning and prestige lost following the Cold War. Angered by the encroachment of NATO into former SSRs and perceptions of diminishing influence in the international arena, the Kremlin under Putin has become almost singularly focused on reasserting Russia as a great power.<sup>1</sup> However, such a goal is difficult in the short term as Russia is simply not capable of generating the economic output necessary for comprehensive military reforms.<sup>2</sup> International sanctions, an economy overly dependent on carbon resources depressed by a global slump in energy prices, and oligarchical economic dominance render Russia incapable of generating the wealth required to simultaneously institute military reforms and placate its population enough to prevent widespread civil unrest.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Russia seems to have found a more economical means of constructing an image of international influence and military potency in what the Kremlin considers its privileged sphere of influence via militia groups.

The continuing War in the Donbas is a direct consequence of Russia's actions in Crimea and its continuing support for separatist militias operating in the region.<sup>4</sup> The conflict has been very destabilizing for the Ukraine, Europe, and NATO. It has galvanized opinions throughout the Western world about how best to confront Russian aggression and the role NATO should play in such a strategy. Moreover, the current conflict in the Donbas has killed thousands,

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<sup>1</sup> (Haas 2010, 3, 172-173)

<sup>2</sup> (Ibid 173)

<sup>3</sup> (The Economist 2016, 66-67)

<sup>4</sup> (Meduza 2016)

created more than a million and a half internally displaced persons in the Ukraine, and forced just under a million Ukrainians to flee the country as refugees.<sup>5</sup>

While a number of publications have explored Russia's regional conflicts, goals in the Near Abroad, and its implementation of 'hybrid' warfighting doctrine, there are far fewer which deal directly with militia groups themselves. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be examining state sponsored militias which I define as paramilitary formations which may comprise both civilians and former professional soldiers. I consider these state sponsored militias to be tools for carrying out acts of forceful coercion while being unbound from the same standards of professional conduct, action, and direct control applied to regular forces. By drilling down into the role of militia forces and the effects of their organizational hierarchy within the context of Russian military reform and foreign security policy objectives, my thesis is trying to bridge an existing gap in literature.

While authors like Ariel Ahram have focused on militias as augmentees to the internal security forces of Late Developing States (LDS), my thesis is attempting to examine how the Kremlin's principal-agent relationship with militia forces evolved over time. Initially in Chechnya, the Kremlin functioned as a principle which came to rely on militia agents as means of reducing Federal Forces exposure to fighting as part of the Chechenization exit strategy. While the militias were useful in violently suppressing separatist elements, albeit indiscriminately, systemic intra-agent infighting overwhelmed the Kremlin's ability to guide agent actions. Subsequently in the Ukraine, the same agency challenges convinced the Kremlin to re-evaluate its relationship with militia agents in Donetsk.

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<sup>5</sup> (Sakwa 2015, 148, 166-167, 178)

In order to scrutinize Russia's control of subordinate militia formations, my thesis will use Vostok Battalion as the basis for a principal-agent and organizational hierarchy focused case study. Vostok had two primary incarnations, first in the Chechnya where it was formed from the Yamadayev family militia and then in the Ukraine where it was rapidly constituted from defecting Ukrainian security personnel, local volunteers, Russian volunteers from abroad, and a handful of Chechens who were apparently veterans of the original unit.

The name Vostok mostly comes from the fact both units operated primarily in Eastern Chechnya and Eastern Ukraine respectively. While links between Vostok Battalion in Chechnya and Vostok in the Donbas are difficult to definitively prove, the principle-agent relations of both militias are remarkably similar and serve to illustrate how the Kremlin altered its strategy for utilizing militias as deniable proxies in domestic and international conflicts. Examining the economic and political benefits of Vostok against its agency related drawbacks helps contextualize and explain the Kremlin's initial interest in militias and its subsequent attempts to guide their actions and behavior. Such an effort may also help measure the extent to which the Kremlin has been successful in such an undertaking. Understanding why the Kremlin uses militias in the Near Abroad could help scholars and analysts better recognize the Kremlin's goals for the region in spite of an extensive Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign aimed at obscuring them.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

Militia groups, as political tools of a state, occupy a somewhat unique position in relation to officially sanctioned and legally recognized state security forces. As Ariel Ahram points out in *Proxy Soldiers*, the Weberian definition of state sovereignty has, at its center, the state's



monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.<sup>6</sup> However, Ahram also takes time to emphasize the fact such theoretical paradigms often do not reflect the real world. In citing Michael Mann, Ahram brings up how states have historically not always claimed a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.<sup>7</sup> In practice, the state's use of force, especially for weak state unable to wield effect control over the territory they lay claim to, may be delegated to local armed actors. Relegating state authority to localized armed actors whose operation reach is defined by the spatial limits of the territory from which they were originally constituted is at the center Ahram's work as well as most scholarly literature addressing the topic of state sponsored militias.<sup>8</sup>

Ahram's goal in *Proxy Warriors* is to understand why certain states, especially the weak or late developing states (LDS) which are the focus of his book, choose to concede part of their claim over a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in order to achieve a level of control in their territory which they are unable to attain otherwise.<sup>9</sup> The differences between unitary and multi-dimensional form organizational hierarchy (where the former is representative of conventional forces and the latter state backed militias) is an important theoretical framework for Ahram's explanation of how militia groups operate.<sup>10</sup> Ahram's case studies of Indonesia, Iraq, and Iran encapsulate the state's rationale for utilizing militias domestically, primarily as irregular augmentees to regular security forces.<sup>11</sup> Like Ahram in *Proxy Warriors*, my thesis uses organizational hierarchy as a basis for examining the principal-agent relations between militias and their state sponsors. However, the units of analysis for my thesis differs from Ahram's examination of proxy militia forces as exclusively domestic tools of the state security apparatus.

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<sup>6</sup> (Ahram 2011, 7)

<sup>7</sup> (Ahram 2011, 2)

<sup>8</sup> (Ahram 2011, 22-24), (Staniland 2015, 770-771), (Marten 2012, 15-18)

<sup>9</sup> (Ahram 2011, 2)

<sup>10</sup> (Ibid 14)

<sup>11</sup> (Ibid 23)

Instead, Vostok's evolution from domestic tool for counter insurgency operations into external means of power projection into Near Abroad is the focus.

In writing about Private Military Firms (PMFs), Peter Singer's *Outsourcing War* focuses on how the U.S. has used PMFs in Iraq as rapidly constituted solutions to the capability gaps of military forces already deployable on the ground.<sup>12</sup> Such firms have been involved in numerous conflicts throughout the world and are considered viable resources by many states which have contracted them to augment security efforts.<sup>13</sup> In spite of scandals involving gross negligence or illegal behavior, PMFs became ubiquitous in Iraq as the Pentagon struggled to field organic U.S. military assets capable of fulfilling mission requirements.<sup>14</sup> However, in the interest of this thesis, PMFs are distinctly different entities than either of Vostok's incarnations. Rather than functioning as a privatized firm of military veterans contracted to support state security operations, Vostok's initial incarnation in Chechnya came from the Yamadayev family clan militia which flipped sides when its patrons agreed to work with Russian state security forces. Additionally, Vostok's subsequent Donbas version was a mostly ad-hoc assortment of defecting Ukrainian security personnel, local volunteers, Russians citizens volunteering from abroad, and what appeared to be a handful of veterans from the unit's Chechen years.

In practical terms, following the humiliation of the First Chechen War, the Kremlin was forced to acknowledge the fact its military was, in its current condition, unable to overcome Chechen separatists purely through offensive means.<sup>15</sup> Crippled by corruption, poor training, broken equipment, and an over reliance on conscripts of dubious quality, the Kremlin was forced

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<sup>12</sup> (Singer 2005, 1)

<sup>13</sup> (Singer 2005, 2)

<sup>14</sup> (Ibid, 5)

<sup>15</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 7)

to re-evaluate the strategic role of its military and its use of local actors.<sup>16</sup> Following its failure the first Chechen War and with only limited funding for substantive and systemic military reforms, the Kremlin needed a refocused strategy for the Second Chechen War. Luckily for Russia, however, radical Islamists had come to dominate the separatist movement and were alienating less religious and more nationalist factions.<sup>17</sup> As Islamists rebels attempted to redirect the secessionist movement in Chechnya towards expansionism to establish a North Caucas based Islamic caliphate, more secular Chechen nationalists started to switch sides.<sup>18</sup>

Facing an aggressive Islamist separatist movement in Chechen looking to export itself to neighboring Dagestan and unafraid of alienating less religious Chechen nationalists, Russia was presented with a unique opportunity to coopt Chechen nationalists rebels no longer willing to cooperate with the Islamists. Sourcing Chechen militiamen from major clan families, and eventually legitimizing them through integration into the state security structure, gave Russia the local talent and expertise it needed to more effectively target Islamist Chechen separatists.<sup>19</sup>

However, by coopting former rebels Russia exposed itself to the pitfalls of having its periphery militias renege by prioritize their own interests and disregard direction from the organizational center.<sup>20</sup> In addressing state measures for controlling unreliable militias, Ahram points out a number of techniques, originally from late medieval period in Europe, which are of particular relevance to Vostok battalion and its conflicts with rival groups.<sup>21</sup> Subverting local elites by promoting them out of their native region thereby isolating them from their domestic constituency, non-merit appointments based on allegiance to the center rather than regional

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<sup>16</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 22-23, 63-65)

<sup>17</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 50-51)

<sup>18</sup> (Ibid 52-53)

<sup>19</sup> (Ibid 63)

<sup>20</sup> (Chadayevev 2007)

<sup>21</sup> (Ahram 2011, 15)

loyalty, and purposely fermenting inter-group conflict between rival militias are all means of state control.<sup>22</sup>

Directly related to Ahram's examination of organization hierarchy and principal-agent relations are works of Alexander Cooley in *Logics of Hierarchy* and James Coleman in *Foundations of Social Theory*. Both of these works provide valuable theoretical frameworks for understanding both Vostok's agency issues and the relevance of its organizational structuring in the context of its relationship with the Kremlin. In *Logics of Hierarchy*, Cooley focuses on the development of organizational hierarchy as an institutional means of control between a center and a periphery.<sup>23</sup> There are two forms of hierarchical organization which Cooley is most interested in, unitary form and multi-dimensional form. Both organizational concepts are developed from management theory. Competition between the Ford Motor Company and the General Motors Company during the 1920s and 1930s serve as popular historical examples.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of Ford, the company was organized via a unitary hierarchy structure defined by strong central control, not unlike some states and most regular militaries. A core of executive leadership operated from the center overseeing a number of periphery divisions which each had their own specific tasks within the organization. For example, one periphery division manufactured vehicles, another engineered them, a third handled sales, and a fourth handled major administrative functions such as accounting.<sup>25</sup> While the executive core was able to exert harmonizing and integrating effects across its periphery divisions, thereby controlling their actions and goals much more rigidly, the center was subject to far too much minutia decision making which should have been handled by management in periphery decisions. As a result,

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<sup>22</sup> (Ahram 2011, 15)

<sup>23</sup> (Cooley 2005, 4, 13)

<sup>24</sup> (Ibid 3)

<sup>25</sup> (Cooley 2005, 5)

Ford executives at the organizational center were tasked with handling far too many day to day operational decisions which should have been handled within divisional management. Tasked with tackling far too much minutia, Ford executives spent little time looking at strategic objectives of the company and evaluating the performance of individual divisions.<sup>26</sup>

Alternatively, GM, with its multi-divisional form organizational hierarchy, was organized so each autonomous periphery division functioned as a whole miniature GM unto itself. For example, the cars division contained its own engineering, manufacturing, and sales teams while the trucks division was essentially just a duplicate of the cars division. As a result, each division was able to operate more or less independently from one another to produce their assigned product. Operational costs were much lower than in the u-form organization and the core of GM executives were freed up from making day to day operational decisions to concentrate on improving divisional efficiency and refining corporate strategic goals. As a result, multi-dimensional form (m-form) organizational hierarchy played a key role in GMs rapid growth compared to Ford from the 1920s through the 1940s.<sup>27</sup>

While there are many benefits of m-form governance, lower operational costs not least among them, the autonomy granted to periphery divisions does come with the potential for significant problems. Informational asymmetry is a major issues within m-form organization structure. Periphery divisions do not need to communicate or cooperate amongst themselves to function and they may not always provide accurate information to the organizational center. Agency problems among division leadership may become a major issue as well when periphery

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<sup>26</sup> (Cooley 2005, 3)

<sup>27</sup> (Ibid 4)

leaders take advantage of the delegated authority and resources provided by the center to pursue localized interests which may not align with the center's strategic objectives.<sup>28</sup>

All of the aforementioned m-form organizational characteristics can be observed in Russia's proxy militias, both the beneficial and the detrimental. The lower financial costs of militias and regional expertise as local agents were significant factors in Russia's original decision to support counter-insurgent militias in Chechnya. Conventional Russian Federal forces, organized by u-form principals, were more expensive to train, transport, pay, and logistically sustain in a combat environment.<sup>29</sup> All the costs associated with supporting an occupying force actively engaged in combat operations put a tremendous burden on the underfunded Russian military in the mid-1990s.<sup>30</sup> In the Second Chechen War, flipping local militiamen, who were experienced, armed, and already operating within the zone of conflict, was an effective and economical means of reducing reliance on conventional forces.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Chechen militiamen who previously fought as rebel in the first war against Federal forces had unique knowledge of rebel asymmetrical tactics, organizational networks, and local terrain familiarity making them very effective fighting force for Counter-Insurgency (COIN) operations.

The organizational structure and utilization of Vostok as a proxy actor in Chechnya is readily relatable to strategies of imperial rule by intermediaries as posited by Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright in *What's at Stake in the American Empire Debate*. In discussing the divide-and-rule system of authority in an ideal-typical imperial organizational form, Nixon and Wright describe a useful and applicable network characterization for the Kremlin's relationship with

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<sup>28</sup> (Cooley 2005, 14)

<sup>29</sup> (Cooley 2005, 45), (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 23-24)

<sup>30</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 22-23)

<sup>31</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 156-158), (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 62-63)

Vostok.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the Second Chechen War, the Kremlin relied heavily on a brutal divide-and-rule strategy for forcibly separating suspected separatists, particularly on the basis on known ties to separatists, from the general population through punitive *Zachitska* raids.<sup>33</sup> The raids functioned as both punishment against the family members of those who continued to rebel and as means of intimidating civilians who might favor separatism but did not actively participate. Critically, as the conflict progressed local Chechen agents such as Vostok began to participate in the raids thereby becoming an intermediary actor facilitating indirect rule.<sup>34</sup>

The utilization of local actors as intermediaries to project the power and influence of the administrative core was not a newly developed course of action in Chechnya, but a well-worn tool of administering central authority leveraged continuously throughout the histories of the Russian and Soviet Empires as well as numerous other imperial powers. Nexon and Wright cite the Soviet experiences during the Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring as examples of an imperial power relying on restricted connections between peripheries and a lack of “cross-cutting ties” to act as a firebreak for a spreading rebellion against a central authority.<sup>35</sup> In a somewhat similar situation, Russia halted the spread of Chechen separatism into neighboring Dagestan in the summer of 1999 when Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab attempted a cross-border incursion to support local ethnic Chechen separatists attempting to hold villages near the administrative boarder with Chechnya.<sup>36</sup> In the Dagestan case, Russian security forces were attempting to shore up the firebreak in Dagestan to protect against potential future separatist spillover from a rebellious, and at the time *de facto* independent, Chechnya.

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<sup>32</sup> (Nexon and Wright 2007, 253)

<sup>33</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 51, 58-59)

<sup>34</sup> (Nexon and Wright 2007, 258)

<sup>35</sup> (Ibid 262)

<sup>36</sup> (Wood 2007, 89, 92)

The lack of accountability for a state sponsor and ‘plausible deniability’ are useful characteristics of militias functioning as outsourced combatants. Relying on blurred connections as a means of obscuring responsibility for atrocities carried out on behalf of a state are the focus of Sabine Carey, Michael Colaresi, and Neil Michell in *Governments, Informal Links, and Accountability*.<sup>37</sup> In recognizing the benefits of delegating violence to proxy actors, Carey Et al. find that not only do states benefit from reduced deployment costs when using militias instead of regular forces, but militias allow states sponsor to camouflage themselves from culpability and international scrutiny in the perpetration of war crimes.<sup>38</sup> As previously mentioned, Vostok’s participation in Zachitska raids and heavy handed COIN operations reduced Russia’s exposure to international condemnation.

Similarly, Daniel Byman and Sarah Kreps discusses the appeal of state sponsored terrorism and the motivations for states to delegate action to terrorist actors functioning as deniable assets in *Agents of Destruction*.<sup>39</sup> Especially pertinent to this thesis is Byman and Kreps’ attention to the vulnerabilities inherent in the principle-agent relationship between state sponsor and terrorist actor which could be exploited by counter-terrorist forces (CTF). Byman and Krep highlight the ‘disharmonious’ nature of a state’s relationship with its terrorist proxy and asymmetrical information flows as potential vulnerabilities to be exploited by CTF.<sup>40</sup> State actors have few reliable means of judging the efficacy or general competence of terrorist actors given the inherently covert nature of their work and the numerous ways it can be thwarted or impeded.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> (Carey, Colaresi and Mitchell 2015, 850)

<sup>38</sup> (Ibid, 851-851)

<sup>39</sup> (Byman and Kreps 2010, 1)

<sup>40</sup> (Ibid, 12)

<sup>41</sup> (Ibid)



While Vostok's relationship with the Russian state is markedly different than a terrorist entity given Vostok fought as an irregular style militia during both its incarnations, the autonomy and asymmetrical information flow points brought up by Byman and Kreps are still quite pertinent. The Yamadayev Vostok's freedom of maneuver as an independent agent, when combined with information asymmetry, allowed it to move quickly and effectively in its COIN operation. Yet, that same autonomy from direct federal control also enabled it to participate in incidents, such as the Samson Plant Raid and Borozdinovskaya Zachitska (both events are discussed in Chapter 3), which resulted in embarrassing publicity for Russia and were eventually used as leverage against Vostok by its Chechen rivals.

The eventual rise of intra-agent rivalry and conflict in both of Vostok's incarnations tempered the benefits Russia enjoyed by establishing local actors as intermediaries for accomplishing state security goals. During the Yamadayev Vostok era in particular, agency problems were extensive and eventually quite destructive. Competing clan militias, which were legitimized under Federal authority as GRU<sup>42</sup> sponsored battalions, including Vostok, engaged in rivalry and infighting which sometimes spilled over to include local security forces.<sup>43</sup> Information asymmetry and local agents prioritizing their own interests over the Kremlin, including those which were directly counter-productive, were continuous issues.

In the case of agents misbehaving, especially when it is to the detriment of the principal and other involved third parties, the "rights of control" as discussed by Coleman in *Foundations of Social Theory* come into play. As Russia is supporting its militias through various forms of military and financial aid and its support is contingent on the completion of a product (in the case

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<sup>42</sup> Main Intelligence Administration of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, Russia's military intelligence agency

<sup>43</sup> (Chadayev 2007)

of Chechnya the ‘product’ is regional security and stability), Russia must assume responsibility for its agent’s actions.<sup>44</sup> However, when militias are operating outside of the legal authority of Russian security apparatus in the Near Abroad, Russia has a vested interest in concealing the extent of its connection with the groups. A centrally important distinguishing factor in whether a principal has rights of control is the status of the agent as either a servant or independent contractor.<sup>45</sup>

In Chechnya, Vostok battalion, along with other militia groups, were sanctioned and legitimized through membership within the state security hierarchy as units subordinate to the GRU.<sup>46</sup> As such, there was no attempt by Russia to conceal its relationship with the units, rather it openly acknowledged them as its agents. In the case of Chechnya, Vostok was an overt augmentee of Federal Security Forces via GRU patronage. Under the rights of control, the Kremlin was therefore liable for Vostok’s actions and had a vested interest in regulating and curtailing activities which ran counter to Russian objectives or caused unacceptable damage to third parties.

In the Ukraine, the extent of Vostok’s relationship with the Russian government was deliberately concealed. Publically, the Kremlin wanted the appearance of a localized anti-Ukrainian government militia operating entirely independently of Russian support or supervision. Numerous sources about the Kremlin’s attempts to direct the course of the conflict and control their agents suggests otherwise, however.<sup>47</sup> In any case, the Kremlin deliberately tried to obfuscate its relationship with Vostok and other Donbas militias. By concealing public

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<sup>44</sup> (Coleman 1990, 149)

<sup>45</sup> (Ibid 148)

<sup>46</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 56, 63)

<sup>47</sup> (Kanygin 2014), (Fitzpatrick, Kremlin ‘Grey Cardinal’ Surkov’s Deal for a ‘Donetsk Transdnistria’? 2014), (Ostrovsky 2015)

ties, the Kremlin wanted to negate liability for militia actions which drew international condemnation. A lack of overt connection between militias and Russia helped, at least in the Kremlin's mind, mitigate the political costs of actively supporting armed separatists groups in Eastern Ukraine.

While Coleman and Cooley's works both provide valuable theoretical frameworks to help conceptualize Russia's relationship with its militias, it is important to discuss some historical context about why Russia found itself in a position to rely on militia groups in the first place. *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, edited by Colby Howard & Ruslan Pukov, explores both the conflict within the Ukraine and the post-Cold War state of Russian and Ukrainian armed forces.

Understanding the extent of Russia's military decay and economy dysfunction throughout the 1990s, especially as it relates to a significant contraction of international political power and influence, is quite valuable in understanding the current mindset of Kremlin leadership. The chaotic and disastrous first Chechen War, exposed deep and systemic problems within the Russian military. Fighting in their own country, against irregular militants armed with whatever equipment they could source locally or capture, Federal forces found themselves engaged in ferocious fighting with mixed performance at best against the rebels. A particularly humiliating defeat came on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1996 when the capital of Chechnya, Grozny, fell to about 1500 Chechen rebels who had infiltrated the city the night before in small teams and rapidly neutralized MVD security forces numbering about 4 times their size.<sup>48</sup>

While Russia had attempted significant military reorganizations starting in 1993 under Pavel Grachov, actual reforms, even those after the first Chechen war, never really measured up

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<sup>48</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 44-46)

to planned intents.<sup>49</sup> Restructuring efforts were often overly ambitious given budgetary limitations and were constrained by years spent clinging to a Soviet-era force structure built around mass mobilization of reserve units. Rather than being postured to rapidly deploy quick reaction forces to intervene in hot spots inside and out of the country, the Russian federation spent years and huge amounts of money trying to maintain a mobilization structure meant to stand up millions of reservists following the outbreak of a war with NATO.<sup>50</sup> It essentially took a failed first war in Chechnya, a hard fought second, and a brief trouncing of Georgia in 2008 for the Russian military to seriously re-evaluate its regional strategic goals.<sup>51</sup> Russian military planners realized based on the Chechen and Georgian experiences that the most likely scenario requiring armed interventions were small, rapid engagements with its immediate neighbors and against domestic insurgents, not a large conventional war with NATO.

Every subsequent defense minister after Grachov made their own attempts at converting the Russian military to a more western-style, rapidly deployable professional fighting force.<sup>52</sup> However, such reforms were tremendously expensive and often constrained by major structural impediments. Accordingly, Russia looked for cost-effective alternatives to substantive military reforms wherever it could. In the Second Chechen War, paramilitary units sourced from Chechen clan militias presented an economically efficient means of rapidly constituted a fighting force already well suited for the North Caucasus' asymmetrical combat environment.<sup>53</sup>

Effective and much less costly than equivalent federal forces, militia units like Vostok were a useful asset, but not one without flaws, for Russia's fight against Islamist separatists in

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<sup>49</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 79)

<sup>50</sup> (Ibid 76-77)

<sup>51</sup> (Ibid 88-89)

<sup>52</sup> (Ibid 79, 81, 84, 86)

<sup>53</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009* 2014, 62-63)

Chechnya. The tactical successes and regional expertise of militia groups, infighting notwithstanding, likely played a part in Russia's decision to deploy Vostok battalion to South Ossetia and Georgia during the August War.<sup>54</sup> From the Kremlin's point of view, the brief deployment and engagement can almost be seen as a sort of trial run examining the effectiveness of militia groups deployed in offensive operations outside the territory they normally operated in. While a markedly different Vostok battalion operated in the Donbas, with only a handful of Chechen veterans from its previous incarnation, the experience of having a militia operate in a conventional environment in Georgia probably influenced the Kremlin's decision to support Vostok.<sup>55</sup>

Throughout the thesis, the theoretical frameworks and language for defining militias, how they are utilized, their hierarchical structure, and their relationship with a state sponsor will all be valuable tools for understanding why Russia chooses to support militias. Much of the theory and historical examples of m-form agency issues discussed by Ahram, Cooley, and Coleman are pertinent to Vostok relationship with the Kremlin and other militias. Also, examining the progression of Russian military reform in the post-Soviet period provides valuable rationale for why the Kremlin chose to support militia groups in the first place. Ultimately, the historical context of Russian military reorganization, hierarchical organization, and principal agent relations will provide the theoretical backdrop for an examining of Vostok battalion from its original formation in Chechnya through its participation in the Donbas conflict.

### 1.3 Hypothesis

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<sup>54</sup> (Zhegulev 2004), (Manenkov 2003)

<sup>55</sup> (Speri 2014), (TASS 2014)

The Kremlin believes regaining Great Power status is essential for recovering lost international prestige and regaining a free hand to guide and coercively control what it views as its privileged spheres of influence. Fermenting political chaos and violence in the Near Abroad serves two important purposes; it sharply undercuts NATO and the West's ability to further their interests, goals, and political ideology within Russia's sphere of influence and it allows the Kremlin to craft a domestic narrative which portrays itself as a bulwark against godless and permissive Western culture. One of the Kremlin's more recently utilized, although not really new, tools for influencing Near Abroad neighbors with NATO aspirations have been Russian backed Ukrainian rebel militias. Such militia forces provides the Kremlin with a politically and economically cost-efficient means of Near Abroad force-projection possessing just enough operational independence from the organizational center to have what Kimberly Marten refers to as 'plausible deniability'.<sup>56</sup>

Militias provide relatively inexpensive, rapidly constituted answers to shortfalls in both Russian military capabilities and regional soft-power influence. Throughout Vostok battalion's history, the unit has retained elements of Kremlin patronage despite efforts to obscure the relationship. First as an official special Spetsnaz<sup>57</sup> battalion of the GRU in Chechnya, the only significant militia force not under control of Ramzan Kadyrov, and later as the only major militia group fighting in Donetsk Oblast which declined to declare allegiance to Igor Girkin's Donbas People's Militia.<sup>58</sup> Following the history of Vostok Battalion and its unique relationship with the Kremlin should provide a useful case study for the benefits and risks the Kremlin runs through

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<sup>56</sup> (Marten 2012, 109)

<sup>57</sup> Special troops primarily trained and equipped for deep reconnaissance, not really the western equivalent of Special Forces, but the term is often used interchangeably. (Galeotti, Spetsnaz: Russian Special Forces 2015, 5)

<sup>58</sup> (Lavrov, Civil War in the East: How the Conflict Unfolded 2015, 217)

its reliance and investment in proxy militia forces. A historical case study will also help in illuminate the level of coherent control the Kremlin exerts over Vostok.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

My thesis will use Vostok battalion as a case study for Russia's relationship with its proxy militias. The bulk of information on Vostok battalion comes from translated Russian and Ukrainian sources. Media articles range from news briefs to more in depth analysis of regional geo-political events involving Vostok. Also included are media interviews with Vostok and other Russian back militia leadership as well as embedded reporting which focuses on Vostok specifically. Reports by NGOs and policy think-tanks, such as the Memorial Human Rights or the Jamestown Center also provide valuable resources. As the veracity of Russian and the Ukrainian media reporting can vary greatly, mitigating the effects of source bias as well identifying and discarding inaccurate or intentionally false information is a centrally important task. Whenever there are conflicting news reports over events, which happened often in Chechnya during Vostok's infighting with Ramzan Kadyrov and his militia, the Kadyrovtsy, an attempt will be made to de-conflict the reports in order to get the most accurate picture of the occurrence.

A particularly glaring issue is the extent to which the Kremlin supports Vostok, either overtly or covertly, and whether direction and guidance coming from the Kremlin is coherently disseminated to Vostok battalion leadership. Media interviews with Vostok battalion members, reports by embedded journalists, OSINT (open-source intelligence) reports from independent investigators, and intelligence products released by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) are the main sources used to trace the extent and depth of the relationship. However, as each provides only a partial, and sometimes biased picture, there are limitations to their reliability in granting

insightful analysis. Given the penchant for secrecy surrounding the Kremlin, the strong repression of investigative journalism in Russia, and the local agency issues which push militias in direction which run counter to the Kremlin, elucidating the extent directed control from the Kremlin influences its subordinate militias is a tremendously difficult task. Accordingly, leveraging the vast array of fragmentary information garnered from publically available primary sources to build a comprehensive picture of Kremlin's relationship with Vostok is a major goal of this thesis.

Media sources pertaining to Vostok cover a period from December 2003 to August 2016 and contain a significant amount of information relevant to this thesis. However, there are some gaps in knowledge when it comes to specific detail of Vostok. Certain periods have less available information than others, details about Vostok's involvement in combat operations may not always be available, and information about force structure is fairly fragmentary beyond senior leadership. Also, as Russia deliberately tries to shield its relationship with Vostok, information about Russian support for and influence over the organization has to be inferred based on reporting from a variety of sources which go beyond media reports. Investigative journalism and arms proliferation research is of great help in identifying specific instances when Vostok, and other militia groups in the Donbas, were found to be in possession of equipment which it could not have captured from Ukrainian security forces. Evidence of militia forces armed with weapons and equipment which could only come from Russia helps draw credible links to the Kremlin.

Prior to examining Vostok battalion, my thesis will briefly describe the recent history of Russian military reform with an emphasis on its historical contextual relevance to Russia's developing relationship with militias, particularly Vostok. *Tanks of August* and *Brothers Armed*



both provide a number of articles which deal directly with reform efforts throughout the 1990s and 2000s along with their relevant political and economic contexts. The decay of the Russian military in the 1990s combined with an embarrassing performance in the First Chechen War grants some insight into the decision by Russian authorities to flip Chechen militias to the federal side during the second war and rely on them extensively during a prolonged COIN campaign.

Once the ground work for the case study has been laid in chapters 2, chapter 3 will focus on Vostok in Chechnya. Chapter 4 will examine Vostok in Donetsk. Throughout chapters 3 and 4, relevant theory on organizational hierarchy and principal-agent relations from the works of Ahram, Coleman, and Cooley will be integrating where applicable. Finally, Chapter 5 will attempt to compare both iterations of Vostok by analyzing how the Kremlin instituted a more unitary organizational hierarchy during the Donbas conflict in an attempt to mitigate the acute agency problems which defined the Chechen conflict's later years.

## **Chapter 2: Post-Soviet Russian Military Reform, the Chechen Wars, and the Attractiveness of Cost Efficient Solutions to Conventional Military Limitations**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Part of the Kremlin's initial decision to rely on and support militias as augmentees to regular forces arose out of a combination of several factors rooted in military reform. Restructuring of the Russian military, failures in the First Chechen War, and militia successes during the Second Chechen War all played a role in convincing Kremlin leadership of militia force's utility not just as domestic security facilitators, but as plausibly deniable assets for force projection into the Near Abroad. While by no means the only tool in Kremlin's hard power toolbox, proxy militias fill an important niche outside of regular armed forces. The Kremlin sees proxy militias as economically and politically viable short-term solutions to conventional military limitations and situations where overt offensive action would draw an unmanageable amount of international attention and condemnation.

Moreover, reliance on local armed actors to function as proxies for the organizational core is deeply rooted in the historic ideal-typical imperial organizational strategy of "indirect rule", a tool which the Russian Empire had a long history of leveraging, especially in the Caucasus.<sup>59</sup> The Cossacks in particular, who were originally settlers trying to escape Moscow's central authority by migrating into the Empire's expanding peripheries, eventually morphed into valuable proxy force extensively relied upon by Moscow to help facilitate successful colonization and suppression of local resistance.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Russian authorities have long relied on kurators to act as reliable agents to enable more effective imperial administrative

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<sup>59</sup> (Nexon and Wright 2007, 258), (Wood 2007, 19)

<sup>60</sup> (Wood 2007, 19)

control over local proxies. Often, kurators were dispatched to areas which were experiencing problems which Moscow wanted addressed, but local leaders were unable or unwilling to fix.<sup>61</sup>

## **2.2 Post-Soviet Russian Military Reforms**

The Russian Federation's military was inherited out of disorganized and festering armed forces of the Soviet Union. Challenges facing the new military were numerous and rooted in systemic issues which traced their origin to the late Soviet period.<sup>62</sup> The end of the Cold War was marked by significant drops in Soviet military capabilities due to budget issues, the political upheavals surrounding the perestroika reforms, and overstretched resources.<sup>63</sup> During the violent suppression of anti-Soviet protests, the political reliability of local security forces was so often in question that Spetsnaz troops were sometimes deployed in their place.<sup>64</sup> Parallel to increasing political upheavals, enormous budget problems necessitated the withdrawal of huge numbers of troops stationed in Eastern Europe despite pleas from Soviet backed dictators in Warsaw Pact countries, such as Romania's Nicolae Ceausecu, to suppress the rapidly growing democracy movement in Poland.<sup>65</sup>

Confusion, exhaustion, poor planning, and panic were the defining characteristics of the Soviet military on the eve of its transformation into the Army Forces of the Russian Federation. An enormous strain on the newly formed Russian military was how to handle the huge influx of soldiers and their dependents following the withdrawal from Eastern Europe. There was no real plan for housing newly arrived personnel, much less the funding for adequate base

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<sup>61</sup> (Goble 2016)

<sup>62</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 74)

<sup>63</sup> (Ibid 75-78)

<sup>64</sup> (Galeotti, *Spetsnaz: Russian Special Forces 2015*, 29)

<sup>65</sup> (Dobrynin 1995, 626, 632)

infrastructure.<sup>66</sup> As a result, even fundamental living standards for soldiers were almost impossible to meet. General quality of life among military personal and their families plummeted causing morale to drop precipitously.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the collapsing Soviet economy was completely incapable of absorbing demobilized military personnel as civilians, a condition which forced the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to retain its overburdened force structure to avoid the political repercussions of too many unemployed former soldiers.<sup>68</sup> With the MoD hobbled by basic quality of life issues and harsh economic realities, tackling larger problems, such as the desperate need for a fundamental force restructuring, became even more difficult.

One of the most pressing issues facing MoD reformers was the military's obsolete mass mobilization force structure.<sup>69</sup> Mass mobilization was built around the concept of calling up huge numbers of reservists to augment a mostly understrength regular Army for a massive conventional conflict with NATO. The process was slow, taking several weeks to complete, and was completely uncondusive to a more capable and rapidly deployable army with higher peacetime readiness levels. It was also an unsavory political egg shell, public resistance to even a partial mobilization of reservists was a major impediment to Russia's ability to respond to the First Chechen War.<sup>70</sup>

After the Cold War, it was a tremendous financial drain to maintain skeletal strength units whose primary tasks was to maintain mothballed equipment. Ending reliance on huge numbers of slow to mobilize reservists and adopting a smaller, professional, and more mobile

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<sup>66</sup> (Dobrynin 1995, 626)

<sup>67</sup> (Ibid 626-627)

<sup>68</sup> (Ibid 626)

<sup>69</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 78)

<sup>70</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 76-78)

military better suited to Russia's actual security needs was an enormous and lasting burden.<sup>71</sup>

Confronted with a chaotic litany of fundamental problems with its military, Kremlin leadership and the Russian national psyche was dealt a terrible psychological blow. The once great and victorious armed forces of the Soviet Union, one of the most tangible and substantive physical constructs of Soviet Super-Power status, was all but ruined. As former Soviet diplomat Anatoly Dobrynin put it, "military and civilians alike wondered how the Soviet army, still seen as the European victors in World War II, could be rushed home as if it had simply been thrown out".<sup>72</sup>

Dealing with all these challenges fell to successive defense ministers forced to balance difficult reform goals with serious budgetary restrictions. Pavel Grachov was the first defense minister to make a serious attempt at reform.<sup>73</sup> Grachov's restructuring plan called for a dual-purpose military, one which maintained elements of mass mobilization, but also simultaneously built up combat ready formations unburdened by understrength units which needed precious time to mobilize. According to Mikhail Barabanov, Grachov's reform efforts in early 1993 set the tone for all subsequent attempts up until 2008.<sup>74</sup> Grachov's saw the need for professionalization of the armed forces through the phasing out of conscription, re-organizing units away from their Cold War-era mass mobilization structure, and the standardization of equipment. Having too many different types of vehicles and equipment filling the same role were serious financial and logistical inefficiencies for the military.<sup>75</sup>

Professionalization for the armed forces by increasing the number of contract soldiers and reducing reliance on conscripts has been particularly difficult for the MoD. Russia remains

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<sup>71</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 76-78)

<sup>72</sup> (Dobrynin 1995, 627)

<sup>73</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 79)

<sup>74</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 79)

<sup>75</sup> (Ibid 77)

consistently unable to fill recruitment quotas with contract soldiers obliging continual reliance on conscripts to fill the gaps.<sup>76</sup> Yet life as a conscript is so widely feared due to the brutal dedovshchina, or “grandfatherly”, system that most young men with available means dodge the draft. Moreover, desertion is a major problem among those who fail to avoid conscription.<sup>77</sup>

Dedovshchina serves as a group hierarchy among conscripts based around their seniority.<sup>78</sup> Thanks in large part to a systemically weak Non-Commissioned Officer Corps, which is an essential component for properly training and integrating new soldiers, senior conscripts dominate junior ones and even actively ignore orders from their superiors.<sup>79</sup> Junior conscripts are subjected to brutal conditions, often have their possessions and rations stolen, and can be beaten to point of permanent injury or death.<sup>80</sup> Dedovshchina allows for systemic corruption, causes thousands of annual desertions, and keeps morale at very low levels.<sup>81</sup>

In addition to being corrupted by dedovshchina practices, reliance on conscription is quite detrimental to overall force readiness. Conscripts are rotated into and out of units as temporary augmentees annually, requiring their units to dedicate time and resources to constantly train new soldiers who will only occupy their billets for a limited time.<sup>82</sup> As a result, units face manning issues at regular intervals as the previous conscript cycle completes its term obligation. Even formations meant to be kept in a “constant combat readiness” posture are often only able to deploy at about 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of their combat strength.<sup>83</sup> While draft obligations have been reduced and

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<sup>76</sup> (Braw 2015)

<sup>77</sup> (Barabanov, *Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia* 2015, 103)

<sup>78</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>79</sup> (Barabanov, *Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia* 2015, 103-104)

<sup>80</sup> (Rudnitsky 2006)

<sup>81</sup> (Gresh 2011, 210)

<sup>82</sup> (Bird 2015), (Barabanov, *Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia* 2015, 103-105)

<sup>83</sup> (Lavrov, *Civil War in the East: How the Conflict Unfolded* 2015, 180)

senior military leaders have repeatedly stressed the importance of professionalization to enhance peacetime force readiness, an all-volunteer Russian military is still infeasible in the short term.<sup>84</sup>

Even more problematic than force readiness and professionalization, however, was the huge amount of resources sunk into Russia's dual military structure. Up until about 2008, MoD leadership tried to build a mobile, professional, and western style combined arms formations which could rapidly deploy while simultaneously maintaining the huge logistical structure supporting mass mobilization.<sup>85</sup> No unit in the Russian military in early 1990s was actually combat ready on short notice thanks to mass mobilization force structure. Even in the 1980s, only 1/5<sup>th</sup> of all Soviet divisions were manned at 70% strength, the rest were at considerably lower levels of combat readiness.<sup>86</sup> Only an outbreak of major hostilities could trigger a mobilization, yet political realities made such efforts often quite difficult in practical terms. When faced with a need for more combatants during the First Chechen War, the instability of the mid-1990s made even a partial mobilization unfeasible.<sup>87</sup> The USSR had previously faced widespread rioting in the wake of a partial mobilization in January 1990 in response to the Azeri-Armenian crisis.<sup>88</sup>

Essentially, the military bifurcated itself by trying to move in two different and competing directions; maintaining an understrength, reservist based mass mobilization structure while simultaneously trying to stand up full strength combat units capable of rapid deployment without mobilization. For the limited federal budget of the early 1990s, funding such a comprehensive restructuring of one military, much less two distinctly different ones, was not

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<sup>84</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 89), (Barabanov, *Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia 2015*, 103)

<sup>85</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 78-79)

<sup>86</sup> (Ibid 76)

<sup>87</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 80)

<sup>88</sup> (Ibid 78)

fiscally feasible.<sup>89</sup> Such was the reality facing even the most determined MoD reformers. Thus, Russia effectively had both hands tied behind its back by a system which was unsustainable, antiquated, very expensive, and of little real use for the small, localized conflicts the Russian Federation was actually facing.<sup>90</sup>

### **2.3 An Enfeebled Russian Army Marches into Chechnya**

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1994, stuck in the middle of intrinsic structural problems, collapsing budgets, plummeting morale, and general unpreparedness, the Russian armed forces were asked to commence combat operations as quickly as possible against militants who had seized control of Chechnya and were demanding independence.<sup>91</sup> The full impact of Russia's military shortcomings were felt almost immediately. Initial attempts to rapidly mobilize forces in the North Caucasus Military District were poorly organized and negatively impacted by weather and logistical issues. Operational timetables were missed by weeks and Chechen defenders were given ample time to prepare for the Russian attempt to retake the capital of Grozny.<sup>92</sup>

When the assault on Grozny did finally come at the end of December, Russian forces advanced into the city along five separate avenues of approach and were immediately drawn into brutal close-quarters fighting which they were woefully unprepared for.<sup>93</sup> With units specialized in urban warfare the victim of budget cuts a year earlier and most combat training and doctrine centered on mechanized warfare against a conventional NATO force, federal troops were poorly postured for urban engagements against Chechen insurgents.<sup>94</sup> The consequences for such unpreparedness were severe. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 131<sup>st</sup> Independent Motor

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<sup>89</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 89)

<sup>90</sup> (Ibid 78)

<sup>91</sup> (Ibid 80)

<sup>92</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 36)

<sup>93</sup> (Ibid 39)

<sup>94</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 24, 36)



Rifle Brigade, which advanced from the west towards the central railyards of Grozny, was surrounded and almost annihilated by Chechen fighters who destroyed nearly all of the battalion's vehicles and inflicted nearly 50% casualties.<sup>95</sup>

It took federal forces weeks of fierce fighting, which leveled most of the city and killed an estimated 35,000 civilians, to take Grozny.<sup>96</sup> In the following months of combat, however, decisive victory against the insurgents proved elusive. While federal forces gradually took more rebel held cities, Chechen insurgents proved adaptable and resilient, adopting a more asymmetrical approach not focused on retaining territory in the face of overwhelming federal firepower.<sup>97</sup> While the insurgency itself was reeling by late spring 1995 from the loss of Grozny and Gudermes, the second largest city in the Oblast, Chechen rebels were still able to hold some territory against Russian advances while carrying out headline grabbing cross-border raids into neighboring territory.<sup>98</sup>

Ultimately, the effectiveness of spectacular-style terror attacks, the grinding attrition rates suffered by federal forces, and the deep unpopularity of the conflict among Russian citizens made perusing military solutions politically unfeasible. When Grozny fell to rebel forces in early August 1996, following an embarrassing collapse in resistance from a much larger force of MVD defenders, Kremlin leadership was faced with the wrenching prospect of another horrific fight to retake the city. Except this time about 5000 MVD troops were isolated throughout the city limits and unwilling to attempt a break out.<sup>99</sup> With domestic support for the conflict evaporating and thousands of lives likely to be lost in a planned all-out assault by federal forces

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<sup>95</sup> (Ibid 37)

<sup>96</sup> (Ibid 38)

<sup>97</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 9)

<sup>98</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 42-43)

<sup>99</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 44-46)

to retake the city, Security Council Secretary Alexander Lebed stepped in to negotiate a ceasefire with Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov.<sup>100</sup>

The experiences of the first Chechen War were stinging embarrassments for the Russian military. Burdened by budget cuts, systemic corruption, low morale, and an unsustainable force structure, the same military which had played a central role in defeating Nazi Germany in the Second World War found itself unable to decisively engage and defeat a relatively small domestic rebel force. The intervening ‘peace’ between the first and second Chechen Wars was not particularly quiet, however. Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov had to compete with fragmenting rebel allegiances, warlords, and a growing Islamist movement bent on creating a regional Islamic caliphate in the North Caucasus.<sup>101</sup>

In an economically devastated Chechnya facing 80% unemployment, however, there were few opportunities to demobilize young fighting men and re-integrate them into civil society. Instead, Mashkadov was forced to bring warlords and militants into the Chechen Republic’s official security forces in the hopes of placating and legitimizing them.<sup>102</sup> Rather than try to maintain a fragile peace, the most extreme elements of the former rebels, particularly Arbi Barayev’s Special Purposes Islamic Regiment, became heavily involved in criminal enterprises and racketeering.<sup>103</sup> It was the more extreme Islamic separatists groups which eventually pulled Chechnya into another war with Russia. The actions of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev and al-Qaeda commander Emir Ibn al-Khattab became the tipping point for Russian intervention. Under the recently formed International Islamic Peacekeeping Brigade, Basayev, Khattab, and their fighters invaded neighboring Dagestan in an attempt to spark

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<sup>100</sup> (Ibid 47)

<sup>101</sup> (Galeotti, Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009 2014, 50-52)

<sup>102</sup> (Ibid 49)

<sup>103</sup> (Ibid)

another local revolution and possibly lay the ground work for a future regional Islamic caliphate.<sup>104</sup>

The aggressive actions of Islamic separatists created a fissure among Chechen rebels which the Kremlin could exploit. Infighting among rival Chechen rebel factions was not a new phenomenon, however. Even before Russia's intervention in late 1994, forces loyal to President Dzhokar Dudayev were engaged in skirmishes with Belsen Gantemirov and Ruslan Labazanov's militias over which faction would control Grozny.<sup>105</sup> While Dudayev was able to defeat his rivals at the time, unity among Chechen rebel factions did not last through the interwar period.

#### **2.4 A New Agent Emerges: The Yamadayev Family Switches Sides**

Facing another Russian intervention following Basayev and Khattab's invasion of Dagestan and the Moscow apartment bombings, the powerful Yamadayev family decided to defect from fellow Chechen rebels and join the federal side.<sup>106</sup> Falling within the nationalist, as opposed to Islamist, camp of Chechen rebel factions, the Yamadayev clan was pragmatic and willing to fight against their countrymen in exchange for federal backing and the legitimizing effects of Russian sponsorship.<sup>107</sup> The first of several prominent defecting factions from the rebel side, the Yamadayev clan militia, known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen Republic (ChRI) National Guard Battalion, became the basis for Russia's new local militias made up of former Chechen rebel fighters.<sup>108</sup>

Unlike during the First Chechen War, the invasion during the second war was much more rapid and not nearly as costly for federal forces. Thanks to much more comprehensive planning

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<sup>104</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009* 2014, 51-52)

<sup>105</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 92)

<sup>106</sup> (Russell 2007, 74), (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 56)

<sup>107</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 56)

<sup>108</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 56)

and perpetration by North Caucasus Military District forces, which had been war gaming invasion scenarios for the past year, federal forces were able to quickly seize and retain major cities throughout Chechnya on their way towards Grozny.<sup>109</sup> Surrounding Grozny again in December 1999, federal forces were able to decisively defeat the Chechen rebels who suffered serious casualties during the haphazard retreat from the city.<sup>110</sup>

Through better preparation, planning, and execution, the second war rapidly pushed rebels out of their positions within cities and forced them into an asymmetrical footing from which they would no longer be able to launch serious challenges to federal control over the country.<sup>111</sup> In addition to superior military planning and training in preparation for the second war, coopting rebel forces into defection proved quite effective at degrading rebel capacity to resist and retain territory. Moreover, the knowledge of asymmetrical tactics, rebel networks, and regional terrain meant former rebels were well suited to assisting to the arduous challenge of pacifying remaining insurgents.

Among former rebel groups newly aligned alongside Moscow, the Yamadayev clan's 2<sup>nd</sup> ChRI National Guard Battalion played a prominent role. First operating as an independent militia prior, and later officially integrated into the Russian military with General Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) sponsorship, the 2<sup>nd</sup> ChRI National Guard Battalion became known as Vostok, or "East", Battalion.<sup>112</sup> In Vostok battalion's original incarnation, prior to its reappearance in the Donbas, the unit's fortunes were directly intertwined with the Yamadayev family.

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<sup>109</sup> (Ibid 54, 59-60)

<sup>110</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 48, 53)

<sup>111</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 53)

<sup>112</sup> (Kozlov 2011)

## 2.5 Conclusion

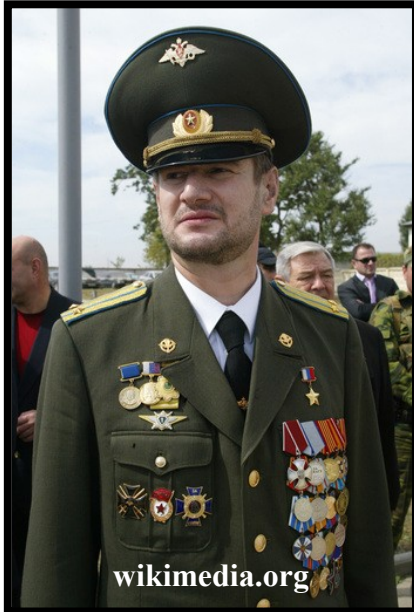
The Russian armed forces which emerged from the hulk of the Soviet Union were disorganized, demoralized, underfunded, and saddled with an obsolete, mass mobilization based force structure geared towards fighting a large conventional war with NATO. Before reform attempts had any real chance to take effect, the military was asked to intervene in a high-intensity insurgency in Chechnya. Thrust into urban environments, federal troops were often forced into engagements where restrictive terrain and limited fields of fire drastically reduced the range advantage of their armored and mechanized assets.<sup>113</sup>

Based on the enormous burdens the military was forced to operate under and the difficult fighting conditions of the North Caucasus, it is not especially surprising Russia was unable to achieve a decisive victory in the First Chechen War. However, lessons learned in the first conflict were applied readily to the second. War gaming against asymmetrical forces in Chechnya combined with better mission preparation prior to the second invasion gave Russia a much stronger initiative. Most significant to this thesis, however, was the Kremlin's realization it could exploit fissures within Chechen rebel factions and flip local militants to the federal side all while utilizing a more cost-effective and politically tenable asset than regular troops. Rather than put ethnic Russians in harm's way via reliance on conventional forces, Vostok functioned as a paramilitary intermediary which assumed some of the burden for fighting. Out of practical necessity given conventional military shortcomings and domestic political opposition, the Kremlin had found what appeared to be a valuable local agent in Vostok Battalion.

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<sup>113</sup> (Billingsley 2013, 18-20, 170-171)

### Chapter 3: The Yamadayev Vostok



Sulim Yamadayev

21 June 1973 – 30 March 2009

- Assassinated in Dubai.
- Vostok Commander: 2003-2008 (unit disbanded).
- Frunze Military Academy: 2004-2007.
- Lt. Col. in Russian Army.



Ruslan Yamadayev

10 December 1961 – 24 September 2008

- Assassinated in Car on Smolenskaya Embankment in central Moscow near the Russian White House.
- Deputy Commandant of Chechen Military: 2001-2003
- Deputy of State Duma for Chechnya: 2003 – 2007



Dzhabrail Yamadayev

16 June 1970 – 5 March 2003

- First Commander of Vostok BN (Until his death)
- Assassinated in Vedeno, Chechnya by bomb placed underneath couch where he was sleeping.



Isa Yamadayev

DoB 1975

- Politician, businessman
- Made peace with Ramzan in exchange for protecting the surviving members of his family



Musa (Aslan) Yamadayev

DoB 1968

- Former Vostok officer
- Never spent a significant amount of time with unit. Was wounded very soon after joining and was discharged due to his injury.



Badrudi Yamadayev

DoB 1977

- Former Vostok officer
- Involved in Arsamakov brothers Kidnapping
- Participated in Gudermes Convoy Confrontation



Ramzan Kadyrov

DoB 7 Oct 1976

- Head of Chechen Republic since 15 February 2007
- Yamadayev Family's Chief Rival in Chechnya

### 3.1 – Introduction

The specifics of Russia's relationship with its subordinate proxy militia forces are often intentionally obscured, even if the militia group in question was officially integrated into the state's domestic security hierarchy. Plausible deniability for the use of coercive violence, specifically violence which would be seen as illegitimate by the international community, is an attractive feature for states looking to sponsor militia forces.<sup>114</sup> In the case of Chechnya, the exploits of Vostok battalion were not often reported to the media, likely due to their unsavory nature.<sup>115</sup> While Vostok fell within the Russian Armed Forces hierarchy as a GRU Spetsnaz battalion, its outward image as an irregular formation and Spetsnaz status under the GRU disconnected it from u-form regular federal forces and gave it operational independence.<sup>116</sup> Most importantly, Vostok's ultimate loyalty lay with the Yamadayev brothers who can be seen as divisional managers within an m-form organizational framework.<sup>117</sup> Throughout the Vostok's history as a Chechen armed formation, the Yamadayev clan's fortunes and interests were tied at the hip to Vostok. If Vostok was the hammer used by Kremlin to exert coercive force in Chechnya, the Yamadayevs were the agents and intermediaries Moscow needed to interface with.

Vostok was not the only pro-Moscow u-form militia in Chechnya, however. It existed alongside other pro-Moscow militia units, primarily the Kadyrovtsy which was loyal to Akhmad Kadyrov and his son Ramzan. Family loyalties notwithstanding, each was essentially just a duplicate of the other; a Spetsnaz, or special troops formation, comprised primarily of Chechens with extensive fighting experience from the First Chechen War and sometimes even the Soviet

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<sup>114</sup> (Marten 2012, 109)

<sup>115</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>116</sup> (Gerasimenko 2004)

<sup>117</sup> (Ahram 2011, 13)



Afghan War. While cooperation between Vostok and Kadyrovtsy occurred occasional for some more extensive operations, such as the capture of Magomed Khambiyev, neither required coordination with the other to function properly.<sup>118</sup> Rather, the relationship between the two organizations was one of asymmetrical information flows and, later, intra-agent rivalry.<sup>119</sup> As time went on, informational asymmetry and agent opportunism pushed both parties towards an eventual confrontation.

Charting the course of the intra-agent infighting between the Yamadayev brothers and Ramzan Kadyrov, who proved to be exceptionally adversarial after the death of his father, is central to Vostok's relationship with the Kremlin. Yet, the Kremlin's attempts to obscure its relationship with periphery militias makes it difficult to decipher how much control and influence the Kremlin actually exerted over Vostok. Principal-agent relations and multi-dimensional form organizational hierarchy therefore provide a very useful theoretical framework to fill gaps in available information.

An m-form hierarchy helps to conceptualize how Vostok and other Chechen rebels existed as independent agents, each operating as fully autonomous periphery divisions unto themselves. By design, they were unburden by direct federal influence and guidance as part of the Kremlin's 'Chechenization' plan of handing over counter-terror efforts to local agents as an exit strategy for the conflict.<sup>120</sup> M-form militias, as Arial Ahram points out, are less expensive than their u-form regular military counterparts, an appealing characteristic to the Kremlin considering the MoD's funding issues.<sup>121</sup> More importantly, m-form militias had operational freedom of action and a weaker connection to the organization center which allowed the Kremlin

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<sup>118</sup> (Caucasian Knot 2004)

<sup>119</sup> (Cooley 2005, 52)

<sup>120</sup> (Russell 2007, 82-83)

<sup>121</sup> (Ahram 2011, 14)

to mitigate its responsibility for crimes committed.<sup>122</sup> Keeping its periphery agents at arms-length let the Kremlin insulate itself from international condemnation over gross human rights violations committed by Vostok and other pro-Moscow Chechen formations. In essence, the Kremlin originally envisioned Vostok as an m-form organization able to help lower to political, military, and economic costs of pacifying Chechnya.

With this in mind, tracing the history of Vostok through its principal-agent relations with Moscow provides this thesis with a means of elucidating some conclusions about why Russia relies on militias, the extent to which it can guide militia actions, and the implications such control has on the relationship. Other than the background history of Vostok which helps set the stage, a few key events and periods in Vostok's history stand out to help illustrate the benefits and pitfalls of Russia's m-form organizational control of Vostok battalion and its other proxy militias. As the political and historical contexts of the wars Vostok participated in are absolutely enormous in their depth and breadth, the focus throughout chapters three and four will remain on Vostok's participation in the conflict. What emerges out of the Kremlin's principal-agent relationship with its militia groups in Chechnya is a case where the strategic success of stabilizing Chechnya came at the cost of systemic agency problems, and ultimately, a failure by the Kremlin to regulate and direct the behavior of its supposedly subordinate agents

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<sup>122</sup> (Ahram 2011, Ibid)

### 3.2 – Formation and Early Successes

The history of Vostok battalion can be traced back to the interwar period of the late 1990s. As Chechen president Maskhadov tried to assemble a unified national security force to prevent infighting between competing warlords, support for Maskhadov among prominent rebel leaders started to waiver.<sup>123</sup> By the summer of 1998, Shamil Basayev, who had been appointed Vice President after a second place finish in Chechnya's 1997 presidential race, resigned from office and joined with other former rebel leaders in opposition to Maskhadov.<sup>124</sup> Basayev represented one of the most significant political personalities in what was becoming a major shift in the Chechen separatist movement following de facto independence in 1996. The desire among Chechen Islamist political leaders to implement Shari'a in addition to attempts to annex Chechen villages from neighboring Muslim-majority Dagestan, possibly to create an Islamic Republic of Ichkeria, bisected rebel leadership into two main groups.<sup>125</sup> The more secular nationalists, who counted future presidents Akhmad Kadyrov and his son Ramzan among their ranks along with the Yamadayev brothers, were in one camp, while Islamists such as Basayev and the 1<sup>st</sup> Emir of Arab Mujahideen<sup>126</sup> in Chechnya Ibn al-Khattab were in the other. It was Basayev and the Islamists separatists' failed attempt to support fellow Islamist separatists hold up in several Dagestani villages in August 1999 which played an important role in provoking a military response from Russia.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 48, 56), (Wood 2007, 89)

<sup>124</sup> (Wood 2007, 89)

<sup>125</sup> (Ibid 89, 92)

<sup>126</sup> The Arab Mujahadeen (foreign fighter) in Chechnya were an armed Sunni Islamist separatist group comprised mainly of Arab volunteers which fought in both Chechen wars.

<sup>127</sup> (Wood 2007, 92)

With a significant number of prominent Chechen secular nationalists no longer willing to side with Chechen Islamists, Russia was able to convince the Yamadayev and Kadyrov families to join the federal side. Gudermes, the second largest city in Chechnya and home to the influential Yamadayev clan, fell quickly to Russian forces early in the invasion. Rather than resist Russia, the Yamadayev clan militia, the 2<sup>nd</sup> ChRI National Guard BN, accepted Russian sovereignty and quickly became a de facto regional security force. In addition to being pragmatic when it came to allegiances and loyalty, the Yamadayev clan had a history of challenging Islamist ambitions.<sup>128</sup> In 1998, Special Purpose Islamic Regiment founder Arbi Baraev tried unsuccessfully to seize the Yamadayev's hometown of Gudermes by force, a move which had him stripped of his position and rank within Chechnya's violently unstable military.<sup>129</sup> The city of Gudermes was handed over by the defecting Yamadayev clan to Russian forces on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1999 without the same horrific and unrestrained use of aerial ordinance Grozny was being subjected to.<sup>130</sup> Around the same time, Ahkmad Kadyrov and his followers broke officially with Shamil Basayev following several months of publically denouncing the Wahhabist faction of Chechen rebels.<sup>131</sup>

Russia's coopting of former nationalist rebels to augment state security forces was grounded in both a pragmatic approach to leverage Chechnya's intra-clan relations in their favor as well as apply lessons learned from the first Chechen conflict. Once federal forces had pushed Islamist rebels out of all major Chechen towns and cities by mid-2000, the Kremlin was left facing a grinding, long term COIN campaign. Without a clearly defined exit strategy to reduce

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<sup>128</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 56)

<sup>129</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 29)

<sup>130</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 34, 37), (Mitkova and Gusarov 1999)

<sup>131</sup> (Makhachkala Kavkaz News Agency 1999), (Russell 2007, 59, 83)

federal force's burden of fighting the conflict, the Kremlin would remain stuck in the same protracted fight which made the First Chechen War politically unsustainable.

During the First Chechen War, it was strong political opposition to mass mobilization of reserve forces which curtailed Moscow's ability to bring troop deployments to their desired levels.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the same domestic opposition made continuing the conflict more difficult as time went on.<sup>133</sup> With a lasting victory unrealistic through conventional military force alone, shifting the part of burden for fighting to Chechen militias became an appealing work around to the issues which made the First Chechen War so difficult to fight. The Kremlin's plan for gradual disengagement of federal forces, which came to be known as 'Chechenization', called for Chechen militias to stand up over time and gradually assume responsibility for COIN operations. In addition to having the unique local knowledge necessary for successful targeting of insurgents, militias taking the lead on operations reduced federal forces exposure to risk while granting the benefit of obscuring Russia's responsibility for atrocities committed during missions.<sup>134</sup>

By having Chechens shoulder the burden for fighting the conflict, the Kremlin believed it could contain most of the casualties within the Chechen population and balance the competing ambitions of rival Chechen political families, primarily the Yamadayevs and Kadryovs. A 2004 Medecins Sans Frontieres report cited by John Russell helps illustrate the transition stating, "The conflict appears to have become more of an internal civil war between rival Chechen factions, instead of a war for independence."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> (Barabanov, *Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict 2015*, 79)

<sup>133</sup> (Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, 47-48)

<sup>134</sup> (Russell 2007, 83)

<sup>135</sup> (Russell 2007, 85-86)

In an important and darkly symbolic military ceremony predicting the coming inter-ethnic violence in January of 2000, Russian Generals Vladimir Kazantsev and Gennadiy Troshev gave a folded Russian flag to Dzhabrail Yamadayev; a gift for helping Russian forces take Gudermes two months earlier. In offering the flag to Dzhabrail, General Troshev made the ominous declaration, “I hand over this folded Russian flag to Dzhabrail Yamadayev so that he can carry it through the remaining part of Chechnya, which is still occupied by bandits, and hoist it at a settlement where the last remaining bandit Wahhabi is killed”.<sup>136</sup> In commenting on the event, NTV International’s correspondent Sergey Kholoshevskiy inadvertently foreshadowed the still latent Yamadayev – Kadyrov rivalry by tacitly implying Dzhabrail essentially represented the entire Benoy clan which the equally influential and ambitious Kadyrov family were also a members of.<sup>137</sup>

Figuring out how to integrate the newly loyal Yamadayev militia into security operations quickly became a priority. At the time, Dzhabrail had roughly 300 irregulars under his control who he had claimed must remain armed and actively engaged in fighting Islamist separatists.<sup>138</sup> Citing the dangerous posed by Islamist separatists, Dzhabrail said neither Shamil Basayev nor Emir Khattab would forgive him for killing dozens of Arbi Baraev’s men during Abri’s failed attempt to seize Gudermes a year and a half earlier.<sup>139</sup> While the Yamadayev’s militia would eventually be integrated into the federal security hierarchy through the GRU as Vostok battalion, there were initial signals of apparent policy dissonance between more senior officials in Moscow and local FSB commanders. Gudermes based FSB Lt. Col Sergei Nosko remarked that

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<sup>136</sup> (Yamadayev, Kazantsev and Troshev, NTV International- 'Influential' Chechen Benoy Clan Joins Federal Forces 2000)

<sup>137</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>138</sup> (Interfax 2000)

<sup>139</sup> (Ibid)

Yamadayev's militia was no different from Maskhadov except for its relation to Wahhabism and that "Preserving illegal armed formations (was) out of the question".<sup>140</sup>

With some local security officials expressing hesitation for relying on Chechen militia formations, integrating the Yamadayev militia took some time. In an early example of Russian intervention to preempt potential cases of intra-agent conflict, Dzhabrail and his brother Sulim were arrested by unidentified Russian military authorities on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2000, while traveling from a local Benoy village towards Gudermes.<sup>141</sup> From there, the detained brothers were flown via helicopter to Khankala and apparently interrogated by federal authorities for two days to ascertain whether or not they would openly challenge Akhmad Kadyrov who had been appointed to lead the republic just a few days prior.<sup>142</sup> While Vladimir Putin claimed during Akhmad's appointment, "The people trust the mufti" and General Troshev, who gifted Dzhabrail a Russian flag a few months earlier, predicted "Kadyrov will be able to call on the Chechens to fight against the gunmen as only they themselves will be able to sort them out", federal authorities were apparently wary enough about potential conflict between their new agents to bring Dzhabrail and Sulim in for questioning on the matter.<sup>143</sup>

Over the next two years, federal security forces in Chechnya embarked on an aggressive and mostly indiscriminate COIN campaign marked by horrific abuses against Chechnya's civilian population. Many federal forces missions were based on *zachistka*, or sweep operations, for most of 2000-2002.<sup>144</sup> *Zachistka* sweeps were primarily undertaken by various Spetsnaz units as punitive missions against civilians suspected to have separatist sympathies and were

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<sup>140</sup> (Interfax 2000)

<sup>141</sup> (Stepenin and Isayev 2000)

<sup>142</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>143</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>144</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 50)

defined as a “special operation aimed to check residence permits and identify participants of the illegally armed formations”.<sup>145</sup> The zachitska sweeps essentially embodied a Russian security forces doctrine of state sanctioned purges whereby suspected separatists and supposedly sympathetic civilians were pulled from their homes and sent to brutal detainment camps called ‘filtration points’. While detained in filtration points, all were interrogated for information, often through torture, and sometimes summarily executed.<sup>146</sup>

It’s not entirely clear from available sources how often the Yamadayev militia participated in the early zachitska operations from 2000-2002. It wasn’t until March 2002 that the Yamadayev militia became an officially sanctioned armed formation under the direction of the Chechen Military Commandant’s office.<sup>147</sup> Integration of the Yamadayev militia into the Chechen security apparatus was likely helped along by Ruslan Yamadayev who had been appointed deputy military commandant of Chechnya in 2001 thanks to intense negotiations with Akhmad Kadyrov in Moscow.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Emma Gilligan writes most of the zachistka sweep operations, and accompanying mass disappearances of civilians, were carried out primarily by Russian Spetsnaz units prior to 2003. It was not until 2003 that unidentified paramilitary personnel speaking Chechen started participating in or leading zachistka sweep operations.<sup>149</sup>

By the summer of 2002, Dzhabrail was commanding the Yamadayev militia and operating extensively in the dangerous Vedensky District.<sup>150</sup> In addition to being home to infamous Chechen separatist Shamil Basayev, the town of Veden in Vedensky served as an

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<sup>145</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 50)

<sup>146</sup> (Ibid 51, 58-59)

<sup>147</sup> (NEWSRU.COM 2008)

<sup>148</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>149</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 83)

<sup>150</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)



assembly area for Basayev and Khattab's failed invasion of Dagestan in 1999.<sup>151</sup> Given heightened levels of separatist activity within Vedensky and its geographical significance to Chechen separatists, Dzhabrail's deployment there has some significant implications. Early in the Yamadayev militia's history, the unit was being consistently relied upon by federal security forces to operate successfully in areas of critical importance to federal COIN efforts, a trend which would continue in the future. By November 2003, when the Yamadayev militia was officially constituted as a GRU battalion designated Vostok, the unit had been consistently praised for its successes by senior Russian military officials. The commander of Vostok's higher headquarters, Maj Gen Sergey Minekov of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division, described the unit as well-trained, well-led, and effective.<sup>152</sup>

For the Kremlin, Vostok battalion essentially embodied the ideal proxy agent within the Chechenization framework. The unit was led by a prominent Chechen family, the Yamadayev brothers, who the Kremlin believed were reliable actors for pacifying the Chechen separatist movement and counter-balancing ambitions of rival Chechen political players, particularly the Kadyrov family. Vostok fighters were sourced from Gudermes locals, loyal to the Yamadayevs and possessing unique local and regional knowledge making them well suited for conducting COIN operations. Vostok's fighters and leaders had previously fought federal forces and were well aware of separatist asymmetrical tactics as well as the composition and disposition of their formations.<sup>153</sup> Sulim Yamadayev himself claimed in an interview, "I know Basayev and

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<sup>151</sup> (Blandy 2000)

<sup>152</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>153</sup> (Minekov 2006)

Maskhadov personally -- planned actions and made decisions with them” which made him a uniquely suitable candidate for hunting down senior separatist leaders.<sup>154</sup>

More importantly, Vostok did not operate under the unitary form hierarchy of the traditional federal security forces, such as a regular motor rifle battalion or MVD interior troops. Its quasi-official positioning within Russian state security echelons, first as a militia under the Chechen Military Commandant’s Office and later as a GRU Spetsnaz battalion under the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division, gave it a unique amount of operational leeway. Dressed irregularly, without the same uniform standards as more conventional forces, Vostok fighters maintained the outward image of militiamen not readily identifiable as members of a regular security or military unit.<sup>155</sup> Ambiguity over what sort of unit Vostok represented and who exactly they answered to allowed the Kremlin to distance itself from Vostok’s actions. Most Vostok operations, other than major successes involving the successful targeting of senior separatist leadership such as Abu Al-Walid, were not openly reported in the Russian media.<sup>156</sup>

Vostok provided the Kremlin with an effective counter-terrorism unit unburdened by the same level of public visibility conventional forces were exposed to. As a locally sourced, irregular fighting force, Vostok had the ability to conduct violent, indiscriminate *zachitska* sweeps with less fear of blowback from international human rights monitors in Chechnya. The lack of direct operational control over Vostok combined with their ambiguous posture as a paramilitary force helped facilitate a decentralized force structure, an important m-form trait for militia units. While a decentralized force structures promotes resistance to the center’s operational control and homogenizing influence, it helped insulate the Kremlin from allegations

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<sup>154</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>155</sup> (Gerasimenko 2004)

<sup>156</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

of direct responsibility.<sup>157</sup> Plausible deniability through the use of special troops units, such as Vostok, allowed the Kremlin to continue a policy of *zachitska* using fewer regular federal forces whose obvious, direct linkages to the Kremlin drew more international scrutiny.<sup>158</sup>

As Vostok continued to succeed in its counter-terror operations, killing a lieutenant of Arab Mujahideen Emir Abu Al-Walid<sup>159</sup> in August 2002, the political fortunes of the Yamadayev family also expanded.<sup>160</sup> In early 2003, Ruslan resigned from his position as Deputy Commandant of the Chechen Military to become the deputy leader of regional United Russia branch.<sup>161</sup> A senior position in the local United Russia affiliate gave the Yamadayev family, and by extension their militia Vostok, a strong platform to project an image of loyalty and reliability towards the Kremlin. Politically alert and pragmatic as ever, the Yamadayev clan, led by the family patriarch Ruslan, positioned itself as a key agent the Kremlin had to successfully engage with and utilize in order to achieve its objective of pacifying a tumultuous Chechnya.

Ambition was coming at a cost for the Yamadayev clan, however. Badrudi Usmanov, brother-in-law to the family and regional head of United Russia's Kurchaloyevsky district branch, was shot dead at home by unidentified gunmen on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, 2002.<sup>162</sup> Authorities theorized Badrudi's assassination was brought on by his relation to Yamadayev brothers. In suspecting Islamist separatists as possible perpetrators, investigators believed Badrudi presented

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<sup>157</sup> (Ahram 2011, 13)

<sup>158</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 78)

<sup>159</sup> Abu Al-Walid became the Second Emir (Military and Spiritual Leader) of the Arab Mujahideen in Chechnya after the death of Ibn al-Khattab in 2002.

<sup>160</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>161</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>162</sup> (Dyupin 2002)

a target for separatists who wished to strike back at the Yamadayev brothers directly, but were unable to do so given the brother's tight security.<sup>163</sup>

In the immense violence Chechnya in the early 2000s, blood feuds, long a part of Chechen culture, had been transformed through Chechenization into a seemingly unending wave of reprisal killings.<sup>164</sup> While Vostok was doing most of the killing in the fight against Chechen separatist, assassins eventually stuck back successfully on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003 when a bomb detonated underneath a couch where Dzhabrail was sleeping, killing him and several nearby Vostok fighters.<sup>165</sup> Blaming separatist leader Shamil Basayev for the assassination, Sulim called for revenge during an interview about the killing saying, ““I do not want him to be killed by someone else - I shall not leave him [Shamil Basayev] alone until I shall kill him myself.”<sup>166</sup>

With Sulim now in command of Vostok, as it was known officially from Nov 2003 onward, the battalion continued on its mission of targeting senior separatist leaders and partaking in punitive zachistka sweeps to roll up suspected separatists and violently suppress potential civilian dissenters. Now with GRU sponsorship and a greater mandate from the Kremlin to act thanks to the expanding Chechenization policy, Vostok was becoming a valuable asset for Moscow. From 2003 – 2004, Vostok killed a number of separatist leaders including a local commander in Gudermes district named Movsar Teimuskhanov, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Emir of Arab Mujahedeen in Chechnya Abu Al-Walid, and a money launder and financier for Shamil Basayev named Mahram Saidov.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>164</sup> (Dyupin 2002)

<sup>165</sup> (Vernidub and Tsvetkova 2003)

<sup>166</sup> (S. Yamadayev, "Our Version" - Moscow Center TV 2004)

<sup>167</sup> (Newsru.com 2004), (Polit.ru 2004), (Votenny Vestnik Yuga Rossii 2008)

In addition to carrying out targeted killings, Vostok also assisted in the controversial and highly publicized capture of Magomed Khambiyev, former Minister of Defense of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and close ally of President in exile Aslan Maskhadov. In order to force Khambiev out of hiding, Vostok fighters under the command of Sulim and Kadyrovtsy under Ramzan Kadyrov captured somewhere between 40-200 (sources vary on the numbers) of Khambiyev's relatives to include elders and women with no connections to separatists other than family relations to Khambiyev.<sup>168</sup> After being arrested, the relatives were shipped to holding facilities operated by Vostok battalion in Gudermes and to others used by Kadyrovtsy. Many of the detained relatives were held in extended isolation and some were brutally interrogated.<sup>169</sup> Sometimes the relatives were released, as was the case of 19-year old freshmen medical student Aslambek Khambiyev found beaten and semi-conscious in the village of Benoa after being dumped from a car. Others, such as Shyta Khambiyev, disappeared completely.<sup>170</sup>

Up to this point, the Kremlin's policy of Chechenization was working more or less as intended, albeit with shocking brutality. Responsibility for most COIN operations had been handed over to pro-Moscow Chechen formations.<sup>171</sup> Federal forces were no longer directly responsible for most Zachistka sweeps and were now able to provide less visible operational support to Chechen militias responsible for missions.<sup>172</sup> Pro-Moscow Chechens were bearing the brunt of the fighting against the separatists which reduced federal force's exposure to hazards, potential casualties, and the accompanying public pushback. Both the Vostok and the Kadyrovtsy had leading roles in a brutal COIN campaign which did little to differentiate between

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<sup>168</sup> (Molodezhnaya Smena 2008), (Human Rights Center "Memorial" 2004)

<sup>169</sup> (Molodezhnaya Smena 2008)

<sup>170</sup> (Human Rights Center "Memorial" 2004)

<sup>171</sup> (Gerasimenko 2004)

<sup>172</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 83)

actual separatists and unaffiliated civilians.<sup>173</sup> The Kremlin's Chechen militia agents were also more or less working together effectively. Sulim and Kadyrov had cooperated, using exceptionally nefarious means, to capture Magomed Khambiyev in a significant blow to Aslan Makhadov's government in exile. Moreover, Kadyrov had praised the work of Dzhabrail in an interview prior to Khambiyev's capture saying the Kadyrovtsy worked in close coordination with the Yamadayev militia and that Dzhabrail had done a lot of good work prior to his death.<sup>174</sup>

Yet, cooperation and counter-terror operational cohesion between Vostok and the Kadyrovtsy were fleeting. Vostok battalion, as mentioned previously, was composed mostly of Chechens from Gudermes district loyal to the Yamadayev clan. Critically, unlike other Chechen militia formations, Vostok did not fall under the authority of Kadyrov.<sup>175</sup> As such, Vostok and the Kadyrovtsy essentially embodied two separate periphery agents within the Kremlin's m-form organizational hierarchy for Chechen militias. As in Alexander Cooley or Ariel Ahram's examples of m-form organizations, both units are more or less an administrative and tactical duplicate of the other.<sup>176</sup> Vostok and the Kadyrovtsy both carry out the same basic missions and have similar capabilities. By design, they both have minimal supervision from their federal sponsors to help augment plausible deniability and make it intrinsically easier for the state to disassociate itself from either group's actions. And, while they did cooperate on some missions, both groups had curtailed horizontal information flows which meant neither was required to share information with the other to complete missions.<sup>177</sup> With neither side operationally dependent on the other and with both groups headed by ambitious agents with competing local interest, a confrontation was inevitable.

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<sup>173</sup> (Russell 2007, 103)

<sup>174</sup> (Kadyrov 2003)

<sup>175</sup> (Sukhov 2008)

<sup>176</sup> (Ahram 2011, 13-14), (Cooley 2005, 46-47)

<sup>177</sup> (Cooley 2005, 46)

### 3.3 – Borozdinovskaya Zachiski Incident

A key element of successful COIN campaign is good Human Intelligence (HUMINT).<sup>178</sup> Intelligence garnered from human sources, as opposed to other collection means such as aerial imagery, provides COIN forces a much more nuanced understanding of the human networks which comprise insurgent's organizations.<sup>179</sup> An aerial platform with a sophisticated sensor package may be able to see a group of insurgents moving through a mountain village from miles away, but it can do little to inform security forces about which members of the village actually support the insurgents, how the group of insurgents fits into a larger organization, or the actual identities of said insurgents. HUMINT is a vital tool for allowing COIN units to identify and define which members of the population meet the criteria for terrorist, how to locate them, and how to effectively separate them from the civilian population and target them.<sup>180</sup> While Vostok and other pro-Chechen militias, along with federal forces themselves, demonstrated consistently little concern for accidentally targeting non-combatants unaffiliated with separatist elements, they still had to rely on confidential HUMINT sources to help them locate higher ranking separatists in hiding.

On the night of June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005, a forest ranger named Tagir Akhmadov living in the village of Borozdinovskaya was murdered by a small group of men who were either members of organized criminal elements in Shelkovskoy District with ties to local separatists or separatists themselves.<sup>181</sup> Media information about the incident varies widely, but a few facts are clear. Akhmadov was specifically targeted for assassination, one of Akhmadov's sons was a member

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<sup>178</sup> (Department of the Army 2014, 110-111)

<sup>179</sup> (Ibid 108)

<sup>180</sup> (Russell 2007, 104-105)

<sup>181</sup> (Rechkalov 2005)

of Vostok battalion at the time, and Vostok carried out a reprisal zachistka sweep on the village immediately after the murder, killing one man and abducting 11 others in the process.<sup>182</sup>

Few of the media articles covering the incident offer plausible theories as to why Akhmadov was murdered. But, an investigative report by Vadim Rechkalov posits a probable scenario in which Akhmadov was specifically targeted because of his service to Vostok as a confidential HUMINT source.<sup>183</sup> Akhmadov frequently worked in the forest along the river Talovka, which runs South East of Borozdinovskaya and abuts the Chechen – Dagestan border. The river and border region are known to be frequented by criminals and separatists conducting smuggling.<sup>184</sup>

Villagers from Borozdinovskaya claim Akhmadov had recently seen an encampment within the forest used by local criminals, or possible even separatists. Moreover, two other forest rangers from Shelkovskoy district had been murdered in the previous three months, possibly because separatist or criminal elements suspected them of providing information to security forces. As Akmadov had family connections to Vostok, it is quite possible he passed this tidbit along to the unit and may have previously done so with other information. Since Vostok relied on confidential HUMINT sources for tips about separatist elements, finding out who killed him and sending a strong message to those responsible was quite important to convincing current, and potential future, HUMINT sources Vostok could ensure their protection.<sup>185</sup>

The sequence of events for Akhmadov's murder and its immediate aftermath is as follows. Late at night, a small group of armed men came to Akhmadov's home and were greeted

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<sup>182</sup> (Rechkalov 2005)

<sup>183</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>184</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>185</sup> (Ibid)



by his son at the gated entrance. Akhmadov's son, seeing the men had weapons and realizing they were likely criminals or separatists, told them his father was not home when they demanded to see him. One of the men standing near the threshold of the gate saw inside the house and noticed Akhmadov's boots setting next to the staircase. Upon seeing the boots, the man declared Akhmadov's must be home whereupon the group pushed aside the son, entered the home, and killed Akhmadov. The men then left the home without doing anything else to Akhmadov's son.<sup>186</sup>

Shortly after killing Akhmadov, the group proceeded to the home of Sultan Beshirov, the village mayor. After confronting Beshirov and his bodyguard, policeman Rasul Khasimkhanov, the gunmen overpowered both of them in a brief fight. Beshirov and Khasimkhanov were both armed, but none involved in the scuffle were killed and neither Beshirov nor Khasimkhanov were seriously injured. After being incapacitated, Khasimkhanov's rifle was stolen along with Beshirov's pistol and his ID card. The men then fled the village using Beshirov's blue Lada as a getaway vehicle. The car was abandoned on the side of the road in nearby Dubovskaya, a village about four and half kilometers to the west.<sup>187</sup>

On afternoon through evening of 4<sup>th</sup> of June, a company of heavily armed Vostok soldiers, possibly under the command of the battalion's intelligence officer Major Khamzat Gayrbekov, arrived in Borozdinovskaya transported by two armored personnel carriers, 3 armored Ural cars, and 6-8 UAZ vehicles.<sup>188</sup> The Vostok soldiers immediately commenced a *zachistka* sweep. All male villagers, including youths and the elderly, were rounded up at gun point and brought to a local school yard. Some were beaten with rifle butts and forced to lay

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<sup>186</sup> (Rechkalov 2005)

<sup>187</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>188</sup> (Caucasian Knot 2005)

face down on the ground in heavy rain for hours.<sup>189</sup> During the raid, three homes adjacent to each other on Ulitsa Lenina Street were burned down. In one of the homes, the charred remains of 77 year old Magomed Malikovich Magomadov were discovered by his family after Vostok left.<sup>190</sup> All told, eleven male villagers between the ages of 19 and 50 were detained and taken from the village by Vostok.<sup>191</sup> Similar to the infamous case of Magomed Khambiev's relatives being abducted, all those taken, save for one, had relatives who were known members of 'illegal formations'.<sup>192</sup> None would ever be seen again. In the immediate aftermath of the raid, most of the villagers of Borozdinovskaya, who were primarily ethnic Avars, fled across the nearby border with Dagestan to stay with relatives.<sup>193</sup>

News reports of the sweep and ensuing mass exodus of hundreds Borozdinovskaya villagers soon started to appear not just in human rights NGO publication, but throughout the international media. Facing a surprising amount of blowback for a zachistka sweep, Chechen officials and the Yamadayev brothers went on the offensive, initially denying any official security forces involvement. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, Chechen President Alu Alkhanov and Ramzan Kadyrov, at that time serving as Acting Prime Minister, arrived in the village to talk to the few remaining locals and the handful of refugees who had returned since fleeing earlier in the month.<sup>194</sup>

While both officials claimed the initial murder on the night of June 2<sup>nd</sup> and the raid on the 4<sup>th</sup> were carried out by armed bandits in public remarks, the villagers present immediately objected to the official story saying the men responsible could not have been bandits given they

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<sup>189</sup> (Jamestown Foundation 2005)

<sup>190</sup> (Rechkalov 2005)

<sup>191</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>192</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>193</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>194</sup> (Allenova 2005)

were dozens of them, wearing security forces uniforms, and traveling in an armored convoy of vehicles. Considering Chechen separatist units operate asymmetrically, in small squad size units of around eight men, the size of the force and equipment involved were strong indicators the sweep on June 4<sup>th</sup> was carried out by Chechen security forces and not bandits.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, given Tagir Akhmadov's family connection to Vostok, a reprisal raid by the unit quickly became a plausible theory among villagers. Facing unwanted international attention and mounting pressure to convince hundreds of refugees to leave Dagestan and return to Borozdinovskaya, Alkhanov and Kadyrov vowed to initiate an investigation to find those responsible.<sup>196</sup>

In an interview about the raid, Vostok battalion commander Sulim denied any officially sanctioned Vostok involvement, saying only a small number of Vostok fighters entered the village without permission from their superiors to conduct an initial investigation of Akhmadov's recent murder.<sup>197</sup> Sulim also denied Major Khamzat Gayrbekov was present during the raid. However, villagers readily identify Gayrbekov as he was not wearing a balaclava, unlike the other Vostok fighters present, and was quite recognizable in Shelkovskoy thanks to his position as the district's United Russia party leader and his conspicuous red facial hair.<sup>198</sup> Ruslan Yamadaev, a deputy for Chechnya in the State Duma at the time, stepped in as well, defending Vostok as an organization and saying senior leadership did not authorize the sweep and those responsible would be identified.<sup>199</sup> Ultimately, Major Gayrbekov was never charged in connection with the Borozdinovskaya sweep operation. Only a Vostok company commander named Mukhadi Aziyev received any punishment for the sweep.<sup>200</sup> Aziyev received a three year

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<sup>195</sup> (Allenova 2005)

<sup>196</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>197</sup> (S. Yamadayev, Borozdinovskaya is Not in Our Area 2005)

<sup>198</sup> (S. Yamadayev, Borozdinovskaya is Not in Our Area 2005), (Rechkalov 2005)

<sup>199</sup> (Riskin and Bondarenko, From the Clan of Presidents 2005)

<sup>200</sup> (Trifonov and Muradov 2005)

suspended sentence, but a lawyer for the family members of the victims said he was never informed of a trial and claimed Aziyev was a scapegoat.<sup>201</sup>

Given the number of Vostok soldiers involved at Borozdinovskaya based on eyewitness accounts and documents, Sulim probably knew about the raid. Vadim Rechkalov's guide while reporting in Chechnya, a local named Khuseyn, offers a particular salient point about whether or not Sulim ordered the raid saying;

*"Sulim is a very tough commander and no one in his company would dare to do such a thing without an order. There is an iron discipline in Vostok but if you believe the military prosecutor; Yamadayev's men halted their special operation in the forest and the entire company<sup>202</sup>, without authorization, like some kind of rabble, ran to carry out a sweep operation in Borozdinovskaya. That is not probable."<sup>203</sup>*

Additionally, given the high frequency of Zachistka sweeps and disappearances occurring in Chechnya at the time, Sulim likely thought Vostok could get away with the operation without excessive scrutiny from media and human rights groups.<sup>204</sup> The immediacy of the raid following Tagir Akhmadov's murder, and the circumstances surrounding the murder itself, make Vadim's theory of the sweep operation as a targeted reprisal for murder of a HUMINT source fairly plausible.

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<sup>201</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>202</sup> Before admitting involvement of any Vostok forces in the sweep, Sulim claimed his men were operating in the forest between the villages of Grebenskaya and Starogladovskaya, about 35 KMs south of Borozdinovskaya on June 4<sup>th</sup>. However, once on Router 262 which runs parallel to the River Terek and connects all three villages, it's only about a 26.5 KMs from Starogladovskaya to Borozdinovskaya, not exactly a time consuming trip for troops Sulim already admitted were in the vicinity of Borozdinovskaya. - (S. Yamadayev, Borozdinovskaya is Not in Our Area 2005), (Google Maps 2016)

<sup>203</sup> (Rechkalov 2005)

<sup>204</sup> (Gilligan 2010, 88)

While the Yamadayev brothers and Vostok avoided any serious repercussions for Borozdinovskaya at the time, the incident, along with their participation in highly controversial capture of Magomed Khambiev, would soon be used as ammunition against them during their brewing intra-agent confrontation with Ramzan Kadyrov. In the months following the Borozdinovskaya sweep, in the middle of a protracted investigation of Vostok, Kadyrov was positioning himself to accede the presidency of Chechnya once Alkhanov either finished his term or resigned.<sup>205</sup> Ruslan, as a deputy of the Duma and senior figure in Chechnya's United Russia branch, posed one of the few serious potential challenger to Kadyrov for the presidency. However, political commentators in the Russian media noted the Yamadayev brother's political aspirations had been significantly damaged by bad publicity surrounding the Borozdinovskaya incident.<sup>206</sup> Sensing a political weakness vulnerable to exploitation, Kadyrov launched the opening salvos of what was to be an exceptionally bloody confrontation. On the eve of the United Russia's victory in November's Duma elections, Kadyrov illegally removed Ruslan from his leadership position in Chechnya's United Russia branch.<sup>207</sup>

In describing the acute principal-agent problems of state sponsored militias, Ariel Ahram, citing Stathis Kalyvas, discusses how states can lose control of their militia agents when fighters place local economic or political interests ahead of state goals. Often, the use of violence by the militias to satisfy those local interests can be counterproductive to state ends.<sup>208</sup> The Borozdinovskaya sweep operation and its politically messy aftermath for Vostok and the Yamadayev brothers is quite important in the context of intra-agent infighting and counterproductive actions. The sweep was the first of several incidents to bring unwanted

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<sup>205</sup> (Riskin and Bondarenko, *From the Clan of Presidents* 2005)

<sup>206</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>207</sup> (Russell 2007, 85)

<sup>208</sup> (Ahram 2011, 14)

negative media attention to Vostok and impede the local interests of the Yamadayev brothers. While Chechenization was working by shielding federal forces from burden of COIN operations and encouraging Chechens to kill other Chechens, the Kremlin was starting to lose its ability to guide its agent's actions. Embarrassing national incidents and agent vs agent bloodshed were about to become common themes for Vostok.

### **3.4 – Paid Enforcers, Expanding Responsibilities, and Intensified Intra-Agent Rivalry: The Samson Plant Raid, the Lebanon Deployment, and Rising Tensions with Ramzan Kadyrov**

As the Chechen COIN campaign started to decrease in intensity by 2006, Vostok's relationship with the Kremlin was become more categorized by acute agency problems. Following the assassinations of Akhmad Kadyrov (9 May 2004) and Aslan Maskhadov (8 March 2004), there were no longer moderate Chechen political power brokers capable of conceivably cutting a peace deal to isolate the most extreme Islamist separatist factions of the conflict.<sup>209</sup> With no realistic avenues for peace agreements remaining, it fell to the Yamadayevs and Ramzan Kadyrov to violently suppress what remained of the Chechen separatist movement and then decide which camp was to take the executive role of guiding the republic. With both sides postured to assume increasing political responsibilities in post-insurgency Chechnya, an intense rivalry began to emerge. Initially confined to underhanded tactics about control over the local United Russia party affiliate, mutual enmity was pushing both parties towards armed confrontation.

As a major power broker in Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov is more than an important political figure. His Kadyrovtsy militia dominated the security forces of Chechnya and was a

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<sup>209</sup> (Russell 2007, 86)

considerably larger force than Vostok.<sup>210</sup> In addition to being one of the best trained and equipped militia forces in the republic, the Kadyrovtsy made Kadyrov a specialist in the coercive use of violence.<sup>211</sup> While by late April 2006, Kadyrov announced he was demobilizing the Kadyrovtsy in favor of more officially regulated formations, thereby signaling a shift towards projecting his power via more outwardly legitimate means, the move away from irregular formations represented little in the practical terms of Kadyrov's security force structure.<sup>212</sup> The Kadyrovtsy, like the Yamadayev militia, became the GRU battalions Sever (North) and Yug (South).<sup>213</sup> The new units were still basically Kadyrovtsy, loyal to Kadyrov but officially sanctioned and maintaining the all-important feature of operational independence from Federal authorities. Integration into the state security apparatus granted them access to heavier equipment and weaponry and the benefits of expense subsidization by the MoD.<sup>214</sup>

In addition to relying heavily on armed formations to help enforce his will, Ramzan lacked a leadership style driven by an ideology larger than himself. Other than professed total loyalty to Vladimir Putin, Kadyrov can best be described as a leader singularly focused on ruling Chechnya as a sort of personal fiefdom. Essentially, Kadyrov is a prime example of Kimberly Marteen's definition of a warlord; a leader who wants personal control over a region and maintains it via a patronage network and reliance on coercive violence administered by his personal militias.<sup>215</sup> As potentially dangerous rivals to Kadyrov's steady consolidation of control over Chechnya, the Yamadayev brothers represented rival warlords with Vostok as their most salient counter to Kadyrov's power structures.

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<sup>210</sup> (Felgenhauer 2006)

<sup>211</sup> (Russell 2007, 88)

<sup>212</sup> (RIA.RU 2006)

<sup>213</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>214</sup> (Politkovskaya 2006)

<sup>215</sup> (Marten 2012, 6)

With Kadyrov integrating his loyalist militias into more official positions within the federal forces hierarchy, the Yamadayev brothers likely realized their future depended heavily on keeping Vostok relevant as a counterweight to Kadyrov's ambitions and leveraging its capabilities for personal enrichment. Vostok, as a paramilitary formation, gave the Yamadayev brothers the physical protection they needed to shield themselves from most of the tremendous danger which came with being prominent politically actors within Chechnya. With Kadyrov working towards assuming the presidency once Alu Alkhanov stepped down, the Yamadayev brothers needed an organizational pivot in strategy to expanded Vostok's operational relevance while generating additional revenue to help them counter Kadyrov.<sup>216</sup> Such a strategy concentrated on both expanded Vostok's significance as a fighting unit within the Russian military and utilizing the group to conduct illicit criminal activities to enrich the Yamadayev brothers financially while providing additional monetary incentives for Vostok members to remain loyal. Within the principal-agent framework, the Yamadayev's were agents acting within the paradigm of self-interest and self-preservation, prioritizing their own objectives over the organizational center.

While there were distant rumblings of rising tensions, Vostok was not especially active during the second half of 2005. The protracted investigation and interviews related to Borozdinovskaya sweep had temporarily suspended actual operations.<sup>217</sup> With the Yamadayev's political capital in the republic dwindling thanks to bad publicity from Borozdinovskaya, Kadyrov had apparently taken advantage of their weakness to consolidate control over United Russia's regional branch and the Chechen parliament by kicking Ruslan out of his leadership position. Writing about the political maneuvering between both families, Russian journalist

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<sup>216</sup> (Fuller 2015)

<sup>217</sup> (S. Yamadayev, Borozdinovskaya is Not in Our Area 2005)



Sevetlana Smaoylova described Kadyrov's strategy as an effort to transform "Chechenization" into "Kadyrovization".<sup>218</sup> With Ruslan removed from his post as regional United Russia party leader in early 2006, the Yamadayevs found themselves on their back foot.<sup>219</sup>

Facing both political marginalization from Kadyrov and the prospect of reduced funding or even potential demobilization once the Kremlin shifted focus from COIN operations to rebuilding a shattered Republic, the Yamadayevs worked quickly to consolidate their interests. First, Sulim and Vostok started to engage in overt instances of criminal activity. In a somewhat bungled attempt to act as paid enforcers over a business dispute, Sulim made national headlines when he and group of 40 Vostok soldiers tried to strong-arm the director of the St. Petersburg Samson meat packing plant, Khamzat Arsamakov, into signing over ownership rights.<sup>220</sup> Second, Vostok was granted an important opportunity to deploy outside the Russian Federation and demonstrate its value as a unit beyond the confines of the Chechen republic. As part of a bilateral agreement between Russia and Lebanon, a company of Vostok soldiers were sent to the country to guard a detachment of Russian engineers working to rebuild Lebanese infrastructure following the conflict with Israel.<sup>221</sup>

While Vostok started off as a successor to the Yamadayev family militia, it grew in size and capability thanks to MoD funding which helped to build barracks and training facilities for the battalion in Gudermes as well as equip it with armored vehicles and heavy weapons.<sup>222</sup> Moreover, as Vostok was officially integrated into the Russian armed forces hierarchy as a Spetsnaz battalion under the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division, extensive operational costs became

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<sup>218</sup> (Samoylova 2005)

<sup>219</sup> (I. N. Muradov 2005), (Zakatnova 2007)

<sup>220</sup> (Kalinina 2006)

<sup>221</sup> (The Jamestown Foundation 2005)

<sup>222</sup> (ITAR-TASS 2004)

covered by the MoD.<sup>223</sup> For the time being, the Yamadayevs could count on Vostok's position within the MoD to keep the unit supplied and paid. But, facing a growing rivalry from the Kadyrov's militias, which performed much of the same functions as Vostok, and an impending shift in focus away from counter-terror operations towards rebuilding Chechnya meant Vostok's position within the MoD was far from assured. While the unit wouldn't actually experience personnel cuts and leadership purges until late 2008, it is likely Sulim Yamadayev foresaw the possibility Vostok could be undermined by Kadyrov.<sup>224</sup> It is possible such concerns encouraged Sulim to take undertake additional criminal activities to ensure future resources from himself and Vostok. By taking advantage of his connection to Chechen business diaspora and the Chechen mafia, Sulim could enrich himself and build up a reserve of resources from which Vosok could be funded should MoD money be redirected to other efforts.

According to an account of the dispute from Gazetta.RU, Sulim was asked by representatives of Salolin Oil and Natural Gas Company, the owner of the land the Samson plant was leasing, to settle a rent dispute on their behalf.<sup>225</sup> The Samson plant apparently owed over 300,000 USD in rent to Salolin.<sup>226</sup> Sulim's job was to force the plant manager, Khamzat Arsamakov, to sign over ownership of the facility to Salolin. Sulim would subsequently receive a payment equivalent to a portion of the value of the land the Samson plant was located on.<sup>227</sup> On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Vostok soldiers confronted Khamzat in his office, badly beat him, but were unable to get the manager to sign over ownership of the plant to Salolin.<sup>228</sup> Given the extent of Khamzat's injuries, a concussion, broken arm, and multiple contusions covering his

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<sup>223</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>224</sup> (Sukhov 2008)

<sup>225</sup> (Smirnov and Stolyarov 2007)

<sup>226</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>227</sup> (Sergeev 2006), (Kalinina 2006)

<sup>228</sup> (Kalinina 2006), (Sergeev 2006)

body, it seems the soldiers may have been slightly overzealous in the attempts at coercion and simply beat Arsamakov until he was unconscious.<sup>229</sup>

While battalion representatives vigorously denied any involvement when asked about the incident by reporters, charges were eventually filed against Sulim at the request of Khamzat in early 2007.<sup>230</sup> Sulim moved quickly to silence the bad press and pressure Khamzat to drop the charges. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, Badrudi, the youngest Yamadayev brother and a Vostok officer, kidnapped Khamzat's relatives, Yunus and Yusup Arsamakov while they were traveling in Chechnya, on the orders of Sulim.<sup>231</sup> The kidnapping of Yunus and Yusup was a fairly provocative course of action by Sulim and Vostok. Both men were brothers of Abubakar Arsamakov, president of the Moscow Industrial Bank, owner of the Samson plant (although not the land it was located on, hence the dispute), and cousins of plant director Khamzat.

While Yunus and Yusup were supposed to be held as leverage in the Khamzat-Samson dispute, Badrudi apparently executed both Yunus and Yusup before dismembering their bodies.<sup>232</sup> Criminal undertaking were not new for Badrudi who had already been convicted, and subsequently paroled, for the attempted murder of Moscow Chief Medical Officer Aleksandr Melnikov in June of 2000.<sup>233</sup> The kidnapping scheme did have the desired effect though, at least initially. A month after the disappearances of Yunus and Yusup, Khamzat announced through his lawyer that he was dropping the charges against Sulim after having "reconciled".<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> (Kalinina 2006)

<sup>230</sup> (Kalinina 2006), (Are 2008)

<sup>231</sup> (Ibragimov, Chechen MIA: Yamadaevs' involvement in kidnapping and murder confirmed by "Vostok" battalion 2008)

<sup>232</sup> (Ibragimov, Chechen MIA: Yamadaevs' involvement in kidnapping and murder confirmed by "Vostok" battalion 2008), (Memorial Human Rights Center 2008), (Lomovtsev 2008)

<sup>233</sup> (Sputnik News 2008)

<sup>234</sup> (Caucas Times 2007)

It's not clear from available sources how frequently Vostok and the Yamadayev brothers partook in criminal activities for self-enrichment, but given evidence available from the Samson raid and Badrudi's previous conviction, it is not a large logical leap to assume various forms of racketeering were a source of income for the Yamadayevs and Vostok. The Yamadayev's criminal activities are instances of what Cooley describes as periphery divisional managers seeking to maximize their own personal income and power, often to the detriment of the core's goals.<sup>235</sup> Threatened by the prospect of Russia curtailing its financial support for Vostok, the Yamadayev brothers arranged their interests ahead of the Kremlin and sought out illicit sources of revenue. Moreover, the Yamadayev brother's actions were fueled the very basic desire of self-preservation. Vostok's status as a military formation independent of Kadyrov was an essential hedge against his influence and power. Without Vostok, or with a dismissed Vostok, the Yamadayev brothers would be quite exposed against Kadyrov.

In spite of controversies facing Vostok over the raid, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov announced in early October 2006 that Vostok had been selected to provide a company of soldiers to escort Russian engineers being deployed to Lebanon.<sup>236</sup> As part of a bilateral agreement between Russia and Lebanon, which fell outside the UN's mandate, around 300 engineers from the 100<sup>th</sup> detached bridge battalion arrived in Jiyeh along with escorts from Vostok and Zapad battalions on October 10<sup>th</sup> to rebuild infrastructure destroyed during fighting with Israel the previous summer.<sup>237</sup> Two small, platoon sized contingents of soldiers were selected out of volunteers from both battalions to provide security for the engineers while they performed their work.<sup>238</sup> Vostok and Zapad were selected to provide security because Chechen Muslim soldiers

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<sup>235</sup> (Cooley 2005, 49)

<sup>236</sup> (Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey 2006)

<sup>237</sup> (Chakmakjian 2006)

<sup>238</sup> (Agentstvo Voyennykh Novostey 2006)

were believed to be better suited for interacting with local Islamic civilians and enhancing Russia's image in the Middle East.<sup>239</sup> Troops from Vostok and Zapad returned from the deployment in early December 2006.<sup>240</sup> While only a small number of Vostok servicemen went to Lebanon from, the deployment was a significant milestone. It was the first time Vostok personnel were deployed outside of Russian borders on a peacekeeping mission and it signaled a willingness by the MoD to commit what were essentially paramilitary forces to external missions.

About a year after the Lebanon deployment, a larger contingent of Vostok soldiers, to include Battalion Commander Sulim Yamadayev, were deployed as peacekeepers to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>241</sup> The same soldiers participated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and briefly fought inside Georgian territory.<sup>242</sup> Although Vostok's capabilities and experience as a unit played a part in decision to deploy the unit, increasing intra-agent rivalries between Sulim and Kadyrov likely encouraged Kremlin authorities to get Sulim out of Chechnya and away from Kadyrov.<sup>243</sup>

Vostok's profile had been raised somewhat by the Lebanon deployment, but by the end of 2007 the Yamadayev brothers were being pressed into a corner by Kadyrov.<sup>244</sup> Ruslan, having been removed from his leadership position in the regional United Russian branch, was outmaneuvered by Kadyrov politically and failed to retain his seat in the Duma.<sup>245</sup> If Vostok and the Yamadayev brothers were supposed to be the Kremlin's counterweight to Kadyrov's growing

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<sup>239</sup> (ITAR-TASS 2006)

<sup>240</sup> (GTRK Rostov-na-Donu 2006)

<sup>241</sup> (Areshidze 2007)

<sup>242</sup> (Cohen and Hamilton 2011, 21, 43)

<sup>243</sup> (Saidov 2007)

<sup>244</sup> (Saidov 2007)

<sup>245</sup> (Abdullaev, Elections To Deliver Duller Deputies - Moscow Times 2007)

influence in Chechnya, as postulated by many political commentators, the repurposing of “Chechenization” to “Kadyrovisation” by Kadyrov himself was subverting much of Moscow’s efforts.<sup>246</sup> While Chechenization had succeeded in transforming the conflict from a separatist fight against federal forces to an internal civil war between pro-Moscow Chechens and Islamist Chechen, Kremlin’s grasp on local agents slipped once separatist opposition had been thoroughly degraded.<sup>247</sup> Without the unifying enemy of Chechen Islamists to hold rival pro-Moscow Chechen factions together, internal civil strife shifted to intra-agent maneuvering and power plays.

### **3.5 – The Gudermes Convoy Shooting, the Russo-Georgian War, and Assassinations: the End of the Yamadayev Vostok**

By early 2008, the Yamadayev’s Vostok and Kadyrov’s militias were postured for a confrontation. Ruslan had been pushed out of United Russia’s Chechen affiliate and subsequently lost his seat in the State Duma. Kadyrov had consolidated his position within Chechnya and been appointed president after Alu Alkhanov stepped down in February 2007.<sup>248</sup> Sulim and several companies of Vostok troops were relocated out of Russia and assigned to peacekeeping mission in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>249</sup> Sulim had been involved in rhetorical spars with Kadyrov in the Russian media and was staying out of Chechnya, splitting his time between Moscow and overseeing Vostok peacekeeping operations.<sup>250</sup> Isa was the acting Commander of remaining Vostok forces in Gudermes. Badrudi was also in Gudermes, commanding a detachment of Vostok fighters and not yet a suspect in the Arsamakov

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<sup>246</sup> (Russell 2007, 87-88)

<sup>247</sup> (Ibid 85-86)

<sup>248</sup> (Fuller 2015)

<sup>249</sup> (Dubnov 2007)

<sup>250</sup> (S. Yamadayev, Vostok Battalion Commander Gives His Views of Standoff with Chechen Leader 2008)

disappearances.<sup>251</sup> With tensions high, it was only a matter of time before either party acted imprudently and escalated the already precarious situation.

The tipping point came on April 14<sup>th</sup> when a Vostok convoy, led by Badrudi, failed to yield to Ramzan Kadyrov's presidential convoy. Accounts differ as to what exactly happened during the confrontation, but apparently 15-20 Vostok fighters and Badrudi confronted troops guarding Kadyrov on the Kavkaz federal highway near Argun. A brief firefight ensued, but it's not clear how many, if any, combatants were killed during the exchange.<sup>252</sup> Following the altercation, Badrudi and the Vostok fighters withdrew to their barracks in Gudermes. Kadyrov wasted no time in exploiting the opening, publically calling for the immediate arrest of Sulim and Badrudi in connection with the confrontation.<sup>253</sup> Trying to separate Vostok the unit from its Yamadayev clan patrons, Kadyrov emphasized the fact he had no quarrel with Vostok itself, merely its leaders who he claimed had finally gone too far.<sup>254</sup>

Vostok barracks and the Yamadayev compound in Gudermes were surrounded by about 500 troops from Yug and Sever battalions (formerly Kadyrovtsy formations) demanding the surrender of Badrudi who was believed was hiding within either area.<sup>255</sup> In a sign Moscow had lost control of the situation, representatives from the Chechen MVD, the North Caucas Military District (the major command Vostok was subordinate to), and senior officers from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division were unable to diffuse the tension and convince Kadyrov's forces to ease off the trigger.<sup>256</sup> On April 16<sup>th</sup>, Vostok soldiers guarding the Yamadayev residence stood down

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<sup>251</sup> (Memorial Human Rights Center 2008)

<sup>252</sup> (ITAR-TASS 2008)

<sup>253</sup> (Interfax 2008)

<sup>254</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>255</sup> (Rosbalt-Yug Information Agency 2008)

<sup>256</sup> (Ibid)

and allowed Kadyrov's men to enter the compound in search of Badrudi. The brother, however, had already fled the area and gone into hiding.<sup>257</sup>

Badrudi now on the run, Kadyrov and his administration took to the Chechen media to denounce Vostok and the Yamadayev brothers as traitors to the republic and complicit in past crimes against civilians. In digging up old sins, the Borozdinovskaya incident was continuously cited as exemplifying the most despicable of Vostok's actions. In a remarkable example of what John Russell describes as "cognitive consonance and dissonance" over conveniently forgetting their past crimes while vilifying an adversary, Kadyrov and his associates took to demonizing Vostok and the Yamadayevs in the media.<sup>258</sup> Totally unburdened by the Kadyrovtsy's complicity in numerous similar disappearances and wrongdoings, the Yamadayevs and Vostok were portrayed as demons responsible for untold numbers of atrocities.

Kadyrov moved quickly to utilize the Chechen legal apparatus to de-legitimize Sulim's authority as commander of Vostok. In May, an arrest warrant was put out for Badrudi by the Chechen prosecutor's office, likely following Kadyrov's guidance, which charged Badrudi with racketeering and connected him to the abductions of the Akhmadov brothers.<sup>259</sup> At the same time, Kadyrov announced in a meeting Sulim had been dismissed from his post.<sup>260</sup> Kadyrov's statement was overstepping his authority, however. As Vostok fell under the GRU and was not directly subordinate to him, Kadyrov's claims in the media about having fired Sulim did not carry any legal weight.

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<sup>257</sup> (Markedonov 2008)

<sup>258</sup> (Russell 2007, 86)

<sup>259</sup> (Markedonov 2008)

<sup>260</sup> (Markedonov 2008)



Unable to locate Badrudi and frustrated by the MoD's refusal to dismiss Sulim, Kadyrov started to target Vostok as a unit. While Kadyrov claimed numerous Vostok soldiers had defected to his side, Vostok personnel were actually being abducted by Kadyrov loyalists and forced to sign statements saying they no longer wished to serve in Vostok.<sup>261</sup> Several incidents in late May resulted in three Vostok servicemen being jumped and badly beaten by militiamen loyal to Kadyrov.<sup>262</sup>

In a multi-pronged effort to discredit the unit, Kadyrov also enlisted the services of rehabilitated former separatist minister of defense Magomed Khambiyev.<sup>263</sup> While both Vostok and the Kadyrovtsy had participated in the brutal targeting of Khambiyev's family members to force him out of hiding, Kadyrov had succeeded in flipping Khambiyev to his side after the surrender and rehabilitated his public image.<sup>264</sup> Now a representative in the Chechen parliament, Khambiyev led a Kadyrov sanctioned protest in Druzhba village, near Vostok's Gudermes HQ, involving several hundred protesters. Blaming Vostok for the Borozdinovskaya sweep, the Akhmadov abductions, and numerous other disappearances, protesters called for the arrests of Sulim and Badrudi.<sup>265</sup>

As the manhunt for Badrudi continued throughout spring and into summer, Kadyrov put more pressure on the MoD to relieve Sulim of his command and dismantle Vostok or at least transfer it to his authority. By late June, the MoD had caved to Kadyrov's demands and declared Vostok's personnel would be cut by 30% and there would be a comprehensive rearrangement of

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<sup>261</sup> (MK.RU 2008)

<sup>262</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>263</sup> (Grozny TV 2008)

<sup>264</sup> (Uzzell 2005)

<sup>265</sup> (Grozny TV 2008)

senior leadership.<sup>266</sup> Most of the personnel reductions would be achieved by transferring all draftees out of the unit and ceasing their future incorporation. In an attempt to mitigate the damage, Ruslan told *Kommersant* the decision to re-organize Vostok and transfer Sulim out of the unit predated the current controversy with Kadyrov.<sup>267</sup>

In spite of Ruslan's attempts to buttress Vostok's image, the battle with Kadyrov over who would control Chechnya was overwhelming the Yamadayev brothers and the unit. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, just a few days before the increasingly tenuous situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia exploded into a conventional confrontation between Georgia and Russia, Sulim was placed on the federal wanted list alongside Badrudi.<sup>268</sup> After months of pressure from Kadyrov, the Russian Prosecutor's Office in Chechnya agreed to file charges against Sulim related to a long dormant murder case from December 1998. Sulim was accused of killing a civilian in Gudermes district on the Kavkaz highway near the village Dzhalka.<sup>269</sup>

With its patrons, the Yamadayev family, in disarray following a continuous barrage of accusations and calls for charges by Kadyrov, Vostok forces stationed in South Ossetia, were facing an increasingly tense situation. The same week which saw their commander placed on the Federal Wanted List saw a dramatic increase in cross-border small arms exchanges, improvised explosive device attacks, and large scale evacuations of non-combatants on both sides of the disputed border.<sup>270</sup> Georgia had been preparing for an armed incursion to reassert government control over the breakaway region of South Ossetia for the past several months. Russia,

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<sup>266</sup> (M. Muradov 2008)

<sup>267</sup> (M. Muradov 2008)

<sup>268</sup> (RIA Novosti 2008)

<sup>269</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>270</sup> (Ruslan Pukhov 2010, 44-45)

however, had also been preparing for a potential conflict with Georgia over the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>271</sup>

Vostok's peacekeeping contingent, a single company from the battalion, was a small part of Russia's overall presence inside South Ossetia. Additionally, the entirety of the North Caucasus Military District, which was considerably larger and more capable than the whole Georgian military, had been war-gaming, redeploying forces under its peacekeeping prerogative, and concentrating on improving unit readiness for months.<sup>272</sup> Both sides were primed for an engagement, but Tbilisi had apparently hedged a tremendously risky bet Russia would not see the disputed territory as important enough to intervene militarily. Tbilisi did not recognize the gravity of its miscalculation until late in the day August 7<sup>th</sup> when Russian reinforcements started mobilize for in incursion into South Ossetia from North Ossetia-Alania. Moving quickly, Russian forces used the Roki tunnel to enter South Ossetia and postured themselves for a decisive push against Georgian forces currently engaged within the territory.<sup>273</sup>

It was during the fighting to retake Tskhinvali from Georgian forces on August 8<sup>th</sup> that a company of Vostok fighters attached to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division played a small but important role.<sup>274</sup> Early in the afternoon, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 135<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment (1-135<sup>th</sup>) was advancing from the North into Tskhinvali with the intention of relieving Russian peacekeeping forces believed to still be trapped within their Tskhinvali compound by Georgian troops.<sup>275</sup> As 1-135<sup>th</sup> troops advanced into Tskhinvali, they were decisively engaged from positions Georgian forces had occupied since late morning. 1-135<sup>th</sup> almost immediately lost four

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<sup>271</sup> (Cohen and Hamilton 2011, 13)

<sup>272</sup> (Cohen and Hamilton 2011, 13-16)

<sup>273</sup> (Ruslan Pukhov 2010, 63-64)

<sup>274</sup> (Ibid 142)

<sup>275</sup> (Ruslan Pukhov 2010, 61)

infantry fighting vehicles and was split into two with only about a quarter of the battalion able to retrograde out of the city limits and rejoin the main body of Russian forces.<sup>276</sup> With destroyed vehicles and heavy fire impeding a withdrawal from the city, the remainder of 1-135<sup>th</sup> was quickly enveloped and pinned in their positions inside the city by Georgian forces.<sup>277</sup>

The company of Vostok fighters, along with several other units, being located just behind what had been 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's vanguard formation, was ordered forward under the cover of Russian artillery and attack aviation assets, to help extricate surrounded 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion elements.<sup>278</sup> Fierce close quarters fighting ensued, but with the assistance of heavy and accurate Russian artillery fire and attack aviation support Vostok and the other relief units were able to link up with the encircled elements of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.<sup>279</sup> Georgian forces, which had recently lost the headquarters of the 41<sup>st</sup> Light Infantry Battalion to accurate Russian artillery fire while sustaining heavy casualties across its front line from the same batteries, started to withdraw from the city by late afternoon.<sup>280</sup> While it's not entirely clear how many casualties Vostok sustained over the course of the conflict, it's quite likely most occurred during the fierce fight for Tskhinvali.

Two days later, Vostok soldiers, having rested and reconstituted after the Tskhinvali engagement, worked with a battalion of VDV troops detached from the 104<sup>th</sup> Airborne Assault Regiment of the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne division to conduct clear up operations in villages north of capital.<sup>281</sup> A day later, Vostok fighters were south of Tskhinvali, just inside the Georgian border, working with elements of the 693<sup>rd</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment to seize and retain Zemo-Khaviti and

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<sup>276</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>277</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>278</sup> (Ibid 62)

<sup>279</sup> (Ibid 63)

<sup>280</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>281</sup> (Ibid 66)

the surrounding villages.<sup>282</sup> Vostok troops participated in no other significant operations during hostilities and may have lost between one and three dozen soldiers during the fighting based on media reports. If accurate, these are fairly heavy casualties given Vostok only deployed a company sized element of around 120 soldiers.<sup>283</sup>

Whatever good will Sulim and Vostok earned from the Kremlin for their performance in the conflict, it was not enough to keep Sulim in command of Vostok. Sulim was removed from his position as commander of Vostok by the end of August.<sup>284</sup> Despite rumors Sulim would assume a staff position within a GRU brigade, he would never again hold a command in the Russian military. Around the same time as his dismissal, Sulim returned to Moscow where he was spending most of his time when not with Vostok and was removed from the federal wanted list. While Sulim was pulled from the federal wanted list as authorities had located him in Moscow, it's not entirely clear from reports why they took so long to extradite Sulim to Chechnya. The delay may have had something to do with rumors Sulim was going to be appointed to another position in a GRU unit.<sup>285</sup> It's quite possible Sulim was banking on another senior position within a GRU affiliated formation to help shield him from attempts at extradition by the Chechen prosecutor's office.

While Sulim was awaiting an uncertain future, Ruslan was assassinated on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September while waiting at a traffic light in Sulim's black Mercedes Benz sedan in front of the British Embassy.<sup>286</sup> Three Chechens were eventually convicted for the assassination. The party responsible for actually ordering the assassination was never named during the investigation or

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<sup>282</sup> (Ibid 70)

<sup>283</sup> (Ibragimov, Chechen Riot Police Reportedly Sustain 'serious' losses in Georgia 2008)

<sup>284</sup> (Sukho 2008)

<sup>285</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>286</sup> (Abdullaev and Saradzhyan, Yamadayev Shot Dead in City Center 2008)

ensuing court trail. Isa Yamadayev maintained Kadyrov was ultimately behind the killing.<sup>287</sup> Its likely Kadyrov used a subordinate to organize the killing and source the hitman. Isa claimed Chechen MP and Kadyrov ally Magomed Khambiyev orchestrated the killing in an interview in 2011.<sup>288</sup> Reporters and the Interpol have also pointed the finger at Adam Delimkhanov, a Chechen State Duma representative and Kadyrov's cousin.<sup>289</sup>

Following Ruslan's assassination, Sulim was likely quite concerned for his safety. Ruslan was driving Sulim's car after all. It's entirely plausible the assassins were gunning for Sulim and not Ruslan, but were not particularly concerned about killing another Yamadayev brother instead. By late November, it was apparent Sulim would not hold another GRU command, his dismissal from the Russian military seemed imminent, and Vostok was slated to be demobilized.<sup>290</sup> Under threat from Kadyrov and facing the loss of GRU protection, Sulim fled Russia for Dubai sometime in early 2008. He lived there for several months until assassins, apparently in the employ of Adam Delimkhanov, according to the Dubai police, shot him in the head outside of his apartment on March 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>291</sup> Most media outlet reported him as being killed instantly, but Isa maintains he was on life support for some time afterward until his death.<sup>292</sup>

Badrudi remained at large in the meantime and Kadyrov shifted his attention to Isa, the most prominent surviving Yamadayev brother. Isa survived two assassination attempts in 2009. Another Yamadayev brother, Musa, who had few connections to Vostok, also became a target of Kadyrov. Musa was sought by Chechen MVD agents in connection with the 2004 disappearance

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<sup>287</sup> (I. Yamadayev 2009)

<sup>288</sup> (Ekho Moskvyy 2011)

<sup>289</sup> (Crime Russia 2016)

<sup>290</sup> (Sukho 2008)

<sup>291</sup> (Anishchuk 2010)

<sup>292</sup> (Crime Russia 2016)

of former Vostok platoon leader Alikhan Khaladov.<sup>293</sup> Isa denied Musa had anything to do with Alikhan's disappearance and that he had barely served any time in the unit before sustaining an injury which ended his military career.<sup>294</sup> Constantly at threat, Isa remained mostly out of the public eye until August 2010 when he announced publically that the Yamadayev – Kadyrov feud had come to an end. Isa provided no explanation as to why the rivalry ended other than denying coercion has anything to do with the agreement.<sup>295</sup> Considering, Isa had already survived multiple assassination attempts and had to go everywhere escorted by bodyguards, it's likely the perpetual fear and fatigue of constant threats to his life drove him to seek reconciliation in exchange for ending his criticism of Kadyrov.

The remainder of Vostok and Zapad, which having been stripped of their conscript personnel and were primarily staffed by Chechens, were re-organized into motor-rifle companies falling under the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division.<sup>296</sup> In early 2009, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division was re-organized into the 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Guards Motor Rifle Brigade (Russian Military Designation Unit: 27777) which received the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle's remaining Chechen Vostok personnel.<sup>297</sup> It's not really possible given available sources to say how many former Vostok soldiers ended in the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards. However, the integration of remaining Vostok soldiers into the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards is important to note for reasons which will be discussed in chapter four.

### **3.6 – Summarizing Vostok's Role in Chechnya**

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<sup>293</sup> (Mashkin 2009), (Walker, President is trying to kill me, says Chechen clan leader 2010)

<sup>294</sup> (Mashkin 2009)

<sup>295</sup> (Ferris-Rotman 2010), (Sputnik News 2010)

<sup>296</sup> (Sukhov 2008)

<sup>297</sup> (Clements 2009), (Voinskayachast.ru 2016)

Vostok's original incorporation into the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division as a GRU Spetsnaz battalion was part of the Kremlin's 'Chechenization' plan.<sup>298</sup> Rather than be drawn into a long and difficult COIN campaign, local proxy militia formations, such as Vostok, provided a number of advantages. They were already trained, experienced, and motivated fighters. Placing the responsibility for COIN operations in the hands of Chechens also shifted the burden away from federal forces. The casualties sustained by Chechen militias would generate less negative feedback than Russian conscripts whose terrible losses in the first war spurred tremendous public pushback against the conflict. Also, initially working without permanent facilities and with lower associated costs than equivalent Spetsnaz units, Vostok was an economical and rapidly constituted alternative to fixing many of the intrinsic problems facing the Russian military in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>299</sup> The unit was staffed primarily by Chechens with the prerequisite regional, cultural, and geographical knowledge needed for fighting a protracted COIN campaign. Vostok's members also served a powerful Chechen family which had pledged its loyalty to Moscow.<sup>300</sup>

Vostok, and other m-form militias, had many attractive features to the Kremlin which was very concerned about repeating the failures of the First Chechen War. Although initially successful in brutally suppressing Islamic separatists in Chechnya, the Yamadayev and Kadyrov factions became bitter rivals thanks in part to their m-form organizational structure. While the Yamadayev's loyalty to the Kremlin made them a useful counterweight to Ramzan Kadyrov, competing ambitions of both agents pushed them to prioritize their local interests over Moscow's larger strategic objective. Acting as independent local agents, the Yamadayev brothers and

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<sup>298</sup> (Votenny Vestnik Yuga Rossii 2008)

<sup>299</sup> (ITAR-TASS 2004)

<sup>300</sup> (Minekov 2006)



Kadyrov tried to construct competing power structures designed to negate or marginalize their rivals. Eventually, both agents, each seeing their other as an irreconcilable rivals, came into direct conflict and fought until one capitulated. Out of the smoke, the Kremlin was left with one agent standing, Ramzan Kadyrov, who remained the only local actor powerful enough to keep Chechnya placated and subservient to Moscow. The Kremlin had no other alternative than to support him to prevent a return to chaos in the republic.

#### **Chapter 4: The Donetsk Vostok**



Igor Girkin (Strelkov)

DoB 17 December 1970

- DNR Defense Minister
- May 2014-August 2014
- FSB Officer: 1996-2013



Alexander Khodakovsky

DoB 18 Dec 1982

Former Vostok Commander

Former Commander of Alfa Special Forces Unit of SBU in Donetsk Region – held rank of Major

- Donetsk People's Republic Deputy Prime Minister (May-July 2014)
- Donetsk People's Republic Security Minister (May 2014-Summer 2016)

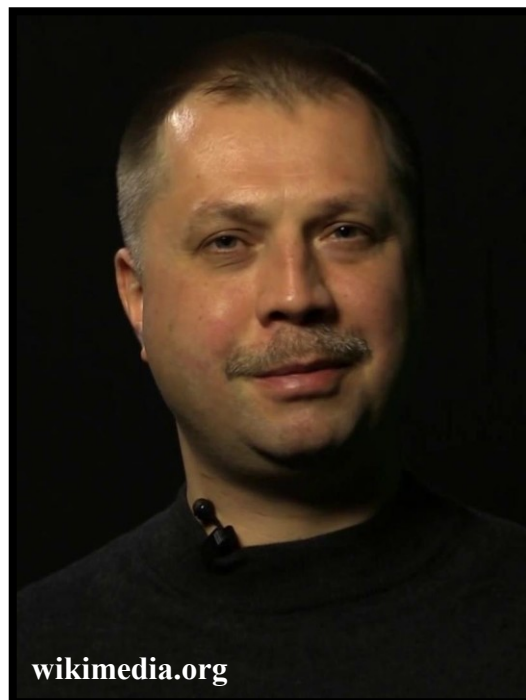




Pavel Gubarev

DoB 10 February 1983

- People's Governor of DNR: March – November 2014
- Detained by SBU from March – May 2014
- Minor political figure, holds no official office currently but has come into conflict with Khodakovsky in the past.



Alexander Borodai

DoB 25 July 1972

- PM of DNR: May 2014 – August 2014
- Deputy PM of DNR:
- August 2014-October 2014

Alexander Zakharchenko

DoB 26 June 1976

- PM of DNR August 2014 – Present
- Commander of the Oplat (Stronghold) Militia

## 4.1 – Introduction

When Vostok was demobilized at the end of 2008, mostly to appease Ramzan Kadyrov, it appeared to be the end of the unit. Dzhabrail, Ruslan, and Sulim had all been assassinated. Isa, the most politically active Yamadayev brother still alive, had ended his feud with Kadyrov to protect his remaining family members.<sup>301</sup> With the Vostok name so strongly connected with Kadyrov's most prolific rivals, it seemed quite odd the unit would pop up again after the outbreak of the Donbas conflict, apparently staffed with at least some former Chechen Vostok fighters.<sup>302</sup> The second iteration of Vostok battalion, however, is difficult to definitively link to the first. What the new Vostok battalion did share with the previous Yamadayev incarnation was Russian sponsorship and the reappearance of many of the same acute agency problems. Moreover, regardless of the links between both versions, Vostok's reappearance in the Ukraine as a Russian backed militia can be seen as the expansion of paramilitary based force-projection the Kremlin developed initially in Chechnya to the international stage.

According to the Donetsk Vostok battalion's official account of its history, the unit formed in early May 2014 as an ad-hoc group of Russian and Ukrainian volunteers led by Alexander Khodakovsky, a defecting Ukrainian SBU officer who had commanded the Donbas's Alfa anti-terror unit detachment.<sup>303</sup> Khodakovsky led the Alfa unit when it was called to Kiev to suppress rioters during the Euromaidan protests which ousted then President Viktor Yanukovich. According to Khodakovsky, he feared the fringe ultra-nationalist groups, such as Right Sector, were starting to dominate the anti-Poroshenko movement and shift the rhetoric towards caustic

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<sup>301</sup> (Ferris-Rotman 2010)

<sup>302</sup> (RFERL 2014)

<sup>303</sup> (Khodakovsky, The Former Alpha Commander, Leader of the Vostok Battalion, One of the Most Performance-Capable Units of the Self-Proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Explained Why He and His People Are Now 'Separatists' 2014)

anti-Russian stances.<sup>304</sup> His Alfa unit continued in actions against protestors throughout unrest into early 2014. By March, Khodakovsky and SBU Alfa troops under his command no longer believed the new regime in Kiev cared about the interests of ethnic Russians in East Ukraine. As the political upheaval continued throughout the country and Crimea was annexed by Russian forces, Khodakovsky and his men defected and formed the 'Patriot Forces of the Donbass'; a rebel movement which provided part of the basis for the Donetsk Vostok.<sup>305</sup>

Once fighting broke out between separatists and Ukraine security forces, Khodakovsky took control of the newly formed Vostok Battalion, a unit staffed by some of his fellow defecting SBU Alfa troops, local volunteers, as well as volunteer fighters from Russia. Out of the Russian volunteers, some were Ossetians and handful of others were Chechens, apparently veterans of the original Vostok Battalion.<sup>306</sup> Other than the battalion name and a limited number of former Yamadayev supporters, the Donetsk Vostok had few obvious connections to Yamadayev Vostok. The Donetsk Vostok was, however, another m-form militia sponsored by Russia via the GRU, much like the Yamadayev Vostok. Unlike the Yamadayev Vostok, the Donetsk Vostok was fighting outside of Russian borders as an illegal armed group, at least as far as Ukrainian authorities were concerned.<sup>307</sup> The Donetsk Vostok was acting as a rebel force receiving lethal and non-lethal aid from Russia in addition to alleged support from local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, who's Donbas based interests Vostok consistently protected.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> (Khodakovsky, The Former Alpha Commander, Leader of the Vostok Battalion, One of the Most Performance-Capable Units of the Self-Proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Explained Why He and His People Are Now 'Seperatists' 2014)

<sup>305</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>306</sup> (Khodakovsky, The Former Alpha Commander, Leader of the Vostok Battalion, One of the Most Performance-Capable Units of the Self-Proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Explained Why He and His People Are Now 'Seperatists' 2014), (Ioffe 2014)

<sup>307</sup> (SSU Press Center 2014)

<sup>308</sup> (Weiss 2014)

Linkages between the Kremlin and Vostok were intentionally concealed. Fighters rarely admit to any Russian support in interviews and journalists asking about the origin of high-end military equipment are often told by militiamen they cannot discuss the source of their hardware.<sup>309</sup> Concerted efforts by Moscow to obscure its relationship with Vostok and other rebel groups leaves a very murky picture as to how much direct control the Kremlin actually exerts over its proxy militias. Trying to fill these gaps and interpret the Kremlin's intentions is quite difficult. As in the case of the Yamadayev Vostok Battalion, however, the principal-agent relationship provides some useful guidance.

Much like in Chechnya, Vostok Battalion in the Donetsk Oblast also developed acute agency issues as the conflict progressed, engaging in instances of intra-agent rivalry with other militia groups trying to control the political direction of the newly de facto independent Donbas region. Rebel formations in the Donbas had different, and occasionally conflicting, strategic end states for territory. Some wanted to create Novorossiia in the Donbas, an ethnic Russian enclave drawing its name and historical lineage from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Tsarist imperial province which stretched from modern the day Donbas to Eastern Moldova.<sup>310</sup> Even Khodakovsky himself alternated between supporting outright separatism in the form of Novorossiia and semi-autonomy for the Donbas throughout the conflict.<sup>311</sup>

As Vostok, and other militias, experienced operational failures and became exposed to potential destruction at the hands of the Ukrainian Army, the Kremlin tried to exert more direct control and even had to rapidly deploy regular Russian troops to save rebel forces on the verge of

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<sup>309</sup> (Sergatskova 2014)

<sup>310</sup> (Caryl 2014)

<sup>311</sup> (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014), (Khodakovsky, Vostok Brigade Commander Alexander Khodakovsky on the Situation in the Donetsk Basin -- 'We Are Aware That Ukraine Is Not a Fascist State' 2015)

envelopment.<sup>312</sup> Ultimately, in applying experiences from Chechnya, the Kremlin seemed more concerned with the potential agency issues it risked through m-form militia sponsorship. As the conflict progressed, Moscow shifted focus towards integrating Vostok, and other m-form militias operating in Donetsk, into a more official, unitary style military hierarchy under the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). Ideally, a u-form hierarchy creates a more homogenously structured entity more subservient to the Kremlin and less vulnerable to agency problems.

#### **4.2 –Connecting the Threads: Linking Both Vostoks, Initial Formation, and First Actions in Donetsk**

The origins of Vostok Battalion in Donetsk are a bit ambiguous. According to the official history from the Patriotic Forces of Donbas's website, Vostok Battalion, which later became a brigade as it received more volunteers, was founded on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014 as the armed wing of the Patriotic Forces of Donbas.<sup>313</sup> Khodakovsky said the name Vostok was selected because the unit was roughly battalion sized and was fighting out of Eastern Ukraine. The unit was constituted in response to the Ukrainian government's April 2014 announcement of a "counter-terrorism operation", often referred to as an Anti-Terror Operation or ATO, to reassert Kiev's control over the breakaway regions.<sup>314</sup> Khodakovsky assumed command of the Vostok during its formation. In an interview with the New York Times that summer, Khodakovsky described Vostok as an international battalion due to the large numbers of non-Ukrainian volunteers making up its ranks.<sup>315</sup> In later interviews, however, Khodakovsky downplayed the

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<sup>312</sup> (Ostrovsky 2015)

<sup>313</sup> (Patriotic Forces of the Donbas 2015)

<sup>314</sup> (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014)

<sup>315</sup> (Roth 2014)

role of international volunteers, saying only locals could be truly counted on to remain for the duration of the conflict.<sup>316</sup>

Given Moscow's attempts from the onset to conceal their hand in the Eastern Ukraine and the Donbas, despite many investigative pieces proving otherwise, it makes sense the Kremlin wants to maintain a measure of plausible deniability while supporting their proxy militias in the Donbas. Pushing militia leaders to emphasize an image of locals resisting a tyrannical regime in Kiev rather than a Russian backed separatist movement looking to construct an anti-West / anti-NATO buffer state helped craft a narrative more conducive to Moscow's official take on the fighting.

The extent to which the Donetsk Vostok is linked to Chechen volunteers from the original Vostok is a point of contention among scholars. While authors such as Richard Sakwa claim Vostok in Donetsk has no connection to Vostok in Chechnya, others, such as Mark Galleotti believes there are some links between both units.<sup>317</sup> In the absence of definitive evidence revealing obvious continuity, several pieces of anecdotal evidence, when taken together, lend support to Galletotti's theory of the Donetsk Vostok being an ad hoc / hybrid Spetsnaz force partially composed of Chechen Vostok veterans.<sup>318</sup>

There are very few mentions of Vostok battalion in the press prior to late May 2014. Their first major action at Donetsk airport occurred just three weeks after the original formation date listed on Vostok's website.<sup>319</sup> According to the official story, Vostok was made up of local volunteers, augmented by some Russians, and armed with weaponry looted from local armories

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<sup>316</sup> (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014)

<sup>317</sup> (Sakwa 2015, 162), (RFERL 2014)

<sup>318</sup> (RFERL 2014)

<sup>319</sup> (Patriotic Forces of the Donbas 2015)



including SBU offices.<sup>320</sup> From a purely practical standpoint, given the Vostok was led by an ex-SBU officer and staffed by some ex-SBU members, locating and looting their own armories was probably a pretty straightforward operation. However, three weeks is not a whole lot of time to assemble, arm, organize, and presumably train, a battalion sized force prior to sending it directly into combat. Moreover, early media photographs of Vostok encampments just after the Donetsk airport battle show fighters with modern SA-18 Grouse man-portable surface to air missiles, not exactly the type of weaponry presumably found in a regional SBU armory.<sup>321</sup> It's more likely in early days of the conflict the unit was, as Galleotti suggests, an ad hoc formation partially supplied by Russia which drew on the expertise of more experienced veterans with GRU connections to help accomplish its missions.

Explaining how Yamadayev Vostok veterans, who were likely supported by the GRU, made their way from Russia to the Donbas between March and May 2014 is a bit more difficult and requires some inferences and theories based on additional evidence. As mentioned towards the end of Chapter 3, Vostok and Zapad battalions were both official disbanded in November, 2008. The demobilization was mainly to placate Ramzan Kadyrov who wanted to dismantle any remaining Chechen security forces power structures he believed were independent of him. However, reporting at the time indicated remnants of Vostok and Zapad, company sized elements according to the article, were going to be integrated into the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division which had been both battalions' higher headquarters.<sup>322</sup>

Part of the rationale for integrating former Vostok and Zapad soldiers was to enhance the overall capabilities of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division by retaining troops who had operational

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<sup>320</sup> (Patriotic Forces of the Donbas 2015)

<sup>321</sup> (Sergatskova 2014)

<sup>322</sup> (Sukhov 2008)

experience as GRU Spetsnaz formations. Soldiers from both units had recently proven themselves to be quite capable in conventional warfare during their participation in several crucial actions during the Russo-Georgian conflict.<sup>323</sup>

By late 2009, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division, which like many other Russian units was understrength and effectively just brigade sized, was reorganized into the 18<sup>th</sup> Independent Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade.<sup>324</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> Guards retained the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Divisions facilities in Khankala, Chechnya.<sup>325</sup> Essentially, as part of the 2008 Russian military reforms and force restructuring, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division became the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards. As the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards received the 42<sup>nd</sup>'s soldiers, equipment, and facilities, the two motor rifle companies of former Vostok and Zapad soldiers were very likely integrated into the new unit. While there was probably some attrition among the Chechen soldiers as contracts expired or they separated from the military, some Vostok and Zapad veterans were probably still in the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards four years later when the unit deployed to Crimea during its annexation by Russia.

After the initial arrival of Spetsnaz and VDV Airborne troopers in Crimea, Russian force composition on the peninsula was primarily light infantry which lacked armor and heavy weapons support.<sup>326</sup> While exceptionally well training and equipped, the Spetsnaz and VDV troopers would be punching above their weight class if they were forced into a fight with any of Ukraine mechanized or armored forces moved in from the mainland.<sup>327</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade was one of the units with heavier weaponry brought in following the initial invasion for just such a contingency. According to Anton Levrov, the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade made a nearly 900 KM

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<sup>323</sup> (Sukhov 2008)

<sup>324</sup> (Clements 2009), (Voinskayachast.ru 2016)

<sup>325</sup> (Voinskayachast.ru 2016)

<sup>326</sup> (Lavrov, Russian Again: The Military Operation For Crimea 2015, 169-170)

<sup>327</sup> (Lavrov, Civil War in the East: How the Conflict Unfolded 2015, 170)

movement from Khankala, Chechnya to Kerch Ferry Crossing where they arrived on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014 with their new BTR-82A wheeled infantry fighting vehicles to support Spetsnaz and VDV forces.<sup>328</sup> The General Staff of the Ukrainian Military, claimed elements of the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards landed even earlier than Lavrov states, saying 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade was in Dzhankoi, Crimea by the 5<sup>th</sup> of March.<sup>329</sup> It is possible the Ukrainian General Staff's reference to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion referred to an **advance echelon** (ADVON)<sup>330</sup> tasked with reconnoitering and securing key terrain within the Brigade's future area of operations prior to main body arrival.

Interestingly, in the same statement, the Ukrainian General Staff referred to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards (1-18 Guards) as 'Vostok Battalion'.<sup>331</sup> It's not entirely clear why the Ukrainian General Staff used the name Vostok in reference to the unit in question. As an article from the Caucasian Knot mentioning the press release points out, Vostok was disbanded in 2008, although the same article makes no mention of former Vostok and Zapad members being integrated into the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division (the 18<sup>th</sup> Guard's precursor) as motor rifle companies.<sup>332</sup> Prior to a number of news articles from late May and early June 2014, the March 5<sup>th</sup> General Staff press release is the first mention of a 'Vostok Battalion' in the Ukraine.

There are a few potential explanations for why the Ukrainian Staff tried to link Vostok to a Russian unit participating in the annexation of Crimea. The release may have been simply a propaganda move by the Ukrainian General Staff to associate a unit actually deployed to Crimea (the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards) with an infamous Chechen Spetsnaz unit. 1-18 Guard's use of the name Vostok could also be entirely benign and just be in reference to 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's area of

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<sup>328</sup> (Lavrov, Russian Again: The Military Operation For Crimea 2015, 172)

<sup>329</sup> (Caucasian Knot 2014)

<sup>330</sup> (Army Publishing Directorate 2016)

<sup>331</sup> (Caucasian Knot 2014)

<sup>332</sup> (Caucasian Knot 2014)

responsibility being in Eastern Chechnya. Alternatively, as the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards did absorb former Vostok and Zapad members when it was created out of the former 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle Division, it is possible the Chechen motor rifle companies were placed into 1-18 Guards. Newly formed military units will very often adopt the lineage of their predecessors as means of creating a readymade history for themselves, a practice which occurs in militaries throughout the world. As Jim Fredrick points out in *Black Hearts*, the famous American 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne division has been demobilized and reactivated four times since the end of the Second World War.<sup>333</sup> Yet, whenever the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne has been reactivated, it simply assumes responsibility for its predecessor's lineage despite the fact it is essentially a new unit.<sup>334</sup>

The same logic could be applied to 1-18 Guards for why the unit was referred to as Vostok. Chechen Vostok veterans integrated into 1-18 Guards during its force restructuring from the 42<sup>nd</sup> Motor Rifle division could have brought the name with them as a means of preserving the lineage of their former unit. Given Vostok was a GRU Spetsnaz battalion, a special troops unit with more elite status than a regular formation, there was probably an allure to attaching the Vostok name and history to the newly formed battalion.

Alternatively, considering 'New Look' motorized rifle brigades have a single reconnaissance company, the motor rifle company of former Vostok fighters integrated into the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards may have become the brigade's reconnaissance company.<sup>335</sup> As Vostok veterans were previously GRU Spetsnaz troops, specializing in deep reconnaissance missions within the enemy's rear areas, they would have been well suited for operations as a brigade's dedicated

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<sup>333</sup> (Fredrick 2011, 21)

<sup>334</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>335</sup> (Dmitry Boltenev 2011, 24)

reconnaissance company.<sup>336</sup> Moreover, a smaller reconnaissance company could mobilize and conduct a 900 KM movement far quicker than 1-18<sup>th</sup>'s roughly 600 man battalion, or the entire 18<sup>th</sup> Guard's 4,200 strong force, in the five days between the first appearance of apparent Russian Spetsnaz in Crimea on February 28<sup>th</sup> and the General Staff's March 5<sup>th</sup> press release.<sup>337</sup> Given such a context, it is plausible the General Staff's press release about 1-18 Guards could be referring to just reconnaissance motor rifle company of former Vostok fighters functioning as the ADVON for larger elements still redeploying to Crimea.

An incident about a week after the first mention of 1-18 Guards as Vostok does not solve the conundrum of which unit in the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards was specifically comprised of former Vostok fighters, but it does further buttress the 18<sup>th</sup> Guard's connection with the Vostok name. On March 14<sup>th</sup>, a Russian soldier from 1-18 Guards was caught by Ukrainian border guards with weapons, ammunition, and equipment near the Chonhar, a village along highway E-105 just 46 KMs north of 1-18's reported position at Dzhankoi.<sup>338</sup> The 29 year old Chechen soldier, Ramzan Susarov, was traveling in a civilian car, wearing civilian clothes, and headed north on highway E-105 which leads into the Donbas region via E-85.<sup>339</sup> During his interrogation by border security agents, Ramzan said he was a member of the Chechen Vostok Battalion of the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards, although he did not reveal his ultimate destination.<sup>340</sup>

Russian soldiers attempting to infiltrate the Donbas via Crimea were not the only non-local fighters to enter the conflict zone prior to the Donetsk airport operation. On the night of May 24<sup>th</sup>, just a couple days before Vostok's ill-fated offensive to seize Donetsk airport, a large

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<sup>336</sup> (Galeotti, Spetsnaz: Russian Special Forces 2015, 5)

<sup>337</sup> (Dmitry Boltenev 2011, 24), (Howard and Pukov 2015, 309-310)

<sup>338</sup> (Secret Service of Ukraine 2014), (Google Maps 2016)

<sup>339</sup> (Google Maps 2016)

<sup>340</sup> (Secret Service of Ukraine 2014)

group of volunteers arrived in Donetsk via one of the Rostov border crossings to join Vostok. The volunteers arrived in five KamAZ trucks and included Chechens and other fighters from the Caucasus, including some older veterans from the Afghan war.<sup>341</sup>

While the initial composition of Donetsk Vostok included a component of veteran fighters from the original Yamadayev Vostok, apparently most were killed during a brief and intense fight to retain Donetsk international airport after seizing it on 26 May 2014.<sup>342</sup> Following the battle, an Ossetian Vostok officer named Oleg discussed the unit's foreign volunteer composition saying they originally had a number of fighters from the Caucasus, nearly all of whom were veterans of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Oleg went on to say nearly all of the battalion's Chechen volunteers, about 50, were killed during fighting at the Donetsk airport.<sup>343</sup>

An article from the Caucasian Knot from the end of May corroborates Oleg's statement, describing how the remains several dozen Chechens had recently arrived from the Ukraine. A Chechen resident of Shalinsky named Apti interviewed for the article said authorities were trying to cover up how several dozen former Vostok and Zapad fighters had been sent to the Donbas by the GRU only to be nearly all killed in fighting at the Donetsk airport. Other Chechens interviewed for the article made similar statements saying they had heard rumors Chechen security force's leadership were ordering troops not to discuss the recently arrived remains.<sup>344</sup> Khodakovsky himself admits in an interview he went Grozny to talk to Adam Delimkhanov, Ramzan Kadyrov's cousin and likely orchestrator of the Yamadayev assassinations, about

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<sup>341</sup> (Dergachev 2014)

<sup>342</sup> (Dergachev 2014)

<sup>343</sup> (Sergatskova 2014)

<sup>344</sup> (A. Ivanov 2014)

Chechen volunteers arriving to the unit, but claims the Chechen's arrivals were spontaneous and not centrally planned.<sup>345</sup>

Former Russian State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomarev, a Kremlin critic currently exiled to the U.S., also commented on the Chechen composition of Vostok battalion in an article about his visit to the Donbas. While Ponomarev said he did not meet any Chechens during his visit, he claimed his contacts in the area had seen a number of former Yamadayev Vostok members, primarily in Mariupol.<sup>346</sup> Most had apparently arrived recently and were on their way to join Vostok battalion in Donetsk. As is mentioned in the other sources, Ponomarev writes a majority of the Chechen volunteers were killed during the first battle for Donetsk airport.<sup>347</sup>

These pieces of evidence; the integration of former Chechen fighters into the 18<sup>th</sup> Guards, evidence of Russian material support, the Ukrainian General Staff's press releases about 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 'Vostok' - 18<sup>th</sup> Guards, interviews with Vostok's foreign volunteers, and the capture of an apparent infiltrator connected to the Yamadayev Vostok, when taken together provide support for Mark Galeotti's posit that Chechen Vostok veterans provided core combatants for the Donetsk Vostok.<sup>348</sup> Given the evidence of former Vostok soldiers apparently infiltrating the Ukraine a month and a half prior to the official formation of the Donetsk Vostok and the unit's tremendously quick standup period prior to engaging in direct combat operations, it does not seem implausible the GRU was relying on a handful of veteran operatives to prop up a new rebel militia in Donetsk. Experienced Vostok fighters, who had already engaged in both conventional fighting in South Ossetia and COIN warfare in Chechnya could have been valuable assets to a

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<sup>345</sup> (Khodakovsky, The Former Alpha Commander, Leader of the Vostok Battalion, One of the Most Performance-Capable Units of the Self-Proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Explained Why He and His People Are Now 'Seperatists' 2014)

<sup>346</sup> (Ponomarev, Activists and Spin Doctors 2014)

<sup>347</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>348</sup> (RFERL 2014)

newly formed irregular unit in need of veterans capable of training and instructing less experienced recruits.

If Vostok was more or less a GRU creation, supported by some former Spetsnaz with better training and equipment than other locally sourced formations, it makes sense Vostok would spearhead such an important operation. Donetsk airport represented key terrain for both sides of the conflict, an important airfield which if capture intact, with surrounding airspace secured and local enemy air defenses effectively suppressed, could be used to rapidly bring in supplies and heavy equipment for whichever side held it. Had Vostok successfully seized and retained the airport without it being destroyed, it may have been used as a staging area for airlifted VDV troopers if the Kremlin decided to increase its conventional commitment to the conflict.

Losing both the battle for the airport and a number of experienced Chechen fighters likely made the failure even more stinging. With some of the unit's most capable fighters now dead in a short but vicious engagement around Donetsk Airport marked by friendly fire incidents, Vostok shifted its attention to reconstituting its ranks and suppressing looters taking advantage of the chaos in Donetsk.<sup>349</sup> Rebuilding the unit was not the only consequence of the airport operation, however. More pertinent to the principal-agent dynamics of Vostok was the re-emergence of intra-agent rivalries between the unit and other Donbas militia groups, especially those under Igor Girkin, also known as Strelkov, a militia leader who had worked behind the scenes in Crimea.<sup>350</sup> The failed operation at the Donetsk airport, which Vostok spearheaded,

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<sup>349</sup> (Gasparyan 2014)

<sup>350</sup> (Loiko 2016)



exposed Khodakovsky to serious criticism from rebel political figures and other militia leaders competing for influence.<sup>351</sup>

#### **4.3 –Intra-Agent Escalation: Khodakovsky vs. Strelkov and the MH 17 Shoot-down**

The immediate aftermath of the airport battle left Donetsk in a state of chaos as the fighting turned militia attention away from general security in the city allowing looters to run rampant. Vostok accused some local rebels who backed “People’s Governor” of Donetsk, Pavel Gubarev, of taking advantage of the situation by looting the Metro Mega-Mall near the airport.<sup>352</sup> In addition to looting, the rebels also occupied part of the Oblast State Administration building. Vostok, quickly rebounding from its defeat at the airport, rapidly disarmed and detained Gubarev supporters, while retaking the administrative building in a move Mark Galeotti suggests was meant to impress the Kremlin’s continued control over rebel movement to wayward locals.<sup>353</sup>

The challenges facing Vostok in the immediate aftermath of the battle for Donetsk airpower were emblematic of the political instability of the self-proclaimed DNR. While Vostok was one of many groups seizing territory in the Donbas, a strong response from Kiev, in the form of the ATO, was steadily gaining momentum.<sup>354</sup> Donbas People’s Militia forces, under the command of several militia leaders including Strelkov, were besieged in the strategically important city of Slovyansk.<sup>355</sup> Slovyansk sits on highway M03, the main route abutting both the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. The highway also leads to both Oblast’s capitals.<sup>356</sup> Losing Slovyansk meant being pushed back from the high-water mark of rebel control and creating an

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<sup>351</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>352</sup> (Artemyev 2014)

<sup>353</sup> (Artemyev 2014), (Galeotti, Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia’s ‘new way of war’? 2016, 286)

<sup>354</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>355</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>356</sup> (Google Maps 2016)

opening for Ukrainian forces to push Southeast along highway M03 thereby cutting supply and communication lines between the DNR and LNR; a potentially fatal blow for the rebels.

At the same time as rebels forces were besieged in Slovyansk, Vostok embarked on another significant combat operation to help regain its strategic initiative. A company of around 150 Vostok troops traveled East of Donetsk towards the Russian border in an attempt to seize the Marynivka checkpoint bordering the Rostov Oblast, which was still held by Ukrainian border guards.<sup>357</sup> The border guards, while very isolated given their position deep within rebel territory, were still preventing the passage of Russian supplies, equipment, and volunteers.

On the Russian side of the border, GRU agents were using nearby Rostov-on-Don as a staging area for volunteers and equipment destined for the Donbas front.<sup>358</sup> A successful operation would not only secure an important supply route from Russia, but it would give Vostok and Khodakovsky a much needed victory to boost their flagging public image. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Vostok fighters assaulted the check point with heavy weapons support from Ural and KamAZ trucks converted to armored technicals and BTR infantry fighting vehicles, but were repulsed by determined defenders.<sup>359</sup> During the fighting, Vostok forces lost several technicals and at least one BTR before withdrawing.<sup>360</sup> The failure was another blow for Khodakovsky's image, putting him at a significant disadvantage just when other rebel militia leaders were positioning themselves to seize more political power.

When Slovyansk eventually fell in early July, after Strelkov was able to organize a successful breakout saving most of the Donbas militia forces engaged in the city. Following the

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<sup>357</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>358</sup> (Galeotti, Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'? 2016, 286)

<sup>359</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>360</sup> (Ukrainskaya Pravda 2014)

retreat back to Donetsk, rebel military and political leaders quickly started to blame each other for what they feared may be an imminent collapse of rebel resistance. In a sign the Kremlin was losing control of its supposedly subordinate agents, Strelkov strongly criticized Russian and DNR leadership, saying a lack of support from both parties cost the DNR Slovyansk. Strelkov even directed his frustration at the Kremlin saying, “Putin is now betraying not only the DNR and the LNR, he is also betraying himself, Russia, and all of us”.<sup>361</sup> Apparently convinced a change in leadership of the DNR was in order, Strelkov tried to capitalize on his popularity following the Slovyansk breakout by proclaiming himself military commandant of Donetsk and organizing a large political rally on July 7<sup>th</sup> advocating his leadership for the DNR.<sup>362</sup>

In a sign foretelling a potentially dangerous escalation of rebel intra-agent infighting, militia forces under Igor Bezler, an ally of Strelkov and friendly with Pavel Gubarev, occupied the Donetsk MVD building as part of an apparent dispute with the city’s police a few days before Strelkov’s rally.<sup>363</sup> DNR Prime Minister Alexander Borodai asked Khodakovsky and Alexander Zakharchenko, leader of Oplat Battalion, to send troops from both of their units to retake the MVD building and detain Bezler’s forces.<sup>364</sup> After a brief firefight, during which one militiaman was killed and seven were wounded, Vostok and Oplat detained Bezler’s troop and retook the building.<sup>365</sup>

Tensions became even more strained a day after Strelkov’s rally when a press conference in Donetsk hosted by nationalist Russian political commentator and Kremlin advocate Sergei

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<sup>361</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>362</sup> Strelkov had held the position of DNR Defense Minister since mid-May - (World Heritage Encyclopedia 2016), (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>363</sup> (News.pn 2014), (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>364</sup> (Makarkin 2014)

<sup>365</sup> (News.pn 2014)

Kurginyan descended into flurry of accusations against Strelkov for losing Slovyansk.<sup>366</sup> It's not entirely clear why Kurginyan visited Donetsk or who sent him, but his condemnation of Strelkov was direct and unambiguous.<sup>367</sup> Kurginyan was highly critical of Strelkov, both for his recent public criticism of Putin and his role in the loss of Slovyansk.<sup>368</sup> Igor Bezler and Pavel Gubarev actually turned up in support of their fellow hardliner Strelkov and ended up talking to Kurginyan who apparently did not recognize them initially.<sup>369</sup> The conference eventually devolved into a shouting match between Gubarev and Kurginyan, with the former trying to detain Kurginyan for his "hostile provocative action" against Novorossiia's defenders.<sup>370</sup> Vostok fighters, who were also present and apparently acting as bodyguards for Kurginyan, prevented Gubarev's men from detaining Kurginyan.<sup>371</sup>

With blame and accusations over recent failures by rebel militia playing backdrop to increasing strained relations between the Donbas militias, Vostok found itself on the opposing side of what appeared to be a power play by Strelkov. Sensing the danger and apparently trying to protect himself while deescalating the situation, Khodakovsky left Donetsk with Vostok troops for nearby Makiivka late on July 10<sup>th</sup> after having refused to recognize Strelkov's proclamation declaring himself military commandant of Donetsk.<sup>372</sup>

Pressure continued to build for the next week as agents in both pro-Strelkov and anti-Strelkov camps publically denied insinuation in the press about political in-fighting. The same day Khodakovsky left Donetsk, PM Borodai held a press conference on July 10<sup>th</sup> with Strelkov

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<sup>366</sup> (Reryna 2014)

<sup>367</sup> (Dergachev 2014)

<sup>368</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>369</sup> (Fitzpatrick, Novorossiia Theory Meets Novorossiia Reality in Donetsk 2014)

<sup>370</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>371</sup> (Dergachev 2014)

<sup>372</sup> (Interfax-AVN 2014)

where the leader of the DNR denied allegations of confrontations between militia groups.<sup>373</sup>

Borodai also announced the appointment of Vladimir Antyufeyev, former Minister of State Security in Transdnestria, to the position of DNR Deputy Premier of Security previously held by Khodakovsky.<sup>374</sup> Borodai had picked Antyufeyev after an urgent trip to Moscow four days prior where he received apparently received instructions to appoint Antyufeyev and advice on how to mitigating the damage of recent rebel losses.<sup>375</sup>

The Borodai and Strelkov press conference announcing the replacement of Khodakovsky with Antyufeyev raised the specter of serious infighting among rebel factions, but Borodai unequivocally denied allegations of a dispute. One of Borodai's intercepted phone call from late July released by the SBU revealed otherwise, however. Just a couple weeks before stepping down from his position as PM, Borodai complained the DNR had become an impotent mess. Borodai also lamented how he had to function as an interlocutor for Khodakovsky whenever the Vostok leader had to coordinate with Strelkov or Bezler because both had stopped trusting him.<sup>376</sup>

With rebel agents under significant pressure from both internal disputes and advancing Ukrainian forces, the Kremlin seemed to move quickly to consolidate DNR leadership. Strelkov was beginning to become an unreliable agent for the Kremlin given his public denunciations of the Putin and apparent leadership ambitions within the DNR. However, the serious threat of Donetsk being encircled by Ukrainian forces in the near future and Strelkov's popularity among pro-Russian civilian in the Donbas made his removal impossible at the time. While the Kremlin seemed to be stuck with Strelkov for the time being, the appointment of Antyufeyev, a long time

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<sup>373</sup> (Augmented Ether, Translator 2014)

<sup>374</sup> (Augmented Ether, Translator 2014)

<sup>375</sup> (Weiss 2014)

<sup>376</sup> (Fitzpatrick, Trouble in the 'Donetsk People's Republic' 2014)

Russian agent who helped organize a failed coup in Latvia in 1991 and spent decades administering security in breakaway territories, signaled Moscow was at least engaged in controlling the political composition of rebel Donetsk if not its militia leadership.<sup>377</sup>

If the Kremlin was concerned about Strelkov's leadership ambitions in the Donbas and general reliability, any remaining tolerance for him was about to rapidly evaporate. On May 17<sup>th</sup>, a Buk surface to air missile launcher, unit number 332, most likely from the 53<sup>rd</sup> Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade, was sighted along Makiivka highway headed towards Donetsk.<sup>378</sup> The same morning at 09:22, Petrovitsky Sergey Nikolaevich, a GRU officer providing intelligence support to Strelkov according to the Ukrainian SBU, spoke with a local rebel officer nicknamed 'Buryat' about transporting the recently arrived Buk to another.<sup>379</sup> During the conversation, Petrovitsky told Buryat that Vostok tanks would escort the Buk to its final destination.<sup>380</sup>

Corroborating the intercepted communications released by the SBU is an open source investigation by the Putin@War blog. Using geolocation tools, pictures taken on July 17<sup>th</sup> posted to social media and a propaganda video Vostok happened to be filming the day of the incident, the report finds Vostok units were traveling along the same route as the Buk at roughly the same time.<sup>381</sup> While Vostok forces were never photographed with the Buk, the report concludes Vostok forces probably escorted the Buk prior to it reaching its destination; a field just to the south of Snizhne also identified by the Dutch Safety Board as the launching point for the Buk missile which destroyed MH-17.<sup>382</sup> After MH-17 was shot down, the SBU released another

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<sup>377</sup> (Salem 2014)

<sup>378</sup> (Bellingcat Investigative Team 2016)

<sup>379</sup> (Security Service of Ukraine 2014)

<sup>380</sup> (Security Service of Ukraine 2014)

<sup>381</sup> (Petros 2014)

<sup>382</sup> (Petros 2014), (Bellingcat Investigative Team 2016)

intercepted communication purported to be Khodakovsky talking to Vostok forces and relaying a directive straight from Moscow; secure the crash site and recover the black box.<sup>383</sup>

There is some debate about which rebel leader had launch authority over the Buk at the time of the incident. The Buk was most likely under the command of Igor Bezler or Strelkov. The SBU released an audio recording in which Bezler gave a missile battery permission to engage a Ukrainian airplane. Bezler said the recording was real, but it referred to another shoot down and not MH 17.<sup>384</sup> Strelkov posted on VK immediately after the shoot down claiming his forces had destroyed a Ukrainian Air Force AN-26, but quickly deleted the post once it became apparent the plane was a commercial airliner and not a military transport.<sup>385</sup> Although a complete and comprehensive picture of the events may never emerged, infighting at the time between Vostok, who escorted the Buk prior to it reaching the launch site south of Snizhne, and Bezler's forces seems to suggest Strelkov as the more likely culprit.

In either case, the immense international pressure levied on Moscow following the disaster and Strelkov's readily apparent involvement caused an abrupt behind the scenes political restructuring of Donetsk. Less than a month after the incident, Strelkov was out of his position as Defense Minister for Donetsk, although official press releases said he resigned on his own accord.<sup>386</sup> Borodai also resigned, replaced by then Vostok ally Alexander Zakharchenko who was acting PM until his election in November 2014.<sup>387</sup> Zakharchenko's appointment occurred just as the Kremlin was starting to push for a more unified command structure for militia forces under the PM's office meant to discourage hardline Novorossiia from acting against Moscow's

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<sup>383</sup> (Sky News 2014)

<sup>384</sup> (Walker, An audience with Ukraine rebel chief Igor Bezler, the Demon of Donetsk 2014)

<sup>385</sup> (Sterbenz 2014)

<sup>386</sup> (Interfax 2014)

<sup>387</sup> (Russia Today 2014)

wishes. While the move should have solidified his powerbase, instead Zakharchenko found himself losing support and influence among his men in Oplot which was becoming divided by its own internal power struggles.<sup>388</sup>

Strelkov's replacement was a Donbas local named Vladimir Konov, a militia leader who apparently worked as a martial arts instructor prior to the conflict.<sup>389</sup> The appointments of Konov and Zakharchenko, who like Kanov had no prior political experience and worked as an electrician in Donetsk, signaled the Kremlin, concerned with infighting and trying to push out unreliable agents, was favoring perceived loyalty over a robust resume.<sup>390</sup>

If the Kremlin's strategy for the Donbas conflict was to create enough chaos to remind Ukraine of Russia's regional hegemony as Mark Galeotti suggests, then the late summer political shakeups involving Vostok's rivals and allies seem to be attempts to control the chaos.<sup>391</sup> Having already been burnt by the MH-17 disaster, minimizing the damage and exerting greater control over local agents in order to prevent a similar reoccurrence became a high priority. Probably influenced by experiences in Chechnya of uncontrolled intra-agent rivalry, the Kremlin was concerned with unreliable militia leaders starting to dominate the rebel movement.

Loyalty to the Kremlin and assurance agents would dependably follow instructions were vital characteristics. Agents like Borodai obeyed Moscow's directives and knew when it was time to step down. Conversely, agents like Strelkov and Bezler were brazen in their actions and felt betrayed when Novorossiia collapsed.<sup>392</sup> Strelkov in particular was unafraid of directly criticizing the Kremlin when he felt he was not receiving the support he needed, a position which

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<sup>388</sup> (Kanygin 2014)

<sup>389</sup> (REN TV 2014)

<sup>390</sup> (Vasovic 2015)

<sup>391</sup> (Galeotti, Hybrid, ambiguous, and non-linear? How new is Russia's 'new way of war'? 2016)

<sup>392</sup> (Toal 2017, 272)



contributed to his fall from power.<sup>393</sup> For the time being, Vostok and Khodakovsky seemed to fall into the Zakharchenko category, a proxy agent which followed the Kremlin's directions and did not make the fatal mistake of biting the hand that fed it.

#### **4.4 – Separation or Federalization?: Vostok flip-flops on Novorossiia and clashes with Zakharchenko**

While Khodakovsky and Vostok's adversaries, Bezler and Strelkov were out of leadership positions, Khodakovsky remained stuck in a fluid political environment. Support for full separatism had initially been strong from Moscow, but major events, particularly MH-17, had a profound effect on support for an independent Donbas. The Kremlin's lead architect for a potential political end state in the Donbas was Vladislav Surkov, orchestrator of the Chechenization program which helped create the original Vostok Battalion.<sup>394</sup> Surkov started to take a much more active role in the Donbas by early summer 2014 in an effort to clean up the remnants of the Novorossiia project which had imploded in early May.<sup>395</sup>

According to Gerard Toal, Novorossiia was a briefly realized attempt at de-conflicting and justifying the contradictory action of Russia annexing territory from a neighboring state with which it shared deep fraternal and ethno-political ties.<sup>396</sup> The plan called for uniting annexed territory in South East Ukraine into a state which favored strong relations with Russia. Although there were no overt calls to annex additional Ukrainian and Moldavian territory to recreate the Tsarist-era Novorossiia, more aggressive militia supporters of Novorossiia favored a push westward to seize territory.<sup>397</sup> However, the tremendous political and economic

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<sup>393</sup> (Fitzpatrick, Is Colonel Strelkov Making a Comeback or Has He Been Tamed? 2014)

<sup>394</sup> (Fitzpatrick, Kremlin 'Grey Cardinal' Surkov's Deal for a 'Donetsk Transdnistria'? 2014)

<sup>395</sup> (Toal 2017, 244), (Kanygin 2014)

<sup>396</sup> (Toal 2017, 237-238)

<sup>397</sup> (Sindelar 2015)

costs of such a move, in addition to practical limitations of rebel's offensive fighting capabilities, made such a scenario unlikely unless the Ukrainian state collapsed outright.<sup>398</sup> Khodakovsky himself implied in an interview such an advance by rebels was impossible given their limited offensive capabilities.<sup>399</sup>

A more realistic goal at the time was the Transdnestria option.<sup>400</sup> It let the Kremlin create a mini-Novorossiia buffer state composed of rebel held territory in the Donbas meant to ferment just enough chaos within the Ukraine to render Kiev politically impotent. Having such leverage over Kiev would provide the Kremlin an effective counter to political stances Moscow considered anathema; pro-European leanings, exclusionary policies against ethnic Russians, and continued NATO membership aspiration. Backing a separatist Donbas also placated some of the more fervent militia factions who strongly supported the Novorossiia movement and felt abandoned by the Kremlin following the failure of DNR rebels to hold Slovyansk in early May.

Khodakovsky himself vacillated between supporting secession and embracing a federative semi-autonomous solution throughout the conflict. During the summer of 2014, he was not sure if outright separatism, while rhetorically appealing, was a viable option for the Donbas rebels. As hostilities continued, increasing casualties, tough fighting, and the Ukrainian government's heavy handed ATO hardened Khodakovsky's opinion and convinced him "absolute independence" was the only path for the Donbas by the end of 2014.<sup>401</sup> The MH-

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<sup>398</sup> (Sakwa 2015, 209)

<sup>399</sup> (Kots 2014)

<sup>400</sup> (Pak 2015)

<sup>401</sup> (Vasyunin 2014), (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014)

17 incident in July 2014 had disastrous implications for remaining supporters of independence, however.<sup>402</sup>

Following to the breakdown of Minsk 1 and the ongoing Second Battle of Donetsk Airport at the end of 2014, Khodakovsky was firmly in the separatist camp; in favor of close relations and support from Russia similar to the frozen conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.<sup>403 404</sup> At the same time, Khodakovsky said the overall strategic goal was to advance to the borders of the Donbas region and hold there, a much more realistic goal than sweeping across Southern Ukraine and linking up with Transdnestria.<sup>405</sup> Once the Donbas region was secured, Khodakovsky hoped representatives from the DNR and LNR could find Ukrainian officials willing to negotiate some sort of peace agreement which guaranteed regional sovereignty free from encroachment by Kiev. As a background to the state building exercise, Khodakovsky emphasized how Vostok was trying to use the authority of the DNR to legitimize its actions. In what he called an effort to “create an illusion of legality”, Vostok used official directives for commandeering vehicles and equipment from local businesses for the war effort.<sup>406</sup>

Khodakovsky’s stance on total independence in late 2014 put him at odds with the Kremlin’s rapidly shrinking enthusiasm for Novorossiia. By the end of the year, international blowback over the MH-17 shoot-down, rivalry among rebel factions, and the inability of rebel forces to succeed militarily against the Ukraine’s ATO without direct Russian military support had pushed Moscow to re-evaluate its position. While Moscow would not officially acknowledge pulling support for Novorossiia until May 2015, Pavel Kanygin, a Russian

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<sup>402</sup> (Loiko 2016)

<sup>403</sup> (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014)

<sup>404</sup> (Cohen and Hamilton 2011, 15)

<sup>405</sup> (Khodakovsky, Commander of Vostok Battalion: Militants Fight for Their Values 2014)

<sup>406</sup> (Ibid)

investigative journalist, started to pick up on the shift around the same time as Khodakovsky's December interview favoring separatism.<sup>407</sup> Kanygin thought the removal of independent militia commanders were indicative of Moscow's growing wariness towards militia leaders who refused to compromise on the question of federative semi-autonomy vs outright independence.<sup>408</sup> Kanygin believed Vladislav Surkov had received new instructions from Moscow following the collapse of the Minsk 1 ceasefire to start setting up a plan to return Donetsk and Luhansk to the Ukraine under an agreement which granted federalized semi-autonomy status.<sup>409</sup>

The purges of independent or unreliable militia leaders who supported Novorossiia, such as Strelkov and Bezler, were part of the Kremlin directed reorganization of Donetsk's power structure under PM Alexander Zakharchenko. Militia leaders thought to operate without regards to the de facto boundaries between Donetsk and Luhansk or ignore regional political leadership were targeted for removal.<sup>410</sup> A more centralized, unitary style militia hierarchy under Zakharchenko was intended to enhance Kremlin control over the course of the conflict and prevent wayward rebels from engaging in activities counter-productive to Moscow's goals. Such a transition was slow and partial, however, as some independent militia leaders remained in power and were not purged until months or years later.<sup>411</sup> Once the Kremlin's shift towards favoring federalization was made apparent by the Minsk II framework, pushback from

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<sup>407</sup> (Sindelar 2015)

<sup>408</sup> (Kanygin 2014)

<sup>409</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>410</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>411</sup> (Losh 2016)

Novorossiia supporters, particularly Strelkov, was loud and agitated. Calling the project a colossal failure, Strelkov became an outspoken critic of Kremlin policy towards the Donbas.<sup>412</sup>

Khodakovsky did not remain in the opposition against Surkov's plan for a semi-autonomous Donbas for long, however. In a June 2015 interview, Khodakovsky walked back from his previous statements in support of separatism, claiming while he aspired to join Russia early in the uprising, he saw the prospect as essentially impossible by the end of 2014.<sup>413</sup> Khodakovsky also openly acknowledged continued Russian support, which the DNR desperately needed, hinged on cooperation with the Kremlin, saying, "Russia will only render me assistance for as long as it feels that this is going where it's intended and is being controlled".<sup>414</sup> When asked about the recent deaths of fellow rebel commanders, including Aleksey Mozgovoy and Pavel Dremov, both highly critical of Moscow and assassinated under mysterious circumstances, Khodakovsky admitted personal political ambitions may have contributed to their demise.<sup>415</sup>

While Khodakovsky does not explicitly admit it during the interview, his acquiescence to Surkov's semi-autonomy plan seems to have been at least partially influenced by the fate which befell his comrades. Aware of the Kremlin's waning tolerance for militia leaders who prioritized their own local interests, Khodakovsky seemed more willing to both toe the party line and publically acknowledge the vital nature of Moscow's support.

Also quite pertinent to Khodakovsky's rhetorical realignment were his long alleged ties to Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, a business magnet with extensive Donbas holdings.<sup>416</sup>

At the time, Crimea was already proving to be a politically and financially expensive endeavor

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<sup>412</sup> (Walker, Russia's 'valiant hero' in Ukraine turns his fire on Vladimir Putin 2016), (Rosbalt.ru June)

<sup>413</sup> (Khodakovsky, Vostok Brigade Commander Alexander Khodakovsky on the Situation in the Donetsk Basin -- 'We Are Aware That Ukraine Is Not a Fascist State' 2015)

<sup>414</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>415</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>416</sup> (Chernyshev 2014), (Kuzio 2015)

for the Kremlin.<sup>417</sup> Other Russian backed frozen conflicts, such as South Ossetia, Transdnestria, and Abkhazia, had economies too small and underdeveloped to actually fund their own governments and required Kremlin backing to continue functioning.<sup>418</sup> Attaining economic self-sufficiency in the Donbas necessitated working with Akhmetov given his vast business ties to the area in Khodakovsky's opinion.<sup>419</sup> Alternatively, should the DNR and LNR separate from the Ukraine entirely, most of Akhmetov's considerable holdings in the region would be in jeopardy of nationalization.<sup>420</sup>

Vostok forces have apparently been charged with protecting buildings, facilities, and businesses owned by Akhmetov throughout the conflict.<sup>421</sup> Khodakovsky is often asked about ties in interviews, but always denies allegations he is an agent of Akhmetov. Rather, Khodakovsky says his support for Akhmetov comes from economic pragmatism.<sup>422</sup> The Donbas's economy is heavily intertwined with Akhmetov's business assets. Akhmetov's regional holdings in heavy industry, mining, agricultural, energy, and steel manufacturing concerns, represent some of the most significant economic sectors of the Donbas.<sup>423</sup> Under DNR and LNR law, failed enterprises can be nationalized.<sup>424</sup> Such a legal framework could conceivably be utilized to seize Akhmetov's assets if they became insolvent. Given some of Akhmetov's Donbas holdings have been shut down by fighting and others are operating at reduced capacity, outright separation from the Ukraine could trigger the conditions necessary

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<sup>417</sup> (Berman 2015)

<sup>418</sup> (Freeman 2015)

<sup>419</sup> (Ovchinnikov 2014)

<sup>420</sup> (Karakuts 2016)

<sup>421</sup> (Kirilov 2016)

<sup>422</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>423</sup> (Grytsenko 2016)

<sup>424</sup> (Kirilov 2016)

to ensure their failure and subsequent nationalization.<sup>425</sup> For his part, Khodakovsky maintained he was not in favor of nationalizing any of Akhmetov's assets, saying Akhmetov's investments in the Donbas are much too vital for a post-conflict economic recovery and dismantling them would be counterproductive.<sup>426</sup>

With full independent from the Ukraine linked to potential nationalization of Akhmetov's business assets, and, the disruption of an alleged source of important funding for Vostok, Khodakovsky had substantive economic rationale for negotiating with Kiev beyond simply staying in step with the Kremlin. However, while Khodakovsky publically backed the Minsk II ceasefire and semi-autonomy framework, he found himself increasingly in confrontation with PM Zakharchenko who was proving himself to be a fairly inept political leader.

Zakharchenko was Moscow's initial pick for PM because of his perceived loyalty and the DNR's chaotic political climate which favored a powerful militia leader to corral independent commanders. In one of his first jobs as PM, Zakharchenko pushed hard for full independence during Minsk 1 negotiations.<sup>427</sup> While the creation of Novorossiia was not yet political anathema for the Kremlin during the late August 2014 Minsk I talks, the Kremlin had pulled back by the February 2015 Minsk II negotiations, a reversal which Zakharchenko did not follow.<sup>428</sup>

According to one account, Surkov, while functioning as an interlocutor between the rebels and Putin, had become exceptionally frustrated with Zakharchenko after he refused to sign

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<sup>425</sup> (Kirilov 2016), (Grytsenko 2016)

<sup>426</sup> (A. Ivanov 2014)

<sup>427</sup> (Zakharchenko 2014), (Fitzpatrick, Russia This Week: Is 'Novorossiia' Really Dead? 2015)

<sup>428</sup> (Kanygin 2014), (Fitzpatrick, Russia This Week: Is 'Novorossiia' Really Dead? 2015)

Minsk II. Apparently, Putin had to personally step in and talk to Zakharchenko, eventually getting the DNR PM to relent and agree to the semi-autonomy agreement outlined in the ceasefire.<sup>429</sup> While Zakharchenko signed off on Minsk II at the time, he vacillated between support for implementing it and outright condemnations of its points in interviews.<sup>430</sup> Unable to stay in-sync with the Kremlin backed plan, Zakharchenko made himself vulnerable to another rumored administrative arrangement in the DNR.<sup>431</sup> As Khodakovsky was the next most prominent militia leader, possessing a large armed formation via Vostok and more nuanced political skills, he quickly made the short list of rumored replacements.<sup>432</sup>

As 2015 progressed, Khodakovsky seemed to embrace his role as potential successor, becoming an outspoken critic of Zakharchenko as the latter tried to consolidate control of both the military and economic structures of the DNR. Issuing thinly veiled condemnations of corrupt DNR leaders, Khodakovsky attacked both Zakharchenko and Dennis Pushilin, People's Council Chairman of the DNR and a Zakharchenko ally.<sup>433</sup> As tensions between the militia commanders grew, Vostok administrative independence from the Donetsk People's Militia under Zakharchenko became a point of contention. As a rival militia leader, Vostok gave Khodakovsky the armed backing he needed to protect his interests. While the Kremlin was making initial moves to corral Donetsk's disparate militia formations under a single, unified command hierarchy, at the time Vostok remained functionally independent of Zakharchenko's authority. Essentially, Khodakovsky and Vostok had become a rival power structure in Donetsk not unlike the Yamadayev Vostok's rivalry with Ramzan Kadyrov and his militias.

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<sup>429</sup> (Fitzpatrick, Russia This Week: Is 'Novorossiia' Really Dead? 2015)

<sup>430</sup> (Quinn-Judge, Disorder Spreads Among Russian-Backed Ukrainian Rebels 2015)

<sup>431</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>432</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>433</sup> (Ibid)



Parallel to the intensifying Khodakovsky – Zakharchenko rivalry, Minsk II was violated regularly by sporadic actions.<sup>434</sup> Khodakovsky had originally complained Putin put excessive restrictions on militia forces via Minsk II for political reasons in spite of limited knowledge of the front line realities.<sup>435</sup> However, he went on to concede the Kremlin was taking on increased responsibility for rebel actions by involving itself in negotiations thereby necessitating greater operational control of militia groups.<sup>436</sup> In a subtle jab against Zakharchenko, whose occasional media outbursts contained declarations to disregard Minsk II and seize Ukrainian held territory, Khodakovsky said “any wrong move by the militia will now be a blow against Russia first and foremost. Recognizing this, we are trying to behave correctly”.<sup>437</sup>

By May 2015, however, the Kremlin moved to diffuse brewing intra-agent rivalry by accelerating the hierarchical reorganization of Donetsk militias simultaneous to its official repositioning on the Novorossiia issues. Officially speaking, Vostok ceased to exist and became the 11th Independent Yenakiyevo – Danube Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps, a component of the DNR’s more centralized unitary military hierarchy.<sup>438</sup> Although Khodakovsky was not longer officially in command of the unit, he retained at least some influence over his former subordinates through his security minister post and his patronage network which still controlled some of the new formation’s purse strings. In October, the Kremlin tightened its grip over the militias by expanding the number of Russian military advisors (kurators) in supervisory roles.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> (Walker, Ukraine ceasefire: 'There is shooting all the time' 2015)

<sup>435</sup> (Pak 2015)

<sup>436</sup> (Pak 2015)

<sup>437</sup> (Quinn-Judge, Disorder Spreads Among Russian-Backed Ukrainian Rebels 2015), (Pak 2015)

<sup>438</sup> (Denisova 2016)

<sup>439</sup> (Vasilyev 2015), (International Crisis Group 2016)

Novorossiia was effectively dead at this point so the Kremlin likely envisioned the new u-form militia structure as a means of regaining operational control and projecting homogenizing influence. A more centralized organizational command hierarchy, ensured through Russian military advisors, was thought to prevent DNR hardliners from causing unwanted escalations. The kurators were meant to facilitate greater Russian command and control over separatist militia forces. Often, kurators, acting as reliable agents with prior military and intelligence experience, were used by Moscow to fix various issues in rebel movements which were damaging to unit cohesion and capabilities. The use of kurators is not a new instrument for Russia, however. Much like divide and rule imperial strategies facilitated by local intermediary agents, kurators have a long history through Tsarist and Soviet periods of being dispatched to problem areas to supersede local officials and ensure Moscow's guidance is being followed.<sup>440</sup>

The rebel actions, when closely controlled and monitored by Moscow via kurator representatives, are valuable political leverage to be used directly against Kiev and indirectly against the U.S. and NATO, a point even Khodakovsky acknowledges.<sup>441</sup> The Kremlin wants to maintain controlled chaos; a political environment it can influence and manipulate, not one where separatist militia commanders drag Russia into more financially and politically costly military confrontations with the Ukraine.

As Khodakovsky had mentioned in an interview, the separatists simply did not have the combat power to advance to the regional borders of the Donbas. Forcing Kiev to the bargaining table for Minsk I had required the direct intervention of a number of battalion tactical groups, comprised of several thousand Russian soldiers, to enter the Ukraine

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<sup>440</sup> (Goble 2016)

<sup>441</sup> (Vasyunin 2014)

unofficially in August 2014 to rescue rebels forces in danger of encirclement and destruction near Ilovaisk.<sup>442</sup> Much like Slovyansk several months prior, rebel militia forces could not hold out against Ukrainian advances. Rather than allow Ilovaisk to fall completely, likely resulting in the encirclement of rebel forces in Donetsk city, Russia intervened militarily which resulted in a decisive Ukrainian defeat.<sup>443</sup> Such an outcome would have been unachievable had the rebels been forced to act on their own.

The Kremlin was willing to run the political risks of sending Russian soldiers to the Ukraine, ostensibly as volunteers or simply with their distinctive uniform insignias removed, but primarily for their own ends.<sup>444</sup> Moscow would absolutely not allow hardliner separatist to focus on unrealistic objectives which require additional direct Russian military interventions. The Kremlin is supposed to be pulling the strings in its principle-agent relationship with Ukrainian rebel militias, not the other way around. Accordingly, a more unitary style militia hierarchy helped to curtail the influence and political clout of militia leaders most inclined to support total separation from the Ukraine regardless of consequences. Yet, a unitary hierarchy free of independent militias did not solve the problem of Zakharchenko's haphazard political rhetoric.<sup>445</sup> It also could do little to curtail Zakharchenko's new moves to undermine Khodakovsky's power base.<sup>446</sup>

As previously mentioned, Khodakovsky appears to be a more competent and capable political actor than Zakharchenko, a fact the latter probably found fairly threatening.

Additionally, Khodakovsky controlled the strategically important DNR city of Yasinovataya, a

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<sup>442</sup> (Peleschuk 2014)

<sup>443</sup> (Ibid)

<sup>444</sup> (Ostrovsky 2015)

<sup>445</sup> (Quinn-Judge, Disorder Spreads Among Russian-Backed Ukrainian Rebels 2015)

<sup>446</sup> (Ibid)

central railway hub for the Donbas region.<sup>447</sup> The railroads helped facilitate a considerable amount of regional contraband smuggling; mineral resources from Akhmetov's mines, weapons, and all manner of un-taxed goods passing through Yasinovataya.<sup>448</sup> With much of the DNR's infrastructure and industry damaged or disrupted by continuous fighting and funding shortages affecting militia fighter pay, grey and black market venues provide lucrative opportunities for armed groups to sustain and enrich themselves.

Controlling Yasinovataya and its railway routes undoubtedly provided Khodakovsky with additional revenues streams either from active participation in contraband smuggling or bribes collected from smugglers using Yasinovataya's railway routes. A key point of concern for Zakharchenko was if Khodakovsky was using these lucrative opportunities to allocate additional funds to the 11<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment previously known as Vostok. Zakharchenko was supposed to have ultimate authority over the 11<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment as it was now an 'official' DNR formation. Yet Khodakovsky's control of Yasinovataya gave him a valuable means of maintaining the loyalty of former subordinates by making sure they received funding the DNR could not allocate given its systemic budget issues. Igor Bezler also briefly attempted to fashion a similar arrangement prior to his removal by the Kremlin in November 2014. In Bezler's case, it was Zakharchenko's own militia, Oplot, which moved to assert control over Horlivka and Yenakiyev, two cities controlled by Bezler and heavily involved Donbas resource extraction and metallurgical sectors.<sup>449</sup>

As tensions between Khodakovsky and Zakharchenko continued to rise into early 2016, Zakharchenko moved to subvert his rival's political base and sources of independent revenue.

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<sup>447</sup> (Quinn-Judge, Ukraine's Eastern Separatist Leaders Turn on Each Other 2016)

<sup>448</sup> (Grytsenko 2016), (Quinn-Judge, Ukraine's Eastern Separatist Leaders Turn on Each Other 2016)

<sup>449</sup> (Kanygin 2014)

On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Khodakovsky was pushed out his security minister position.<sup>450</sup> Just few days later, Zakharchenko appointed Pavel Gubarev the new mayor of Yasinovataya in an attempted ousting of elected mayor, and Khodakovsky ally, Yuri Yanenka. Gubarev was unable to enter the Yasinovataya administrative building on his first day, however, as hundreds of protestors had turned out in support of Yanenka. After failing to enter the building, Gubarev left and Zakharchenko withdrew the decree appointing him as mayor. Khodakovsky vehemently denied he was using Yasinovataya for self-enrichment, claiming the move was part of an effort to erase the memory of Vostok.<sup>451</sup> While Yanenka remained in office temporarily, he was successfully replaced the next month by Dmitriy Shekhovtsov who briefly served as an appointed Mayor from March until late June 2016 when was forced into hiding amidst corruption charges.<sup>452</sup>

Zakharchenko's maneuvers against Khodakovsky pushed the former Security Council minister into a precarious position. Without Vostok officially under his control, Khodakovsky was denied potential counters to Zakharchenko which relied on hard power backing. Moreover, the loss of a political ally in the Yasinovataya mayor's office meant Khodakovsky's ability to generate funds to keep former Vostok members loyal was severely curtailed. Acutely aware of the danger he faced, Khodakovsky flashed some dark humor when addressing potential assassins. Saying he often traveled through populated areas with his bodyguards, Khodakovsky warned against attempts to replicate the bloody ambush style killings of former rebel leaders Mozgovoy and Dremov. In order to avoid collateral damage, he asked any would be assassins to use more 'elegant' methods.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> (Stratfor 2016)

<sup>451</sup> (Vasin 2016)

<sup>452</sup> (Krechetov 2016), (DAN News 2016)

<sup>453</sup> (Quinn-Judge, Ukraine's Eastern Separatist Leaders Turn on Each Other 2016)

Out of office and no longer able to call on Vostok, Khodakovsky managed to move himself into the opposition without being assassinated or forced out of the Donbas like Strelkov or Bezler. The Donbas Patriot's Movement, his political organization, became an outlet for protest against Zakharchenko who Khodakovsky describes as absolutely corrupt and out of touch with reality.<sup>454</sup> So far, Khodakovsky has managed to remain a staunch opponent of Zakharchenko despite losing both Vostok and his ministerial position. Yet he remains in a precarious position having been barred from travel to Russia since 2015 due to what he called "acute dissatisfaction" with him from Moscow.<sup>455</sup> While he remains an opposition figure in the DNR, the absence of support from Moscow and the loss of his militia have rendered Khodakovsky a somewhat marginalized political figure. Given Khodakovsky current situation, Zakharchenko may no longer consider a serious threat. It remains to be seen whether Khodakovsky will continue as an active opposition figure in the DNR or if he will suffer a fate similar to other rebel leaders who fell out of the Kremlin's favor.

## Conclusion

In terms of tactical utility, Vostok's performance in the Ukraine was mixed, especially compared to the early victories in CT targeting its Chechen cousin experienced. In Chechenia, the Yamadayev Vostok, thanks to its locally source fighters and leadership with important regional connections, functioned as an effective Spetsnaz unit with a greater affinity for targeting separatist elements than regular federal forces. The Donetsk Vostok, however, was rapidly formed and almost immediately thrust into conventional operations where it encountered far greater difficulties. Despite challenges, Vostok remained functional enough as a unit, thanks to strong support from Moscow, to contribute to the disparate group of militias propping up the

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<sup>454</sup> (Vasin 2016)

<sup>455</sup> (Khodakovsky, It's Not True 2016)

DNR. The Kremlin was able to limit the impact of initial operational setbacks, but quickly found itself dealing with disunity and rivalry among militias. Early attempts by influential rebel commanders to seize the political reins of the DNR encouraged instability and incentivized militia leaders to prioritize their own interests. As the DNR developed as a new and more unitarily structured administrative entity, Khodakovsky joined in on the race between rival rebel formations competing for influence, power, and control.

Some militias were merely vessels for their leader's self-interest in personal enrichment via criminal enterprises. More influential militia leaders, such as Khodakovsky, Strelkov, and Zakharchenko were most concerned with guiding the political course of the DNR's development. Strelkov and Zakharchenko linked the DNR with a larger conception of Novorossiia which initially seemed to have Kremlin support but began to fall apart in the wake of MH-17.

Khodakovsky shifted tones on Novorossiia dramatically throughout the conflict, first supporting separatism before moving to a more moderate position once it was clear the Kremlin was no longer willing to back outright secession. Khodakovsky seemed reasonably proficient at staying within the bounds of acceptable rhetoric as dictated by Kremlin guidance, at least more so than Zakharchenko. But, Vostok as an independently run m-form organization represented a hierarchical and operational uncertainty which the Kremlin wished to mitigate. As the Kremlin shifted towards a more u-form organizational structure for the Donetsk's government and armed forces, Vostok needed to transform into a more centrally accountable regular military unit. One which could more reliably serve Kremlin goals without becoming an unsustainable liability.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications of Russia's Reliance of Vostok**

The Donetsk Vostok was an almost entirely different organization than the Yamadayev Vostok. Other than a handful of Chechen veterans who provided a small cadre of experienced and trained fighters during the early days of the unit, Vostok in the Donbas is distinctly different from its Chechen incarnation. Yet, their stories are remarkably similar. In both cases, the militias functioned as proxy forces, completing tasks and missions the Kremlin could not because of a combination of prohibitive economic, political, and military conditions. In trying to regain regional influence and restore its own perception of great power status in the world, the Kremlin came to rely on Vostok, and other militias like it, as one of its many security policy tools.

In a broad sense, Vostok was a small part of a larger effort by the Kremlin to employ financially and politically cost effective means of projecting influence domestically and internationally in the Near Abroad. Initially tested in Chechnya, the Yamadayev Vostok's intra-agent rivalry proved to be too intense and unsustainable. When a new, but hierarchically similar, incarnation of Vostok was constituted in the Ukraine, the Kremlin encountered some of the same m-form agency issues which caused explosive confrontations in Chechnya. Rather than repeat the Chechen balancing act of maintaining two rival m-form militias, the Kremlin attempted to consolidate Donetsk based rebel formations under a centralized u-form hierarchy. Success was mixed and gradual, however, as the Kremlin struggled to find agents it could rely on to follow its guidance and seemed to tolerate some independent rebel leaders for months or years before purging them.

While similar efforts to consolidate independent militias under a u-form umbrella have not been duplicated to the same extent in neighboring Luhansk, it is possible Russia is attempting



to implement the same measures, but with less success.<sup>456</sup> The assassinations of independent militia leaders Pavel Dremov and Alexey Mozgovoy, both of whom were outspoken critics of Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) leadership, suggests the possibility they were killed on Russian orders to help purge unreliable leaders.<sup>457</sup> In describing the characteristics of Russia's doctrinal implementation of next generation warfare, Michael Kofman likens the strategy to that of a startup. Kofman describes the operational process as built around quickly applying new concepts to practice with minimal investment of resources and then rapidly adjusting as they succeed or fail.<sup>458</sup> While the militias of the LNR are outside of the scope of this thesis, a similar consolidation of independent militias may be on the horizon if experiences in u-form consolidation in the DNR turn out to be trial runs for future lines of effort in the LNR. Such developments could provide a possible focal point for future research.

Mitigating the damage diehard separatist militia leaders could potentially do became the Kremlin's rationale for trying to integrate independent m-form militias into more conventional military hierarchy in Donetsk. Greater centralized control helped reduce agent rivalries by clearly defining which actors maintained the reins of power and curtailed the proliferation of mini-fiefdoms, like Bezler's Horlivka and Yenakiyeve. Essentially, rather than attempting to curb one group's rising ambitions for political control by establishing a rival as a counterweight, as was done in Chechnya, the Kremlin attempted to restructure the DNR militias into a more centrally manageable unitary hierarchy.

Independent militia leaders were removed through various means. Ultimate command authority for the combined DNR forces was place within the prime minister's office. Russian

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<sup>456</sup> (Socor 2015)

<sup>457</sup> (Interpreter Magazine 2015), (Fitzpatrick, Who Killed Prizrak Commander Aleksei Mozgovoy? 2015)

<sup>458</sup> (Kofman 2017)

military advisors were incorporated into supervisory roles as kurators to ensure militia unit cohesion and compliance with Moscow. Continued support became contingent on acquiescence to the Kremlin's plan for the DNR and LNR as put out by Surkov. Other than publically denying allegations of direct participation of Russian forces in the Ukraine, the Kremlin basically gave up on trying to maintain the façade of rebel militias operating independent of Russian support. While the shift away from m-form militias towards more regular u-form units had legitimizing effects on the soldiers propping up the DNR, more than anything the hierarchical restructuring was meant to help the Kremlin clamp down on detrimental agency problems.

Yet in spite of the Kremlin's attempts to learn from its experience in Chechnya, Moscow still faces persistent principal-agent challenges which it has been struggling to alleviate. Force restructuring of the Donetsk People's Militia helped stop independent leaders of smaller armed groups from becoming budding warlords, but it placed a rhetorically scattershot Zakharchenko at the organizational head. A replacement for Zakharchenko never materialized. Instead, the Kremlin remains stuck with an agent who seems very reluctant to give up on Novorossiia and still scuffles with opposition leaders like Khodakovsky.<sup>459</sup>

The fact the militias have been unable to retain their ground during Ukrainian offensives without direct military intervention from Moscow is especially revealing. The Kremlin has to step in to ensure operational success in the Donbas and the continued survival of the rebels. In that sense, Moscow is at least fulfilling its mission of undermining Kiev's domestic political legitimacy while reminding Near Abroad neighbors about the penalties of turning away from the Kremlin. The financial and political costs incurred by Russia, however, are great. And, more importantly, while the Kremlin helped initiate the conflagration, though its annexation of Crimea

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<sup>459</sup> (Donbas Live 2015), (Quinn-Judge, Ukraine's Eastern Separatist Leaders Turn on Each Other 2016)

and support for rebels, it has consistently struggling to control it. Ex-militia leaders like Strelkov who adamantly supported Novorossiia feel abandoned by Moscow and have morphed into a persistent thorn in its side, deriding Putin and the Kremlin while stirring up anxiety among civilians and combatants who still favor outright separatism. Even Zakharchenko, who stayed in office in spite of consistent failures to follow the Kremlin's lead in public remarks, remains a problem the Kremlin is unwilling or unable to solve.

Ultimately, the story of Vostok in Chechnya repeated itself in Donetsk. The militia group was a pragmatic response to lack of sufficient conventional military and political power to influence regional events in both cases. In Chechnya, Vostok was part of the Chechenization exit strategy; reduce federal forces involvement in the deeply unpopular conflict and get Chechens to fight other Chechens. In the Donbas, Vostok, and other rebel groups, could be used as more politically tenable stand-ins for federal forces thanks to plausible deniability. In both cases, the individual goals of militia leaders often ran counter to the Kremlin's strategic objectives as the conflict progressed. Facing undermining agency problems which were subverting efforts to direct the course of the conflicts, the Kremlin attempted to alter the power structures which they were losing control of. Yet, the Kremlin's ability to reassert its control over the strategic situation was consistently limited by the persistent agency issues of local actors it could never quite mitigate.

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