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CONFLICT IN UKRAINE, RUSSIAN- LANGUAGE JIHADIST PROPAGANDA, CHECHENS BATTALIONS AND THE LINK WITH THE RUSSIAN NORTH CAUCASUS

Resume

Since the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, international media have reported the presence of Chechen battalions among the ranks of Kyiv and Moscow's forces. The Chechen presence in the conflict has nourished the jihadist propaganda in the Russian language and created a debate in the Russian North Caucasus and among the Russian Muslim *umma* (community) regarding the legitimacy of fighting with or against the Russian Federation. This paper wants to analyse the Russian jihadist propaganda's narrative over Ukraine, the Chechen battalions' role in support of the Ukraine army, and the geopolitical risk for the entire Eurasian region from terrorist groups' exploitation of the Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: Ukraine conflict, North Caucasus, terrorism, jihadist propaganda, geopolitical risk

INTRODUCTION

When the Russian Federation began its 'special military operation' in Ukraine in support of the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Lugansk, the West harshly reacted to the Kremlin's military intervention labelling it as an 'act of war'.***

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*** Since February 2022 the Kremlin has always promoted the idea of a 'special military operation' in Ukraine while the West and part of the international media community have described the events in Ukraine as 'Russian invasion', 'Russian aggression', 'Ukraine war'. Therefore, the author of this research preferred to use the term 'Ukraine conflict'.

In a few days, the Ukraine conflict had become an ‘international conflict’ because it had attracted western soldiers and foreign fighters from all over the world to support the Ukrainian army. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, since the start of the Ukraine conflict, 7,107 mercenaries have arrived in Ukraine to become members of Kyiv’s ‘international legion’: while 4,366 fighters were killed or left the combat zone, 2,741 continue to participate in the conflict. Russian officials reported that among the Ukrainian ranks there are Poles, Americans, Canadians, Romanians, British, Georgians, Turks, Chechens and people from the Middle East who are fighting against the Russian army (RBC 2022, Bifolchi 2022a).

Soon after the beginning of the hostilities, international media informed that the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, sent his troops’ well-known *kadyrovtsy*¹ to the Mariupol area in support of the Russian military forces. A video showed Chechen soldiers praying on Ukrainian soil while Grozny local and international media outlets denounced that Ramzan Kadyrov gathered his troops and special forces in the Chechen capital and was ready to support the Kremlin with more than 10 thousand soldiers (Bifolchi 2022b). The presence of the *kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine had a huge psychological impact on the ground since the Chechen soldiers are famous in the post-Soviet space and the Arab-Muslim world as highly skilled fighters who fought against the Russian troops during the Chechen conflicts and then contrasted terrorist groups in Chechnya (Šmíd and Mareš 2015; Ratelle and Souleimanov 2016; Chambers 2022).

Kadyrovtsy’s presence in Ukraine created a link between the Ukraine conflict and the Russian struggle in North Caucasus to counter local militant groups and terrorist organisations such as Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasus Emirate) and Vilayat Kavkaz (Caucasus province) and control a region which plays a strategic role in Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy (Bifolchi 2020).² Furthermore, since 2014, when Donetsk and Lugansk decided to become independent from the Ukrainian central Government after the Euromaidan and thanks to the support of the Kremlin, several Chechen fighters have arrived in Ukraine to military support Kyiv’s army in Donbas in the fight against the pro-Russian separatists forces. The Chechen presence in Ukraine and the Kyiv-

1 The term *kadyrovtsy* refers to the Chechen paramilitary group that plays the role of private and personal guard of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

2 The North Caucasus has been defined a ‘bridge’ between Europe and Asia and a ‘barrier’ between the Muslim and Orthodox Christian worlds. In recent decades, local militancy and terrorist groups have negatively influence the regional dynamics pushing the Kremlin to elaborate a military and socioeconomic strategy to guarantee local stability and security and improve the living standard conditions.

Moscow confrontation over Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk, have attracted the interests of North Caucasian militancy and terrorist groups and media and social networks related to the Russian jihadist propaganda's galaxy.

It is undeniable that North Caucasian armed militancy, as well as terrorist groups, have been monitoring the Ukrainian crisis since 2014 and subsequently, since February 2022, have extensively analysed the Russian military operation in Ukrainian territory by promoting a strategic communication aimed at portraying Vladimir Putin's Russia as the first enemy for the Caucasian and Muslim community and labelling as 'traitors' the Muslim allies of the Russian Federation like the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

This investigation aims to analyse the essential points of the jihadist propaganda in the Russian language promoted by the portals belonging to the world of armed militancy and terrorist groups of the North Caucasus. Furthermore, the research wants to provide an overview of the Chechen battalions in Ukraine against Russia that invoke jihad against the Russian troops and recall the Russian Muslims to their effort 'on the path of Allah' against the Russian 'invader'.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This qualitative study investigates jihadist propaganda in the Russian language and the presence of North Caucasian foreign fighters in Ukraine among the ranks of Kyiv's forces.

This paper is based on media and journal articles and NGO reports concerning the role of the Chechen battalions in Ukraine and the impact of jihadist propaganda in the Russian language on the Russian Muslim community. The author of this paper collected open sources (articles, videos, posts, and social messages) from February 2022 to April 2022 to assess the impact of the Ukraine conflict and Russian foreign policy in the North Caucasus and the Russian jihadist galaxy.

In the paper context, it should be stressed that the North Caucasus, thus Chechnya, plays a fundamental role in the Kremlin's foreign and domestic politics. The region was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union; nowadays, the North Caucasus represents a federal administrative entity inside the Russian Federation, which attracts the economic and political interests of foreign countries and plays a strategic role as a transport and infrastructure corridor between Europe and Asia where different commercial ways intersect, first among all the New Silk Road.³ Indeed, the North Caucasus is a logistic cluster which links Russia

3 In 2013 China started the Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the New Silk Road, an attempt

with the Caspian Sea area, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Many consider the region a barrier that has divided the Orthodox Christian and the Muslim world and protected the Middle East, Turkey and Iran from Russian expansion. Today the North Caucasus continues to play this fundamental and decisive role of protection and division, so its control remains one of the primary goals of the Russian Federation.

Due to its geostrategic centrality, the Russian Federation needs to maintain its control over the North Caucasus. Since the '90s, the Kremlin has faced local ethnonationalist movements, first among all the Chechen requests for independence which culminated in two conflicts, and then terrorist activities and jihadist propaganda that have undermined regional stability and development and threatened entire Russian territory. The Kremlin's necessity to control the region affects the Russian political discourse and influences jihadist narrative and propaganda. Therefore, the jihadist propaganda in the Russian language on the Ukraine conflict as the Chechen battalions' support to the Ukrainian armed forces have links to the North Caucasus and represent a potential threat to the Russian central authority.

THE CONFLICT NARRATIVE OF KAVKAZCENTER AND CHECHENINFO

The web portals Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo have often discussed the conflict in Ukraine and supported Kyiv's resistance against Moscow. Since the Kremlin considers Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo as means of propaganda for different terrorist groups operating in Russia and the post-Soviet space because they depict Moscow as an enemy of the Muslim community, an investigation of their narrative might provide valuable information regarding the possible support or link between North Caucasian jihadist organisations and Chechen fighters in Ukraine.

Kavkazcenter⁴ has found space in academic and scientific investigations since the beginning of its activities and the Kremlin's accusation of being a terrorist portal which supported local North Caucasian militancy and terrorist groups. Kavkazcenter started its activity in 1999 during the outbreak of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). From the beginning, the portal's managers declared that they wanted to create a media agency to provide information about the events of the Chechen

to create a commercial and human interconnection between Europe and Asia. This strategy is composed by the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. At the beginning this initiative was called One Belt, One Road but in mid-2016 the Chinese decided to change its name in Belt and Road Initiative.

4 Link: www.kavkazcenter.com.

conflict, overcoming the Moscow narrative labelled as ‘propagandistic’ and ‘false’. Although scholars and specialists do not entirely agree on whether to call Kavkazcenter a pro-terrorism portal, a connection between the website managers and the exponents of ImaratKavkaz (Caucasus Emirate) has been demonstrated in the past (Hann 2014; Dobaev and Cherevko 2017; Bifulchi 2021).⁵

Compared with Kavkazcenter, ChechenInfo⁶ is the official information agency of ImaratKavkaz - VilayatNokhchichoy, which published its first post in April 2014. Looking at the website structure and posts’ chronology, ChechenInfo publishes original materials, external articles, and sources that might support VilayatNokhchichoy’s cause and the propaganda message.

Both websites cite each other as sources for their articles. Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo have followed and analysed Kadyrovtsy’s presence in the Ukraine conflict and Moscow’s military operation in the Ukraine territory, using their articles and posts to interest and spread their messages among the North Caucasians and Russian Muslims.

On February 22nd, 2022, when Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the decree to recognise Donetsk and Lugansk (“Russia Recognised the Independence of Donetsk and Lugansk” 2022), Kavkazcenter published an interview with Abu Hamza, the emir of the Mujahidīn-Muhajir (fighters-migrants) of ImaratKavkaz – VilayatNokhchichoy. Abu Hamza described Kadyrov as Putin’s “personal project” and accused Moscow of using the “Kadyrov gang” (kadyrovtsy) to pursue its purposes according to his will and personal desires. Abu Hamza defined the Chechen leader as “one of the many Putin puppets who follow the Russian president on every mission.” ImaratKavkaz – VilayatNokhchichoy’s emir also commented on the news about the presence of 300-500 Chechen fighters on the Ukrainian territory and the eventuality that Moscow could have used

5 The Russian central authority considers *ImaratKavkaz* (Emirate of the Caucasus) a terrorist group that has organised attacks against Russian and North Caucasian civilians and military personnel. The Caucasus Emirate was composed of: *VilayatNokhchichoy* (Chechnya), *VilayatGalğayçö* (Ingushetia and North Ossetia), *VilayatCherkessia*, *Vilayat Dagestan*, *Vilayat of Kabarda, Balkar (Kabardino-Balkaria)* and *Karachay* (large area of Caraciai-Circaxia), *VilayatNogay* (areas inhabited by Nogai in the Territory of Stavropol). In 2007, Doku Umarov, the self-proclaimed emir of *ImaratKavkaz*, founded the Caucasus Emirate with the final goal to establish an Islamic state in the North Caucasus based on the *shari’a* (Islamic law). During the years, Kavkazcenter has published press releases and videos of the Caucasus Emirate and demonstrated its connections with some members of the Caucasus Emirate. Between 2013 and 2015, *ImaratKavkaz* saw a strong downsizing when Russian forces eliminated the leadership of the group (including Doku Umarov) pushing some main figures of the North Caucasian terrorist scene to swear allegiance to the Islamic State giving life to the *Vilayat Kavkaz* (Caucasus Province). The Russian Federation has repeatedly worked to close Kavkazcenter, whose server has been located in the Baltic countries and also in Sweden.

6 Link: www.checheninfo.com

more North Caucasian soldiers to fight the Ukrainian army. Regarding the possible involvement of the Chechen Diaspora in Ukraine, Abu Hamza stressed that “There is no Islamic basis in this participation, except for the situation where a mutually beneficial agreement with specific obligations between Caucasian volunteers and the highest authorities of Ukraine will be concluded. In this case, participation in hostilities is allowed because Ukraine and the Muslims of the Caucasus have only one enemy - Russia. Caucasians (Chechens) living in Ukraine have a different situation; they have property, relatives and families there. They are obliged to defend their home, honour and homeland on a par with Ukrainians. They are obliged to fight on the side of Ukraine against the aggressor.” (Kavkazcenter 2022a).

On February 28th, 2022, a few days after the beginning of the conflict, Kavkazcenter published a video where Abu Hamza, speaking in the Chechen language, labelled kadyrovtsy as “Putin’s slaves” and “infidels” who “...sold everything to the Russian infidels: their honour, people, religion, and homeland.”. In a 7-minutes video, Abu Hamza emphasised that sending Chechen troops to Ukraine is part of the bigger Kremlin’s strategy to reduce the number of Chechen fighters who might wage war against Russia in the future and free their motherland. The emir of Imeretia – Vilayat Nokhchichoy, also accused Ramzan Kadyrov of having transformed Chechnya into a Russian concentration camp isolated from the rest of the world; therefore, the international community has become hostile against the Chechens due to Kadyrov’s domestic policy and support to Moscow (Svobodnij Kavkaz 2022b).

Usually, it is possible to watch Abu Hamza’s videos on the YouTube channel Svobodnij Kavkaz (Free Caucasus), which collect videos and messages from currently and previously leaders of the Caucasus Emirate and the North Caucasian militancy. Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo have recently commented, reported, or published several videos firstly broadcasted on the Svobodnij Kavkaz YouTube channel. For instance, the channel posted Abu Hamza’s tape where the emir attacked what he called “Kadyrov’s shameless mullah, Salah Mezhiev” for declaring jihad in Putin’s name and thus allowing the participation of Chechen soldiers in the conflict in Ukraine in support of the Russian armed forces. Abu Hamza, urging Salah Mezhiev to meet him in Turkey to discuss the reasons for his statements, stated in his video message that “The deceptive rogue (Salah Mezhiev) agreed that the dirty murderer of Muslims, the executioner of Chechen children and women, Putin, who publicly declared that he would fight with Allah, can almost be considered the ‘caliph of the Islamic State’” (Svobodnij Kavkaz 2022a),

Kavkazcenter published an interview with Sheikh Hasan al-Zabadi who reiterated that the Russian Federation is the greatest enemy of Islam and Muslims. Al-Zabadi emphasised that “Currently it is the duty of Muslims, particularly in Ukraine, to repel the aggression of our traditional enemy: Russia. This enemy is attacking Islam and Muslims today, just as it did before” (Kavkazcenter 2022b).

Kavkazcenter also distributed the interview with Shaykh Abu Qatada al-Filastini⁷, who exalted the Chechen jihad and the figure of Shamil Basayev, whose “example still gives rise to heroes in the ummah, gives rise to the Mujāhidīn”⁸. Al-Filastini concluded the interview by declaring that “Chechnya was a place where great events took place, a great exchange of believers with Allah, a real downfall, a legend! This was the greatest jihad in which Allah exalted men and allowed them to crush (Russia), the state of the criminals, inflicting such damage on them that none of the larger states could inflict on them” (Kavkazcenter 2022c).

On the one hand, at the beginning of the Ukraine conflict, Kavkazcenter published articles, news and interviews which defamed Chechen soldiers who were fighting against the Ukrainian forces and provided clarification about why the Chechens who live in Ukraine might conduct jihad against the Russians. On the other hand, ChechenInfo tried to convince the Russian Muslims to take arms against Mosco because the Kremlin and Putin are the “greatest enemy” of the Muslim society.

In a bilingual article (Russian/Arabic) published towards the end of February reporting what was defined as a “stray message” sent to the editorial staff, ChechenInfo stressed that “... it is currently the duty of Muslims, particularly in Ukraine, to repel the aggression of our traditional enemy: Russia. This enemy is attacking Islam and Muslims today, just as before. Muslims must persevere in reining in the enemy, wherever he may be, taking advantage of every lawful opportunity from the point of view of the shari’a. Islam and Muslims have no greater enemies than Russia. In particular, if Muslims have the opportunity to coordinate with a government hostile to the aggressor, even non-Islamic, to protect themselves from Muslims (the Chechens), as well as to take revenge on

7 Abū Qatāda al-Filāstīnī, born in Bethlehem in 1960, is a Muslim cleric of Jordanian-Palestinian origin accused of being in contact with or belonging to *al-Qaida*.

8 Shamil Basayev was a Russian soldier, terrorist and politician who fought the first and second Chechen wars as an Islamist militant and Chechen independence leader, adopting the name of ‘AbdAllāH Shāmīl Abu Idrīs al-Bassī. During the two Chechen wars Shamil Basayev adopted guerrilla warfare tactics and terrorist attacks to influence the Russian and international public opinion. Indeed, according to Russian security forces, he was behind the attacks of Dubrovka Theater in 2002 and the No. 1 School in Beslan in 2004. He was killed on July 10th 2006, in an explosion in the town of Ekazhevo in the Republic of Ingushetia.

an old Bolshevik enemy, every time the opportunity arises, it must be used". This paragraph underlined the idea that the Russian Muslims and every Muslim in the world should ally with the Ukrainian Government, even if not Muslim, in the fight against Russia and Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov. Looking at the history of Islam, also the Prophet Muhammad fought with the non-Muslims in the battles of Badr and Uhud against the Meccan enemies, who were friends and relatives of some of the Prophet's companions. Thus, in this framework, ChechenInfo saw an alliance between Muslim Chechens and Orthodox Ukrainian as a possible and helpful strategy against the common enemy (ChechenInfo 2022).

These articles and interviews might relate to several posts, images, and videos spread among Twitter and Facebook accounts and YouTube and Telegram channels which painted Russia as the greatest danger and enemy of the Muslim ummah and Islam against whom Chechens and North Caucasians as every Russian Muslim should fight "in the path of Allah". According to Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo narrative, Russia is an adversary that oppressed Muslim believers in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Bashkiria, Tatarstan, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Egypt. Therefore, these portals considered legitimate that all Muslims, especially those living in Russia, can fight against the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

THE DZHOKHAR DUDAYEV AND SHEIKH MANSUR BATTALIONS OPERATING IN UKRAINE

Since 2014, Chechen fighters have operated in Ukraine by supporting Kyiv's army in Donbas among the ranks of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion and Sheikh Mansur Battalion. The Ukrainian Government allowed Chechen fighters' participation in the military conflict against pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, especially when, in 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree on a simplified procedure for obtaining Ukrainian citizenship even for those who "participate in counter-terrorism operation in eastern Ukraine, ensure the national security of Ukraine or discourage the aggression of the Russian Federation in some areas of Donetsk and Lugansk."

On this issue, before the beginning of the conflict, several Chechens were subjected to sanctions or restrictions on the process of obtaining citizenship due to the Kremlin's request for extradition. By contrast, since February 2022, the Ukrainian Government has changed its approach by allowing the Chechens to live in the Ukrainian sovereign territory and fight in support of Kyiv's army in Donbas. Among these people there are

the Chechen soldiers who fight in the ranks of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion and Shaykh Mansur Battalion (Belov 2022; ChechenjaSegodnja 2022).

THE DZHOKHAR DUDAYEV BATTALION

The International Peacekeeping Battalion, named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, is defined as a voluntary non-governmental armed formation that takes part in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine alongside the Ukrainian security forces. It is mainly composed of Chechens who emigrated from Russia after the Second Chechen Conflict (1999-2009). Among its ranks, there are also volunteers from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Sweden, England, Norway, Denmark, France, Austria, and Finland (Korrespondent 2014).⁹

The battalion is named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, the first president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, killed in 1996 by the Russian armed forces. In 2014, in Denmark, the social and political movement SvobodnjKavkaz (Free Caucasus) established the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion to create an armed group capable of taking part in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Currently, the Chechen activist Adam Osmaev is the battalion leader. Russian authorities accused Osmaev of attempting to assassinate Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2017, according to Russian and Western sources, Osmaev managed to escape an attack in Kyiv, where his wife was killed (“Batal’on Im. Dudaeva Vozglavil Chechenec, Obvinjaemyj v Pokushenii Na Putina” 2015).

In the past, among its ranks, the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion also included Isa Munaev, a Chechen commander who fought in both the First Chechen War (1994-1996) and the Second Chechen War (1999-2009). After fighting the Russian troops in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, Isa Munaev received political asylum in Denmark, where he created the movement SvobodnjKavkaz. In 2014, after the establishment of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, Isa Munaev went to Ukraine and fought against pro-Russian separatist forces of Donetsk and Lugansk until February 1st, 2015, when he died in the battle of Debaltseve (Muradov and Sokolovskaja 2015).

Russian sources reported that among the creators or supporters of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion there are: Sergey Melnikoff, an activist and photographer with US citizenship, awarded the Order of Heroes of

⁹ The Second Chechen Conflict (1999-2009) broke out following a series of organized attacks in Russia that recorded a high number of civilian casualties has often been defined by Moscow as an anti-terrorist operation linked to the global fight against terrorism launched by the United States.

the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria; Isa Sadigov, a military leader and an Azerbaijani public and political figure; Nureddin Ismailov, a former commander of the Boz Qurd detachment (Gray Wolves); Shamil Tsuneoka Tanaka, a Japanese journalist who converted to the Muslim religion in 2001 and took part in the clashes in the Kodori Gorge; Hasan Isaev, also known as Kazbich Chechenskiy (ChechenNews 2017).

In recent years, the Dzhokar Dudayev Battalion has released several videos and messages via its media channels and social networks to draw attention to its activities and influence the Chechen and Muslim communities. In a video published in February 2022, Adam Osmaev declared that it was necessary to join forces against “the terror suffered by the Chechen people carried out with the tacit consensus of Russian President Vladimir Putin”. He also added that the Chechens living in Turkey and Europe could have joined the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion in the fight against the Russian forces when the situation on Ukrainian soil would have been stable. In addition, Osmaev addressed Chechen soldiers’ parents who fought for the Russian armed forces inviting them to urge their sons to go back home and abandon “the army of the empire that killed their people (Magomedov 2022).

SHAYKH MANSUR BATTALION

The Shaykh Mansur International Peacekeeping Battalion is considered a voluntary, non-governmental organisation that takes part in the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine alongside the Ukrainian security forces. The military group mainly consisted of Chechens who emigrated from Russia after the Chechen wars. The battalion is named after *Shaykh Mansur Ushurma*, who led the resistance against the Russian expansionism of Tsarina Catherine the Great during the late eighteenth century. The figure of *Sheikh Mansur* remains a symbol of resistance to the external invasion both in Chechnya and the entire North Caucasian region. Indeed, the North Caucasian jihadist propaganda has often used *Shaykh Mansur* as Imam Shamil to revoke unity and urge Muslims to take up arms against the Russian central authority (Bifolchi 2022c, 39-41).

Muslim Cheberloevsky is the battalion leader. In February 2022, he published a video to confirm that he was fighting with his Chechen comrades in Ukraine against the Russian armed forces. In addition, Cheberloevsky accused *kadyrovtsy* and other Chechens who fight for the Russian Federation of misrepresenting the Chechen people. He stressed that “Chechens have no enmity with Ukrainians. I am sure that the participation of Chechens in military aggression on someone’s side goes

against the national interests of the Chechen republic and its people. Those who want to support Ukrainians and express their protest [...] against Russia's actions should do so in peaceful demonstrations in the squares of the cities where they live"(NovostiOdessi 2022).

The battalion has its Facebook page and a significant presence on social networks. At the end of March 2022, the *Shaykh* Mansur Battalion published a video that exalted an incursion conducted against the Russian armed forces in a village near the Ukrainian capital(Maskhadov 2022).

CONCLUSION

We define geopolitical risk as the danger associated with wars, terrorist attacks and state tensions (Caldara and Iacovello 2018, pag.2). The Ukraine conflict has raised the geopolitical risk in Europe, especially due to foreign fighters' presence in military operations on the Ukrainian soil thanks to the Kyiv's "international legion".

Jihadist propaganda and terrorist organisations might exploit the Ukraine conflict to convey their message and reach a broader audience. This framework includes portals such as Kavkazcenter and ChechenInfo, and foreign military groups operating in Ukraine, such as the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion and *Shaykh* Mansur Battalion, that might become the fertile ground for the jihadist recruiting campaign.

Due to its strategic location, Ukraine might become a 'bridge' between Europe and Asia, particularly the Middle East, for jihadist and terrorist groups. The vacuum of power registered on Ukrainian soil due to the conflict and Kyiv's strategy to use foreign fighters and mercenaries against the Russians might push terrorist combatants to join the so-called "international legion" to acquire Western training and weapons, using them against Europe in violent attacks.

Considering that in 2021 Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree granting citizenship to foreigners fighting against Russia, if Ukraine becomes a member of the European Union, these foreign fighters could quickly move on European soil and carry out targeted attacks. Among them could also be the Chechens and the North Caucasian fighters who currently are among the ranks of Dzhokhar Dudayev and Shaykh Mansur battalions or other people that Kavkazcenter or ChechenInfo exhorted to join the fight in Ukraine as "truly Muslim believers".

Since the propaganda aims to weaken or destroy the Russian Federation, this eventuality will increase the geopolitical risk associated with the proliferation of jihadist groups, which see Moscow as their first enemy.

Furthermore, due to the consistent presence of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Europe, especially the Chechens, the European Union cannot underestimate the threat posed by jihadist propaganda in Russian related to the Ukraine conflict. Even though articles, videos, and messages published on Kavkazcenter, ChechenInfo, and other social media channels are a direct threat to Moscow, in the past, these websites have also targeted Brussels accusing the European Union of oppressing Muslim believers.

In this perspective, the European Union cannot overlook the impact that jihadist propaganda in the Russian language can have on the Chechen and North Caucasian Diaspora present in Europe. In contrast, the Ukrainian Government considers heroes those people who are on Russia's terrorist lists. Therefore, after the end of the conflict, these foreign fighters might stay in Europe and organise the activities of the Caucasus Emirate, al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, increasing the European geopolitical risk.

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