

Russia: The spine of the Caucasus

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Villages in Dagestan are showing the rest of Russia how to resist the draft

Putin's "partial mobilisation" in Russia continues — according to official statements, some 300,000 Russian nationals will be drafted and sent to the frontline in Ukraine. In a number of Russian regions, however — especially in villages and small towns — the mobilisation is not so "partial", but rather total. Shortly after the draft began, Russia's republic of Dagestan in the North Caucasus revolted — so far, close to 300 of its natives have been killed in the war.

Last Sunday, dozens of people in the small Dagestani village of Endirey took to the streets demanding an end to the draft and the call-up of their relatives to the war in Ukraine. The anti-war rally then spread to Makhachkala, where protesters blocked a federal highway.

Novaya Gazeta. Europe tells the story of what happened in Dagestan over the past weekend.

Dagestan reacted immediately to Putin's mobilisation order. The day after Putin's announcement, dozens of men from the village of Babayurt on the border with Chechnya blocked a federal highway and came to the local military registration and enlistment office to protest against the draft. At the same time, news about the draft summons that Dagestanis have been receiving bombarded local media

Akhmet [name changed on request — **editor's note**], a 24-year-old Dagestan native and a journalism graduate from one of Moscow's universities, told *Novaya Gazeta. Europe* that he had received an enlistment notice on 22 September. The young man had no prior military experience, nor had he served in the army as a conscript. Akhmet had merely completed a two-year training course at the university's military department, specialising in the use of reconnaissance ground units, where he was promoted to the rank of sergeant. All his coursemates also took part in his university's military training, but only he — a Dagestani — was called up.

"First there was a rumour on Telegram that [the Kremlin] was going to announce a draft. Then I had an inside tip from my friends in the authorities that the first to be drafted were people from the Caucasus and the far-flung regions [of Russia]. When I read that, I acted immediately: without waiting for a summons, I left for Baku [in Azerbaijan — translator's note]. In Dagestan, they take people away in droves, without any formalities like the mandatory signatures on draft notices and summonses.

I know that in Kaspiysk, for example, the enlistment office and the police took away all the men who happened to be on the street at the time, and then the enlistment office was told who could be drafted and who couldn't. On the 22nd, a district police officer came to my place of registration in Makhachkala, and handed my parents a summons in my name. My lawyers and my parents are now dealing with the situation. In theory, I shouldn't have been called up, because I haven't served in the army and I don't have any [military] experience. They shouldn't take random people, what kind of a scout commander could I possibly make? I'd get everyone killed and give away all the intelligence.

The summons that I got was hardly a mistake though: [Russia's Defence Minister] Shoigu said that if the army lacked any specialisations, additional recruits would be brought in from the reserves. That statement made me leave," says Akhmet.

Dagestani Telegram channels are keeping a close eye on the number of people drafted into the mobilisation army. For example, the Tut Dagestan Telegram channel reported that 110 men from the village of Endirey, with a population of 8,000, were drafted. On 25 September, Endirey locals staged a spontaneous protest against the draft by blocking the Khasavyurt-Makhachkala highway and demanding "to stop sending men for slaughter".

Police officers arrived almost immediately, clashing with local residents and firing warning shots into the air, despite the fact that women, the elderly and children were among the protesters.

Videos from Endirey spread like wildfire, and administrators of local Telegram channels began urging people to gather in Makhachkala, where a celebration of the city's 165th anniversary was due to take place on the same day. During the day, dozens of protesters, most of them women, streamed into the centre of the Dagestani capital. Almost immediately, clashes broke out between the protesters and the police. A video from the scene shows law enforcement (some of them in civilian clothes) beating women and men, who in turn get hit back by protesters chanting "No to war!", "We are for peace!" and "Our sons are not cannon fodder". The women tried to convince the police that Russia was killing innocent people in Ukraine and that a person who dies in such a war cannot be considered a shahid [a believer taking a martyr's death fighting in the name of Allah — **editor's note**].

It is this rhetoric that is currently promoted by official Dagestani religious figures. For example, the chairman of the republic's Muftiate [traditional representative bodies of Muslims in the North Caucasus and elsewhere — **translator's note**], Mukhammad Mairanov, claimed that a Dagestani killed in this war would become a shahid and go straight to heaven.

Famous Dagestani preachers Abu-Umar Sasitlinsky [Israil Akhmednabiyev by birth — **editor's note**] and Abdullakh Kosteksky [Abdulla Magomedov by birth — **editor's note**] began actively criticizing the pro-government Dagestani Muslim religious board. Sasitlinsky has been living in the Republic of Niger in West Africa for several years.

In January 2014, the Russian government initiated several criminal investigations against Sasitlinsky — according to the FSB, he had established the Muhajiroun charitable foundation, which he then used to allegedly finance terrorist organisations. Abu-Umar himself has claimed that money from the foundation was spent on building wells, educational and sports facilities in Africa. In June 2019, Abdulmumin Gadzhiyev, editor of the newspaper Chernovik, was detained in Makhachkala. He was prosecuted for financing terrorist activities — more specifically, for transferring money to Sasitlinsky's accounts.

Memorial [one of Russia's oldest human rights organisations, now defunct — **translator's note**] has recognised Gadzhiyev as a political prisoner. Abdullakh Kosteksky is currently living in Turkey and is wanted in Russia for "public justification of terrorism". Both preachers are very popular with local youth, with half a million followers each on Instagram alone.

"Not a single Ukrainian has called us 'churkas' [literally '**block of wood**', it is an ethnic slur for someone from the Caucasus or Central Asia — **translator's note**]. Muslims feel much safer in Ukraine. Stop this lawlessness, don't send us [to war], we were churkas for you yesterday. Muslims, come out on the streets, do not let your children be taken away. People, question your imams who told you that you can go to this war. They are betraying people, they will not be forgiven for any of

this. You [pro-Kremlin imams] will be cursed by generations, fear Allah! What is the point of sending people to kill others in a war where no one has said a bad word to you? What is the point of jihad here? It is better to starve, to be malnourished, but to be free. Men of Dagestan, take to the streets! They may hit you with a baton, but you will be proud in the future because you saved someone's life. Caucasus, wake up!" — Abu-Umar Sasitlinsky said in a joint live broadcast with Kosteksky on Instagram. Snippets from that broadcast immediately went viral in local Telegram feeds.

"I wanted to once again appeal to the relatives of those who are fighting. Those who are fighting are a disgrace to your tukhum [family commune — editor's note]! Why don't you stop them? History will remember their names and faces, will you not be ashamed? Stop them now!" — urged Abdullah Kosteksky.

Meanwhile, at the rally, security forces brutally detained protesters, mostly men.

One of the clips shows a policeman beating a man who is already being led by two security guards under his arms. "Let him go one-on-one," the woman behind the camera urges.

Amina Magomedova, a journalist with local newspaper Chernovik, told *Novaya Gazeta. Europe* that, according to her calculations, around 300 protesters had gathered in the centre of Makhachkala. The reporter was present at the rally — during a telephone conversation with the Magomedova, shrieks of women being detained could be heard in the background:

"The women have said they don't want to send their sons and their husbands to the 'special operation'. Violent arrests began when the police arrived. The cops beat people up and threw them into police vans. The women actively tried to prevent that. One of the women was aggressively pushed by a police officer right in front of my eyes. They tried to take away my phone twice and interfered with my reporting. They asked me to get into a police car, but I refused. I said that I had done nothing illegal, I was just recording what was happening, fulfilling my journalistic duty. Do you hear the screams? There's a scuffle here, and riots."

Novaya Gazeta. Europe managed to speak with Said [name changed on request — **editor's note**], who was detained by security forces and tasered in a police car. According to him, local police had blocked the central streets, where a festive concert in honour of the city day was taking place parallel to the riots.

"My girlfriend and I first went to the square and saw the festivities, although even there, women were shouting 'No to War'. We noticed that police buses were coming from the square in the direction of the Puppet Theatre. We saw that something was clearly happening there and we went over to take a look. That's when [the police] started beating a woman who was protesting — many onlookers lost their nerve and started defending her and shouting slogans. Then the police started shooting to scare them away. But it didn't work. We were standing close by and filming the whole thing. There were lots of cops in plain clothes, and that's what got me arrested in the end," Said says.

He was detained by plainclothes officers while he was taking photographs of the demonstration. According to Said, he was taken to a police station and asked to hand over his phone:

"I refused to give the phone back, [a cop] started beating me, then hit me on the leg with a taser. It turns out it doesn't hurt that much. I still wouldn't give it back, he started hitting me in the arm with the taser, apparently hitting the phone some more, as the phone got a bit messed up.

Then he pulled out the pepper spray. I said, 'Don't, OK, I'll give it to you. Don't do that.' I

gave it to him, because I couldn't breathe there even without the pepper spray. I gave him the phone."

Said and the other detainees were taken to a police station in Makhachkala's Leninsky district. Said and the rest of the detainees were taken to the Leninsky District Police Station near Rasul Gamzatov Avenue, where the protest action was taking place. According to the young man, two people were delivered there approximately once every five minutes.

During the time Said was at the station, about 50 detainees, mostly men, were transferred to other police stations. Most of them were released on the same day and issued administrative charges of "violating the established order of organising or holding a meeting, rally, demonstration, march or picket". Five were told that they had "assaulted officers" which would lead to criminal proceedings. Several journalists, meanwhile, were left in a special detention facility for two days.

The detainees were forced to undergo fingerprinting. The police, who saw that Said's fingerprints were already in the database, first asked him if he had been detained before and then asked if he had served in the army. The young man replied that his fingerprints were there precisely because he did conscript service.

"They asked questions about whether I supported the government's 'special operation'. I answered that yes, I supported it, as there was no point in arguing with them. Then they asked me if I would dodge the draft if I got a summons — I said no. When we were being interrogated, a military enlistment officer came in and asked if any of us had served. I said yes, but I have a deferment, as I take care of my disabled parents. He replied that he was not interested, and handed me a summons to sign. At that moment, other people came in, he was distracted by the conversation with them, and I just quietly slipped the summons into my pocket and everyone forgot about it," Said said.

According to a Chernovik journalist, not a single member of the local administration came out to the protesters during the whole day, as the officials were occupied at the anniversary concert. By nightfall, fireworks started going off across the city. A total of 101 people were detained in Makhachkala on 25 September.

The following day, the protests continued to spread: people began to gather not only in Makhachkala, but also in another major Dagestani city, Khasavyurt. Video footage from Khasavyurt shows security forces beating and violently detaining protesters.

Amid the protests in Dagestan, regional head Sergey Melikov said that "mistakes were made" at the start of the draft and urged residents who had their rights violated to contact the republic's military enlistment office.

"If people who were not on the list were drafted, including students, fathers of large families with young children and guys who had never held a gun in their lives, then those mistakes should be immediately corrected. I know that there were such mistakes at the very beginning of the draft," Melikov wrote on Telegram.

Fariza Dudarova

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