

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	359
Land:	Rusland
Kilde:	Jamestown Foundation
Titel:	Kadyrov Succeeds in Pressuring Moscow to Renew the Military Draft in Chechnya
Udgivet:	25. september 2014
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	5. januar 2015

Kadyrov Succeeds in Pressuring Moscow to Renew the Military Draft in Chechnya

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 11 Issue: 169

September 25, 2014 03:54 PM Age: 69 days

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(Source: FP)

After many years of Chechen government appeals, Russia's Ministry of Defense finally agreed to start drafting Chechen conscripts into the ranks of the Russian armed forces ([vedomosti.ru](#), September 19). This is arguably the development Ramzan Kadyrov has most wanted since the counter-terrorist operation regime in Chechnya was lifted on March 31, 2009 ([RIA Novosti](#), March 26, 2009). Since then, Grozny has tried to convince Moscow to allow Chechens to serve in the Russian army. Twice a year, this would raise concerns among Chechen parents who did not want to send their children to serve in the Russian army. The bulk of the Russian army fought in Chechnya during the Russian-Chechen wars, and most Russian officers have no warm feelings toward Chechens because of this ([Kavkazsky Uzel](#), April 3).

The assertion that Chechens have not been drafted into the Russian army in the past twenty years, however, is not accurate. They were drafted as far back as 2001, when, at the height of the second Russian-Chechen war, 70 young Chechen men were conscripted into the Russian army and sent to serve in the sports squadron of a motorized brigade stationed in the Moscow military district. However, upon their arrival, the Chechens demanded an imam to lead their Friday prayers. Then they were given prayer rugs to pray in the morning and evening. They also refused to dine with anyone else, demanding halal food. Furthermore, the Chechens rejected the orders of their military bosses, regarding the Russian officers as their personal enemies in the Russian-Chechen war. After a series of fistfights, in which the Chechens brutally beat their commanding officers, they finally refused to carry out any other orders. Thus an entire Russian military unit was essentially terrorized by 70 Chechen athletes ([kp.ru](#), January 17, 2002).

Attempts to improve the group's behavior by inviting respected Chechens living in Moscow also did not work. In the end, the officers of the military unit demanded that the Chechens be sent back home as soon as possible, which was eventually done. Following this unsuccessful attempt to use Chechens in the Russian army, Moscow stopped drafting this nationality. The Chechens' behavior ultimately resulted in the Russian army loosening its rules regarding Muslim conscripts during Muslim holidays. On major Islamic holidays, collective prayers were allowed and even the North Caucasians' daily prayers were de facto permitted. Thus,

the Chechens serving in the Russian military in 2001 set new norms regarding the treatment of soldiers who practice Islam in the Russian army.

However, Chechnya's post-war leaders have incessantly continued in their attempts to persuade Moscow to allow Chechens to be drafted into the Russian army. The only Chechen official to oppose this was the republican government's human rights ombudsman, Nurdi Nukhazhiev, who repeatedly spoke out against the idea. "Today's conscripts are children of war and until they undergo appropriate moral-psychological rehabilitation, they cannot be sent to serve in other regions of Russia," he said. "Today, unfortunately, there are phobias against Chechens and xenophobia, and there have been cases of ethnic profiling not only in regard to Chechens, but also Dagestanis. In these circumstances, to morally traumatize conscripts who have not gotten over the war is a very reckless move" ([Kavkazsky Uzel](#), May 23, 2007).

Despite all this, Chechen authorities said in 2011 that they had prepared 7,000 young men for the military draft because the federal authorities had repeatedly voiced concerns about a shortage of conscripts ([specletter.com](#), July 22, 2011). Nevertheless, Russia's defense ministry preferred to experience a lack of draftees rather than endure the headache presented by Chechen conscripts.

A relatively high concentration of North Caucasians has served in the Russian ground forces stationed in central Russia lately, often resulting in the existence of so-called diasporas in the army and clashes between these conscripts and their officers because of cultural differences ([profi-forex.org](#), August 14). As the epicenter of the conflict between the Russian army and the armed radical Islamist resistance in the North Caucasus shifted from Chechnya to Dagestan, a decision was made to stop drafting Dagestanis, as well. The Dagestani leadership was indignant over this decision and sent multiple requests to Moscow to resume the military draft in their republic ([top.rbc.ru](#), November 28, 2012).

After Moscow refused to draft Chechens, Ramzan Kadyrov recreated the system of Soviet-era military commissions and started drafting Chechens into the military units stationed in the republic ([BBC News](#), August 8, 2012). Although the number of Chechens conscripts drafted was in the hundreds rather than the thousands, the military draft campaign was carried out according to Russian law.

By autumn 2014, Chechens will again be drafted into the Russian army. Ramzan Kadyrov and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reached an agreement that only 500 Chechens will be drafted at the initial stage. Kadyrov called this agreement "a great political success" ([kavpolit.com](#), September 19).

Because Moscow was forced to yield to Kadyrov's pressure to renew the draft in the republic, conflicts between Chechen conscripts and Russian officers who fought in the Russian-Chechen wars will likely occur again in the near future. Even during the Soviet period, military service was the sort of experience that often turned Chechens into opponents of the Soviet system. Today, it is possible that Chechens returning from the Russian army could end up replenishing the ranks of the insurgency in the North Caucasus, meaning that Russia itself will have given young North Caucasians military training that may be used against the country in the future.