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VOLUME XIII, ISSUE 6 | June 2022

A Post-Mortem Analysis of Vakha: The Notorious Buryat Wagner Group Mercenary Killed in Ukraine

Jacob Zenn

On June 4, 44-year old Vladimir Andonov Batobolotov, also known as "Vakha," was reportedly killed by a sniper during a battle near Kharkiv, Ukraine, while he was fighting on behalf of Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries (javanews.al, June 7). The well-built ethnic Buryat fighter, whose exploits brought him from Ukraine to Syria and Libya and back to Ukraine, was particularly notable because of the alleged abuses he committed, many of which were captured on video. Indeed, for Ukrainians who remembered him from the first Russian invasion in 2014, Vakha's demise was most likely seen as a sign of relief, even though the Russian war in Ukraine will persist for months, if not years, longer without Vakha.

Vakha first gained notoriety when a picture of him with military fatigues and a mohawk hair style emerged from a Wagner Group base in Qasr bin Gashir, Libya, where

shortly beforehand three members of a family had been executed by "Russian speakers" (bbc.co.uk, August 11, 2021). A number of social media posts, including on Telegram, substantiated that Wagner Group had a presence in and around the Qasr bin Gashir base and at an adjacent detention center (citeam.org, September 27, 2019). Although Vakha denied it was him in the picture from Libya, he was previously seen in a picture on his "Vakha Donbas" social media account with the exact same mohawk haircut in Ukraine pointing to a chalkboard. It had writing on it stating a "plan" to "find and kill them all," presumably referring to Ukrainian soldiers (bbc.co.uk, August 11, 2021).

Compared to his stints in Libya and Ukraine, less is known about Vakha's activities in Syria, although he was reportedly in Deir es-Zur in 2017 (ulan.mk.ru, June 4). This was the location where, on February 7, 2018, U.S. forces killed several dozen Wagner Group members, including several Buryats (osw.waw.pl, February 21, 2018). Vakha, however, seems to have departed from Syria before these airstrikes in order to return to Buryatia and live a "peaceful life."

Upon his return home, he was also awarded two military medals, but he missed the battlefield life, which compelled him to travel to Libya in 2019 (ulan.mk.ru, June 4).

Vakha was unable to leave the combat life because it was all he had known for the 25 years before his death. In 1997, he joined the Russian army, with only a stint away from combat and training in 2005 when he returned to Buryatia to study at Aginsky Pedagogical Trade. He failed to complete his education there and ended up fighting in the Donbas in Ukraine in 2014. This was the start of his subsequent travels in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine again (ulan.mk.ru, June 4).

If Vakha had not initially been inclined to engage in abuses of civilians, things may have begun to change when he was serving under the command of "Olkhon" in the Donbas in 2014 (focus.ua, June 5). Olkhon, whose real name is Maksim Tkhorzhevsky, was a Russian spetsnaz member with prior experience fighting in Chechnya in the 1990s before he came to serve in the Wagner Group in the Donbas in 2014 (informapalm.org, December 4, 2017). While in the Donbas, Olkhon was caught on video whipping a Ukrainian to death (khpg.org, February 17, 2016).

Vakha's death in Ukraine and career before then proved to be representative of the Russian military's ambitious overseas exploits beyond its borderlands. While Vakha survived in Libya and Syria, the intensity of the battles in Ukraine in 2022 have been exceptional and a sniper caught Vakha in one such battle. He is now among the well over 30,000 Russians killed in Ukraine since the invasion commenced in February, and he is also among a growing number of Buryats killed in Ukraine as well (meduza.io, May 11).

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Sheikh Mansur Battalion Commander Muslim Cheberloyevsky: From Chechen Nationalist to Defender of Ukrainian Sovereignty

Aslan Doukaev

Just a year ago, Muslim Cheberloyevsky's life in Ukraine was teetering precariously on the brink of disaster after the country's National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) blacklisted him as a major criminal underworld figure (President.gov.ua, May 14, 2021). For reasons which are still yet to be fully explained, Cheberloyevsky, the commander of the Sheikh Mansur volunteer battalion that had fought alongside Ukraine's government forces since the Donbas conflict erupted in 2014, landed on the NSDC's list of international kingpins and gang bosses (Pravda.in.ua, May 24, 2021; see EDM, August 2, 2021). According to President Volodymyr Zelensky, individuals on the list would be subject to a range of punishments from the blocking of their assets to a ban on entering Ukrainian territory (Facebook.com, May 14, 2021).

Luckily for this Chechen commander, after a groundswell of public outrage accompanied by rumors of Russia seeking to influence Kyiv's decisions, the Ukrainian authorities removed Cheberloyevsky and three of his comrades (alongside dozens of other people) from the sanctions list (Censor.net, October 16, 2021; see EDM, August 2, 2021). NSDC head Oleksiy Danilov admitted that over a hundred individuals, nearly a fifth of the original list, had been targeted "by mistake" (Kyiv Post, October 17, 2021). Cheberloyevsky was apparently one of them.

Cheberloyevsky had every reason to be concerned about getting caught in Kyiv's cross-hairs. Three years earlier, in 2018, the Ukrainian authorities had extradited one of his fighters, Timur Tumgoyev, to Russia, despite calls by the UN Human Rights Committee "to halt Tumgoyev's

extradition pending consideration of his assertion that he would face torture if forcibly returned” ([State.gov](https://www.state.gov), June 1). In Russia, Tumgoyev was, indeed, tortured before being sentenced to 18 years in prison on terrorism charges ([Zaborona.com](https://www.zaborona.com), January 25, 2021).

Early Militancy in Chechnya

Little is known about Cheberloyevsky’s militant career prior to his emergence as an anti-Russian volunteer commander in Ukraine. The few Russian accounts of his earlier life contain inaccuracies and lack balance and substantiation. Muslim Cheberloyevsky, whose real name is Umkhan (Umakhan) Avtayev, was born in 1969, most likely in the village of Prigorodnoye, just outside the Chechen capital of Grozny. He is of the Nizhaloy *teip*, which is an affiliate of the confederation of kinship clans known as Cheberloy (hence the second part of his *nom de guerre*). Until 1991, he served in the Soviet army, but after the failed anti-Gorbachev putsch in August of that year he returned to his homeland to join the popular movement for Chechen independence ([Nv.ua](https://www.nv.ua), April 7).

Contrary to claims by some Russian media, he never served as a bodyguard for General Dzhokhar Dudayev, Chechnya’s independence leader who was killed in 1996 in a Russian missile attack ([EADdaily](https://www.eaddaily.com), May 24, 2021). According to Chechen sources, Cheberloyevsky aligned himself with Vakha Arsanov, a field commander who participated in the defense of Grozny during the First Chechen War and later became the Vice-President of the separatist Chechen Republic of Ichkeria under President Aslan Maskhadov. Arsanov, a controversial and much critiqued figure, not least because some of his decision-making directly undermined Maskhadov, was “seen by Moscow as one of Chechnya’s most radical and odious politicians” ([Monitor](https://www.monitor.com), October 2, 1997).” Arsanov would later be killed in a shoot-out with pro-Russian Chechen forces in 2005, leaving Cheberloyevsky without an influential patron and with no other option

than to seek affiliation with other rebel groups and like-minded militants.

Move to Ukraine

It must have been during the Second Chechen war that Cheberloyevsky became acquainted with the former military commander of Grozny, Isa Munaev, who would later—in exile in Denmark—organize an estimated 500-strong volunteer force to fight with the Ukrainians in the Donbas region ([EDM](https://www.edm.com), July 18, 2014). Cheberloyevsky, at the time an asylum seeker in nearby Sweden, joined the new battalion, named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, in the summer of 2014, but the partnership did not last long. By the end of October, Cheberloyevsky broke away from the Munaev-led group to create his own fighting unit, which was named after the legendary Chechen commander Sheikh Mansur of Aldy, who led a coalition of Caucasian tribes against Catherine the Great’s imperialist push in the 18th century ([Golosichkerii.com](https://www.golosichkerii.com), October 25; [EDM](https://www.edm.com), November 7, 2014).

It is not entirely clear what led to the split between the two veteran fighters. Both subscribed to the view that Russia’s defeat in Ukraine would be beneficial to the Chechen cause and that a victorious Ukraine could become a springboard for independence-minded Chechens to fulfill their own aspirations. “If we succeed in Ukraine, then we can succeed in Chechnya,” Munaev, who would be killed in 2015, asserted ([The Intercept](https://www.theintercept.com), February 27, 2015). Cheberloyevsky’s views, however, were different in one significant respect. Several years ago, he outlined his vision for the future as follows: “[W]e want to see a free, independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, and the entire Caucasus, and by the will of the Almighty, we will achieve this” ([Petrinmazepa.com](https://www.petrinmazepa.com), October 6, 2019).

Although it may not be that obvious at first glance, Cheberloyevsky appears to share the objectives of the Caucasus Emirate, the pan-Caucasus militant group that was

created in 2007 by the then-head of the Chechen insurgent network, Doku Umarov. Back in those days, Munaev, alongside a number of other prominent field commanders, issued a statement distancing themselves from Umarov and his new organization ([RFE/RL](#), October 30, 2007). However, there is no record of Muslim Cheberloyevsky having ever done so. Moreover, Chechen sources suggest that Cheberloyevsky's second-in-command and close confidant, Muslim Idrisov, maintains close ties with the Emirate's adherents who found refuge in Turkey. [1] It is, therefore, highly likely the divisive issue of the Caucasus Emirate was the main reason for the rift between the two volunteer commanders.

Conclusion

Cheberloyevsky refuses to reveal the actual size of his battalion ([Kavkaz Realii](#), March 7). However, Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in 2021 has apparently breathed new life into the unit. The battalion has, for example, taken part in the defense of Kyiv, most likely near Velyka Dymarka in Kyiv Oblast. In mid-May, it was re-deployed "in the direction of Kharkiv" ([YouTube](#), May 14).

From its precarious beginnings as a front-line volunteer group to its fast growing recognition as a dedicated and effective fighting force, the Sheikh Mansur battalion has become something of a permanent fixture of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Its commander, Muslim Cheberloyevsky, invariably sports a luxuriant beard and remains clad in Fidel Castro-style cap and fatigues. He has become one of the most recognizable foreign faces of the conflict.

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Notes

[1] Author's online interview with a Chechen journalist and a source in Kyiv, both of whom requested anonymity as the

information is not publicly available, June 1.

Denys Prokopenko: The Rise, Capture, and Coming Show Trial of Ukraine's Azov Regiment Commander

Lucas Webber

Introduction

There is a hackneyed but true saying that one man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Since the Russians invaded Ukraine in February, this duality has been most prominently embodied by Azov Regiment Commander Denys "Redis" Prokopenko. To many Ukraine supporters, he is a brave national hero and defender of the Ukrainian homeland, while for large segments of the global far-right movement, he is an archetype of white resistance to the Russian government and its sympathizers. To Russia, however, he is the commander of a Nazi fighting force and a war criminal accused of playing a lead role in the "genocide" against Russian speakers in the Donbas since 2014, which Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted in his February 24 declaration of a "special military operation" in Ukraine ([TASS](#), March 5).

In the first hours of the Russian war in Ukraine in February, a self-recorded video emerged and went viral of then little-known Prokopenko confidently and belligerently goading the Russian invaders by declaring that "the Azov Regiment...will fight to the last drop of blood" to defend the port city of Mariupol and that his men would, "destroy the Russians in the air, on land, and on the water" ([Telegram/Azov Mariupol](#), February 24). The video attracted a great deal of attention on pro-Azov Telegram channels and with supporters elsewhere on the internet. From the beginning of the siege of Mariupol to

the battle's denouncement, Prokopenko periodically released these types of video updates, which were widely shared online.

For nearly 90 days, the "Defenders of Mariupol" put up a legendary level of resistance to Russia's attempt to seize the city. Far-right supporters in Cyprus accordingly created graffiti art comparing Azov to the vastly outmatched Spartans during the Battle of Thermopylae ([Telegram/Ultras Not Reds](#), May 19). Because of the stoic and charismatic leadership of Prokopenko, and the willingness of his fighters to continue battling the Russians for so long and hard while being completely surrounded in the Azovstal steel factory and under relentless ground assault and ordnance bombardment, Prokopenko became an icon and symbol of white racial resistance to much of the global far right.

Prokopenko's Combat Career

Although Prokopenko's profile went truly global with Azov's performance against the Russian invaders in Mariupol, he had reached his position of leadership by fighting in the Donbas since 2014. There he climbed the ranks to ultimately take command of a platoon and a company of the Azov Regiment. Prior to 2014, however, Prokopenko was a Dynamo Kyiv soccer team hooligan ([Army Inform](#), March 23). He does not quite fit the typical hooligan stereotype though because he is an athlete, well-educated, and fluent in multiple languages. For example, he received a degree from the Department of Germanic Philology at Kyiv National Linguistic University with a focus on teaching English.

Prokopenko is ethnically part Finnic Karelian and comes from an anti-Russian/Soviet warrior lineage. His grandfather was the only member of his family to survive the Winter War of 1939-1940 ([Army Inform](#), March 23). He lived up to this family legacy when he was promoted to an Azov leadership position in 2017 and received the Order of Bohdan

Khmelnitsky III Decree from President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky in 2019. Furthermore, on March 19, he was awarded the title of Hero of Ukraine with the Order of Gold for his battlefield conduct in defense of Mariupol, which is the highest award that the President can bestow upon a citizen of Ukraine ([President.gov.uk](#), March 19).

Prokopenko's battlefield performance, if not also his looks, has resulted in the European far-right making murals, portraits, clothing, and even one video game depicting him in combat ([4Echok](#), May 25; [Twitter/@jmvasquez1974](#), May 12). The Italian ultra-nationalist group Nuovo Fronte Politico also made a video of its members chanting in front of a giant Azov Regiment poster featuring Prokopenko's face ([Telegram/Runic Storm](#), May 14). Far-right supporters of the Azov Regiment would often post a photo of Prokopenko, who appears fit and warrior-like with blond hair and blue eyes, next to the Russian enemies of Azov who they deemed "dysgenic." One example, which was posted by the Misanthropic Division-linked White Lives Matter Telegram channel, compared Prokopenko's photo to a detractor and captioned it as "[Alexander] Duginist Serb Incel vs Ukrainian Azov Chad [alpha male]" ([Telegram/White Lives Matter](#), April 9). In many other instances, Azov supporters would use Prokopenko to make racial comparisons between him and Russian soldiers from non-white minority groups, such as Buryats.

White Resistance: Azov as a Bulwark and Prokopenko as an Icon

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has galvanized segments of the global far-right movement, and online activists and radicals have developed a highly racialized framing of the war. Perhaps the core animating narrative is that of an anti-white, Jewish-controlled, Eurasian Asiatic, and multicultural horde waging a war of imperialism against Ukraine, which is depicted as a racially pure white European

neighbor ([Telegram/Fortress Kyiv](#), May 11); [Telegram/Runic Storm](#), May 15; [Telegram/Forvm 2.0 White Lives Matter](#), May 20). The Russian soldiers are referred to as "orcs [goblins]", "pigs", and "Bolsheviks", while Ukrainian armed forces are presented as defenders of white civilization and European lands ([Telegram/White Lives Matter 2.0](#), April 29). The Azov Regiment is especially exalted by the pro-Ukraine far right as the highest order of white resistance in the face of invasion and, by extension, Prokopenko is extolled as an example of excellence for leading such a force ([Telegram/Forvm 2.0 White Lives Matter](#), April 16).

The Azov Regiment itself is named after the Sea of Azov. The port city of Mariupol, located on the sea's littoral, is considered by some to be the true cradle of the Regiment. However, the Azov Regiment is highly controversial due to its professed ultra-nationalist ideology and neo-Nazi symbology, accusations against it for war crimes, and its reputation for violence against Russian speakers ([TASS](#), March 10). Due to its explicitly pro-white ideology, the Azov Regiment has found the support of many far-right elements around the world since its formal introduction in 2014. Because of this, the Azov Regiment has also attracted international foreign fighters, whom Moscow refers to as "mercenaries" ([Twitter/@nexta_tv](#), March 1).

Conversely, to its enemies, the Azov Regiment has become infamous, and when Russian President Vladimir Putin officially declared the launch of the "special military operation" in Ukraine, his stated war aims included "de-Nazification" and "demilitarization" ([TASS](#), May 18). The Azov Regiment, as the most prominent Ukrainian fighting force with a hard right ideological orientation, naturally became the leading focus of Russian propaganda, with others such as the Right Sector, Freikorps, and Centuria also being targeted ([TASS](#), April 27). This made Prokopenko, as the highest ranking and most well-known figure in Azov, one of the most

desired captives for the Russians and its allied separatists to prosecute for propaganda purposes.

Show Trials for Prokopenko and the Defenders of Mariupol

Russia's campaign against Mariupol had a practical military purpose, which was to capture a major coastal port city and effectively turn the Sea of Azov into a "Russian lake" in support of the strategic naval blockade of Ukraine. However, there was also a symbolic aspect to the operation. Mariupol is the birthplace of the Azov Regiment and contained the bulk of Azov fighters as well as high ranking-leadership figures, such as Prokopenko.

Russia sought to destroy these forces and "de-Nazify" them but also sought to capture some of these fighters alive to make propaganda videos showing their neo-Nazi and Viking/pagan tattoos to the Russian public and the world ([Zenger News](#), May 23). Perhaps most of all, Moscow wanted to detain Azov leaders, such as its top commander, Prokopenko, and his deputy, Svyatoslav "Kalina" Palamar, to prosecute in show trials. On May 16, after nearly 90 days of holding out against the Russians in Mariupol, Prokopenko, looking gaunt and wearing a t-shirt that revealed a previously unseen arm wound, announced that the remaining Ukrainian forces holed up in the tunnels below the Azovstal steel factory served out their mission. This signaled their intent to finally surrender ([Twitter/@Gerashchenko_en](#), May 20).

Russia's propaganda campaign focusing on Prokopenko began immediately after he surrendered along with the last of the remaining militants. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that the "so-called commander of the Azov Nazis, due to the hatred of Mariupol residents and the desire of the townspeople to massacre him for his numerous atrocities, was removed from the territory of the plant in a special armored vehicle" ([Telegram/Russian Ministry of Defence](#), May 20). This tactic

was designed to give the impression that the local population was extremely hostile towards Prokopenko and the Azov forces he commanded. It would set the stage for Russia and the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) to bring them to 'justice' in a series of show trials or some kind of collective criminal process.

Shortly after, on May 24, TASS Russian News Agency reported that the LPR was ready to participate in "a court martial for Ukrainian nationalists from the Azov battalion," citing an interview with LPR's human rights commissioner, Viktoria Serdyukova ([TASS](#), May 24). It was notable that of the "Big 3" leaders who were holding out in Azovstal steel factory — the others besides Prokopenko were Serhiy "Volyna" Volynsky (commander of the 36th Marine Brigade) and Svyatoslav "Kalina" Palamar (Deputy Commander of Azov Regiment) — the media was only given a video of Volynsky's surrender. This perhaps signaled that Russia wants to keep the other Azov Regiment leaders like Prokopenko unseen to build suspense for the show trials ([Telegram/South Front](#), May 20).

Conclusion

The latest update on the Azov leader's status comes from Prokopenko's wife, Kateryna. She has been quite vocal in the media, pressuring the Ukrainian government to free her husband and claiming that she received a brief phone call from her spouse, who described the Azovstal steel factory defenders as being held in "satisfactory" conditions and not subjected to violence. However, he may have been monitored and under duress during the conversation. It is unclear exactly where Prokopenko is being held and his wife has no knowledge of whether fighters from Azovstal steel factory, including Prokopenko, are being taken to Russia ([Ukrinform](#), May 25).

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Kuudaabek uulu Almaz: A Profile of the First Kyrgyz Foreign Fighter in Ukraine

Nurbek Bekmurzaev

On May 14, the State Committee of National Security of Kyrgyzstan (GKNB) launched a criminal case against a Kyrgyz national, who was identified at first with only his initials K.u.A., for his participation in the war in Ukraine ([Kaktus Media](#), May 14). In video footage released by the GKNB on the same day alongside the official statement, a young Kyrgyz man was seen wearing a military uniform, handling weapons, and fighting together with Ukrainian troops against the invading Russian army ([YouTube/Borubek Kudayarov](#), May 14). In what became the first charge filed against a Kyrgyz national for fighting in Ukraine, the GKNB accused K.u.A. of participating "in armed conflicts or hostilities on the territory of a foreign state or undergoing training to commit a terrorist act" ([Kaktus Media](#), May 14). In sum, the authorities charged K.u.A. with the same crime that has been routinely applied to Kyrgyz nationals who joined Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations fighting in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq.

On May 20, K.u.A. revealed his identity as Kuudaabek uulu Almaz. This came in a fiery video message he recorded for the authorities who filed charges against him and for the people of Kyrgyzstan. Almaz lambasted the GKNB for mischaracterizing the war in Ukraine and portraying him as a terrorist in his home country ([YouTube/5ACE](#), May 20).

At first glance, this is a simple story of an ordinary man who decided to fight for a cause he believed was righteous. However, Almaz's case and the way GKNB has

handled it reflects the perilous foreign policy course that the Kyrgyz government has charted so as not to upset Russia and avoid sanctions from the Western European countries and U.S all at the same time. This article explores Almaz's profile by breaking down his video message and examining how the Kyrgyz government has dealt with the war in Ukraine and its citizens fighting on both sides of the conflict.

Almaz' Two Messages About the War in Ukraine

From the GKNB montage, consisting of Almaz's videos shared via Instagram, and Almaz's own video message, it is clear that Almaz went to Ukraine in December 2021 to work as a barber and joined Ukraine's territorial defense units as a volunteer when the war broke out in February. There were two main messages Almaz attempted to convey in his address to the Kyrgyz people. First, he argued Russia is to blame for the senseless war, and Ukrainians are defending their homeland. He stated, "Fascist Russia invaded Ukraine, killing civilians, and having witnessed this lawlessness, and since the truth is on the Ukrainian side, I could not leave because I am a man." He drew historical parallels between Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union and Russia's military aggression towards Ukraine as well. Almaz concluded that "They [the Russian army] are attacking the civilian population of Ukraine, killing children, women and elderly without any reason" ([YouTube/BACE](#), May 20).

Almaz went further to dismantle Russian propaganda and assured to his intended Kyrgyz audience that there were no fascists and neo-Nazis on the Ukrainian side and that there were only Ukrainians defending their homeland. From these explanations conveyed by Almaz, it can be concluded that it was important for him to discuss the war from the Ukrainian point of view and that he deeply cared about explaining that view to the Kyrgyz people and other Russian-speaking people of Central Asia. It

is worth noting that his video message was recorded for and circulated by a Kazakh media source called *BACE*.

The second message that Almaz was determined to convey is that he is not a terrorist. He considered his prosecution by the GKNB to be the result of his activities on social media, which were aimed at exposing "the atrocities committed by the Russian soldiers." Almaz seemed significantly distressed that his family members were being interrogated and were told by the GKNB that he joined a terrorist organization to commit horrific acts. He complained that "the pro-Russian system in my homeland, our pro-Russian government, GKNB, has put me on wanted list and filed charges blaming me of terrorism ([YouTube/BACE](#), May 20)."

It is difficult to deny that Almaz was speaking rationally because Almaz is not the first Kyrgyz national who has gone public about involvement in the war. On May 10, a Kyrgyz national under the pseudonym of Kubanych uulu Dayirbek, who enlisted in the Ukrainian army, gave an interview to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Much like Almaz, Dayirbek went to Ukraine in peacetime in search of work and decided to stay there once the war broke out. Dayirbek stated that "We basically do not take part in clashes, we are engaged in the removal of the wounded from the red zone to safe areas ([Radio Azattyk](#), May 10)." What separates Almaz from Dayirbek and what also got Almaz in trouble with the authorities, however, was the fact that Almaz actively fought against the Russian army and showcased it on social media.

Almaz's video concluded with him blaming the Kyrgyz government for leaving him "without a homeland, without family and without parents." His return home would, therefore, be problematic and risky, since he can end up in prison for up to eight years. "Since there is a criminal case filed against me in Kyrgyzstan, and I am on a wanted list, I have no chance to visit my child, my wife and my family," he noted ([YouTube/BACE](#), May 20).

Kyrgyzstan's Awkward Position on the War in Ukraine

The Kyrgyz government has found itself in a difficult political situation since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The country is too dependent on Russia politically and economically to openly condemn the invasion, but it is still cautious not to openly support it to avoid sanctions from Western European countries and the U.S. The authorities have, meanwhile, chosen a method of suppressing Kyrgyz citizens' open support for Ukraine. A case on point is the story of Almaz. After the GKNB filed charges against him, Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to Ukraine, Idris Kadyrkulov, stated that Almaz is not involved in hostilities directly and only "helps orderlies of the [Ukrainian] territorial defense units" instead ([Kaktus Media](#), May 14). Kadyrkulov also revealed that Almaz declined the embassy's offers to help him return to Kyrgyzstan.

The inconsistency displayed in the explanations by the GKNB, which accused Almaz of terrorism, and Kadyrkulov, who insisted that Almaz is a mere orderly helping wounded soldiers, is emblematic of the way the Kyrgyz government has mishandled the war in Ukraine. After the phone call between Vladimir Putin and Kyrgyzstan's president Sadyr Japarov on February 26, the Kremlin released a statement about Japarov's "expressing support for decisive actions by the Russian side to protect the civilian population of Donbass ([Kremlin's Press Service](#), February 26)." The Kyrgyz summary of the phone call, however, neither confirmed nor rebuffed that interpretation but simply stated that Putin and Japarov "exchanged opinions on international and regional security issues, including the situation unfolding around Ukraine ([Kyrgyz President's Press Service](#), February 26)." Japarov's spokesperson continued this ambivalent messaging by noting that Kyrgyzstan welcomes the resolution of the war "through negotiations to prevent further casualties and destruction" ([24.KG](#), February 26).

The Kyrgyz government has undertaken other actions to implicitly express loyalty to the Kremlin. The most recent example involved the police interrogation of two mountaineers who placed a Ukrainian flag on a Kyrgyz mountain peak that carries the name of Vladimir Putin ([24.KG](#), May 26). An even more striking example of Kyrgyzstan's loyalty to the Kremlin has been its decision not to prosecute Kyrgyz nationals enlisting in the ranks of the Russian army, despite numerous reports that Kyrgyzstani nationals are being recruited into the Russian army in exchange for Russian citizenship ([CabarAsia](#), April 6). The only news about the Kyrgyz fighting on behalf of the Russian army have been reports on the death of three Kyrgyzstan nationals, who all allegedly obtained Russian citizenship before traveling to fight in Ukraine ([Radio Azattyk](#), April 18). All three of Kyrgyzstan's nationals who died in Ukraine have been buried in Kyrgyzstan with the participation of both Russian and Kyrgyz army officials, which raised questions about the alleged Russian citizenship of these soldiers or whether they were Kyrgyz citizens after all and died before they could obtain Russian citizenship.

Conclusions

The story of Almaz is a pebble in the shoe of the Kyrgyz government. Almaz does not recruit other Kyrgyz nationals to join him in Ukraine, but he is still, in fact, breaking the law, albeit for a morally righteous cause according to many Kyrgyz people. His involvement in the war in Ukraine is certainly different from the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, where Kyrgyz nationals have joined jihadist groups. Only time will tell what will happen to Almaz when and if he returns to Kyrgyzstan. If he is put in prison, the international community is likely to draw attention to his case and exert pressure on the authorities to drop it altogether.

Almaz's social media activity also challenges the Russian discourse on the war and forces the authorities to react. The

Secretary of the Security Council of Kyrgyzstan has already warned that Kyrgyz citizens are forbidden from taking part in armed clashes abroad. The GKNB went a step further by filing criminal charges against Almaz. Besides expressing loyalty to the Kremlin with this act, the Kyrgyz government sent a strong message to its citizens in Ukraine and elsewhere attempting to scare them away from plans to fight with Ukrainian troops.

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