

‘You Can’t Trust Putin’: Chechens, Georgians and Belarusians Fighting for Ukraine Warn of Russian Betrayal

By [Joseph Roche](#)

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Benor and the Obone Battalion. **Joseph Roche**

Berdychiv, UKRAINE – Mikhael Dudadiev, 39, known by his war name Benor, is in the small kitchen of a Soviet-era apartment, preparing Zhizhig Galnash, a traditional Chechen dish made of meat, pasta and garlic sauce.

“It reminds me of the dishes from my childhood.”

A thick brown beard frames his face, and his broad shoulders hint at his time on the front lines in Zaporizhzhia. Benor is part of the Obone unit, a division of the Foreign Legion specializing in close combat, mainly composed of Chechen volunteers, and affiliated with the government of Ichkeria (the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic) in exile in Kyiv.

After weeks on the front lines, Benor is enjoying a brief moment of respite in the rear. He dips

large chunks of boiled meat into the garlic sauce and eats them in hearty bites.

Next to him, one of his comrades, Vakha*, a Georgian, pours himself a glass of Coke. Benor is a veteran of the Second Chechen War. Vakha, who fought in the Georgian army, took part in his country's 1993 war against Russian-backed Abkhaz separatists.

In the background, a radio is broadcasting the news:

“Following the phone call between U.S. President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, an American delegation led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio traveled to Riyadh and met with the Russian foreign minister. Volodymyr Zelensky, who was scheduled to visit Riyadh the same day, canceled his flight.”

The two men barely pay attention. They've heard it all before.

The last light of the day lingers on Vakha's face.

“I'm not interested in politics anymore. All I can say is that Russia will never honor its commitments. It never has. Not in Georgia, not in Chechnya, not in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea. So why would it now?” says the 60-year-old.

Having immigrated to Moldova in the 1990s, he joined the Ukrainian army at the very start of the war.

“I don't really know why anymore. I just couldn't sit back and do nothing.”

Since then, his life has been a cycle of frontline battles, training and rotations.

“I don't feel nostalgic for any homeland. I feel at home everywhere — on the front, in a trench, in Kyiv, and even here in Berdychiv,” he laughs.

A fight for a lost homeland

Benor dreams of spending his final days in his homeland. Born in Grozny, he joined the Chechen resistance during the Second Chechen War. He was barely 16.

Borne out of the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in the 1990s, this conflict pitted Chechen Muslim independence fighters, led by Dzhokhar Dudayev (to whom Benor has no family ties), against Russia.

Taking advantage of Russia's weakened post-Soviet power and their region's mountainous terrain, the separatists secured an initial victory, culminating in the Khasavyurt Agreements (1996), which forced a Russian military withdrawal.

However, in 1999, under the pretext of an anti-terrorist operation, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin launched a new military intervention. Divided and under-equipped, the Chechen separatists surrendered in 2009. Since then, Chechnya has been reintegrated into the Russian Federation and is ruled by the Kadyrov clan, a close ally of Moscow.

“Every day was like Bucha,” Benor recalls. “Every day, the Russians would raid our villages and massacre men, women, and children. They killed more than 100,000 people and

destroyed every city in the country.”

Exiled in Norway since 2008, Benor, now married and a father of five, also joined the Ukrainian army in March 2022.

“Only the downfall of Russia will one day allow me to see my homeland again. That’s why I fight.”

Salevi Subotsky, known by his war name Stare, a fighter from Pinsk, Belarus, shares Benor’s view. Though he doesn’t express a particular desire to return home, he knows that Russia, through its ally Alexander Lukashenko — the pro-Russian dictator of Belarus — has sold off his future and forced him into exile.

“I left for economic reasons, not really political ones. First to Switzerland, then to France, where I tried to join the Foreign Legion, and finally to the Netherlands, where I worked on a tulip farm.”

Accompanied by a pitbull, Stare walks with a straight back, running a hand over his shaved head. “I came here because I had Ukrainian friends and saw what Russia was doing.”

Since then, the Belarusian KGB has tried to intimidate his family back home.

“They’ve arrested my relatives multiple times to get information about what I’m doing in Ukraine,” he says. “It’s a corrupt country, completely controlled by Russia. And they want to do the same thing in Ukraine. They want to destroy the Ukrainian language, the culture, and everything that even remotely opposes the Kremlin. And if they can’t install a dictator like Lukashenko in Ukraine, they won’t stop the war. No matter the treaty. Ukrainians should keep on fighting.”

Three years later, neither man expected the war to last this long.

‘You can’t trust Putin’

In a dimly lit room, behind dusty-colored curtains, Adam*, known by his war name Berkhi, another Chechen fighter, focuses on his prayers. Drones and shells sit in a corner. On the couch, several rifles are piled haphazardly.

“We can never trust the Russians. I lost my country because of that so-called peace agreement (the Khasavyurt Accords). History is repeating itself. We won the First Chechen War. They took their time to rearm while dividing us, and in the end, they won. They will try to do the same thing with Ukraine. You can’t trust Putin. He’s a liar and a murderer,” Berkhi says in hesitant French. After living in Belgium, he joined the Ukrainian army in 2016.

For him, Ukraine must keep fighting because this is a matter of survival for Europe. The next target, he believes, will be the Baltic states.

“When I hear talk of negotiations, I get flashbacks to the Chechen peace talks in 1996-1997. A peace treaty with Russia is worth no more than the paper it’s written on,” he says.

Ukraine must be very careful, Benor insists.

“They will try to divide Ukraine, rebuild their army and resources — I’m 100% sure of it,” he continues. “That’s exactly what they did with Chechnya. They will use everything they have to take full control of Ukraine. They will never stop.”

Vakha takes a drag from his cigarette. He, too, knows what the Kremlin’s word is worth.

“They won in 1993, then started again in 2008. Today, Georgia has a pro-Russian president.”

What Trump is offering Russia, Vakha says with frustration, is nothing short of Ukraine’s capitulation. The Russians will never stop.

“When they run out of men, they will send the sick, women, and children into battle if they have to.”

But in a rare moment of optimism, Benor tries to temper the discussion. He argues that Ukraine, with the help of European allies, could also use a ceasefire to rearm and prepare for the next war.

He holds onto the prophecy of Dzhokhar Dudayev, the leader of the Ichkerian independence movement, assassinated by the Russians in 1996, who once declared:

“Russia will fall when the Ukrainian sun rises.”

Benor sighs. “We’ll see.”

**Last names have been withheld for safety reasons.*

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