

# Conflict & Security

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## The False Dawn of Russian Military Reform

David J. Betz and Valeriy G. Volkov

No institution illustrates Russia's post-Soviet troubled times better than its armed forces. What was once the Soviet military juggernaut is now a shrunken and embittered shambles. Russians feel this deterioration in a very direct way because tragedies like the sinking of the Kursk submarine or the continuing debacle in Chechnya are widely reported, and many Russians still depend on the defense sector for their livelihood. On a more personal level, no Russian parent with a son nearing draft-age rests easy nowadays until an exemption certificate or deferment is obtained by hook or by crook. The crisis has also penetrated Western public consciousness in a crude but profound fashion: from Jack Ryan to James Bond, the "rogue" Russian general is a staple nemesis of Hollywood action heroes, only slightly less clichéd than the Colombian drug lord or Islamic terrorist.

The case for the reform of the Russian military has long been clear. The question is: why has so little been achieved thus far? And, in particular, why have the expectations that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, would rebuild and reform the army from its currently appalling state come to naught?

Virtually everyone in Russia agrees that the army is a mess and incapable of meeting the current threats, but there is no agreement as to what exactly those threats are or what strategic setting

**David Betz** is Lecturer in War Studies at King's College London. He is the editor, with John Lowenhardt, of *Army and State in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Cass, 2001).

**Valeriy Volkov** is a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war, and served in the General Staff headquarters. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in 2001. He retired from the Russian army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

would best enable Russia to face them. Questions like “Where does Russia belong?” and “Who are its friends and potential foes?” have proven exceedingly difficult for the Russian politico-military elite to answer. Nor has the top military brass received much help in their search for answers; most people are content to leave the military alone to sort itself out. Russian society has been taught that it should not intervene in matters of the state, where specialized knowledge and secrecy are required. There is, moreover, no tradition in Russia of civilian defense experts, which means that there are few alternative sources of advice for decision-makers beyond the “trade union of the generals.”

Meanwhile, ever since army tanks and commandos brought an end to the parliamentary revolt against then-President Boris Yeltsin in October 1993, the Kremlin has been prepared to accept an army that resists democratic oversight, so long as it does not bridle at presidential control. Given the lack of consensus on a strategic outlook and the political will to impose one, and since the exercise of civilian oversight of the armed forces is narrow and opaque, Russian generals have considerable latitude to thwart decisions they do not like and to distribute the army’s scarce resources in the manner in which they see fit.

The failure of military reform is symptomatic of a more general ailment: Russia’s dysfunctional system of civil-military relations. For more than ten years now, the Russian army has been like a stubborn victim with a gangrenous limb, agonizingly snipping off the worst bits while the infection spreads. In practice, the army receives just enough resources to prevent its complete collapse, but not enough to bring about

reform. The bottom line is that civil-military relations in Russia today are mutually unpleasant—a reality that precludes substantive reform. While soldiers need politicians primarily for money, of which there is never enough, politicians need soldiers only insofar as they advance a particular political agenda. Russia’s political machine sees the army as dispensable in this period of relative peace and stability. It is, therefore, content to leave the armed forces to struggle alone.

### **The “Putin Effect” on Military Reform.**

In late 1999 and early 2000, when Vladimir Putin rose from the ranks of obscurity to the height of the presidency, the fortune of the armed forces also seemed to be on the rise. In the wake of NATO’s enlargement, unilateral intervention in Kosovo, and the outbreak of another war in Chechnya, Putin’s Kremlin began to articulate ideas similar to those held dear by the army. Russia, although smaller than the USSR, still faced a complex of external and internal challenges including international terrorism and regional separatism inspired and supported by Islamic radicalism, NATO’s eastward expansion, and overall U.S. attempts at enforcing its hegemony. Putin’s supposedly new approach resounded with the military elite. He declared that the role and status of the armed forces needed to be upgraded, as the military and security services were integral to the foundation of a strong state.

Putin’s affinity toward those in uniform, moreover, stood in stark contrast to the views of his predecessor. Unlike Yeltsin, who paid little attention to the state of the military and rarely referenced it, Putin’s dramatic change in rhetoric promoted optimism in the military. The

new president appeared to be signaling his sympathy and respect for the security services. He visited fleets and garrisons, expressed genuine interest in weapons and equipment, and was, as it is colloquially said in Russia, “in the theme.”

Much to the military’s delight, Putin soon backed his words with concrete actions. To this end, he enacted a new *National Security Concept* in January 2000, followed shortly thereafter by a new *Military Doctrine* in April 2000 and a new *Foreign Policy Concept* that July. Additionally, a package of various reform measures was

operation in a Moscow opera house in October 2002, which culminated in the death of over one hundred hostages.

This flurry of activity could suggest that the Kremlin is resolved to addressing the problems afflicting the armed forces. Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case. The most significant aspect of all of these documents and statements is how vague they are on matters of military reform. The *Foreign Policy Concept* makes no mention of military reform at all, while the *National Security Concept* and *Military Doctrine* speak of it only in the blandest of

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passed in January 2001. In March 2001, a close confere of Putin, Sergei Ivanov—a retired FSB lieutenant general—was appointed Minister of Defense. At the same time, a tough senior civil servant, Lyubov Kudelina, was brought over from the Ministry of Finance to manage the books of the Ministry of Defense.<sup>1</sup> In November 2001, the General Staff was ordered to prepare a plan to “professionalize” the armed forces by 2010.<sup>2</sup>

To this very day, Putin continues to reiterate the importance of military reform in his public addresses. The latest mention of the state of the armed forces occurred at a meeting with junior officers on the eve of Defenders of the Fatherland Day (February 23, 2003). Before, he had spoken of the necessity of again revisiting the *National Security Concept* with a view to specifying how the military could contribute to antiterrorism efforts. That statement looked topical as it came right after a calamitous counter-terrorist

terms. It is difficult to define any “Putin effect” on military reform, even on the basis of the platitudes found in the foremost policy documents.

While Putin and Ivanov have forced some hard decisions on the military, such as closing bases in Cuba and Vietnam, steering a more obliging course in relations with NATO, cooperating with American forces in the war on terror and acceding—albeit grudgingly—to a limited U.S. military presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, hardly a dent has been made in solving the serious structural issues facing the armed forces. Procurement of new equipment is practically at a standstill. Combat pilots log only a fraction of the annual flying hours that would be considered necessary in the West to maintain proficiency. Ships also do not sail enough due to a lack of fuel and spare parts. Large numbers of officers still live below the poverty line in poor and remote housing and, therefore,

leave service at the first opportunity. The world of the barracks is still a Hobbesian dystopia where hazing, criminality, drug abuse, alcoholism, lack of discipline, and desertion are the norm. And the nightmare in Chechnya continues to simmer though the focus of operations may finally be shifting from counter-terrorism to reconstruction following the recent referendum in the region. The situation, to use the words of the Chief of the General Staff, Anatoliy Kvashnin, is “beyond critical.”<sup>3</sup>

While the military’s problems are manifold and complicated, the core problem seems clear: there is not enough money. If the Russian military is to have any hope of equipping itself with modern weapons, and training and maintaining itself in some state of combat readiness, then it will have to undergo major reductions in size, regardless of whether it is manned by conscripts or volunteers.<sup>4</sup>

This decrepit state of the military begs the question of who is responsible for it. To be sure, bureaucratic foot-dragging and obstruction by the army leadership has undermined efforts to reform the armed forces. It is clear that the generals—many of whom hold attitudes toward the West that have changed little since the end of the Cold War—favor maintaining an army similar to the USSR’s, only smaller in size. Yet, it is unreasonable to lay the blame for the dreadful state of the army squarely on the shoulders of the General Staff.

Much of the blame for the military’s sorry state should be placed on Yeltsin—but it was Putin who inherited this system, and he was, therefore, expected to treat it. Notwithstanding his Machiavellian image, rarely has any leader had as little freedom to position himself as a statesman as Putin. Other than as an adherent to the

notion of “*gosudarstvennost*,” as the prosecutor of a new and—at least in 1999–2000—popular war in Chechnya, Putin did not have much of an identity of his own.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, many perceived him as no more than a stooge of the Yeltsin family. Society was ready to embrace this ex-KGB man and Soviet nostalgian as a symbol of order, security, and stability, but beyond that, his intentions were an enigma. Putin’s interest in reviving the faded symbols of a strong state was an outgrowth of social and bureaucratic expectations placed on him at the beginning of his political ascendance. It is not necessarily the case, as his record is beginning to show, that this interest will remain the same as he matures as a leader.

### **Russian Civil-Military Relations.**

During the Soviet era, civilian control of the military was understood in a restricted manner focused on maintaining the strict subordination of the military to the Communist Party. The notion of “democratic civil-military relations” entered political discourse only after the collapse of the USSR, but it has remained to a large extent *terra incognita* for the politico-military elite to this day, discussed and enacted in a shallow and *pro forma* manner, if at all. Indeed, because Russia has a rich military tradition of its own with particular ideas about how the army should relate to civil society and how it should be employed as a tool of policy, the term “democratic civil-military relations” strikes many as alien—an unnecessary import with an overtone not of democracy, but of implied Western superiority.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the military has been able to resist the otherwise ineluctable logic of downsizing only because it has been able to exploit the reluctance of Russia’s civil-

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ian leaders to submit their defense policies to democratic scrutiny and transparency. Defense policy in Russia is rarely subject to the “reality check” of civilian oversight that usually makes policy in more transparent systems more effective. Take, for example, the recent lamentable failure of the experiment to switch the 76<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division to a professionally-manned model, as a result of alleged sabotage by the General Staff. True or not, it is hard to envision how this plan might have succeeded, or how the experience might have been relevant to the army as a whole, even if the General Staff had been in favor of it. There are simply not enough morally and physically fit young men in Russia willing to put up with sub-standard living conditions and the threat of death or injury in Chechnya or elsewhere, all for a monthly pay packet ranging from 3,000 to 4,500 rubles (\$95–140). But, then again, even if such young men did exist in high quantities, there would not be enough money in the budget to pay them.

To make matters worse, the term civilian “control” does not even translate well. The obvious Russian analogue, “*control*,” comes closer to the looser English term “monitoring,” and carries little sense of “management” or “direction,” which “control” implies in English. Though Russian history rings with the clamor of rebellion and revolution, it has never included military rule. This is, paradoxically, a part of the prob-

lem. Among the politico-military elite there is a simplistic view that civil-military relations are not a problem because there is no historical tradition or contemporary inclination towards a military *coup d' tat*.

Such reasoning misses the point that, while the army is under civilian control, it is also unguided. The president generally has the levers necessary to exert control over the army, whose leadership is bound to him by a mixture of professional loyalty and personal self-interest. In practice, however, the army is free from most interference, acting independently within certain broad guidelines. Thus, the pattern of civil-military relations in Russia is one that combines close political control of the military leadership with a lack of concrete political direction on matters of policy.

The impact of this state of affairs in Russia's current time of troubles has been to increase the sense of alienation of the rank and file—but not necessarily the senior leadership—from both civil society and government. Throughout the 1990s, the officer corps survived materially through a mixture of stoicism and petty corruption, and mentally by thinking of itself as the inheritor of true patriotism and as the legacy of the great Russian past. A rift exists between the bulk of the command and staff officers on the one hand, and a considerably smaller number of top military leaders and bureaucrats on the other. The president, along with his

administration, has control over members of the second category because of his power over appointments and discharges, whether military or civilian. Therefore, when one points to the actions or failures of such officials it should be understood that they are still agents of the state executive. Secondly, the state—now effectively an embodiment of presidential authority—controls the purse strings. The relationship of the top military-bureaucratic leaders with the president and his administration should be seen as symbiotic and collaborative. But this symbiosis does not pertain to the army as a whole.

Russian society as a whole feels alienated from military affairs and public interest in the armed forces is aroused episodically. Indeed, only when the Kursk submarine sunk with 118 of her crew in August 2000, when a Mi-26 helicopter was shot down in Chechnya with 110 men aboard, or when politicians reference particular issues like conscription or hazing does the Russian public seem to think twice about the state of their armed forces. In general terms, moreover, Russians' interest in and knowledge of military reform is slight. The average person is scornful of the generals, whom they see as an integral part of the corrupt elite. At the same time, the travails of civilian life are such that, by and large, they do not lose sleep over the living conditions of servicemen. For most Russians, military reform is of little importance because, in their view, it is Russian society as a whole that needs a transformation.

## Reform of What and What of Reform?

There is an expression in Russian that goes "We thought we had hit bottom, but then we heard someone knocking from below." What Putin seemed to bring to the army in the first years of his presidency was a sense that maybe there was no one knocking anymore, that things would finally stop getting worse. After ten years of disappointment, Putin's accession was obviously a welcome change for military men, and morale did indeed improve. It is hard to escape the feeling, however, that the love affair between Putin and the military has ended, and that it has been replaced with the frustrated apathy of the past. Things may not be getting worse, but neither are they getting better. There is a hint of novelty to the current debate that dissociates it from the compromised approaches to military reform of the Yeltsin era—but it is only a hint.

In essence, Putin's approach to reform still looks rather like the decade-old reactive practice of redistributing available resources and reducing the size of the army without changing its underlying structure. This would suggest that while he has brought a new style to the role of commander-in-chief—one that is utterly at odds with the capricious and frequently drunken antics of his predecessor—he has not changed the inherent dysfunction of the system of civil-military relations that militates against real and substantive military reform. In other words, when Putin says "Reform! And this time I really mean it," he doesn't really mean it.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The man she replaced, General Georgy Oleinik, is the subject of a long-running investigation into the misuse of as much as \$450 million from the MOD's budget.

<sup>2</sup> The plan is expected to be ready in mid-2003.

Recently, Ivanov announced the rather improbable estimation that professionalization would be achieved by 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Golts, *Yezhenedelny Zhurnal* (18 June 2002).

4 The budget can sustain probably less than half its current approximately 1 million troops.

5 The possession of "gosudarstvennost," meaning strong "statehood" or "stateness," is tied in the minds of the elite and mass alike in Russia with the presence of stability—a national historical preoccupation. There is a widely-held conviction that Yeltsin's opportunistic "denial" of the state in the early 1990s led directly to instability, hardship, and ruin in most aspects of life. Similarly, many believed that the post-Soviet elite enriched themselves under a facade of democratic rhetoric in order to institutionalize the wealth and

privilege attained by them under the status quo. Hence, when Putin arrived on the scene people were well-prepared to displace dashed hopes for democracy and feelings of socio-economic disparity and privation with the invigoration of "gosudarstvennost."

6 An attitude perhaps reinforced by its association with NATO, which held it as a main criterion for membership of the Alliance and a key goal of the Partnership for Peace program. Russian anger at NATO expansion influenced their perception of the more abstract notions of transparency, accountability, and oversight of the armed forces.