

---

## Moscow's Military (In)effectiveness: Why Civil-Military Relations Have Hampered Russia's Performance on the Battlefield in Ukraine

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 883  
March 2024

Kirill Shamiev<sup>1</sup>  
*European Council on Foreign Relations*

The performance of the Russian armed forces in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a puzzling development for military and Russia specialists. Having fallen significantly short of analysts' pre-war expectations in the strategic, operational, and tactical domains, the Russian military has failed to achieve overwhelming dominance in Ukraine. Many military and Russia experts have been taken by surprise by this: prior to the war, most ([although](#) not all) experts [assessed](#) the Russian military to be far more [capable](#) than it has since proven to be. Why did analysts not anticipate the issues that have confronted the Russian military?

This memo argues that many analysts focused on the material factors contributing to military strength rather than paying attention to the intangible elements that influence how militaries use those resources in a conflict. In the case of Russia, the flawed analysis drew on an inaccurate assessment of the impact of civil-military relations on military effectiveness. The transformation of Russia into a personalist dictatorship allowed Putin to take the risky foreign policy decision to embark on a full-scale invasion without considering elite objections or engaging in realistic military planning. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's aversion to taking any risks with regard to domestic politics delayed partial military mobilization, which allowed Ukraine to regain territory during this period of inaction. In parallel, the Russian military's command and control failures; rigid command structure; poor material support; and conservative, centralized organizational culture hindered the integrity of military leadership and the skill development of enlisted servicemembers. These problems undermined Russia's pre-war material advantages and have played a significant role in Russia's military failures in Ukraine.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kirill Shamiev is a visiting fellow in the Wider Europe program at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Central European University and specializes in policy evaluation, civil-military relations, and security sector reform.

## What Is Military Effectiveness?

Most discussions of Russian and Ukrainian military effectiveness lack a robust definition and operationalization of what effectiveness truly means. In their book *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*, Risa Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley define military effectiveness as the capacity of a military to generate military power using the state's resources, such as wealth, technology, population size, and human capital. For the purposes of this memo, I follow this definition, which puts a helpful focus on the capacity of the state to use available resources for military development.

Military effectiveness consists of four main attributes: integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality. *Integration* refers to a military's ability to maintain consistency in military operations, create synergies within and between different levels of military activity, and avoid counterproductive actions. *Responsiveness* relates to the ability of a state to account for both internal and external constraints and opportunities in preparing for armed conflict. *Skill* encompasses the capacity to motivate and equip military personnel with the basic competencies required to perform their tasks on the battlefield. *Quality* refers to a state's ability to equip itself with superior weapons and equipment.

The more integrated, responsive, and skilled a military is, and the higher the quality of its hardware, the greater its ability to use its basic resources to wage war. In the case of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated poor integration of its operational plan and combat tactics with its loosely defined strategic objectives, failed to properly train and prepare its troops for war, and faced serious logistical difficulties in deploying its resources. Below, I focus on the first three (intangible) components of Russia military effectiveness: integration, responsiveness, and skill.

## Russia's Mismanaged Military Power

The extent to which the Russian government can demonstrate military effectiveness is determined by political institutions, cultural and societal norms, and social structure. Together, these components created an imperfect environment that has undermined Russia's military efforts in Ukraine.

The Russian military has struggled to integrate its strategy with operational planning and create synergies between different levels of military activity, as evidenced by ill-prepared soldiers, vehicle breakdowns, and unprofessional tactics. The problems first began with the inadequate invasion strategy. The institutions that regulate Russia's security sector have centralized control over the military within the presidency and inflated the strategic and operational role of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) in security affairs. The FSB has [multiple](#) faces: it conducts foreign intelligence, signal intelligence, financial intelligence, and counter-intelligence operations, including in the armed forces; commands special forces and antiterrorist units; and provides advice and intelligence to the president. As a result, a small group of Putin's trusted advisors [developed](#) the invasion

plan, which was doomed to fail because of its faulty assumption that Ukraine would not resist the invasion; arbitrary political guidance, including in creating the military strategy; and planning mistakes, such as unprepared troops and slow procurement.

This approach to operational planning was apparently a significant intelligence failure, allegedly [attributed](#) to the Fifth Directorate, which is responsible for clandestine operations in Ukraine. Moscow over-relied on its agents in Ukraine, who were supposed to paralyze the Ukrainian administration and make the country unmanageable, at least in the first days of the invasion. Meanwhile, the military was tasked with attacking the headquarters and barracks of the Ukrainian armed forces and preventing them from deploying with a rapid maneuver operation. However, the plan did not materialize; the Ukrainian administration remained functional and the Ukrainian armed forces managed to organize a flexible defense.

This failure may be due to the well-known tendency of Russian intelligence and the Foreign Service to present “policy-based evidence” – that is, the facts that the leadership wants to hear. Boris Bondarev, the only Russian diplomat to publicly renounce the war and leave the service, confessed that his arms control unit in Geneva had [cabled](#) misleading information to Moscow to avoid scrutiny and backlash from the capital. Given the patrimonial nature of government and their own lack of transferable skills that would enable them to take up jobs outside the government, Russian bureaucrats, including those in foreign affairs, are naturally incentivized to serve the wishes of the president, even if they are illegal.

Moreover, the transformation of Russia into a full-fledged personalist dictatorship has insulated Putin’s regime from any form of public accountability and the need to seriously consider elite positions in its foreign policy decision-making. The Kremlin is therefore generally willing to [take](#) risks in its foreign policy, including by overruling the military, which is typically more inclined to [avoid](#) costly military interventions. Even before the war, the 2020 wave of the Survey of Russian Elites [indicated](#) that support for a single Russian-Ukrainian state was a peripheral position among elites. Moreover, Russian military elites were even more reluctant than their civilian counterparts to support the idea that Russia and Ukraine should unite into a single country.

Putin’s willingness to take risks, thanks to the insulation of his power from public accountability and the flawed institutions that govern Russia’s security agencies, partially explains why the initial invasion plan was so audacious and out of step with the military’s previous experience. Putin was laser-focused on bringing Ukraine back into Russia’s sphere of influence, which naturally excluded objections from elites who would have counseled caution or a more realistic assessment of Russian military planning and capabilities.

In contrast to the Kremlin’s tendency to take risks in foreign policy, Moscow has long been risk-averse in domestic affairs. Despite numerous appeals from military circles, the

Kremlin only announced the partial mobilization of Russian society almost seven months into the war, on September 21, 2022. This delay produced a shortage of manpower and prevented Russia from responding quickly to the attrition of its military. As a result, following six months of attritional fighting, the Ukrainians were able to exploit this weakness, quickly regaining much of their territory in the Kharkiv counteroffensive. Indeed, in the summer of 2022, the situation facing the Russian military was so dire that some mobilized personnel with little to no military training were quickly [sent](#) to the front to stabilize the situation and prevent further Ukrainian gains.

However, the Kremlin's fear of civilian resistance to the military mobilization did not materialize. The partial mobilization, surprisingly, did not provoke mass protests and brought the necessary manpower to the front. There are two main reasons for this. First, Russian attitudes toward the war can be characterized as "[acquittance](#)," a social tendency to passively accept the invasion because the state's framing resonates with the nation's mythology. This is especially applicable to Russians living in smaller localities, who tend to have less diverse social networks and more trust in government and other power structures. These people are often manual workers and have lower incomes than those living in larger urban settlements. As a result, material incentives to fight in Ukraine are more important for these men, as are ideological factors such as the perception that it is their duty to be part of this event of historical significance for Russia by enlisting. Second, even before the invasion began, the Kremlin effectively wiped out any alternative political leadership and selectively repressed the most active social activists and groups. Perhaps as a result, hundreds of thousands of Russians who presumably disagreed with the war simply left the country after the mobilization was announced rather than engaging in protest at home. However, hundreds of thousands of men have joined the military and reversed the negative trend of Russia's campaign in Ukraine.

However, even if politicians make flawed decisions, a military should still do its best to implement them effectively. In the Russian case, this has not happened. Military responsiveness has been [undermined](#) by institutional problems such as poor cohesion, weak organizational learning, and over-reliance on individual officers' decisions. Uneven levels of organizational readiness and individual commander skills have eroded the organizational cohesiveness required to build a powerful military, which is a critical aspect of military development. Poor training performance, examination results, and incidents are seen as the failure of an individual soldier. Instead of looking for structural explanations by organizing a systematic review, commanders tend to quickly find a scapegoat—who may or may not in fact be responsible for the incident—and close the case. This system makes Russian military effectiveness too dependent on talented individual commanders who personally invest in their troops.

The secrecy and plausible deniability that shrouds Russian combat experience in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion—even though hundreds of servicemen previously fought there—has effectively barred the Russian military from engaging in knowledge-sharing and learning about the Ukrainian armed forces. Moreover, for reasons of operational

security, officers and soldiers were [kept](#) in the dark about the invasion until days or even hours beforehand. While keeping Russia's war plan closely guarded until the last minute enabled Moscow to take the Ukrainian government by surprise, it also undermined the readiness of the Russian troops. Junior and battalion-level commanders received overly complex orders that [were](#) impossible to execute. This flawed decision-making, coupled with limited knowledge of the enemy, led to a series of avoidable command and control errors, deconfliction problems, and logistical challenges for the Russian military.

The Russian military has [struggled](#) to move away from the conservative, overly centralized organizational culture inherited from the USSR. The cornerstone of its culture is obedience to the commander and his orders. Russian officers have unilateral authority to determine the future of their subordinates, from the General Staff down to the platoon level of command. They are the final arbiters of promotions, bonuses, days off, and assignments. This culture encourages superficial compliance and flattery while undermining reflective leadership based on responsiveness to changing circumstances, unit cohesion in the face of shocks, and – ultimately – the quality of command.

## Conclusion

The root cause of Russia's problems in Ukraine lies in the civil-military domain, which conditions the Russian government's ability to use its resources to build a powerful military. Despite Russia's comparative advantages in economy, technology, population size, and human capital, its government has failed to generate a sufficiently effective military power. However, these underlying problems could potentially be solved with organizational measures and change of mid-level military bureaucracy, which would likely significantly increase Russia's military effectiveness, even if – due to the loss of modern equipment, strained production, and Western sanctions – its military were less technologically advanced than before the invasion. In the absence of regime change in Russia, Western governments should closely monitor institutional and social changes in Russia and be prepared for a resurgent Russian military that can use its current know-how, organizational innovations, and hundreds of thousands of experienced soldiers to make dangerous use of its material resources.