

Why Military Dissatisfaction Is Not a Threat to the Russian State

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- **It is a well known fact that the Russian military today is in terrible shape.**

Funding shortfalls are so severe that basic needs go unmet. Neither officers nor troops get paid on time, many officers' families are living in abysmal conditions because adequate housing is not available, food supplies for the troops have frequently been found to be contaminated or unfit for human consumption, and the amount of time given to combat training is very low because adequate fuel is not available to fly planes or send tanks or ships on exercises. Societal respect for the officer corps has plummeted as its dirty laundry has been hung out for public inspection. Corruption in the officer corps is prevalent, ranging from illegal sales of weapons and supplies to the habit of commandeering troops for private slave labor on dachas or in officer-owned businesses. Dedovshchina, the brutal hazing of new recruits by more senior troops, is rampant, and often leads to murder or suicide; combined with a sharp increase in the number of serious accidents happening on base, peacetime death rates within the Russian military have soared in recent years. Not surprisingly, draft-dodging is at epidemic levels and the officer corps is hemorrhaging as the youngest and most talented officers leave as soon as they can.

- **These problems are exacerbated by the way in which current military reforms are being carried out.**

It is clear that the military needs to be downsized in light of Russia's shrinking defense budget. It is not clear, however, that the Defense Ministry has made wise choices in carrying out this mandate. Several long-standing separate force structures are being eliminated or merged together, and huge numbers of officers (at the level of 40 to 45% in many service units) are being discharged into early retirement. Because entire regiments and brigades are being eliminated, hundreds and even thousands of officers in particular localities are being suddenly laid off without being given any housing, significant severance pay, or useful job retraining or other relocation assistance. Given that a huge number of officers have left the service voluntarily to take civilian-sector jobs, it is a good bet that a large percentage of those who are being involuntarily laid off as a result of restructuring are those who lack the resources and skills to easily find employment elsewhere. This means that the burden of social welfare for those with no alternatives is falling on the shoulders of particular cities and provinces where military bases are concentrated.

- **Political activism among the officer corps is correspondingly on the increase.**

This is reflected at the most basic level by the staggering number of articles appearing in the official military press which complain about resource shortfalls and corruption in the officer corps, and which blame the Russian state and society for these circumstances. Many military writers argue that officers have no choice but to steal from the state when the alternative is hunger and deprivation. Increased political activism is also reflected by the apparent growing popularity of the Movement to Support the Army (staffed largely by retired officers) within the active officer corps. Although membership in any political organization is legally off-limits to serving officers, it appears that there is a lot of sympathy towards this movement on military bases, which is especially disturbing given movement leaders' recent calls for officers "not to fulfill orders, not to disarm, and not to leave military settlements if those demobilized are not provided with housing and compensation."

- **Most disturbing are the accelerating number of political protests and demonstrations about funding shortfalls that have been reported at local military bases over the past year and a half.**

These protests are often supported by local government authorities. Some of these protests have actually resulted in what is technically a mutiny, where officers refuse to fulfill direct orders. For example, a group of navy officers in St. Petersburg who were ordered to move their families off of decommissioned ships where they had been living (in the absence of sufficient military housing) went on a hunger strike and refused to leave the ship. Officers' wives at the Uzhur Strategic Missile Forces base in Krasnoiarsk blocked a road to prevent their husbands from going on duty, and rallied for two hours demanding their husbands' back pay. An army major in Nizhni Novgorod commandeered a tank from his garrison and ended up leading a large rally, also demanding payment of back military wages.

- **Given the structural financial hardship of the Russian state, particularly its inability to collect taxes and stop capital flight, it is unlikely that even the new government's plans to pay back wages will succeed in containing these protests in the long run.**

The funds to keep the military functioning at its current size do not exist, nor do the funds exist to provide an adequate social safety net for those demobilized by the reform process. If money is printed to pay back wages, the result will be hyperinflation that lowers the value of those wages and other elements of the military budget, leaving the officer corps as dissatisfied as before.

- **Yet it is very unlikely that this situation will destabilize the Russian state or society.**

While many officers may indeed become more and more directly involved in politics, they are unlikely to do so in any kind of cohesive, nationwide fashion, and they are unlikely to take out their frustrations on democratically elected officials. Instead, the economic interests of Russian military officers are in competition with each other, and protests are aimed at the Defense Ministry officials who formulated reform plans--all of whom are themselves senior military officers. Strong inter-service rivalry is emerging as the commanders of particular services and units compete against each other for survival in a time of dwindling resources. The rivalry is also geographical, as governors of at least ten provinces in Russia have lobbied the Defense Ministry to keep military bases that were scheduled for closing open, to prevent a massive increase in

local unemployment. And sentiment within the officer corps seems to be directed against Defense Minister Marshal Igor Sergeev, a career general, much more than it is directed against civilian politicians.

- **It is likely that if this situation continues, individual garrisons may become uncontrollable from time to time, as they are first demobilized by the reform process, and then politicized by those with revolutionary agendas. Yet it is unlikely that the immense fissures within the officer corps will be overcome, and there is unlikely to be unified support for political action on behalf of any particular platform or individual.**

What makes unified action even more unlikely is the fact that dissatisfied officers have alternatives today. They can either leave the service to find better work in the civilian sector, or line their pockets by stealing from a state that cannot protect its resources from predation. In the end, local protest activity is likely to remain just that. The military will continue to be an institution that society keeps at arm's length, one that is ruled by individual expediency at the local level rather than a common corporate vision.

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