

The Rise and Fall of the Russian Internal Troops?

Brian Taylor
November 1998
PONARS Policy Memo 45
University of Oklahoma

The conventional wisdom among both Russian and Western analysts is that the Internal Troops (VV) of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) have been a bureaucratic Pac-Man since the collapse of the Soviet Union, eating up precious state resources. The MVD's voracious appetite is said to have had a particularly deleterious impact on the Russian Armed Forces, whose financial difficulties are considerable and well-known. Former Minister of Defense Igor Rodionov, shortly after being dismissed in May 1997, remarked, "what is happening? We are cutting and disarming the Army and Navy. And at the same time the other forces are developing unchecked."

Knowledgeable observers generally agree about the reason for this purported change in fortunes. They explain the MVD's power by Boris Yeltsin's need to protect his regime against domestic challenges, including from the regular army. In other words, Yeltsin is engaging in "counter-balancing." For example, the British journalist Anatol Lieven maintains that most Russian army officers believe "with good evidence" that President Boris Yeltsin has been pursuing a strategy of "'divide and rule'...designed to set the different security forces against each other and reduce the possibility of any threat to his rule from this quarter."

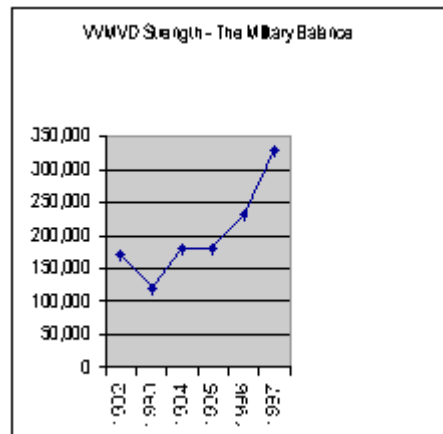
This conventional wisdom about the growing size and power of the MVD has rarely been challenged. This memo suggests that analysts need to be more skeptical about the VV MVD's alleged Pac-Man qualities. There are at least two reasons for thinking that the conventional wisdom may be wrong. First, it is not obvious that the Internal Troops of the MVD have in fact grown in the last seven years--and some reason to believe they have shrunk. Second, there are plausible alternative explanations other than counter-balancing for why the MVD may have been more favored than the Armed Forces in the last decade, including a rational assessment of likely threats and bureaucratic politics. Finally, regardless of our assessment of the MVD's size and power in the last seven years, current indications are that the Internal Troops are also headed for the chopping block.

The Difficult Task of Counting Heads

Russia's fabled penchant for secrecy hinders efforts to determine the current size of the Internal Troops--the answer is not simply listed in the annual budget or posted on the Ministry of Internal Affairs web-page. Another difficulty is that the MVD has multiple functions and directorates. The most basic division is between the regular police (militia)

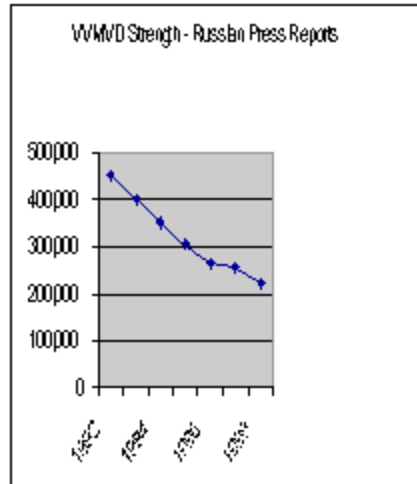
and the VV, but even within the VV there are multiple groupings. Without attention to this basic fact, it is hard to know exactly what the various numbers being bandied about regarding the size of the MVD actually mean.

The high priests of bean counting at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, unfortunately, have had as much trouble nailing down exact numbers as the rest of us. The numbers reported in *The Military Balance* fluctuate considerably from year to year.



The figures from *The Military Balance* (see table above) seem to confirm the conventional view about the growing size of the MVD in the last seven years. However, *The Military Balance* does not provide enough details to figure out the changes over time, such as why 50,000 troops disappear in one year and reappear the next. Moreover, these numbers are often out of step with figures provided in the Russian press by authoritative figures. At times *The Military Balance* understates the size of the VV according to these statements, and at other times overstates it.

The statements of government officials, including the current Minister of Internal Affairs Sergei Stepashin, former Internal Troops Commander Leontii Shevtsov, former Minister of Internal Affairs Anatolii Kulikov, the Chief of Staff of the Internal Troops Boris Maksin, and former Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces Mikhail Kolesnikov, provide a somewhat different picture (see table below).



These data are also difficult to interpret, because of lack of clarity about what is being counted. Numbers for 1993 and 1995 had to be extrapolated from the preceding and following years. Nevertheless, they contrast sharply with The Military Balance numbers, both in terms of raw numbers and the general trend. For example, Kolesnikov stated in 1994 that the VVMVD had 350,000 troops, at a time when The Military Balance gave them half that number. By 1997 Kulikov and others were maintaining that the VVMVD possessed 257,000 troops, considerably lower than the 329,000 attributed to it by The Military Balance.

Given the large disparity in numbers published in different sources, we need to be more cautious in our statements about the "growing power" of the MVD. Moreover, whichever way the trend is going, it is important to determine whether the changes are due to groupings being reassigned from one ministry to another, rather than personnel increases in existing structures. For example, the current decline in VV strength seems to have arisen in part because responsibility for guarding prisons is being transferred from the MVD to the Justice Ministry.

Additionally, a large percentage of the personnel attributed to the VVMVD are not troops in any meaningful sense of the word, as the example just mentioned suggests. According to The Military Balance and British expert Mark Galeotti, between 100,000 and 150,000 of VV personnel are prison and factory guards. Only around 70,000 of the Internal Troops are mechanized infantry with their own artillery and armored personnel carriers. Thus, claims that the Internal Troops are as large as the Ground Forces of the regular military are misleading.

It is true that the Armed Forces have been shrinking more rapidly than the MVD troops, even if the figures from Russian officials are correct. The Armed Forces have declined from 2.8 million in 1992 to 1.2 million in 1998, a steeper decline than the MVD's. It is also believed that MVD troops are paid better and more regularly than army personnel. Thus, it is probably correct to say that the MVD has been favored relative to the regular army, even if the extent of this tendency has been overstated.

Explaining the MVD's Status

Those who contend that the MVD's power and status have increased tremendously under Yeltsin--a claim backed by ambiguous evidence--usually argue that the MVD has become more powerful due to a deliberate "divide and rule" policy pursued by Yeltsin. This argument may well have an element of truth to it. Yeltsin has certainly jealously guarded his control over the so-called "power ministries." But there are other reasons that the Internal Troops and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in general may be more favored than the Armed Forces.

First, an objective assessment of Russia's internal and external threats suggests the logic of expanding the Internal Troops and cutting the regular Army. Indeed, expansion of the VV goes back to the late Gorbachev period, when preserving the Soviet Union was prioritized over preparing for conflict with the West. During this time the size of the mechanized infantry within the VV doubled to 72,000, and the notorious OMON "black beret" units were created. The Russian government has made clear-- including in the December 1997 National Security Concept--that internal threats are its most serious security concerns (e.g., the war in Chechnya and the explosion of crime). Given the military's traditional distaste for internal roles, beefing up the MVD for these tasks makes sense.

Second, even if Yeltsin does think that the VV should be strengthened in order to increase his hold on power, it's not clear that the army is the perceived threat. When Yeltsin considered canceling the presidential election in March 1996, only to be told by MVD head Kulikov that the reliability of his troops was doubtful, the concern was not about rebel army units but general public disorder. Moreover, the fact that Kulikov told Yeltsin his troops were not reliable suggests that the MVD sees itself as more than a praetorian guard.

Third, a bureaucratic politics explanation for MVD power relative to the Armed Forces is quite plausible. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military was left with an enormous infrastructure built for the goal of waging world war against a more powerful enemy. The government has an understandable tendency to drastically cut this infrastructure, including bases, depots, military educational institutes, military industries, etc. The MVD and other alternative power structures were comparatively less burdened by a massive infrastructure from the Cold War, and found it easier to make the case for specific amounts of money for items such as personnel or light arms, particularly given the huge increase in crime. Additionally, Kulikov, and to a lesser extent his predecessor Viktor Yerin, were apparently more effective bureaucratic players than the hapless Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev and his successor Igor Rodionov. Kulikov's status as Deputy Prime Minister was a clear symbol of his bureaucratic clout. At the same time, when Kulikov got overly ambitious and tried to further expand his own influence and the MVD, Yeltsin unceremoniously dismissed him.

The importance of these bureaucratic factors comes out even more clearly by looking at the fortunes of the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS). In the Yeltsin era of

bureaucratic musical chairs, the head of the MChS, Sergey Shoygu, has been a remarkable bureaucratic survivor who has held his post since 1992. The MChS now has around 70-80,000 troops as part of the State Rescue Service. The expansion of the MChS is hard to attribute to "counter-balancing" arguments; bureaucratic politics provides a more likely explanation. It is quite possible that the MVD's position since 1992 can be attributed to similar factors, an explanation that is at least as plausible as speculation about counterbalancing and thwarted military coups.

The Decline of the MVD?

The current trend of the Internal Troops is clearly in a downward direction. Stepashin, who replaced Kulikov in March 1998, has outlined his plans to cut the VV substantially during his tenure. Current figures suggest that the VV are to be cut to around 140-150,000 troops by 2000 and 120,000 by 2006. Much of this decrease probably can be attributed to reorganization plans, such as the transfer of the prison system from the MVD to the Justice Ministry or the transfer of guarding the Baikal-Amur railway to the Transport Ministry. The apparent goal is to maintain control over the more elite VV units and get rid of the less glamorous guards.

Stepashin, unlike his predecessors Yerin and Kulikov, is not a career VV man and has no institutional loyalty to the organization. He apparently believes that the MVD in recent years has become too militarized and devoted too little effort to fighting crime. One possibility is that the VV will become an elite crime-fighting unit, a sort of "super-OMON" modeled on the Italian and French gendarmes. The VV did not perform well in Chechnya, and there seems to be some desire within the MVD itself to reconfigure away from ethnic conflict to a prestigious, professional organization devoted to fighting organized crime. A key issue to watch is whether the MVD in the next few years will change its focus in this way, or will continue to hang on to its internal conflict role.

A final question is the role the Security Council will play in these reorganization efforts now that Andrei Kokoshin has been replaced as Secretary of the Council by Nikolai Bordyuzha. Kokoshin spearheaded the effort to bring greater order to the disparate power bodies. He had succeeded in removing heavy equipment from the Federal Border Service, and clearly had his sights set on both the MVD and the MChS. Bordyuzha's policies remain unclear, but given Russia's economic crisis it seems clear that most of the power agencies, including the MVD, will face severe budget constraints in the years to come.