

Civil-Military Relations in Russia and the Chechnya Conflict

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December 1999
PONARS Policy Memo 99
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A number of recent developments have provoked unease in both Russia and the West about the state of Russia's civil-military relations. The Russian army's massive campaign in Chechnya, forceful comments by Russian military commanders, the promulgation of a new draft military doctrine, and the recent staging of military exercises and test launches by the Russian armed forces have prompted numerous commentators, such as William Odom, to claim that "the Russian generals are so frustrated that they are lashing out in a number of different ways at the same time." Some Western and Russian analysts have gone even further, arguing that the Russian army already has launched a "silent coup" and is now the *de facto* ruler of the country.

There is no doubt that several events this year--the Kosovo conflict, the approach of Russia's parliamentary and presidential elections, and the war in Chechnya--have had an impact on Russia's civil-military relations. This impact, however, is not as far-reaching as often alleged and will not necessarily be permanent. The shift to a less accommodating and more assertive stance by Russia in its relations with the West is not the result of civil-military tensions in Moscow. There is no evidence that Russian military officers are acting against the wishes of civilian leaders or that decisions are being imposed by the military on reluctant civilians. Military officers certainly have been trying to influence policy in ways they desire, but that is a normal part of politics in almost all countries. Russia is no exception. The political clout of Russian officers is now somewhat greater than in the recent past, but that is hardly unusual for a country fighting a (thus far) successful and popular war. There is no evidence that senior military personnel are ruling, or want to rule, the country.

Moreover, the increased salience and influence of military officers are entirely dependent on the fate of the current war. If things turn sour in Chechnya (which is highly plausible), some Russian officers undoubtedly will step down or be forced out. This outcome need not result in any lasting change in civil-military relations. Recent threats by Russian commanders to resign if the military campaign in Chechnya is halted or slowed may stem from career aspirations as much as from a genuine concern about the prospect of civilian interference in military prerogatives. The importance of the recent civil-military maneuvering depends, at least in part, on the extent to which the latter consideration is more important than the former.

This policy memo offers a brief overview of civil-military relations in Russia, focusing on recent claims by Western and Russian observers that the Russian army has acquired much greater political influence and is on the verge of supplanting (or has already supplanted) civilian authorities. The memo finds that, although a few disturbing signs have emerged, there is no basis for concluding that civilian control of the Russian military is in danger. Although the war in Chechnya is likely to have a highly adverse impact on Russian politics (not least because of the many thousands of civilians in Chechnya who are likely to be killed), the notion that this will lead to military rule is misleading. A disproportionate focus on the civil-military aspects of the Chechnya crisis may divert attention from the much more plausible risk of a return to authoritarian civilian rule amid a surge of xenophobic nationalism among *both* civilians *and* military officers.

Four key points are worth stressing at the outset:

- For understandable reasons, Russian military officers are fostering a myth that they could have won in Chechnya in 1996 if only civilian leaders had not inhibited them from doing so. This is pure revisionism. The Russian army was given a free hand to destroy as much as it could in Chechnya from December 1994 until 1996. The army's humiliating defeat stemmed not from civilian interference, but from the gross ineptitude of top Russian commanders, the poor quality of Russian troops, and the fierce resistance put up by the Chechen guerrillas.
- Russian commanders thus far have avoided making some of the most egregious mistakes that they committed in 1994 and 1995, when they sent armored units into the streets of Grozny without infantry cover. Unprotected, the Russian tanks became sitting ducks for Chechen guerrillas wielding anti-tank guns, bombs, and Molotov cocktails. In the latest offensive, Russian commanders have adopted a far sounder approach, relying on the methodical advance of infantry and mechanized units, backed up by fierce air and artillery barrages as well as Scud missile strikes whenever resistance is encountered. Rather than storming Grozny at the outset, the Russian forces have laid siege to the city, hoping to cut off all supply lines to the guerrillas. Far more Russian troops are involved this time (100,000 versus only 30,000-40,000 in 1994-1996), and many are from elite commando and internal security units. It remains to be seen how well Russian soldiers will fare if they are eventually ordered to move into central Grozny, but the operation as of early December 1999 has proceeded with no fatal glitches, in marked contrast to the previous war against Chechnya.
- Smooth though the operation may have been thus far, the condition of the Russian army makes one wonder how long the war can continue as it has, particularly now that winter is setting in. The Russian army is in deplorable shape, and no amount of destruction and chest-beating in Chechnya is going to change that. The Russian army remains unsuited for counterinsurgency and mountain warfare. Large numbers of conscripts have had to be deployed to Chechnya along with the elite troops. Although most of the conscripts have been kept away from the front lines and have been used mainly for support roles, that pattern is unlikely to remain

feasible if the war intensifies. Because the majority of Russian soldiers are ill-trained, ill-fed and ill-equipped, it is not at all clear that the offensive would be sustainable if it bogs down.

- The recent deployments and maneuvers by Russian forces--the holding of Zapad-99 military exercises in June, the dispatch of an Oscar-class submarine to the Mediterranean in August, the dispatch of another Oscar submarine to the eastern Pacific in September, the test-firing of an SS-19 intercontinental ballistic missile in October, the test launch of an anti-missile interceptor in early November, and the test-firing of an SS-N-20 submarine-launched ballistic missile from a Typhoon submarine in mid-November--are, for the most part, elements of a long-planned series of exercises. Military exercises and test launches cannot be carried out on a moment's whim. They are planned well in advance. Although the tenor of the Zapad-99 exercises may have been altered somewhat in response to the Kosovo crisis, the exercises otherwise were in full accord with Russia's increased emphasis over the past several years on nuclear weapons. The exercises and the latest tests of strategic forces have been somewhat more frequent than in the recent past, but they are still a far cry from the vastly higher level of readiness maintained by the Soviet Army. Occasional exercises and scattered test launches will not make it any easier for the Russian army to stave off its continued precipitous decline.

These four points are crucial to bear in mind when assessing recent developments in civil-military relations.

Civil-Military Maneuvering

So long as the military effort in Chechnya continues without any grave setbacks, it is highly unlikely that civil-military tensions will emerge. In the past, a few officials (notably Yuri Luzhkov) and at least one prominent military officer (Aleksandr Lebed) had expressed willingness to consider granting independence to Chechnya (and then "building a wall to seal it off," as Luzhkov put it), but no one in the Russian hierarchy any longer supports that position. The only politician who has called for any attempts at a negotiated settlement is Grigory Yavlinsky, and even he has never been willing to grant independence to Chechnya. (Moreover, Yavlinsky has set tough terms for the Chechens and has warned that a military solution will be needed if Chechnya fails to accept those terms.) Russian political leaders and military officers see eye to eye on the need to resubordinate Chechnya to Russian control. It is highly misleading to conceive of the war as being in any way contrary to the wishes of President Boris Yeltsin.

If, on the other hand, the war does not continue as smoothly as it has, civil-military tensions might well surface. Recriminations undoubtedly would ensue, and some military officers would probably resign or be dismissed. Some military commanders might well claim that, once again, they were "betrayed" by civilian leaders.

Nevertheless, the potential for conflicts should be kept in perspective. Although General Vladimir Shamanov, the commander of Russian forces in the western region of the North Caucasus, warned, in a television interview on November 7, that a premature end to the Chechen operation could spark mass resignations by military commanders, his comments were widely thought to be part of an effort to orchestrate the removal of defense minister Marshal Igor Sergeev. Shamanov and others are believed to want General Anatoly Kvashnin, the current chief of the General Staff, to be appointed in place of Sergeev. As one Russian commentator put it, such a step "would automatically give all of [Kvashnin's] supporters the opportunity to take a step or two forward in their careers." Another theory, which is not incompatible with the previous one, holds that Shamanov's comments were intended to bolster the position of prime minister Vladimir Putin, whose standing in opinion polls in early November had not yet made him politically unassailable. Shamanov offered an explicit endorsement of Putin, claiming that the prime minister "is a vibrant symbol for the people" who has made things "better for Russia." At the time that Shamanov made his comments, rumors had begun circulating in Moscow that Putin would soon join the long list of former Russian prime ministers. The supposed reason for this predicted development was that Putin had grown too popular for Yeltsin's taste. The rumors had it that Putin would be replaced by Sergei Shoigu (currently the emergency situations minister) or Vladimir Rushailo (the current internal affairs minister). All these rumors proved unfounded, and Putin's influence grew immeasurably. The opaqueness of decision-making in Moscow makes it impossible to know whether one or both of these factors--the military officers' support of Kvashnin, or their desire to bolster Putin--may have been behind the comments in November by Shamanov and other high-ranking officers. If in fact one or both of these factors played a role, the long-term impact on civil-military relations will be slight. Military officers may gain political weight temporarily and seek to lobby for "goods" they want, but this is hardly unusual for the byzantine give-and-take that characterizes Russian politics. Experience has shown that the increased influence of a particular group (in this case the military) is apt to be transitory. Inevitably, as time passes, the fortunes of the military will fall, and some other group will gain at the military's expense. Yeltsin and Putin may be forced to concede some points to the military in the near term if Chechnya proves "successful," but they are unlikely to yield on any points that would seriously erode their own control. The net long-term impact on civil-military relations could thus prove negligible.

The Alternative View

The more pessimistic--though much less plausible--scenario is one of rapidly decreasing civilian control over the military. Some analysts, both inside and outside Russia, have asserted that the army is in the process of carrying out a "silent coup," with the intent of assuming outright control in Moscow either directly or behind the scenes with a supportive prime minister and Yeltsin as a figurehead president. This "coup" supposedly started in June, with the incident at Pristina airport. The "coup" gathered pace, according to this scenario, when Sergei Stepashin was replaced as prime minister in early August, supposedly because he was perceived as too "soft" on the conflict in Dagestan. Having

Putin as prime minister, the argument goes, solidified the military's control over national security policy and paved the way for the full-scale invasion of Chechnya in October. Some possible reasons for this "silent coup" were spelled out in an article in the daily *Kommersant*, which posited that top military officials in Russia were impressed by the recent military coup in Pakistan and now believe that "overcoming the economic crisis and liquidating the hotbed of terrorism in the North Caucasus demand a consolidation of all the healthy forces of society, of the whole people." The danger, according to the *Kommersant* article, is that the military High Command may have decided that, like General Pervaiz Musharraf in Pakistan, they are the only force capable of "healing" the country.

This scenario is misleading both in its specific claims and in its broader thrust. The "silent coup" argument begins with a misreading of the Pristina airport incident. All evidence suggests that Yeltsin was fully aware and supportive of the military's intention to occupy the airport. He certainly could have prevented the move if he had wanted to. As far as Stepashin's dismissal goes, there is no reason to believe that it was motivated by his response to the incursions into Dagestan. The main reason for his removal was the friendly overtures he was making to Luzhkov and Yevgeny Primakov, something that Yeltsin and his entourage could not tolerate. (It remains to be seen whether Putin's own, more limited overtures to Luzhkov and Primakov in December 1999 will cause frictions with Yeltsin.)

More generally, the "silent coup" scenario is based on a fanciful premise. Far from striving to gain political control, Russian military officers are well aware of the deep-rooted nature of Russia's problems, and they also are aware that military officers are ill-suited to address those problems. The poor performance of Aleksandr Lebed as governor in Krasnoyarsk is a sobering reminder of the difficulties that army commanders would face if they tried to assume broad political control. It is worth emphasizing that, contrary to some press reports, Shamanov himself never expressed any intention of defying civilian orders. On the contrary, when Shamanov was asked whether he would obey orders to halt the advance of his troops in Chechnya, he replied unequivocally: "The army will fulfill its orders, let no one doubt this."

Moreover, even if it were true that Russian military officers were seeking to acquire outright political control--something that, as indicated, is highly implausible--their recent threats of resignations merely confirm that they have not established any position of controlling authority, or even a position of dominant influence. Most proponents of the "silent coup" scenario contend that military commanders have already reached the point where they can "call the shots," but if this were true, there would be no need for Shamanov and others to threaten to resign if the army is ordered to halt its offensive in Chechnya. If military officers were truly in charge of security policy, they could be confident of forestalling any disruption of the military campaign. The fact that they are concerned about a disruption indicates that no "silent coup" has occurred.

Conclusion

None of this is to imply that civil-military relations in Russia have been unaffected by recent events. On the contrary, the Russian High Command has gained, and will continue to gain, political weight as long as the military offensive in Chechnya moves smoothly ahead. To the extent that the campaign succeeds in reestablishing Russian control over Chechnya, senior commanders will clearly have greater leeway to press their demands for increased resources and other "goods." But this is hardly equivalent to a "silent coup." Assuming that things in Chechnya do not go badly awry for the Russian army (which may be a heroic assumption), Russian military commanders will acquire greater influence in the spheres that directly affect their interests. Whether they will seek--much less acquire--political control is a very different matter. The rumored takeover by a "party of war" in late 1994 turned out to be a fictional disguise for Yeltsin's own calamitous decision to start the war in Chechnya, and the current scenarios of a "silent coup" in Moscow are certain to prove just as ethereal

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