

Putin's Court: How the Military Fits In

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The style of Vladimir Putin's presidency, while slightly unpronounced as yet, has certain unmistakable militaristic features. On many occasions during his first year--awarding gift knives to soldiers in Chechnya, congratulating the Pskov Division on Airborne Troops Day, or addressing the relatives of the crew of the Russian submarine Kursk--Putin sought to present himself not just as military-friendly, but as a leader who naturally belongs to this culture, with its self-discipline, professionalism, and a specific command-and-control mindset. This picture may be wrong in more than just detail. It hides not only a less than confident grasp of most military problems, but also a deep-seated mistrust which in the near future could cause a split or even conflict.

Putin is a product of the KGB system--perhaps not its best product but certainly a very whole one. It is apparent--despite some liberal-economic schemes and democratic spin--that his ideal model for the Russian state is the KGB writ large. But this all-penetrating super-structure had (and continues to have, despite shrinking and dismemberment) a very different organizational culture than the armed forces. The KGB has always been a hierarchy-network hybrid with a heavy emphasis on secrecy, a preference for clandestine methods and a self-perception of the highest authority. There has never been much trust between the KGB and the army: Georgy Zhukov's intense hatred of Lavrenti Beria was more than a nuance of the July 1953 coup, and the failure of the August 1991 coup could to a large degree be attributed to the mutual lack of confidence between Dmitri Yazov, the Soviet Union's last defense minister, and then KGB Chief Vladimir Kryuchkov.

Without attempting a re-examination of the ever-looming question "Who is Vladimir Putin?" we can establish as the point of departure that the KGB/FSB is his alma mater, his main personal network, a key source of trusted cadres, and his political instrument of choice. With this narrow (even if solid) power base, he obviously seeks to expand control over the whole set of power structures, and recognizes the particular importance of the armed forces. Putin wants to keep the top brass on a short leash and to win the confidence of the rank and file, but he probably does not trust the military. He aims at making the army a useful and usable instrument and recognizes the need to increase the priority of defense in resource allocation, but has at best a rough estimate of the scale of deterioration of Russia's military machine. Putin may have a soft spot for military hardware, but he remains blind to the erosion of military professionalism and to the fundamental rejection of the draft system by society. The profile of the military during Putin's presidency therefore remains uncertain, and the character of relations between the chief executive and the high command could evolve in different ways with a significant probability of serious conflict.

The Military in the Kremlin

The first area of inquiry concerns the role of the military leadership in policymaking, particularly its ability to push forward its priorities and its access to the commander-in-chief. During former President Boris Yeltsin's reign, there were frequent fluctuations in this role, but overall the influence of the military remained limited. The October 1993 crisis in Moscow propelled Defense Minister Pavel Grachev close to the top of the pyramid of power, but he lacked the courage to perform there, and Yeltsin skillfully cut him down to size. For the rest of Yeltsin's era, the top brass had little impact on foreign policymaking, and next to nothing on domestic issues. On the other hand, the military was left to manage its own domain with little outside interference; attempts to establish civilian control over the military (associated with former Kremlin Security Council boss and now Duma Deputy Andrei Kokoshin, former Defense Council Secretary and presidential security advisor Yuri Baturin, and Krasnoyarsk Governor Aleksandr Lebed) were inconsistent and short-lived.

With the start of the second Chechen war, the military leadership saw another opportunity to move itself to the very center of decision-making and to reverse its creeping marginalization. This campaign from day one has been "Putin's War," so direct and unimpeded access to the commander-in-chief has been granted to those in charge of operations. It has also been a remarkably popular war, so the increased political profile of the top brass has rested on much stronger public support. Nevertheless, Vladimir Putin has succeeded in placing the military exactly where he wants them to be: close enough to keep them under tight control, but not in the inner circle where they could exert pressure on the president.

While Putin has not managed to put together a single coherent presidential team, his administration maintains a balance between three competing groups. These are: the "economists" with several mutually hostile clans, including one around Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov; the "chekists" (Special Services leadership) with the Federal Security Service (FSB) leadership in the center and the Security Council as the main vehicle; and the remnants of the "family" with presidential administration chief Aleksandr Voloshin and "shadow-oligarch" oil tycoon Roman Abramovich being the key members. Neither of these groups has close relations to (or particular interest in) the military, who are left with few reliable allies in the Kremlin, and only an occasional voice in the Security Council.

What makes it even more difficult for the military leadership to consolidate its influence in the Kremlin are deep splits within its own ranks. For that matter, the entire traditional military-industrial complex has fallen apart since the mid-1990s, when the armed forces stopped paying for new armaments, and the directors of military enterprises formed their own lobby. But now the top brass are fighting among themselves--and in full public view. While tensions between the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff are traditional and structural (they are competing bureaucracies with overlapping functions), they have sharply escalated during the course of the second Chechen war. A group of ambitious army generals with combat experience from Chechnya, led by General Staff Chief

Anatoly Kvashnin, believes that Putin is "their" president and expects him to pay attention to their demands. Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev has tried to keep the "Chechen Guard" in check, but has lost several key deputies and resigned himself to inevitable defeat. The Navy command has pursued its own intrigue, playing first on Putin's special feelings, and after the Kursk on his guilt complex, in order to secure more funding.

Putin has refereed this infighting very cautiously and--much to the surprise of the military leadership--has even refrained from sacking and scapegoating after the Kursk disaster. The key question now is about his choice for the next defense minister. Against the inflated expectations of Kvashnin and his allies, Putin could be worried about the potential influence of military hawks and would probably prefer a more controllable and personally loyal minister. Instead of a Chechnya general, he might opt for a quasi-civilian minister, either from other power structures or from the industries (following the example of Dmitri Ustinov, the Soviet-era civilian defense minister). As long as the Defense Ministry remains a massively over-staffed military bureaucracy, it matters less whether there is a civilian on the very top. With choices like Security Council Secretary Sergei Ivanov, or Chief of Russia's Audit Chamber Sergei Stepashin, or Unity party head Sergei Shoigu, it is doubtful that Putin is preparing to attack the problem of downsizing this Leviathan.

The Military in Politics

The military's role in the turbulent democratic processes of Yeltsin's era had two distinctive features: one parliamentary (attempts to get enough officers elected to parliament to form a military faction), and the other electoral (attempts to attract the vote of the military electorate as a united group). Neither was particularly successful: the few military members of parliament who were elected were always bitterly divided; and the military vote was always split, often showing higher than average support for opposition candidates like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

This picture has changed in the most recent election cycle. There were few attempts to elect officers to the State Duma, either by supporting them in constituencies or by putting them on party lists. As a result, the military opposition both from the right (with such distinguished voices as those of Russian Regions deputy Vladimir Lopatin, Union of Right-Wing Forces deputy Sergei Yushenkov or Duma deputy Eduard Vorobyov); and from the left (with such colorful personalities as Movement to Support the Army deputies General Albert Makashov and General Vladislav Achalov, and General Valentin Varennikov) has been essentially silenced. And the military electorate for the first time was remarkably united in giving its support to the party of power and personally to Vladimir Putin.

Putin's victory was so convincing (despite the well-investigated reports of election fraud) that he probably is not overwhelmed with gratitude toward the military electorate, nor feels particularly indebted. While keeping a watchful eye on approval ratings (which contrary to many expectations have so far remained in the sixties), he has more reason to

worry about the erosion of his support in the media and among the intelligentsia than about a decline of popularity in the military. As for the State Duma, the only influential military voice there now belongs to Andrei Nikolayev, Chairman of the Defense Committee. Putin's narrow circle has remained suspicious of Nikolayev, not only because he (as the Director of the Border Service) successfully removed the Border Troops from FSB control, but mainly because he is perceived as an ally of Moscow's Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

One new feature of the military's role in politics during Putin's presidency has been increased emphasis on the regional level. To be sure, several retired officers (Aleksandr Lebed in Krasnoyarsky krai, Aleksei Lebed in Khakassia, Aleksandr Rutskoï in Orel oblast, and most recently Boris Gromov in Moscow oblast) had won gubernatorial races before that--often against the preferences of the federal center. But Putin has strongly encouraged the Chechnya generals to enter politics on the regional level, perhaps expecting to keep their personal loyalty. He has appointed Generals Konstantin Pulikovskiy and Viktor Kazantsev (both former commanders of federal forces in Chechnya) as heads of two of the seven newly created super-regions (or federal districts)--the Far-Eastern and the Southern, respectively. In the cycle of gubernatorial elections that started in autumn 2000--besides several candidates with FSB backgrounds--another Chechnya general Vladimir Shamanov is running in Ulyanovsk oblast; yet another high-profile military candidate is Admiral Vladimir Yegorov, Commander of the Baltic Fleet, who is running in Kaliningrad oblast. At the same time, Anatoly Kulikov, former Interior Minister and also a Chechnya general, is running in Stavropol krai with strong support from Luzhkov.

The overall picture is that of a significant decline of military involvement in politics at the central level, and a noticeable increase at the regional level. President Putin obviously seeks to check the regionalization trend and to strengthen central control through his disciplined minions. However, putting his trust in the Chechnya generals, he tends to forget the political trajectory of General Lev Rokhlin, who was launched into politics by the party of power only to turn into one of the driving forces of the military opposition from the left.

Military Reform

There is probably no need to assert here that there is massive need for comprehensive military reform in Russia, and there is certainly insufficient space to estimate the accumulated deficiencies, structural malfunctioning, and risks of accidents. While Russia's military structures shrunk by at least 75% during the 1990s, their sustained under-financing and abuse also caused deep-to-the-core debilitation, which was not arrested by the palliative reform measures approved in mid-1997. Putin was initially upbeat about the military posture, placing emphasis on restoring morale in the armed forces and their prestige in society. It was the Kursk catastrophe that became an eye-opener for him, revealing the scale and urgency of the accumulated problems. Putin's main problem now is perhaps not so much where to start, but rather with whom to start.

Putin has declared his intention to move towards compact, mobile and modernized armed forces; this ideal model has for years been elaborated by several civilian experts (Aleksei Arbatov is perhaps the most thoughtful). The problem with this reform avenue is twofold: on the one hand, it would require massive new investment (in both reduction and modernization), which runs against the blueprints of Economics Minister German Gref and the budget plans of Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov. On the other hand, it would be fiercely resisted by the Chechen Guard, who would argue that such a compact all-volunteer army might be useful for various rapid-deployment and peacekeeping operations, but cannot win protracted Chechnya-type wars, which are certain to remain manpower-intensive.

Another option for military reform, centered on priority funding for the nuclear forces, has been advanced by Defense Minister Igor Sergeev since mid-1997, but now appears to be discredited by the concerted attack from the General Staff. This option, in principle, might be supported by the economists in Putin's team as relatively cheap and cost-efficient, and can be justified by the need to preserve Russia's "great-power" status. Given the background of the second Chechen war, however, it is too obviously irrelevant. The option that the Chechen guard (and the General Staff) are pushing cannot be placed under the rubric of reform (but perhaps can be defined as "re-Sovietization"), as it envisages both numerical beefing-up and modernization of key weapon systems. Even if a new "mass army" could be justified by alarmist threat assessments, it obviously cannot be sustained on the available economic base.

Choosing between these options, Putin--smarting after the Kursk catastrophe--expressed disappointment in the military leadership. His dilemma is how to launch a meaningful and affordable reform without any reformers. It is proven that no comprehensible reform project could emerge from within the armed forces (all reform-oriented officers have been systematically purged); painful reforms would have to be politically enforced upon the military. But Putin's enforcement ability is increasingly limited, not only by the consolidating profile of the Chechen Guard, but also by the lack of real reformers in his own team. None of the basic documents produced by the Security Council (the Military Doctrine and the National Security Concept) contain any mention of, not to say guidelines for, a military reform. Furthermore, support for a far-reaching reform of the armed forces in the State Duma cannot be taken for granted since Nikolayev has made it clear that his priorities are much closer to the 1.5 million old-fashioned draft army than to a 600,000-strong modern and professional one.

The Chechnya Factor

While the Chechen war has retreated to the political background and away from public attention, it continues to be the single most important determinant of President Putin's relations with the military leadership, and of the political role of the military more generally. The General Staff leadership is fully aware that the current deadlock cannot be sustained through the second year of the war. Kvashnin has started to push the "final-solution-now" message to the president, counting on support from the "chekists." In Putin's narrow circle there is broad consensus that the ground for a political dialogue with

Chechen separatists is nonexistent and that another defeat is unacceptable. That leaves the decisive victory option, and the top brass can argue that it is achievable--providing there is political will and an executive order to apply deadly force on a large scale, aimed at obliterating most of the villages in the southern part of Chechnya and setting a sufficiently wide buffer zone in the foothills.

Putin remains reluctant to go for such a Stalinist victory in Chechnya. He has invested considerable personal effort in building ties with Western leaders and has acquired a rather positive international profile; those would be lost if massive new violations of human rights were committed in Chechnya. International investors, who have started to return to the growing Russian market after the scare of August 1998, might feel rather uncomfortable about expanding their operations in a country that is the subject of broad international condemnation. Russian society, while quite possibly remaining supportive of a forceful resolution of the Chechen problem, would inevitably shift towards nationalistic state-centrism and further away from democratic reforms.

The choice about Chechnya is therefore locked into a much broader dilemma of state-building and reforms--it is in essence a choice about Russia's path. President Putin is trapped between controversial and fundamentally incompatible models of a strong, vertically-integrated state and liberal market reforms; the "chekists" and the "economists" in his team, while so far remaining on speaking terms, are pulling him in opposite directions. Putin's instinctive reaction to this dilemma has been to postpone crucial decisions and to accumulate sufficient personal weight to avoid becoming hostage to any one of the interest groups. In this fluid situation it is exactly the interwoven issues of Chechnya and military reform that could force the decisive choice and trigger crystallization.

The choice is by no means predetermined, and Putin still might opt for the reform track, through which he can expect to achieve quick economic results and to harvest nice international dividends. But the Chechen Guard is certain to give him a hard fight from the very start. While the commander-in-chief is probably perfectly able to overcome their resistance in the federal center, he might find it much more difficult to prevail on the regional level, where the newly-arrived Chechnya generals could quickly forge alliances with many governors squeezed by Putin's centralism. Putin would much prefer not to alienate the top brass, but they are perhaps too eager to prove that his third way between authoritarianism and market is a blind alley. The real problem is that the military way leads from Chechnya to a much larger disaster.