

Putin and the Russian Military

Kimberly Marten Zisk
October 2000
PONARS Policy Memo 155
Barnard College, Columbia University

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, first as the appointed acting president and then as the duly elected leader of Russia, many people predicted that it heralded the political triumph of the "power ministries," including the Defense Ministry and the uniformed military. Putin's career history with the intelligence services was believed to make him a natural security hard-liner, sympathetic to military concerns. As prime minister in the late Yeltsin era, he was associated with the reopening of war against rebels in Chechnya. Furthermore, this time around the Russian forces were better funded and the General Staff was allowed to choose its strategy without much political interference. The control Putin wielded over the independent media prevented critical reports about the Chechen war from appearing on the nation's most frequently watched television channels and in the most frequently read newspapers; Putin thereby undercut the anti-military impact that human rights organizations might otherwise have had on the Russian citizenry. He furthermore made it a high priority to pay off accumulated wage debt to military officers and recruits, and his budget proposals to the Duma placed much more emphasis on defense technology purchases than had been the case in the Yeltsin era. It seemed that the Russian military had it made.

Russia's Stagnant Military

Yet a year has now passed, and the truth is that not much has changed for those serving in the Russian military. The explosion on the Kursk submarine in August, and the perception that Putin responded in a typical Soviet cover-up fashion, with too little help too late, served to dissipate much of the goodwill the officer corps had earlier extended to him. There are in fact reports that newly drafted Russian recruits are refusing to serve in the navy. While the troops in Chechnya are not in the desperate shape they were in 1994-96, draft dodging and desertion by inductees are still major problems, and the contract soldiers who volunteer for tough assignments appear to be dominated by a criminal element. Even these contract soldiers leave early when the extra pay they were promised doesn't arrive. Dedovshchina, the brutal "hazing" that senior recruits practice on newcomers, as well as violence committed by officers against troops under their command, appears to be flourishing.

As was the case in the late 1990s, those attracted to a career in the military are still mainly those with no other options, leaving Russia with a junior officer corps notably lacking in the best and the brightest, and hollowed out because many choose not to renew

their contracts. Exercise and flight time remains abysmally low because of shortages of funds to cover fuel and spare parts, which in turn threatens the safety of operations in the field. Corruption from top to bottom of the military hierarchy is still regularly reported, despite the fact that under Putin more test cases of prosecution are going forward than in the past. All the evidence indicates that criminal rings of military officers continue to divert weapons intended for use in Chechnya to illegal purchasers, and indeed those leaving service in Chechnya are especially likely to be targeted for membership by Russian organized crime groups.

Brakes on the Reform Process

Perhaps most important, real structural reform of the Russian military remains stalled in political infighting, leaving the design of the armed forces poorly matched with the state resources available for their upkeep and the threat environment Russia currently faces. The most visible fight over structural reform is between two prominent individuals. The defense minister, Marshal Igor Sergeyev, who spent most of his career in the Strategic Rocket Forces, favors the privileging of a strong nuclear deterrent posture, believing that a decline in Russia's strategic nuclear capabilities threatens Russia's great power status. The chief of the general staff, Army General Anatoly Kvashnin, spent his career as a military engineer and tank division commander, and favors the maintenance of large, varied, and well-equipped forces that could respond to what he sees as the major threats facing Russia today, namely NATO expansionism and religiously motivated conflicts on Russia's periphery.

Most commentators have concentrated on the high-level contest between these military leaders, predicting (or hoping) that one or both men will be fired soon and that this will remove the log jam. Given Putin's championing of military action in Chechnya, as well as the seeming reversion in recent military exercises and discussions to the notion of integrating tactical nuclear weapons into large-scale conventional operations, the standard view is that Putin favors Kvashnin and that Sergeyev will soon be out. Other analysts, such as Mark Galeotti, a columnist for *Jane's Intelligence Review*, argue instead that Putin is playing Kvashnin and Sergeyev off of each other in a divide and conquer effort to quash a strong military voice, implying that if only Putin picked one reform plan and stuck to it, then military reform would finally move forward.

Yet this assumption--that it is the top-level debates that shape policy implementation--does not reflect the reality of Russian military reform attempts in the late 1990s. What happened then, repeatedly, was that any attempt to shrink the forces or restructure command hierarchies for new operational purposes was undercut by local protest actions and the refusal of officers to cooperate. The conflicts that occurred were not along the nuclear versus conventional forces axis; instead they were conflicts over such things as the future roles of coastal versus internal border defense, and of the importance of strike aviation versus tank and ground artillery forces in future warfare. In other words, no matter who wins this top-level debate (which undoubtedly extends down into the service hierarchies, far beyond the personal antagonism between Sergeyev and Kvashnin),

important fights would continue at much lower levels within each service, and actual reform in troop dispositions would continue to be stymied. Even if Putin succeeds in appointing a civilian outsider to head the Defense Ministry, as he announced he would do in October 2000, it is unlikely that real structural reform can move ahead easily.

In some ways, these tensions reflect standard practice in any organization undergoing drastic change: individuals fight to maintain the prestige and responsibility of their positions, and officers who have been leaders in a particular branch of service come to believe that their work is the bulwark of the state's defense posture and thus irreplaceable. But in Russia, bureaucratic and organizational politics are made much worse because of an additional pernicious factor: the majority of officers who have remained in the Russian military through this period of institutional decline believe that they have no employment alternatives. Most are men in their thirties, forties and fifties who are supporting families, who prefer the small uncertainty associated with late wages from the state to the large uncertainty of competition in the marketplace in a country where prosperity is far from assured. Regardless of who is giving them the orders, they will be reluctant to leave their posts early, or to have their responsibilities (and perks) given to someone else.

The Russian state has not put many resources into the needs of officers facing early retirement. Retraining and relocation assistance from Western countries and non-governmental funding organizations--such as that encouraged by the International Institute for Strategic Studies--can ease this burden somewhat. But it would be unreasonable to expect that outsiders can provide Russia with the level of funding necessary to satisfy the concerns of everyone threatened by sweeping military reform. Instead, for reform to be politically acceptable to the officer corps, Putin will have to ensure that significant state resources go not only to the active military and its technology needs, but to programs designed to ease the situation of retirees and veterans. Given recent reports indicating that Putin's administration is overestimating the size of the available state budget in future years, as well as continuing pressures from disparate social groups for funding their own pressing economic needs, it is unlikely that adequate resources will be funneled into veteran's affairs anytime soon.

An Unreformed Military Is Dangerous

Some Western analysts may be tempted to see the stagnation of Russian military reform as a good thing for Western interests, fearing that Putin's ultimate goal will be to create a "lean, mean, fighting machine" that could better threaten Eurasian stability. Yet this perspective is shortsighted: it is an unreformed Russian military that threatens stability most.

Russian leaders in the late 1990s feared the consequences of acting too strongly to force structural reform on an unwilling officer corps, and thus allowed local protests to stymie forward movement. Recent statements by figures such as Deputy Secretary of the Duma Defense Committee Aleksei Arbatov signal ongoing concerns that acting too hastily without adequate funding could lead to a "social explosion." Such statements are

sometimes bandied about lightly in Russia today, as arguments for why any particular social group requires more budgetary attention. Yet there is no question that an unhappy and undisciplined officer corps with easy access to weapons and much recent experience in guerrilla fighting is problematic for society. While an organized military coup against the state does not seem even remotely likely, local violence and support for criminal structures threatens everything that Putin needs to do to regain state solidity in Russia, from border controls to tax collection.

Furthermore, history tells us that states with unpredictable military plans and uncertain capabilities sometimes tempt aggression. Lack of clarity in a state's military posture can lead to misunderstandings about what a state is likely to do in the event of a small incursion, and can even lead to the belief that it is better to act now when the state is infirm rather than waiting for military reform to produce a stronger enemy. Despite some of the jingoist statements from Russian military leaders about the threats they face from NATO, it is not aggression by stable, economically comfortable states that Russia needs to fear today because it is not in NATO's interests to create instability on its own eastern borders. Instead Russia needs to fear aggression by unconventional means from those who wish to undermine Russian control in its geographic and ethnic peripheries. A bloated but hollow officer corps plagued by insufficient supplies and deteriorating weapons systems provides a tempting power vacuum for terrorist incursions, such as those carried out by separatists in Dagestan last year, which provoked the renewal of the Chechen war. Such ethnic conflicts can have spillover effects in other regions, and can fuel the fire of other separatist and terrorist efforts elsewhere.

For these reasons, Russia's inability to institute clearly articulated military reform plans threatens all of us. Since the root cause of this inability is bureaucratic infighting made worse by economic desperation, there is little the outside world can do to help, except to encourage Russian economic recovery as soon as possible. A strong economy will breed internal optimism, aiding both labor mobility out of the army and social funding for veterans' programs.