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Civil-Military Relations in Russia

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Professor Patrick O'Neil for supporting my escapades into the Labyrinth of FSU politics and helping guide me through the creation of this work.

Introduction

The question of civil-military relations in Russia is a difficult one, given the peculiarities of the Russian state and the prominence of informal politics via neopatrimonial ‘clans.’ Neither theories on democratic civil-military relations (henceforth referred to as ‘CMR’), nor more confrontational theories on military intervention seem applicable to Russia, given its deliberately anti-democratic and informal politics, and lack of military coups despite ample opportunity and incentive.¹

Modern Russian CMR exist in the context of geopolitical competition with the West and fears of Western encirclement. This view necessitates a fiscally untenable security policy, as well as the perceived need to build a near-peer military to NATO. The issue is further complicated as much of Vladimir Putin’s domestic legitimacy and relationship with the military is built on his hawkish foreign policy. This would not be such an issue if the Russian economy were better performing, but Russia’s economic stagnation and over-dependence on oil exports means that this type of geopolitical competition is economically unsustainable. In other words, Putin’s foreign policy helps to cement his domestic power, but it also creates multiple issues relating to the construction of a military more conducive to Russia’s geopolitical and economic situation. As Russia’s economic problems and global confrontations become more acute, we should expect to see greater turbulence in Russian CMR as the different facets of Putin’s rule begin to clash.

Rather than fruitlessly discussing policies that Russia would need to pursue in order to continue to build an effective military, this report will outline the various aspects of the relationship between the military, the government and Vladimir Putin. In other words, this will function as a thematic, rather than temporal, road map to understanding what one scholar has deemed “the Gordian knot of Russian civil-military relations,” rather than another discounted recommendation about the ideal Russian CMR.

Background: Collapse

Against the backdrop of the chaotic 1990s, Russia’s military faced near complete collapse. In April 1992, the Russian government nominally took over responsibility for 2.6 million Soviet soldiers and the Soviet General Staff.² In practice, there were significantly fewer soldiers, as hundreds of thousands simply went home due to lack of pay. By 1994, the Russian military had 1.5 million men on paper,³ although this number is likely also an overestimation. In 1994, Russia wanted to maintain an army of 1.9 million men despite the fact that only 30% of the current soldiers were receiving paychecks.⁴ Soldiers went months without paychecks, and the military was unable to house them all. There are even accounts of recruits being given

¹ Taylor, Brian D. “Organizational Cultural and Civil-Military Relations” in *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003).

² Mikhail Barabanov, “Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict,” in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. Colby Howard & Ruslan Pukhov (Center for Analysis of Strategy and technology-CAST: Moscow, 2014), 77.

³ Stephen M. Meyer, “The Devolution of Russian Military Power,” *Current History* 94 (1995): 324.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 323.

dog food due to lack of proper funding, and officers' wives becoming prostitutes in order to earn money for the household.⁵

In light of this dire situation, potential recruits would get deferments from military service in any way they could, while talented officers would leave their now dead-end military careers in order to pursue more lucrative careers in business.⁶ The quality of Russian soldiers dropped, and corruption and criminality became the norm. The already vicious hazing process of new soldiers became deadly and the rate of violent crime skyrocketed.⁷ Corruption, already a problem, became even more endemic — an accurate reflection of Russian society and politics of the time — as unpaid soldiers and officers took and sold piles of increasingly obsolete Soviet equipment.⁸ Russian military equipment would surface in every former Soviet Union (FSU) war, including in the hands of Chechen rebels. It was not just corrupt soldiers and officers partaking in this kind of behaviour, but high-ranking General Staff and Ministry of Defense officials as well. It has been estimated that approximately 30-50% of Russia's defense budget was either misused or just outright embezzled during this time.⁹

The main issue regarding the military was its Soviet strategic orientation, which was carried over by the Soviet-turned-Russian General Staff officers. The Soviet Army, and post-Soviet Russian army, were mobilization armies designed to fight NATO, not the limited territorial wars of the 1990s. Rather than having a professional standing military made up of contracted professional soldiers, the Russian military was comprised of 132 divisions, of which only 20 (there may have been even less in practice¹⁰) were staffed at 70% of their wartime readiness strength. The rest of the units were staffed at between 5% and 10% readiness and were designed to be brought up to full strength by mobilizing conscripts in the event of a war.¹¹ In the event of full mobilization, Russia had the command infrastructure to field a five-million-man army.¹²

This meant that Russia lacked a high readiness army to respond to localized crises, and there were massive stores of equipment for the theoretical 1.9-million-man force, which were expensive to maintain.¹³ Additionally, the government was largely unable to mobilize soldiers for its limited post-Soviet wars due to ongoing political problems, namely the military's lack of popularity and the state's lack of capacity.¹⁴

Norms Against Military Intervention

⁵ Stephen J. Blank, "Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary Russia," in *Civil-Military Relations in Perspective: Strategy, Structure, and Policy*, ed. Stephen J. Cimbala (Routledge: New York, 2012).

⁶ Zoltan Barany, "Civil-Military Relations and Institutional Decay: Explaining Russian Military Politics," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 4 (2008): 592.; David J. Bentz, "Security Policy-Making and Defense Reform," *Civil-Military Relations in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Routledge: London, 2004).

⁷ Stephen J. Blank, "Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary Russia".

⁸ Tor Bukkvol, "Their Hands in the Till: Scale and Causes of Russian Military Corruption," *Armed Forces & Society* 34, no. 2 (2008): 262-3.

⁹ Stephen J. Blank, "Civil-Military Relations and Russian Security," in *Civil-Military Relations in Medvedev's Russia*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 16.

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin. *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 188.

¹¹ Mikhail Barabanov, "Hard Lessons Learned: Russian Military Reform up to the Georgian Conflict," 76.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Stephen M. Meyer, "The Devolution of Russian Military Power," 323.

¹⁴ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, 189.

Due to the strong civilian control of the military in Soviet times, the military which Russia inherited had strong norms against domestic deployments and political interference. These norms were reinforced by experiences in the late-Soviet era, which demonstrated the futility of military involvement in domestic politics. For example, the military was scapegoated for a series of failed crackdowns in the late-1980s, and sat by as the failed 1991 KGB coup led to the ultimate unravelling of the Soviet Union.¹⁵

Therefore, despite having ample opportunity (multiple political crises) and incentives (a drastically reduced budget and impoverishment of officers), the military never tried to take power.¹⁶ The only time military infrastructure was actively involved in politics was during the 1993 constitutional crisis, and only then because of the direness of the situation, and explicit written orders from President Yeltsin. The military first sought to stay uninvolved, and then to maintain the 'legitimate' political order.¹⁷

Directions of Military Reform

The question of military reform is closely linked with Russian security goals and economic possibility, as well the corporate interests of the General Staff. The main point of contention is deciding whether to create a more Western-style, high-readiness mobile army using contract soldiers, or to maintain a very large conscription army which could be mobilized to fight a near-peer adversary. Historically, Russia tended to opt for the second option of a poorly trained but massive military force.¹⁸ However, due to Russian state collapse in the 90s and budgetary constraints, this mass mobilization model became increasingly unrealistic. Despite a series of announced reforms in the 1990s, the Russian military continued to disintegrate, culminating in Russia's embarrassing defeat during the First Chechen War (1994-1996), in which Russia could only muster 40,000 soldiers despite the military's authorized strength of 1.5 million personnel.¹⁹

In 2003, after the poor performance of the army during the Second Chechen War (1999-2007), new reforms were put forward by Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov. He managed to clarify the relationship between the General Staff, Ministry of Defense and the Kremlin, thus creating a more rational chain of command. Ivanov also created a showcase, fully-contracted high-readiness paratrooper unit, but his successes were primarily political and only marginally improved the armed forces' performance.²⁰ Furthermore, Ivanov's high readiness unit, as with most contracted forces, was still extremely expensive to maintain due to contract negotiations with soldiers.

After the Russian victory in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, a new round of reforms known as the "New Look" sought to radically shift the Russian force structure. Although the

¹⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*, 98-103; Brian Taylor, "Russia's Passive Army: Rethinking Military Coups," *Comparative Political Studies* 34, no. 8 (2001): 940.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000*, 1-5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁸ Nadja Douglas, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia: Conscript vs. Contract Army, or How Ideas Prevail Against Functional Demands," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27 (2014): 513.

¹⁹ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington DC, 2008), 76-7.

²⁰ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, 85.

Russian army routed the Georgian army within 5 days, this was as much due to Georgian incompetence as Russian capability.²¹ Since 2007, plans for further reform based off of Sergei Ivanov's fully contract parachute existed, but the war was the catalyst for change due to Russia's poor operational performance.

The reforms aimed to reduce the strength of the military to 1 million personnel by 2012, drastically reduced the number of officers from 335,000 to 220,000 (the bloated officer corps was a distinctly Soviet legacy²²), centralize and standardize military school curriculum, reorganize and simplify the entire command structure, abolish mobilization-centric skeleton units, thus bringing every unit up to full readiness, and have primarily contract soldiers.²³ Additionally, the leadership of the Ministry of Defense wanted to create an NCO (non-commissioned officers) corps as the institutional backbone of the army.²⁴ This would ensure that there was a cadre of professionals with practical knowledge of soldiering and tactics. This represented a radical change towards a professional, high-readiness army and it reflected the belated realization that Russia was likely not going to fight a near-peer adversary in the foreseeable future.²⁵

As of 2018, two-thirds of forces now stand at permanent readiness. There is once again a sense of professionalism, salaries are up, there is a strong NCO corps, and training has greatly improved.²⁶ Similarly, there are now 400,000 contract soldiers and only around 276,000 conscripts.²⁷ This contributed to the formation of an NCO corps and improved professional culture. Command and control have significantly improved, and the organization of the armed forces has shifted in favor of maneuvering multiple smaller units, rather than World War II-style armies on massive fronts.²⁸ Furthermore, the movement away from the mobilization model means Russia no longer needs to maintain massive stockpiles of weapons and logistics hubs, and can effectively focus on supplying current personnel with up-to-date weapons and communications technology.

Overall, the reforms are the most successful to date. Russia was able to annex Crimea and fight its war with Ukraine in the Donbas region using exclusively high-readiness contract soldiers; the same is true in Syria. Russia is now able to pull off relatively large complex operations using its new modern army. Although issues remain, it is clear that the military has once again become a very effective tool of Russian state power.

However, increased professionalization will likely remain elusive, as Russia has been forced to cut the military budget due to fiscal restraints. Russian plans for an additional 95,000 contract soldiers by 2021 are increasingly doubtful as there are simply not enough funds for

²¹ Vyacheslav Tseluiko, "Present and Future of the Georgian-Russian Conflict: The Military Aspect," in *Tanks of August*, ed. Ruslan Puhkov (Center for Analysis of Strategy and technology-CAST: Moscow, 2010), 79.

²² William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), 39-40.

²³ Mikhail Barabanov, "Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia," in *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, ed. Colby Howard & Ruslan Puhkov (Center for Analysis of Strategy and technology-CAST: Moscow, 2014), 93.

²⁴ Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria* (CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program: Washington DC, 2018), 3.

²⁵ Mikhail Barabanov, "Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia," 92.

²⁶ Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*, 5.

²⁷ Mikhail Barabanov, "Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia," 93.

²⁸ Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*, 7.

the government to negotiate the additional contracts.²⁹ Although the ‘New Look’ reforms have been successful, Russia still does not have the military it wants, nor does it have the military that would be practically more beneficial.

The Rise and Fall of Military Corporatism

The long-term issues surrounding military reform, and the incompetence in carrying out such reforms, was a result of domestic institutions, lack of political will and military corporatism. Yet, despite the military throwing around its bureaucratic influence to change policy in its favor, and the politicization of generals in the 1990s, the military still has very strong norms against using force to achieve its goals.³⁰ In other words, the military’s resistance towards reform is real, but this is better explained by bureaucratic corporatism rather than existing models of military intervention in politics.

Throughout the 1990s, Soviet CMR fell to pieces once Russia was no longer a party-state, as well as political struggles and Yeltsin’s weak leadership. The 1993 Constitutional Crisis turned out to be a watershed moment for Russian CMR. The army, via the Minister of Defense, sided with Yeltsin and attacked the legislature with tanks, and as part of the political consequences, the Duma lost almost all practical power to review military budgets. The Duma is still responsible for approving a budget, but it has very little power to write or even amend those budgets due to the secrecy surrounding the President’s defense budget and foreign policy decision-making,³¹ a situation which persists today.

The military drifted away from civilian control as ambitious generals conducted their own foreign policies, often motivated by anti-NATO paranoia.³² Some generals set their own security policies and defined threat perceptions, often in spite of the Kremlin. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Defense and General Staff developed a rivalry, which meant it was unclear who was responsible for carrying out policies. Herein lies part of the reason the ‘90s reforms were all failures. Yeltsin may have been able to add clarity to the situation and reign in the generals, but his own personal shortfalls as a leader and lack of bureaucratic skill prevented this from happening.³³ For example, Yeltsin could have used his control of military budgets to control the generals, or simply fire them, but he did neither.³⁴

Since his first term, Vladimir Putin has steadily pulled the military back under ‘civilian’ control. Due to poor military advice during the *Kursk* disaster in 2000, and poor operational performance by the military in Chechnya from 1999-2003, Putin has been more eager than Yeltsin to both subordinate and reform the military.³⁵

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Taylor, *Politics and the Russian Army: Civil-Military Relations, 1689-2000*, 340.

³¹ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy*, 31-2.

³² Andrea Mörka, “The Military as a Political Actor in Russia: the Cases of Moldova and Georgia,” *The International Spectator* 33, no. 3 (1998): 124-6.; Zoltan Barany, “Civil-Military Relations and Institutional Decay: Explaining Russian Military Politics,” 590.

³³ David J. Bentz, “Security Policy-Making and Defense Reform.”

³⁴ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy*, 31-2.

³⁵ Thomas Gomart, “Russian Civil-Military Relations: Is there Something New with Medvedev?” in *Civil-Military Relations in Medvedev’s Russia*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 86-8.

In 2004, Putin appointed the Russian Federation's first 'civilian' Minister of Defense, Sergei Ivanov. Ivanov had served his entire career with the KGB and FSB, but he was not a military officer.³⁶ Using both carrots and sticks, Ivanov was able to control the nexus of General Staff-Ministry of Defense-Kremlin relations. In 2004, Ivanov took control of doctrinal and operational matters from the military, which clearly subordinated the General Staff to the Ministry of Defense.³⁷ Later in 2004, Putin and Ivanov capitalized on a surprise attack from Chechen rebels to dismiss the Chief of the General Staff, Anatoly Kvashnin — the general who famously pursued his own foreign policy by sending Russian soldiers to Serbian airfields during the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, despite having no authorization to do so.³⁸

Putin also capitalized on the military's wider operational failures to shift responsibility for the war onto the security services, primarily the FSB. The new emphasis on international terrorism in light of the 2004 Beslan School Siege allowed Putin to further shift security responsibility away from the military, thus reducing its power and giving Putin more freedom to enact badly needed reforms.³⁹

At the same time, Putin used his political clout to raise the military budget, as well as soldiers' salaries. From 2000 to 2008, the military budget doubled. Between 2008 and 2016, it again increased by about 50%.⁴⁰ Part of the reason that Putin and Medvedev have been so successful in bringing the military back under control is that they have shown their seriousness in rebuilding the military as a tool of national power, despite firing some of the most aggressive and outspoken generals who also favored this goal. Changing the budget was an important part of showing this seriousness.

Under Putin's first two terms, CMR moved in a direction of greater clarity as corporatism and rouge actors in the military were brought under control. Under Medvedev, CMR became more confused due to Putin's position as Prime Minister and his apparent control over foreign policy, as shown by his conduct during the Georgian war and his attempts to sabotage logistical cooperation with NATO.⁴¹

Yet, under Medvedev, civilian control of the military was further tightened. In 2007, Minister of Defense Ivanov was replaced by Serdyukov, a true civilian with a talent for organization.⁴² Serdyukov became the driving force behind the "New Look" military reforms. When disagreements over budgets became an issue, Serdyukov was able to have both the Chief of the Ministry of Defense's Main Operations Directorate and the Chief of the General Staff fired, thus increasing his and Medvedev's control over the formal institutions.⁴³ Despite the split character of Russian foreign policy during this time, due to Putin's ongoing influence, Medvedev's modernization drive successfully pushed through some of the radical reform the

³⁶ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, 49, 64.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁸ Zoltan Barany, "Civil-Military Relations and Institutional Decay: Explaining Russian Military Politics," 590.

³⁹ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, 56-61.

⁴⁰ "Military Expenditure by Region in Constant US Dollar, 1988-2018." Published by *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (2019).

⁴¹ Stephen J. Blank, "Civil-Military Relations and Russian Security," 6, 18, 57, 43-9.

⁴² Thomas Gomart, "Russian Civil-Military Relations: Is there Something New with Medvedev?," 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105.

Russian armed forces badly needed. Yet, the neutering of the armed forces' political power under Medvedev was still part of a process that stretched back to 2004.⁴⁴

Since coming back into power in 2012, Putin has continued to support reform and keep a tight grip over the military, even as he increasingly uses it for his foreign policy. The issues of dual leadership are no longer an issue, given Putin's indisputable position as head of security policy and the government in general.

Yet, since 2016 the military budget has been cut by 22% to \$64 billion (2018 USD) in response to budgetary pressure brought on by poor economic performance.⁴⁵ This is the first time since the Yeltsin era that the military budget has suffered cuts, and given how important increasing the military budget was in the process of winning over the generals, it is unclear how this will affect CMR going forward.

Vladimir Putin and the Military

Putin's relationship to the military is central to his rule. Unlike Yeltsin and Medvedev, Putin stakes much of his legitimacy on being a security-focused leader. The military is also important in attaining his foreign policy goals. Despite his continued support of reforms away from the conscript army and his undercutting of the military's political power, the military largely supports Putin, because unlike Yeltsin, they view Putin as a person with a serious security background who both respects the military and holds similar foreign policy views, especially in terms of Russia's need for the status of a Great Power.

Putin oversaw the Second Chechen War from the beginning — first as Prime Minister under Yeltsin, and then as President. Between this experience and his KGB and FSB background, it was clear that Putin was both well-versed and interested in security policy.⁴⁶ During the Chechen War, it seems that both Putin and the military's threat perceptions aligned in terms of the immediate problem of maintaining Russian territorial integrity, but they still diverged on the importance of the NATO threat. Some contemporary scholarship argues that even in the late 1990s, Putin was intent on bringing back Russia's Great Power status. However, this was not yet on display, and it is unclear whether the military was privy to Putin's ambitions.⁴⁷ This seems unlikely given the low opinion Putin had of the military as a result of their poor operational performance in Chechnya, and the disastrous advice Putin received from the military regarding the *Kursk* fiasco.⁴⁸

One of the most important CMR successes of Vladimir Putin is his taking control of foreign policy threat perception. Throughout the 1990s, the General Staff was largely in control of Russia's threat perception due to the disinterest of Yeltsin and the lack of CMR clarity in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 98-9.

⁴⁵ "Military Expenditure by Region in Constant US Dollar, 1988-2018." Published by *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (2019).; "GDP (current US\$) - Russian Federation" *World Bank*. Accessed 25 November 2019.

⁴⁶ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, 5.

⁴⁷ Brain D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism* (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2018), 166-94.

⁴⁸ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin's Legacy*, 30-1.; Thomas Gomart, "Russian Civil-Military Relations: Is there Something New with Medvedev?", 86-7.

the Yeltsin era; this changed after the 2004 Beslan School Siege.⁴⁹ Despite obvious links to the conflict in Chechnya, Putin linked the attack to ‘international terrorism,’ which redefined Russia’s threat perception away from simply maintaining territorial integrity and NATO. This marks the first time Putin unilaterally defined threat perception. By framing the issue in this way, Putin had a pretext to reorganize the Russian security services in a way more conducive to fighting terrorism.⁵⁰

Putin did this after Beslan in 2004, and it is widely agreed that the FSB was the big winner from the reorganization in terms of size, resources and influence. Putin shifted responsibility for counter-terror operations onto the FSB and its special forces. Moreover, because of the clear link between the hostage crisis and Chechen War, the FSB also took control over Chechnya from the military under the guise of combating ‘international terrorism.’⁵¹ This was one of the early steps in the ‘securitization’ of Russian politics under the FSB, which is reflected in the amount of former security officials who made it into the top ranks of government under Putin.⁵²

By the Georgian War, Putin’s anti-Westernism and fears about NATO expansion and revolution begins to show through. Georgia’s stated goal was to join NATO, and its military force structure was designed with this goal in mind, reflecting the seriousness of Georgian political elites.⁵³ Putin’s paranoia is further reflected in his anti-Western shadow foreign policy under the Medvedev administration.⁵⁴ Although it had taken time, Putin has revealed himself to have many of the same anxieties about the West and NATO expansion as his generals,⁵⁵ yet with an important caveat: whereas the General Staff still wants a mobilization army, which could fight NATO in a conventional war, Putin has more prudently recognized that this type of war seems very unlikely given that Russian statehood is guaranteed by a massive nuclear arsenal. Furthermore, the Russian military would still be dwarfed by NATO forces in terms of personnel, and it cannot compete with NATO in terms of military technology.⁵⁶ Still, Putin’s ambitious foreign policy seems fairly in line with that of the General Staff.

Another important dynamic of the Putin-military relationship is Putin’s need for a strong military in order to legitimize his own rule. Putin has increasingly painted Russia as surrounded by the West in a not dissimilar way to the ‘Capitalist Encirclement’ of the Soviets, except now it is more akin to Western encirclement of Eurasia. Instead of the Communist Party being the only bulwark against Russia’s enemies, it is now Vladimir Putin himself.⁵⁷

Putin has brought the military back into full view in the form of constant public adulation of the soldiers, reviving massive military parades on Victory in Europe Day (May

⁴⁹ “Beslan School Siege Fast Facts,” CNN, 17 August 2019.

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/09/world/europe/beslan-school-siege-fast-facts/index.html>

⁵⁰ Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy*, 77-82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56-61.

⁵² Andrei Illarionov, “The Siloviki in Charge,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 2 (2009): 69.; Thomas Gomart, *Russian Civil-Military Relations: Putin’s Legacy*, 47.

⁵³ Vyacheslav Tseluiko, “Georgian Army Reform under Saakashvili Prior to the 2008 Five Day War,” in *Tanks of August*, ed. Ruslan Puhkov (Center for Analysis of Strategy and technology-CAST: Moscow, 2010), 13-15.

⁵⁴ Stephen J. Blank, “Civil-Military Relations and Russian Security”, 43-49.

⁵⁵ Brain D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, 166-94.

⁵⁶ Mikhail Barabanov, “Changing the Force and Moving Forward After Georgia,” 92.; Olga Oliker, “Moscow’s Nuclear Enigma: What Is Russia’s Arsenal Really For?” *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2018).

⁵⁷ Brain D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, 166-94.

8th) to showcase new military technology, and consistent appeals to the officers' patriotism. Although seemingly a ham-fisted approach, these efforts have had a positive effect on the military's morale as well as the view of the military in Russian society, and have been further bolstered by Russian military successes in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.

As his rule has matured, the military has become increasingly central to Putin's goals and worldview. Putin's zero-sum view of international relations, in which Russia is surrounded by enemies and needs to defend itself, requires that Russia has a strong military as well as a sense of pride surrounding it. Otherwise, Russia could dissolve during a revolution. In the end, despite his forceful handling of generals and subordination of the army during the early years of his rule, the military holds Putin in very high esteem. Putin needs this acclaim in order to pursue his goals and maintain his domestic image as Russia's sole protector, thus allowing him to maintain his wider rule of Russia.

Future Challenges for the Russian Military

Many of Russia's issues relate to its meager economy, which would not be such an issue if Russia were not engaged in geopolitical competition with the West. This is one of the primary dynamics which helped destroy the Soviet Union, and it remains to be seen how Putin's Russia will deal with this asymmetry in terms of its military modernization.

Despite Russia's modern fighter program and showcase weapons, there are simply not enough funds to produce these weapons on a meaningful scale. The government lacks the budget to fund the military on a level comparable to the West, or even China.⁵⁸ The issue of the conscript vs. contract army has still not been fully solved, despite reform in favor of a contract-based system, and budgetary constraints that indicate Russia will likely fail to get 95,000 additional contract soldiers by 2021.⁵⁹ Additionally, Russia's demographic issues have led to historically low levels of young males in the conscription pool.⁶⁰

This budgetary issue has become increasingly important, given that increasing the military budget has forced Russia to cut back on spending for social services. In 2018, Russia announced pension 'reforms' that raised the retirement age, sparking protests and dissatisfaction.⁶¹ The economic booms of the early 2000s and 2010s are over, and it will be politically difficult for Russia to maintain a high military budget as expressions of social unrest increase.

Finally, corruption remains a major issue in the Russian military. Despite the reforms, corruption has never been eliminated. As of 2008, around 30% of the defense budget was unaccounted for.⁶² Russia's recurring problems with corruption go even deeper, since corruption is a structural tool employed by Putin to meld state institutions with his clan-

⁵⁸ Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*, 26.

⁵⁹ Nadja Douglas, "Civil-Military Relations in Russia: Conscript vs. Contract Army, or How Ideas Prevail Against Functional Demands.," Anton Lavrov, *Russian Military Reforms from Georgia to Syria*, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶¹ "Russia Pension Protests: Fresh Anti-Reform Rallies Held," BBC, 2 September 2018.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45389797>

⁶² Stephen J. Blank, "Civil-Military Relations and Russian Security," 16.

governance style.⁶³ In a system of government where there are no accountability mechanisms, and corruption itself is a mode of governance, corruption cannot be rooted out.

Conclusion

Russian CMR must be considered in the context of the 1990s and military collapse. Under Putin, the military has largely recovered, but it still has not achieved parity with NATO forces and likely will not do so in the foreseeable future. Despite this relative weakness, Russia is still devoting massive amounts of resources to developing near-peer military capabilities to defend itself against perceived encirclement, despite the fact that it cannot economically compete against the West. These actions stand within a long historical pattern of the Russians' security predicament dating back to the Tsars, as well as the tradition of paranoia that often plagues authoritarian governance. Russia's focus on military strength is also a result of Russian attempts to catch up with the West by modernizing the state under a single 'strongman.'⁶⁴ However, the adage that "Russia is never as strong as she looks; Russia is never as weak as she looks" still likely holds true.⁶⁵

The question of military reform and other factors like military corporatism, control over threat perceptions, foreign policy, and domestic politics have all linked together to both decimate and rebuild the Russian military. Despite the Soviet inheritance of the army, Russia has had to effectively reconstruct the institution of the Soviet General Staff, which had, for so long, hampered the military reform Russia still badly needs.

This all begs the central question of why Russia needs a near-peer military to NATO, given that nuclear weapons are the ultimate guarantor of the Russian state, and Russia can already easily dominate its neighbors.

The more prescient question is how budgetary constraints will affect Russian CMR. Russia's military still has ambitious plans for professionalization, but under its decreasing budget these plans will likely not materialize. The military budget cuts may also prove to be problematic for Putin, given that increased budget expenditures were one of the main tools he used to cultivate the loyalty of the generals. The generals will likely still support Putin's hawkish foreign policy, but that, too, will eventually have to face budgetary pressure as the wars in Ukraine and Syria have been costly.

The budgetary pressures also extend to societal benefits, as seen in the pension reforms of 2018 which raised the retirement age. This reform caused massive protests, something which is becoming more common in Russia. Much of Putin's legitimacy was built on Russia's economic boom throughout the 2000s. This boom ended in 2014 and the effects on the Russian populace have become more acute, paradoxically leaving Putin more reliant on legitimization through a hawkish foreign policy and strong military.

⁶³ Brian D. Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, 42-77.; Anders Åslund, "How the United States Can Combat Russia's Kleptocracy" (The Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, 2018).

⁶⁴ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2016).

⁶⁵ This adage has been attributed to Talleyrand, Metternich and Churchill. Mark N. Katz, "Policy Watch: Is Russia Strong or Weak?", UPI, 10 July 2006. <https://www.upi.com/Defense-News/2006/07/10/Policy-Watch-Is-Russia-strong-or-weak/39541152565695/?ur3=1>

The budgetary pressures are a result of Russia's poor economic performance, which itself is a result of the endemic corruption of Putin's regime. Yet, Putin continues to use this corruption to cultivate his power base, in order to enact his policies. This 'clan network' allows him to maintain massive influence even as Prime Minister. Even as corruption helps Putin enact his policies, it further strangles the Russian economy.

Putin needs the support of the generals, the populace, and corruption-based clan networks to cement his power and carry out geopolitical goals. Yet, each of these pieces of Putin's power base are increasingly at odds with each other, due to the economic strain of geopolitical competition. If Putin changes to a more financially tenable security policy by cutting the military budget, it will pressure his relationship with the generals and hurt his identity as a strongman. If he stops cutting the military budget, he would have to cut more social benefits, thus creating greater civilian resentment towards his government. The corruption in the Russian government cannot be dispensed with, due to its structural role in holding many disparate clan groups together. Assuming Russian economic performance remains lackluster, we should expect to see greater social unrest, more fraught civil-military relations or both, as the contradictions of Putin's rule come to a head.

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