

Siloviki

Journal Issue**Author(s):**

Taylor, Brian D.; Galeotti, Mark; Luzin, Pavel; Haven, Kurt; Klein, Margarete

Publication date:

2025-01-20

Permanent link:

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000715606>

Rights / license:

[In Copyright - Non-Commercial Use Permitted](#)

Originally published in:

Russian Analytical Digest (RAD) 323



<https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>

SILOVIKI

- ANALYSIS 2
The Russian *Siloviki*: Twenty Years of Scholarship
Brian D. Taylor (Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs,
Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University)
- ANALYSIS 6
Siloviki at War: The Russian Security Community Since February 2022
Mark Galeotti (Mayak Intelligence; University College London)
- ANALYSIS 10
The Transformation of Russia's Military Leadership
Pavel Luzin (Center for European Policy Analysis—CEPA)
- ANALYSIS 14
Reforms of the Russian Police and Staffing Gap Consequences
Kurt Haven (Russia)
- ANALYSIS 19
Russia's Volunteer Formations: Instruments for Recruitment, Proof of Loyalty or
Diffusion of Power?
Margarete Klein (German Institute for International and
Security Affairs—SWP, Berlin)

The Russian Analytical Digest is an open access publication.

You can subscribe to free e-mail alerts for new issues at

<https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad/newsletter-service-rad.html>

The Russian *Siloviki*: Twenty Years of Scholarship

Brian D. Taylor (Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000715606

Abstract

This analysis presents a brief introduction to the academic literature on the Russian *siloviki*. It provides an overview of the origins of this literature and some of the central concepts, findings, and debates. The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated both the political influence of the *siloviki* and the organizational shortcomings of key power ministries.

The Birth of a Research Agenda

Twenty years ago, Russian sociologist Olga Kryshтанovskaya (2002) launched a new research agenda in the study of Russian politics with her article describing the new regime of President Vladimir Putin as a “militocracy.” The Russian and English (Kryshтанovskaya and White 2003) versions of this foundational piece have been cited collectively more than 400 times. In these articles, Kryshтанovskaya (and White) called attention to the growing importance of officials with military, security, and law enforcement backgrounds (the now-famous *siloviki*) in key positions in Russian politics. Curiously, the term “*siloviki*” does not appear in the English-language version, presumably because it was determined to be too obscure a neologism to introduce into the English language. Not anymore.¹

Siloviki studies started at the beginning of the Putin era. This makes sense. Putin is the first leader in Russian history to have begun his career by becoming an officer in security or military structures. One could argue that the tsars were all military officers, but that was an avocation they were born into, not a profession that they chose. As Kryshтанovskaya and others documented, the number of *siloviki* in important positions increased significantly after Putin came to power, although she also noted that the trend toward appointing officers to civilian positions began in Boris Yeltsin’s second term (1996–1999). Of course, scholars wrote about Russian military, security, and law enforcement bodies in the 1990s, but not as part of a general argument about the nature of the regime.

Who exactly are the *siloviki*? The word comes from the Russian word for “power” or “force” and specifically the term “force structures” (*silovye struktury*). In her 2002 article, Kryshтанovskaya defines this group as “people in uniforms of all types: army and navy, the border service, internal troops, security services, MChS

[Ministry of Emergency Situations], and so on.” Kryshтанovskaya and White (2005) defined the *siloviki* as officials “who had served or were currently serving in the armed forces, state security, law enforcement or one of the other ‘force ministries.’” Some of the key power ministries include the Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB, the main domestic successor agency to the Soviet KGB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Federal Guards Service (FSO, responsible for leadership security), the National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*), the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD, responsible for the police). The Procuracy and the Investigative Committee, two important law enforcement agencies, are also often considered force structures. Other scholars who use similar definitions include Renz (2006), Rivera and Rivera (2014), and Soldatov and Rochlitz (2018).

Although the concept and definition seem straightforward, in reality the category of *siloviki* has blurry boundaries. Some experts, for example, consider the military as separate from the *siloviki*, which they use primarily to refer to the security services.² There can also be ambiguity about specific people. For example, Sergey Shoigu holds the rank of general and headed both the Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Ministry of Defense, so he seems obviously to fit in the *siloviki* category. But he began his professional life as a civil engineer with Communist Party connections, so he has never been a professional officer and was not educated in one of the military, security, or law enforcement academies. Is he really seen as “one of us (*svoi*)” by those who started their career in one of the power structures, attended a service academy, and rose through the ranks?

In earlier work (Taylor 2011), I proposed that there are three different ways to think about the *siloviki* and the role they play in Russian politics. I called these three

1 The term “*siloviki*” was used in the Russian press earlier, in the 1990s. Interestingly, Peter Reddaway (2002) *did* use the term “*siloviki*” multiple times in an academic article published the same year as the original Kryshтанovskaya piece.

2 See, for example, the replies by John Foreman and Jullian Waller to this tweet from Jeremy Morris: <https://x.com/posts/socialismus/status/1795023460537717242>.

approaches the cohort, corporate, and clan approaches. The cohort approach treats everyone with a siloviki background as part of a large collective group, often assumed to have similar values or interests; this is the method Kryshтанovskaya used in her research on the “militocracy.” The corporate or organizational approach focuses on the different power ministries and services, comparing the way the values or interests of the military, for example, might differ from those of the secret police (FSB) or regular police (MVD). Finally, the clan approach starts from the premise that the real action in Russian politics involves battles between different informal elite groupings, often referred to as clans, for power and resources. Under Putin, observers have frequently referred to a siloviki clan or group in high politics, usually seeing this group as battling with more “liberal” groupings of civilian economists or lawyers. In reality, there are multiple siloviki clans that compete for influence (Galeotti 2016; Meakins 2018; Reddaway 2018).

Studying the Siloviki: Stakes, Findings, Debates

Why should we care about the siloviki? Social scientists in general and political scientists in particular are more inclined to study elections, parties, public opinion, political economy, social movements, presidents and prime ministers, legislatures and courts, and so on. The literature on the state is often rather abstract, not delving into the details of organizations and officials. Scholars occasionally study the military, more rarely the intelligence services, and hardly ever the police and law enforcement. The concept of “the power ministries” does not really exist in comparative politics.

The reason people care about the siloviki, despite its relative uniqueness as a scholarly topic, is quite simple: they matter. Public opinion polls consistently show that Russians think that Putin represents the interests of the siloviki more than any other group—more than big business, more than state officials and bureaucrats, more than the middle class, and certainly more than “simple people” (Levada Center 2023). Putin as a personalist dictator has enormous influence over Russian domestic and foreign policy, and Putin and many of his closest and most influential associates (Shoigu, former longtime Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev, FSB director Aleksandr Bortnikov, SVR head Sergey Naryshkin, Rosgvardiya commander Viktor Zolotov, Investigative Committee head Aleksandr Bastrykin, defense conglomerate Rostec chief Sergey Chemezov, and Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin, to name a few) are siloviki. Institutionally, the FSB

is widely considered the most powerful state agency, with the Investigative Committee and the General Procuracy also wielding enormous influence. Economically, spending on defense, security, and law enforcement has historically been about one-third of the federal budget. Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this has risen to around forty percent (Prokopenko 2024).

In terms of policy choice and implementation, the siloviki have been at the center of many of Putin’s most important domestic and foreign policy initiatives. On the domestic side, these include building the “power vertical” by systematically weakening regional governments (Petrov 2005), the crackdown on the “oligarchs,” and the assault on civil society and oppositionists (Soldatov and Borogan 2010; Petrov 2021). The siloviki, not surprisingly, have been equally heavily involved in Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, including but not limited to the war against Ukraine (Galeotti 2016).

The siloviki are undoubtedly important. But moving on from that critical yet simple fact, questions and debates abound. First, scholars raised questions about whether the number of siloviki in various spheres of political and economic life was as extensive as sometimes claimed by Kryshтанovskaya and others. David Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera (2014; 2018) showed that the way Kryshтанovskaya and White averaged percentages across elite groups of vastly different sizes systematically overstated the percentage of the elite coming from the siloviki; their recalculations indicated, for example, that the siloviki were around twenty percent of the political elite in 2008, not the more than forty percent claimed by Kryshтанovskaya and White (2009). Second, various authors challenged the notion of a unified siloviki, either in terms of ideas or interests. These critics noted that, whether at the individual or organizational level, the siloviki were not a unified team (Renz 2006; Gomart 2008). Moreover, lumping the siloviki together under one label obscured the degree to which they held important political influence. The heirs of the KGB, in particular the FSB, held a unique status, due both to Putin’s own background and to the generally more powerful role in domestic politics of the secret services compared to either the military or the police. It was the “chekists” who wielded real influence in Russian politics.³ This remains true despite the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war, as the FSB was empowered to launch a purge of the armed forces in 2024 (Kozlov 2024).

Perhaps the most important question was the simple “what do the siloviki want?” The core debate reflects the habitual social science divide between materialist and ideational arguments. Materialist arguments would

3 Named after the Cheka, a KGB predecessor organization created under Lenin.

stress the individual and institutional pursuit of power and wealth. There is abundant evidence that various siloviki have been heavily involved in a variety of corrupt schemes, and that officers in the FSB, the MVD, the Investigative Committee, and the Procuracy use their public office for private gain. Siloviki clans compete with other clans and among themselves for power and wealth (which, of course, often go hand in hand).

At the same time, there is strong evidence that many siloviki have ideational commitments, and that in general the siloviki are more hardline than their civilian counterparts. This applies to both authoritarian views at home and hawkish views abroad. In some sense, the two sides of this worldview reinforce each other; Russia is believed to have many enemies, both at home and abroad, and the foreign foes work with internal collaborators to weaken Russia from within. Both elite survey data and more qualitative discourse analysis seem to bear out this siloviki mentality (Rivera and Rivera 2019; Kragh and Umland 2023), although there are obvious exceptions, as well as hawkish civilians. The chief checkist, Putin, exhibits both these material and ideational orientations, acquiring enormous wealth while articulating imperialist and illiberal views (Belton 2020; Taylor 2018).

The Siloviki at War

Putin's mentality, given his uniquely powerful position in the Russian political system, arguably played the central role in his decision for war with Ukraine both in 2014 and 2022 (Waller 2023). To the extent that he consulted with others about these two decisions, it was mostly with other siloviki. One well-known pathology of personalist autocracies, the tendency of subordinates to tell the ruler what he wants to hear, also played an important role. The information Putin received prior to invading Ukraine in February 2022 came primarily from the FSB and the armed forces (Dylan, Gioe, and Grossfeld 2023).

One might think that the obvious military and intelligence failures of powerful agencies such as the FSB and the armed forces would have hurt their standing with Putin. So far, only the military has experienced major personnel changes. Defense Minister Shoigu lost his job two years after the full-scale invasion, and more than a dozen generals have been either arrested or removed from their position, mostly due to allegations of corruption. This seems primarily to be a settling of scores with Shoigu's team by other clans with the assistance of FSB military counterintelligence, rather than a decision by Putin to punish the military for command failures (Shiryayev 2024). For example, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, despite multiple mistakes, remains in place. Other prominent generals,

such as Sergey Surovikin and Ivan Popov, were seemingly removed not for corruption or incompetence but for perceived disloyalty.

Russian political scientist Ekaterina Schulmann (2024) sees the situation with the military somewhat differently, arguing that a personalist regime at war must always worry about military coups and generals becoming too popular. She links Putin's tendency to appoint civilian ministers of defense to that general concern about military coups, as well as the historical animosity in Russia between the military and the secret services. Given how thoroughly the officer corps is monitored by the FSB, and the long historical tradition of the Russian military not seeking state power for itself, it is hard to know whether Putin genuinely worries about overt military opposition to his regime.

What the Russo-Ukraine War has done repeatedly is show the weakness of the siloviki. The FSB's Fifth Service, responsible for Ukraine, told Putin that Russia would be greeted as liberators, and the armed forces launched a poorly planned attack with inadequate forces, displaying stunning operational incompetence in the process and losing some of their best troops. When Evgeny Prigozhin (*not* a silovik, by the way, despite having his own army) launched a mutiny in the summer of 2023, the military, the security services, and law enforcement all appeared slow to react, if not outright taking a wait-and-see approach. When Ukraine launched an assault on the Kursk region of Russia in August 2024, once again Russian military and security forces seemed utterly unprepared in the face of the first foreign invasion of Russia since World War II. Gerasimov reportedly (Bloomberg 2024) ignored intelligence about the coming attack and did not report this information to Putin. The ongoing response is hampered by organizational overlap, competition, and buck-passing between the different power ministries.

These performance weaknesses of the Russian power structures do not, however, seem to have had any major consequences for the standing and influence of most of these agencies or their leadership. Perhaps the one obvious loser is the regular police (MVD)—they are having a hard time filling their ranks because of the higher salaries on offer not only in the military, but also in the civilian economy.

At the individual level, illness and the march of time seem to be the biggest threat to many of the most influential siloviki. Putin, Shoigu, Patrushev, Naryshkin, Bortnikov, Zolotov, Bastrykin, and Chemezov have an average age of 71. Patrushev has already been downgraded from Security Council Secretary to Presidential Aide, and other retirements are likely in the coming years. The new generation of influential siloviki seems to come mostly

from the ranks of Putin's former bodyguards, such as presidential aides Aleksei Dyumin and Dmitrii Mironov.

Given Putin's own background and worldview, and his commitment to a foreign policy of imperial war

against Ukraine and a domestic policy of militarization and repression, he is unlikely to sideline the siloviki. "Military Putinism" (Rogov 2024) seems to be with us for the foreseeable future.

This article draws on material from a forthcoming chapter in a volume under contract with Brookings Institution Press: Failure. Russia Under Putin, edited by Harley D. Balzer and Steven A. Fisher. The material is used with permission from the Press.

About the Author

Brian D. Taylor is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University. His new book is *Russian Politics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

Further Reading

- Belton, Catherine. 2020. *Putin's People: How The KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Bloomberg News. 2024. "Russia Declares Border Area Emergency as Ukraine Troops Strike." *Bloomberg*, August 8, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-08-08/russia-calls-kursk-emergency-after-kyiv-sends-troops-over-border>.
- Dylan, Huw, David V. Gioe, and Elena Grossfeld. 2023. "The Autocrat's Intelligence Paradox: Vladimir Putin's (Mis)management of Russian Strategic Assessment in the Ukraine War." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 25, no. 3: 385–404.
- Galeotti, Mark. 2016. *Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services*. European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Gomart, Thomas. 2008. *Russian Civil-Military Relations*. Carnegie Endowment.
- Kozlov, Pyotr. 2024. "FSB Launches Sweeping Purge of Military Elites with Kremlin's Approval." *Moscow Times*, May 24, 2024.
- Kragh, Martin, and Andreas Umland. 2023. "Putinism beyond Putin: The Political Ideas of Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Naryshkin in 2006–20." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5: 366–89.
- Kryshтанovskaya, Ol'ga. 2002. "Rezhim Putina: Liberal'naia militoktratiia?" *Pro et Contra* 7, no. 4: 158–80.
- Kryshтанovskaya, Ol'ga, and Stephen White. 2005. "Inside the Putin Court: A Research Note." *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 7: 1065–75.
- Kryshтанovskaya, Ol'ga, and Stephen White. 2003. "Putin's Militocracy." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 19, no. 4: 289–306.
- Kryshтанovskaya, Ol'ga, and Stephen White. 2009. "The Sovietization of Russian Politics." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25, no. 4: 283–309.
- Levada Center. 2023. "Otnoshenie k Vladimiru Putinu." July 7, 2023.
- Meakins, Joss I. 2018. "Squabbling Siloviki: Factionalism within Russia's Security Services." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 31, no. 2: 235–70.
- Petrov, Nikolai. 2005. "The Security Dimension of the Federal Reforms." In *Dynamics of Russian politics: Putin's Reform of Federal-Regional Relations*, Vol. 2, ed. Peter Reddaway and Robert W. Orttung. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Petrov, Nikolai. 2021. "The Spiral of Repressiveness: Internal Dynamics, and Problems of Entry and Exit." *Russian Politics & Law* 58, no. 1–2: 45–70.
- Prokopenko, Alexandra. 2024. "Russia's New Budget Is a Blueprint for War, Despite the Cost." *Financial Times*, October 7, 2024.
- Reddaway, Peter. 2002. "Is Putin's Power More Formal Than Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 18, no. 1: 31–40.
- Reddaway, Peter. 2018. *Russia's Domestic Security Wars: Putin's Use of Divide and Rule against His Hardline Allies*. Springer.
- Renz, Bettina. 2006. "Putin's Militocracy? An Alternative Interpretation of Siloviki in Contemporary Russian Politics." *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 6: 903–24.
- Rivera, David W., and Sharon Werning Rivera. 2018. "The Militarization of the Russian Elite under Putin: What We Know, What We Think We Know (but Don't), and What We Need to Know." *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 4: 221–32.
- Rivera, David W. and Sharon Werning Rivera. 2014. "Is Russia a Militocracy? Conceptual Issues and Extant Findings Regarding Elite Militarization." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, no. 1: 27–50.

- Rivera, Sharon Werning and David W. Rivera. 2019. “Are Siloviki Still Undemocratic? Elite Support for Political Pluralism during Putin’s Third Presidential Term.” *Russian Politics* 4, no. 4: 499–519.
- Rogov, Kirill. 2024. “Dolgi voennyi putinizm: skol’ko on prodlitsia i chem zakonchitsia. Realii i proektsii.” *Re: Russia*. 11 June. <https://re-russia.net/expertise/0161/>.
- Shirayayev, Valerii. 2024. “Dobralis’ do kotla.” *Novaya Gazeta*. April 25, 2024. <https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2024/04/25/dobralis-do-kotla>.
- Soldatov, Andrei, and Irina Borogan. 2010. *The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia’s Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Soldatov, Andrei, and Michael Rochlitz. 2018. “The Siloviki in Russian Politics.” In *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin’s Russia*, ed. Daniel Treisman. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Schulmann, Ekaterina. 2024. Interview by Il’ia Davliatchin. “Eslī dlīa togo, chtoby ne tratit’ lishnikh resursov, ponadobitsia etu voinu svernut’, pover’te, ona budet svernuta.” *Tochka*, May 27, 2024. <https://pointmedia.io/story/66547924d69aa0bc05e35330>.
- Taylor, Brian D. 2018. *The Code of Putinism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Brian D. 2011. *State Building in Putin’s Russia: Policing and Coercion after Communism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Waller, Julian G. 2023. “Putin’s Agency and the Decision for War.” *Riddle Russia*. May 15, 2023.

ANALYSIS

Siloviki at War: The Russian Security Community Since February 2022

Mark Galeotti (Mayak Intelligence; University College London)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000715606

Abstract

With the Kremlin moving ever further onto a war footing, the role of the “special services” in its operations at home and abroad has only increased, coming to include a campaign of increasingly brazen sabotage activities in Europe. Domestically, the Kremlin’s increasing intolerance of dissent has served to increase the powers and profile of the Federal Security Service (FSB). Abroad, adapting to the new environment—including the mass expulsions of intelligence officers from embassies across the West—has not always been easy for the intelligence services and has led to a growing reliance on both cyber operations and proxies. While these have by no means always been successful, there is little doubt that they will remain central to both domestic and foreign activities.

Already at War

In September 2024, Sir Richard Moore, head of the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service (better known as MI6), said at a joint event with his CIA counterpart that “the Russian intelligence service has gone a bit feral.” Perhaps it would be better to suggest that the “special services,” to use the Russian idiom—essentially the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), military intelligence (GU, still widely known by its old acronym, GRU), and the FSB—have adapted quickly, even enthusiastically, to feral times.

There is a sharp difference between intelligence and security services in times of peace and in times of war. In peacetime, they and their political masters are more

risk-averse, more focused on gathering intelligence than imposing direct effects, whether blowing up a bridge or toppling a government. In war, by contrast, they will take more chances, because it is considered more important to seize opportunities than to avoid embarrassment, and they either become more focused on active operations or—as with SMERSH, Stalin’s murderous counterintelligence agency, formed in 1942 and dissolved in 1946—are supplemented by a parallel agency.

The Russian intelligence community—in lockstep with Putin himself—has increasingly been operating in wartime mode since around 2011–12. Rather than regarding the Bolotnaia Protests as a genuine expression of anger at a rigged political system, Putin chose

to interpret them as evidence of Western “hybrid war,” an attempt to destabilize his system that began, in his words, when then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “gave the signal” to opposition leaders. In part, this could be regarded as reflecting an increasingly paranoid worldview, encouraged by his long-serving Security Council secretary—and de facto national security adviser—the hawkish Nikolai Patrushev. Yet it was also an example of mirror-imaging. The Russian intelligence community was, after all, heir to the Soviet KGB, with its preoccupation with “active measures”—political operations ranging from sabotage to subversion—and assumed they were equally central to Western intelligence doctrine.

At home, there was a steady shift away from the relatively permissive “hybrid regime” approach of the earlier Putin and Medvedev presidencies, in which considerable latitude had been granted to civil society and even dissent so long as this did not seriously challenge the dominance of the regime. The rise of the security state saw the security and law-enforcement agencies acquire growing powers, resources, and freedom of operation. While the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) was often hesitant to move more directly into political policing for fear this would distract from their core law-enforcement role and undermine efforts to build a more constructive relationship with society (which would be one of the reasons it lost its public security forces to the new National Guard in 2016), the FSB took full advantage of these new opportunities.

Foreign intelligence likewise began to operate at a higher operational tempo and with diminished regard for possible blowback. This wartime mentality only became more evident after Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14 (which Putin has characterized as a Western-engineered coup d’état). Thus, even before the full-scale invasion of February 2022, Russia’s intelligence community was, in the words of a British counter-intelligence officer, “brazen, aggressive, and operating all-out.” It was also operating with greater inter-agency cooperation—or at least less competition—than before. Historically, Putin encouraged the services to struggle against each other for budgets, responsibilities, and precedence through overlapping remits and the threat of extinction (as happened to FAPSI, the Federal Agency of Government Communications and Information, which was devoured by its rivals in 2003). The assessment of foreign security services, though, is that this has been much less evident since 2022: in time of war, there is less appetite or latitude for horizontal rivalries.

New Challenges

The war in Ukraine is, to Putin, just part of a wider struggle. In his Victory Day 2023 speech, Putin asserted that

“a real war is being waged against our country again.” With direct military operations against a much more powerful NATO alliance out of the question, even were the bulk of Russian forces not mired in Ukraine, and with Western financial and military assistance crucial to Kyiv’s war effort, doing whatever possible to disrupt these activities has become a priority. Furthermore, the Western sanctions regime has created a new priority for the agencies: finding ways to bypass controls on everything from imported microchips to the flow of operational funds around the globe.

There are also specific new challenges, especially in the post-invasion international environment. The mass expulsion of known and suspected intelligence officers from embassies across the West—in Europe alone, some 400 of the 600 diplomatic personnel expelled are believed to have been spies—created serious problems for GU and, to an even greater degree, the SVR. Human intelligence operations based around officers operating under diplomatic cover were often temporarily paralyzed, as recruited agents no longer had handlers and prospective recruits were left in the wind. Over time, workarounds were found; in particular, the Russians have turned increasingly to proxies—from politically sympathetic locals to criminals recruited on the dark web who may not even know they are working for Moscow—to conduct a variety of activities.

At home, meanwhile, the security apparatus is dealing with the twin, sometimes intersecting problem of growing dissatisfaction, galvanized by the threat of mobilization, and an aggressive and imaginative campaign of sabotage and subversion operations carried out by the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) and Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR). Despite the steady stream of arrests and claims of plots foiled, in practice it has been able neither to prevent Kyiv from staging and fomenting attacks inside Russia nor to combat underlying public dissatisfaction.

The SVR: Coming Out of the Embassies

The SVR, as perhaps the most traditional intelligence agency, primarily concerned with human intelligence gathered through embassy-based officers, has been the hardest hit by recent developments. In part, it has adapted by further developing its cyber arm, which was previously active largely as an intelligence-gathering force (notably the unit known in the West as APT29, or Cozy Bear) but since 2022 has moved more firmly into the realm of disruptive attacks. However, the greatest expansion of its online operations has been in using the internet as a means of recruitment now that it is that much harder to operate on the ground.

The SVR has shown definite signs of adaptation to the new operational environment, as well as a continued

ability to use other Russian-based structures as fronts (including the Fund for Support and Protection of the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad, whose leadership is packed with serving SVR officers). However, there is a sense among Western counterintelligence agencies that this adaptation has been patchy and marked by much less of the coordinated tactics that used to be characteristic of the SVR. To a degree, this is likely to be due to a lack of strong and engaged leadership. There is a sense that the 69-year-old Sergei Naryshkin, director of the agency since 2016, is what one service veteran called a “permanent stand-in.” He was appointed in many ways as a consolation prize when the Kremlin decided to replace him as chair of the State Duma with Vyacheslav Volodin, and it is common knowledge that he has been seeking a senatorial seat as both a congenial working retirement and an opportunity to focus on what really interests him: his role as chair of the Russian Historical Society.

While the role of director of the SVR has always been more about political advocacy than operational control, there seems to be a feeling within the service that he is unable to provide clear guidance in the current environment, especially given that his authority has never fully recovered from the mauling Putin gave him during the televised Security Council meeting of February 21, 2022. As a result, individual directors, departments, and stations often operate with near-autonomy or receive direct instructions from the president. In some ways, this can be a strength, liberating the ambitions and imaginations in a manner quite alien to the generally micromanaged SVR, but it also creates problems with disputes over jurisdictions, working at cross-purposes, and fragmenting effort.

The GU: Back to Basics

The GU has always been quite sharply divided between the Spetsnaz special forces and the Agentura, the intelligence side. The Spetsnaz are heavily involved in Ukraine and have incurred very heavy losses, especially in the early stages of the war, such that their capabilities are heavily degraded. While the GU’s intelligence activities in the West have also suffered from the campaign of expulsions, it moved more quickly than the SVR into cultivating and using proxies. It has also reprioritized its mission toward disruption of the West and preparations for a more serious sabotage campaign should relations deteriorate further.

After all, a central element of the GU’s mission, especially in war, is sabotage. Through 2023, the Kremlin became increasingly permissive of attacks in Europe, at least. It has been connected with a range of operations ranging from arson in East London to the assassination of defector Maxim Kuzminov in Spain. Its spe-

cialist “wet work”—assassination and sabotage—force, Unit 29155, reportedly now even includes a cyber unit (variously nicknamed Bleeding Bear or Ember Bear) to further its activities in an age when its operators are less able to operate abroad.

In Europe and North America, that is; Africa is another matter entirely. Following Evgeny Prigozhin’s ill-fated mutiny in June 2023, the Wagner mercenary army has essentially been brought under closer control by the military. Fighters operating in Ukraine have had to join the regular army or one of the other, much less autonomous mercenary forces as part of the Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps, which is subordinated to the regular military territorial commands. In Africa, the other main theater for Wagner operations, they are being subsumed into a new structure, the Africa Corps. This is tightly controlled by military intelligence, and its “curator”—overseer—for operational matters, Maj. Gen. Andrei Averyanov, is the former head of 29155, since promoted to deputy head of the GU in charge of the newly created Service for Special Activities.

Admiral Igor Kostyukov, the head of the GU, has been in office for 6 years, longer than any other post-Soviet military intelligence chief. His relationship with Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov seems good, but it is less clear how he engages with new Defense Minister Andrei Belousov. With Belousov’s predecessor Sergei Shoigu now secretary of the Security Council, though, this is arguably less important—unless and until Gerasimov is replaced. Even so, there is little reason to suggest this will change the GU’s operational culture or current missions.

The FSB: Coming Into Its Own

If the SVR and the GU have had to adapt to more difficult circumstances, in many ways the FSB has been a beneficiary of the febrile and paranoid new environment. The irony is that it has not served Putin—or at least Russia—well. Just as it was the most bullish of all the agencies about the likelihood that Viktor Yanukovich could weather the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity, it seems to have been most enthusiastic about the 2022 invasion, believing—or at least claiming—that it had an extensive network of agents ready and eager to support Moscow. In practice, this proved largely illusory, with many Ukrainians who had been willing to take the FSB’s money having no intention of actually betraying their country. Likewise, although the DVRK, the FSB’s Military Counterintelligence Directorate, does appear to have belatedly discovered that Evgeny Prigozhin was planning some move against Shoigu and Gerasimov, forcing him to advance his plans, this happened very much at the last minute, precluding any chance to prevent it.

Nonetheless, as so often, the FSB—Putin’s former service, after all—seems to have escaped any lasting consequences for its failures. With the regime becoming increasingly authoritarian and intolerant, the FSB’s remit at home has only expanded. Its role in the campaign of arrests and investigations of senior military officers on corruption charges, for example, while not led by the agency nor the “purge” sometimes claimed, has seen it assert its primacy over the Investigatory Committee. Abroad, the temporary interruption to the activities of the SVR and GU courtesy of the mass expulsions likewise helped empower the FSB. Its cyber operations have long targeted the West. The UK government has, for example, blamed hackers from its Centre 18, code-named “Star Blizzard,” for attacks against British parliamentarians. However, it is now stepping up physical operations, especially in Europe, in response to the problems facing the SVR and GU. After all, its nascent foreign operations had not generally been based out of embassies but rather centered around clusters of “illegals” (agents operating without diplomatic cover) inside other bodies in the Russian diaspora. It has been accused of a series of recent efforts to infiltrate political circles and influence policy—especially over support for Ukraine—in the European parliament, the German Bundestag, and the Austrian Parliament.

The FSB has also proven well-placed to adapt to the new need to depend on proxies, not least because of its links to organized crime. The FSB combats major organized crime groups, but also in many cases has corrupt connections to them, which can be exploited to recruit operatives or develop connections with other groups active abroad. Although the GU is regarded as ultimately behind Kuzminov’s murder, for example, Spanish intelligence sources have suggested it was carried out by local organized crime figures engaged through the good offices of the FSB, a telling example of the way the culture of the Russian intelligence community has shifted from competition to (albeit sometimes grudging) cooperation.

Prospects

There seems little prospect of the “special services” losing any of their current saliency in the foreseeable future, both because of Putin’s apparent faith in them as an instrument of control at home and statecraft abroad, and the unlikelihood of any substantive improvement of relations with the West.

About the Author

Dr Mark Galeotti is the executive director of the consultancy Mayak Intelligence and an honorary professor at UCL School of Slavonic & East European Studies.

One imponderable relates to their leadership. In May 2024, Patrushev was replaced as secretary of the Security Council by former defense minister Sergei Shoigu. Although his role as a presidential adviser is clearly broader in reality than his formal remit of overseer of the naval industry, he does appear to have lost his centrality in national security debates and his authority over the security agencies. It remains to be seen whether Shoigu aspires to a similar role (or even remains in post for long), but it does throw into question some of the looming leadership changes in the agencies. Since 2022, after all, while there has been considerable turnover within their senior management (just as within the military), the service chiefs have all remained in post. This status quo is unlikely to last much longer.

As already mentioned, Naryshkin has for some time been looking to move on from the SVR. Meanwhile, the FSB’s Alexander Bortnikov is 72, over the official enforced retirement age for state officials, and has suffered from ill health for some years. He was due to step down in 2021, but a last-ditch campaign by rivals of his anointed successor, Sergei Korolev, delayed the transition and with the war in Ukraine Putin has kept him in place regardless, to avoid having to favor one camp over another. The 62-year-old Korolev has a reputation as a ruthless and ambitious operator, having already managed to alienate not just many of his colleagues, but also senior officials in the GU, Interior Ministry, and Investigative Committee. Struggles at the top of the FSB remain more prevalent and serious than in the other agencies (2023 saw fully three directorate heads changed), opening up the way for a new generation of leaders, and it seems unlikely that Bortnikov—who is only rarely seen in person at meetings these days—will remain in post for long, even though it is not clear whether his enemies have managed to derail Korolev’s succession.

Either way, as the direct war with Ukraine and the political struggle with the West become the central operating principle of late Putinism, justifying his authoritarian turn, the agencies will remain at the heart of his domestic and foreign operations. In practice, their record is mixed, and arguably their eagerness to flatter Putin’s prejudices has led to disastrous imperial overreach. Nonetheless, not only is there no evidence that he actually grasps this, but also, locked as he currently is in a long-term struggle, there is no sign that he intends to punish, tame, reform or rein in his “special services.”

The Transformation of Russia's Military Leadership

Pavel Luzin (Center for European Policy Analysis—CEPA)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000715606

Abstract

The wartime transformation of the Russian military leadership has brought an end to the modernization of the armed forces that had been taking place over the previous thirty-plus years. The last generation of Soviet-era officers was supposed to be a generation of winners. But they found themselves in a race to avoid responsibility for the failures of the war and to maintain the political bargain with the Kremlin that makes them beneficiaries of the current authoritarian regime in exchange for total loyalty. In turn, the educational and cultural backgrounds (and consequently the moral qualities) of the younger generations of military officers make it simply impossible to restore lost military capabilities along the lines of modern advanced armies. However, the main problem facing the Russian leadership is how to prevent the military elite from becoming political actors.

During the three years of the cruelest and most intense war in which Russia has been involved since 1945, the Russian military leadership has undergone a major transformation. For the purposes of this article, the term “military leadership” refers only to the leadership of the Russian Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense (MoD); it does not include the leadership of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Protective Service (FSO), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the National Guard (Rosgvardiia), which also maintain official military services.

This transformation has finally eliminated the logic of the military modernization efforts of the previous three-and-a-half decades: the attempted military reform in the late 1980s; the subsequent attempts in the 1990s and 2000s, inspired by the changes in Russia's post-Soviet political economy; the revolution in military affairs; the negative combat experience in Chechnya; the major military reform of 2009–2012; and the efforts to learn lessons from Russia's wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria.

Russia has turned away from attempting to create a compact, well-educated, and relatively transparent force armed with high-precision weapons, in favor of a massive, only partially regular, and “barbarized” armed forces full of former prisoners, representatives of the poorly educated social underclass, and mercenaries from various countries that is ruled by violence. This transformation can be understood not simply as a change in direction, but as a logical consequence of trends observed in previous years, such as the declining educational and cultural level of the Russian officer corps and a lack of trust between the political and military leadership.

Generational Change

Russia's high-ranking military leadership consists of the very last generation of Soviet servicemen. They gradu-

ated from military colleges in the late 1980s or early 1990s and were young officers during the 1990s, including the first years of the Chechen wars. They survived an era when military service was one of the less prestigious careers and when many, if not most, of their fellow students were discharged from the armed forces in search of a better, calmer, and more prosperous life.

People like Col. Gen. Gennadii Anashkin (1968), acting commander of the Southern military district; Col. Gen. Andrei Kuzmenko (1972), commander of the Eastern military district; Col. Gen. Sergei Kuzovlev (1967), commander of the Moscow military district; Col. Gen. Aleksandr Lapin (1964), commander of the Leningrad military district; and Col. Gen. Mikhail Teplinskii (1969), commander of the airborne troops, belong to this generation.

For these people, more than two decades of Vladimir Putin's rule left their career growth entirely dependent on demonstrating total loyalty to the authoritarian regime—including subscribing to Putin's vision of restoring Russia to the prestige and greatness it had lost in their youth.

As such, the large-scale aggression against Ukraine since 2022 represents both the culmination of their professional life and an opportunity for public (and even global) recognition of their glory and dignity. If their predecessors lost the Afghan war, the Cold War, and the Chechen wars, this generation of commanders considered themselves the victors in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014–2015, and in Syria in 2015–2017—and they aimed to become the ultimate winners in Ukraine in 2022.

However, as the war has turned into a long-term “meat grinder,” the commanders of this generation have come to face the risk of an inglorious end to their military careers. Some of them have been killed in combat; others have been made responsible for systemic failures and replaced. However, these replacements cannot be

explained solely by a lack of competence among Russian generals. After all, they are replaced by commanders of the same level of competence. A more important factor is the lack of trust between Russia's political and military leadership.

For instance, Army Gen. Sergei Surovikin, former commander-in-chief of the air and space forces and former commander of the Russian joint forces in Ukraine, lost his position and has rarely appeared in public since summer 2023. Col. Gen. Aleksandr Zhuravlev (1965) lost his position as commander of the Western military district in 2022. His successor, Lt. Gen. Roman Berdnikov (1974), was removed from this position less than three months later. Col. Gen. Alexander Chaiko (1971) was a commander of the Eastern military district for less than a year, from November 2021 to July 2022. His successor, Col. Gen. Rustam Muradov (1973), held the same position for a mere six months. Maj. Gen. Ivan Popov (1975) commanded the 58th joint army for several months in 2023 before being dismissed due to personal conflict with the chief of the general staff, Army Gen. Valerii Gerasimov (1955). He was initially "exiled" to Syria before being arrested on accusations of fraud.

In short, this loyal and ambitious generation of officers have found themselves in a political race to avoid responsibility. However, the winners of this ongoing race will also eventually replace the previous generation of commanders, including the chief of the general staff. Moreover, even if Valerii Gerasimov's position appears highly toxic today and it is possible to find a workaround for the existing age limit of 65, he will sooner or later be replaced: former minister of defense Sergei Shoigu, with whom Gerasimov had worked since the fall of 2012, was replaced in May 2024. Moreover, the position of chief of the general staff will become much more attractive in the post-war (or the inter-war) period, no matter how painful the results of the war are for Russia.

As the main instigator and arbiter of this race, the Russian political leadership seeks to expand this generational change beyond generals to include colonels and lieutenant colonels. For instance, they have been promised fast-tracked career progression thanks to the transformation of brigades into divisions: a brigade commander typically holds the rank of colonel, and a division commander that of major general, irrespective of the actual size of these formations. The division of the Western Military District into two military districts—the Moscow Military District and the Leningrad Military District—has resulted in the creation of more officer positions. The increase of the manpower strength ceiling from 1 million to 1.5 million military servicemen also promises more officer positions and high military expenditures (much higher than it was before 2022) in a long-term prospect. Therefore, the ongoing

race among the Russian top- and high-ranking officers inevitably entails a race for loyalty, effectively preventing them from showing any sign of personal political ambitions or even personal opinions.

Nevertheless, the bargain between the Kremlin and Russia's top- and high-ranking officers is rational: Both sides remember that political circumstances in Russia have changed over the past three-plus decades, and they are interested in preserving the current politico-economic order. The present regime not only guarantees their benefits and security, but also embodies an attractive symbolic continuity between the "golden age" of the Russian Empire, late Stalinism after the victory in World War II, and the contemporary Russian regime.

Deterioration of Military Elite Reproduction

The state and development of the middle and lower levels of the Russian military officer corps is less favorable for the Kremlin in terms of restoring its conventional forces (to say nothing of increasing Russia's military power) after the disastrous losses in Ukraine. Following the reduction of the excessive number of military officers and vacant officer positions during the reform of 2009–2012, the actual number of Russia's officer corps in the late 2010s – early 2020s could be estimated at up to 180,000 servicemen. This number corresponds to the known number of lieutenants who graduated from military colleges and institutes in 2019–2021—13,000, 12,000 and 10,000, respectively—and to the fact that an average Russian military officer serves about 15 years in the armed forces between graduation and retirement (although this depends on branch of service and troop type) (Ministry of Defense 2019; TASS 2020; TASS 2021).

These last pre-2022 lieutenants enrolled in military colleges and institutes in 2014–2017. During that time, there was still a euphoria in Russian society occasioned by the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, the financial crisis of 2014–2015, together with public officials, law enforcers, and the military becoming the core of the Russian middle class, motivated young Russians (and their parents) from the lower classes, small towns, and poor regions to seek economic safety in military service. The same motivation probably also drove those who enrolled in officer education programs in 2018–2021; we can expect that 10,000–12,000 lieutenants a year graduated during 2022–2024 and will graduate in 2025. Although it is today hard to assess how many people have enrolled since the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, the number is likely to be either stable or decreasing. There are no signs that the military colleges in Russia have become more attractive.

In addition to the limited reproduction of the military officer corps, there is another major long-term challenge: the declining cognitive/intellectual capacity of those who get into the military education system. For example, the minimum entrance scores in math, physics, Russian language, and social science for the military colleges and institutes is equal to the minimum scores for passing these exams. Similarly, the average entrance score for military colleges and institutes in 2020–2021 was significantly lower than the minimum entrance score for Russian regional technical universities (*Krasnaia Zvezda* 2020; MVOKU 2021).

Simply put, the military education system in Russia tends to produce graduates who perform much worse than those who enter civilian universities and colleges. Moreover, the quality of school education declines with political and administrative pressure. As a result, the educational level of military students is also decreasing.

The last generation of Soviet-era officers has at least a basic philosophical and scientific vision derived from the Marxist and materialist background; this is far from perfect and relevant to the present, but it is at least holistic. The newer generations of Russian officers have fragmented and modest knowledge, which limits their learning ability, motivation, and independent thinking. As became clear during the Prigozhin mutiny in June 2023 and the Ukrainian offensive in the Kursk region of Russia in August 2024, such officers do not even perform their duty without specific orders from above.

Russia cannot pretend to restore and develop its armed forces along the lines of modern advanced armies without major political, economic, and cultural reforms. The most likely scenario for the Russian armed forces under continued authoritarian rule is a growing role for ideological indoctrination, combined with the existing financial motivation and potential privileges, as well as brutal disciplinary practices to maintain political control over the officer corps. This scenario also presupposes efforts to expand the manpower reserves. This means a militarization of the Russian educational system and an increase in the number of conscripts, the negative demographic dynamics notwithstanding.

The Political Logic of the Reshuffle in the MoD

Nevertheless, the Russian political leadership follows the logic of regime preservation rather than the logic of politico-economic modernization, including the modernization of the armed forces into an effective, well-trained and well-equipped force capable of defending Russia. Of course, the examples of Russian allies such as Iran, North Korea, Hezbollah, the Taliban, and the Houthis clearly testify that a threatening military force need not be any of these things; it can be poorly educated,

not too advanced, and even non-regular and fragmented. Political loyalty can dominate all other considerations.

In 2024, the Kremlin went beyond reshuffling military commanders. The series of arrests in the MoD after the dismissal of long-time minister of defense Sergei Shoigu and the appointment of Andrei Belousov as his successor, together with the replacement of some deputy ministers, demonstrates another long-term vector of the evolution of the Russian armed forces. The renewed MoD leadership pursues the following main goals: a) better control over financial flows from the highest military budgets in modern Russian history; b) better control over the top-ranking officers because of the unfavorable course of the war, the growing dysfunction of the Russian authoritarian regime, and the century-long political tradition of Kremlin distrust of the military; and c) an improvement of communications between the MoD, civil ministries and governmental agencies, and other actors like the presidential administration, state-owned corporations and regional authorities in order to restore the regime's functionality.

In this way, for instance, Leonid Gornin, former deputy minister of finance responsible for military spending and arms procurement programs, has become the first deputy minister of defense. Pavel Fradkov, son of former prime minister Mikhail Fradkov and younger brother of Petr Fradkov, who heads Promsviazbank, the main bank of the Russian military-industrial complex, has become the deputy minister of defense. Notably, Pavel Fradkov has a background in the FSB, Russia's security service for intelligence, counterintelligence, and political policing. Another new face in the MoD is Anna Tsivileva, wife of energy minister Sergei Tsivilev and Vladimir Putin's great-niece. Her probable main roles here are serving as an informal communication channel between Andrei Belousov and Vladimir Putin and controlling financial flows destined for veterans. Oleg Saveliev, former auditor of the audit chamber of Russia and the only minister for Crimean affairs (2014–2015), with a probable background in the FSB, has been appointed as the deputy minister of defense and head of the ministry's staff (Ministry of Defense 2024).

As a result, four of ten deputy ministers of defense have a background in the FSB: Pavel Fradkov (appointed in June 2024), Viktor Goremykin (appointed in July 2022), Alexei Krivoruchko (appointed in June 2018), and Oleg Saveliev (appointed in June 2024). For comparison, in 2018–2022, there were two deputies with ties to the FSB—Aleksii Krivoruchko and Nikolai Pankov (appointed in September 2005, dismissed in June 2024)—and previously there had only been one. Considering that the recent wave of arrests would have been impossible without the involvement of the FSB, the changes in the Russian Defense Ministry can be

interpreted as a further expansion of the role of the FSB among Russia's power institutions. Together with Anna Tsivileva, these four deputies create a counterbalance to the military leadership of the MoD and the armed forces. By providing the military with vast sums of money and career promises, the Kremlin will limit its remaining autonomy.

Conclusions

The Russian political leadership is trying to solve a number of tricky problems: how to force the military to continue fighting the shameful war; how to maintain their loyalty regardless of the outcome of the war; how to prevent their transformation into political actors; and how to restore military power, which is an essential precondition for the preservation of the existing

authoritarian regime. Moreover, the ongoing generational change among Russia's senior and high-ranking officers raises the question of who will take responsibility for the results of the war and the lessons learned from it. At the same time, the deteriorating educational level of lower- and mid-ranking officers means that the Russian armed forces cannot pretend to be an advanced military power going forward. Instead, the growing ideological indoctrination of the officer corps and the expansion of available manpower reserves would guarantee the Kremlin's ability to threaten and intimidate its neighbors, including NATO members. In this way, the FSB's expanded control over the Defense Ministry is unavoidable, given the long-term priority of high military expenditures and the existing lack of trust between the Kremlin and the military leadership.

About the Author

Pavel Luzin holds a PhD in international relations (IMEMO, 2012). He is a senior non-resident fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis (USA), a visiting scholar at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University, USA), and a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation (USA).

Bibliography

- *Krasnaia Zvezda*. 2020. "Vse namechennoe distignuto v polnom obeme." *Krasnaia Zvezda*, December 18, 2020. <http://redstar.ru/vsyo-namechennoe-dostignuto-v-polnom-obyome/>.
- Ministry of Defense of Russia. 2019. "Bolee 13 tys. leitenantov popolnili Vooruzhennye Sily Rossii v etom godu." <https://stat.mil.ru/100GUK/news/more.htm?id=12249822@egNews>.
- Ministry of Defense of Russia. 2024. "Rukovodstvo. Zamestiteli Ministra." <https://structure.mil.ru/management/deputy.htm>.
- MVOKU. 2021. "V Moskovskom vysshem obshhevoiskovom komandnom uchilishche proshel otbor abiturientov vo 2 batalon kursantov." <https://mvoku.mil.ru/more/Novosti/item/336353/>.
- TASS. 2020. "Okolo 12 tys. leitenantov iz 36 vuzov Minoborony vstupiat v riady VS RF." *TASS*, May 9, 2020. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/8438015>.
- TASS. 2021. "Svyshe 10 tys. leitenantov poplniat riady VS Rossii v 2021 godu." *TASS*, June 19, 2021. <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/11694483>.

Reforms of the Russian Police and Staffing Gap Consequences

Kurt Haven (Russia)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000715606

Abstract

This paper analyzes the structure, reforms, and current challenges facing the Russian police under the Ministry of the Interior (MI). With nearly one million officers, the police play a crucial role in maintaining public order and enforcing criminal law. Significant reforms in the early 2010s included a name change from “militsiia” to “politsiia” and the introduction of public accountability measures, but also resulted in increased centralization and the retention of performance evaluation systems that prioritize clearance rates over community engagement. Following the creation of the National Guard in 2016, which drew resources away from the police, staffing shortages became acute, exacerbated by the ongoing war in Ukraine. By 2024, the MI reported a shortage of 152,000 personnel, with low salaries and working conditions contributing to high turnover rates. The analysis highlights a trend of feminization within the ranks and an overwhelming bureaucratic burden that hampers effective policing. Despite a general decline in violent crime, police are increasingly tasked with addressing offenses committed by combatants who come back from the frontline, further complicating their operational capacity amid structural inefficiencies.

Reforms in Russian Law Enforcement Agencies in the Last Decade

The Russian police is one of the largest and most centralized agencies in Russia that acts as a single government agency, the Ministry of the Interior (MI). Today, it employs almost one million officers, each with their own specialization. Police officers are responsible for the criminal and administrative prosecution of citizens and businesses. Even cases investigated by the Investigative Committee¹ are supported by police detectives. Public order on the streets, criminal policy, and the overall repressive mechanisms of the state depend on the police. This state body is essential to understanding how Russian *siloviki* operate.

The most important police reform in post-Soviet Russia was carried out in the early 2010s. It was preceded by an unprecedented phenomenon in law-making—a broad public discussion of the new law “On Police,” which involved stakeholders (President Medvedev, the MI itself), human rights activists, and ordinary citizens (via a special online platform). The reform envisaged not merely renaming the “militsiia”—the Soviet name for the agency responsible for policing (maintenance of public order and criminal prosecution)—into the “politsiia” (police) and sewing new uniforms for police officers. It was also presupposed that new public accountability mechanisms should be established, such as the reporting of heads of police departments (both local and regional) to legislative organs or mandatory pub-

lic reporting by local police officers to the population. Opinion polls assessing police performance were also envisioned as an important element of public oversight. This was supposed to break the “stick” (“palochnaia”) system, under which the efficiency of police officers was assessed by internal indicators, each of which was based on a comparison with the previous year’s performance (“za analogichnyi period proshlogo goda”). This system forces each police officer to act as they did the year before and to achieve the same indicators, regardless of citizens’ interests.

At the same time, the reform implied increasing the centralization of the police forces. Before 2012, regional and local authorities financially supported some police staff in maintaining public order or even programs in schools to prevent juvenile delinquency.² The reform completely abolished these instruments and transferred all police officers to federal subordination. Police officers’ salaries were also increased at least twice, while staff had to be reduced.

What are the main achievements of the reform? The renaming of the police was deemed successful by researchers. The reform improved the public image of the police: patrol officers in new uniforms had to behave more favorably to citizens, and their chiefs strongly controlled patrols’ appearance. In addition to making lower-ranking police officers more manageable, a system of personal responsibility was introduced for supervisors. Each of them had to supervise their subordinates per-

1 The Investigative Committee was established as a unique state agency after the separation of investigation units from the Prosecutor’s Office in 2011. The Committee’s jurisdiction extends to serious violent offenses such as murder; complex economic offenses, including corruption; and cases involving juvenile offenders and/or victims. The Committee also investigates cases against police officers.

2 For instance, in Krasnodar Krai, regional authorities supported about 600 police school inspector positions to control minors’ misbehavior. All these staff had to be dismissed during the reform.

sonally and was obliged to visit and have conversations with them. All this activity had to be recorded in files. As a result, the formal and informal pressure on ordinary officers increased. At the same time, the police supervisors also considered themselves vulnerable because they responded to subordinates' misconduct.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, the KPI system has not been overcome during the reform: the clearance rate (the percentage of registered crimes that are solved) remained the primary indicator for local police stations; regional departments that unify the statistics from the local level; and the Ministry's central apparatus in Moscow, which, in turn, supervises the regional departments. The displacing of managers from regional departments led to the formation of managerial structures in local police stations, which, while *de jure* occupying the positions of ordinary police officers, *de facto* exercised managerial control to achieve key indicators.

Centralization of the police increased paperwork and formal reporting from the top down, while police accountability to citizens and local authorities quickly became simulated. High centralization and subordination do not create incentives for information flow from local-level police to high levels because the perpetrators of problems will always be held responsible. Digitalization duplicated paperwork: Since 2014, much has been done to link police databases and enable police officers in different regions to share data. That aimed to overcome the information gap between regional departments and increase their cooperation. In the 2010s, for example, the police combined regional databases on administrative offenses, including traffic offenses. This has made all the misbehavior of citizens visible at the national level, facilitating a great deal of administrative repression by the police. However, it is only very rarely that the digitalization of the police helps ordinary police officers. Usually, it is designed to make it easier to control the police officers. For example, local policemen today do not keep a paper record of the populace and paper cases describing their neighborhood of control, as they did before 2016. They have to do this work in the form of a database. This makes their work transparent to chief management, and any errors in the databases or incorrect information can be penalized.

Local and regional authorities felt that the police were now a federal agency. To reconcile the interests of the regions and local authorities with those of the police, councils or committees for the prevention of offenses and councils for anti-terrorist work began to be formed at the regional and local levels. Such coordinating organs bring together local law enforcers and regional/local authorities. Regions and wealthy municipalities were incentivized to fund police prevention work; this is how local police may be financed by regional and local authorities

today. They must support various federal law enforcement initiatives with their financial funds, such as creating Voluntary Guards (DND, *Dobrovolnye Narodnye Druzhiny*).

The salary increase that came in the wake of the reform had the most positive effect on the police force. In 2011, budget expenditures on MI totaled 340.6 billion rubles; in 2012, this doubled to 767 billion rubles. This brought about new interest in working for the police. Just after the reform, young adults from small cities returning from mandatory army service were choosing between employment in nonstable positions in industry or the police, and often opted in favor of the latter. The Russian Monitoring of the Economic Situation and Health of the Population of the Higher School of Economics showed that in 2012, the average income of police officers was more than twice the national average (46,600 rubles compared to 29,200 rubles for non-police officers). However, inflation after the annexation of Crimea and rising salaries in the rest of the economy meant that police salaries were no longer competitive by 2017.

In April 2016, Vladimir Putin's decrees introduced another reform without any public discussion: The National Guard of the Russian Federation (*Federalnaia sluzhba voisk natsionalnoi gvardii Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), officially known as the *Rosgvardiia*, was created. This body is directly subordinated to the President, whereas the MI is formally part of the government cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister but is also subordinate to the President due to Russia's dual executive structure. *Rosgvardiia* was made up of the internal troops of the MI (these are not only soldiers recruited for army service, but also contract troops from the riot policy OMON and other special units, designed to control public events and protest activities in large cities), as well as more numerous and locally based departments of property protection (special troops that provide private protection to banks, firms, and housing) and departments of licensing (which control the weapons licenses in Russia and also control private security businesses). Salaries and overall funding in the *Rosgvardiia* were higher than in the police, and it attracted more recruits, leaving the police with fewer opportunities to hire suitable candidates. At the local level, *Rosgvardiia's* involvement in public order is still coordinated by the police, which oversees patrolling plans in all cities. Two state agencies participate together in weapon control: *Rosgvardiia's* inspectors from license departments usually cooperate with local policemen in campaigns to control hunters and other gun owners. Also, the *Rosgvardiia* does not have the full range of state coercion and has the right to prosecute citizens only administratively. Moreover, *Rosgvardiia's* officers mainly send administrative cases to the police for registration and operations. As the protests

in Moscow and St. Petersburg since 2012 have shown, both state agencies—Rosgvardiia and MI—are participating in street control and acting violently against protestors and the public.

Simultaneously with the formation of the Rosgvardiia, Vladimir Putin abolished two agencies: the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN, Federalnaia sluzhba po kontroliu za oborotom narkotikov) and the Federal Migration Service (FMS, Federalnaia Migratsionnaia Sluzhba). The FSKN was a fully independent body that had a complex cycle of administrative and criminal repression of drug-related offenses and possessed all staff needed: detectives, forensic experts, and investigators. It often competed with the police drug units,³ as it did not always serve solely as a specialized agency for major drug-related crime. Research has shown that on average, the MI and the FSKN prosecuted people mainly for drug possession of similar size. However, there was also regional variation: in Moscow or St. Petersburg, these two agencies operated differently, while in other regions (for example, in the Pskov region), they achieved the same performance. This duality ended when the FSKN was disbanded and its officers became part of the specialized police units of drug-related crime.

FMS had long remained formally a civil service. However, most of its employees, especially those who worked in the passport service and exercised control over issuing citizenship and visas to foreigners, were required to have police ranks. For many years, the FMS and the police worked together on migration control. Therefore, returning this service to the police was less painful than with the FSKN. After the FMS joined the police, migration control became more punitive.

Challenges After February 24, 2022: Violence in the Wake of the “Special Military Operation” (SMO) and Staffing Gaps

Russian police are the first responders to any crime committed in the country, and a key debate now relates to the crimes committed by soldiers and combatants in Russia’s war against Ukraine. Almost every day, uncensored media report on criminal violence and/or criminal prosecution of these people in their hometowns and cities. The evidence of such crimes is quite voluminous and may be regarded as a new trend. Anonymous interviews with police officers in the field reflect that tendency: some even reported their frustration that, despite hav-

ing expended significant effort to collect evidence and solve a criminal case, the criminal would not face long-term imprisonment.

Despite the media evidence of this new violent trend, no evidence thereof is yet to be found in official criminal statistics. The data on criminal cases opened and then solved that are published by the Prosecutor General’s office (see crimestat.ru) have been classified since December 2022. We still have criminal court statistics for 2023, but there are no differences between the statistics on murder and other severe violence cases for 2021–22 and 2023, with the exception of an increase in the sexual abuse of minors in 2023 (Bloomberg 2024). It can only be speculated why official criminal court statistics do not show the rising violence committed by combatants and soldiers.

One explanation is that those who commit this violence are doing so in the zone of the “SMO,” which is not included in official Russian statistics. Thus, the official stability in the number of murder cases may be explained by the fact that the people who are involved in such violence has decreased due to war-induced losses. The number of returnees (even if they commit more violence) is less than the number of those who voluntarily went to the SMO.

But there might be another explanation: the police in the field and even the Investigative Committee are suffering from staffing problems. At the higher levels, criminal offenses by soldiers have to be investigated by special military investigators, of whom there have been only 1,500 since before 2022. This is obviously not enough to investigate all criminal misconduct in the wartime military.

Even better documented is the shortage of low-ranking police officers. In early November 2024, the MI indicated that the police are understaffed by 173,800 people, or 18.8 percent (Kommersant 2024).⁴ This shortage is uneven across regions and police divisions: Some regions, according to the MI data, are short 90 percent of needed patrol officers.

This was not the first time that the head of the MI raised this problem. In 2021, Kolokoltsev reported a shortage of 70,000 personnel, and in 2022 about 90,000 (in Moscow, the shortage was 50 percent—TASS 2022). As we can see, during the war in Ukraine, the problem has increased significantly, even according to official statements. Interview data with officers suggest an even more dramatic shortage: they indicate that

3 In some regions, there were internal wars between FSKN and police units to control the drug market. For instance, in the Republic of Tatarstan, there were some criminal cases that police and FSKN officers had opened and sent to the courts against each other. See <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2754442> and <https://m.realnoevremya.ru/news/167947-v-kazani-eks-podpolkovnika-fskn-prigovorili-k-7-godam-za-organizaciyu-narkoproizvodstva>.

4 Considering that a year earlier the total staffing of the Interior Ministry was set at 934,000 people for 2024—see the Presidential Decree <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202212050104>.

among local police officers almost everywhere, understaffing is 50–60 percent, and understaffing of patrol officers can reach 70–80 percent. A recent iStories (2024) investigation based on publicly available data on police officers' insurance shows that the shortage problem varies regionally: for instance, in Crimea⁵, Primorskii Krai, Magadan, and Tula regions, the staffing gap is a quarter or more even according to official reports.

Why did the personnel problem become so acute precisely in the wake of the Russian war against Ukraine? The same iStories study, looking at vacancy announcements, found that the average salary of police officers has gone down since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and is now completely uncompetitive on the labor market: A local police officer is offered approximately 49,000 rubles per month (less than \$500), an ordinary lower-ranking patrol policeman even less (38,000 rubles, less than \$400). These are almost the same salary that was granted in 2012 during the reform. After the creation of the Rosgvardiia, salaries for its officers increased, while the police did not receive such a pay raise. Over the past two years, there has been a rise in the salaries of workers at enterprises, while payments to those involved in the so-called "SMO" have increased. This all significantly reduces the prospects of the police recruiting new personnel. Today, a guy from a small town who is choosing between a position as a factory worker or a policeman will choose the former, as the salary is at least twice as high.

The police, like other employment segments in Russia, are faced with a new generation of recruits for whom retirement after only 25 years of service is less of a motivation than it was for previous generations. Young people join the police force for 1–2 years and leave it quite quickly without being enticed by social benefits in the distant future. To be a police officer today means doing the work of two or three people to produce the KPI and, above all, the clearance rates that management wants for the unit as if it were fully staffed. For lower-ranking officers, this means irregular working hours, which, given the low pay, creates even greater incentives for quitting the job.

As a result, the police has seen a wave of feminization, just as in the 1990s, when the MI had similar personnel problems. Today, the police have fully feminized units, including juvenile affairs departments and those positions that consist entirely of paper-based and bureaucratic work, such as administrative law enforcement departments and inquiry or investigation units. Moreover, a growing number of women are working as local police officers, patrol officers, and other outdoor services for which men were traditionally recruited. Women may see police work as more attractive not only because they

have lower salary expectations, but also because maternity time is counted in the system as full-time service; it is not uncommon for the birth of two children to take up a third of a female police officer's total service time.

Feminization occurs in parallel with bureaucratization. The increasing burden of reporting and scrutiny coincides with the influx of more female officers into such work. Today, the investigation of criminal and administrative cases is also predominantly a stream of paperwork and bureaucratic decisions. Excessive bureaucratization and the principle of personal responsibility encourage police officers to work not for results but for clearance rates. At the same time, management control over the KPI and case paperwork is strengthened. The attention of the prosecutor's office to how the police register crimes is also intensifying; this reduces the discretion of police officers in the field and multiplies the paperwork on those cases that have no prospect of being solved. Before suspending a case with no prospects, an inquiry officer or investigator has to do significant paperwork, reducing the resources available for investigating complex cases. As a result, the police focus on recording and investigating the most straightforward cases, often those that do not involve harm to any victim.

It is important to note that Russia, like the rest of the world, is experiencing a decline in violent crime. Even soldiers coming back from war cannot reverse the trend. Consequently, a growing share of the flow of cases are victimless crimes. For example, up to 17 percent of all defendants in criminal courts are accused of having had an administrative record drawn up against them in the last 12 months (most often for non-payment of child support or drunk driving). The police, suffering from a shortage of qualified and experienced personnel, can only successfully investigate this type of crime.

Another consequence of the staffing shortage is the lack of experienced managers in average police stations. Since the principle of a manager's personal responsibility for the actions of subordinates still applies, and there are not enough people in the field, no experienced policemen are willing to rise up the career ladder and occupy management positions, which bring no salary bump but only increased risk of dismissal and punishment.

Conclusion

The ongoing war may well change the dynamics of violent crime in Russia. Returning former Wagner combatants, or soldiers temporarily returning from the frontline, are often in the news as a constant source of violence. This is confirmed by interviews with police officers, who feel frustrated that criminals who are caught are not properly punished because they end up returning to the

5 Illegally annexed by Russia in 2014 and internationally recognized as part of Ukraine.

front. There are also reports that many of those who are sent to the front from prison colonies manage to escape. However, at least for the moment, official criminal court statistics (currently available until the first half of 2024) do not confirm this trend.

The police do not appear to be among the domestic beneficiaries of this war at all, first and foremost because the police are seriously understaffed. The head of the MI recognizes this in public. Nevertheless, the 19-percent staffing shortage voiced by Vladimir Kolokoltsev sounds like a dream for lower-ranking officers. Often, in the divisions of local policemen and patrols, there is a 50-percent or greater shortage of personnel. The police compete for personnel with other law enforcement agencies, for example the Rosgvardiia. Here, the salaries are better and the range of responsibilities less comprehensive than in the police. Low salaries and irregular working hours do not make the police an attractive

place to work. The response to the shortage of personnel has been the feminization of the Russian police. The MI features all-female units; more and more women are also taking up positions traditionally occupied by men. This trend coincides with the increasing bureaucratization of police work. Today, investigating administrative and criminal cases and processing them for the criminal court is more often paperwork than detective work.

Second, the principle of managers' personal responsibility, introduced in the 2012 reform and intensified over the years, has washed out the layer of managers willing to take responsibility for decisions. Third, policing has become digitized in recent years. Gradually, regional police information centers have started to integrate their databases. However, the problem of accountability remains. Most digital reforms are initiated more because of management's desire to control subordinates than any will to help them in their work.

About the Author

Kurt Haven is a pseudonym. Collecting and publishing information about law enforcement agencies can be qualified as criminal behavior by the Russian state. The author lives and works in Russia and prefers to remain anonymous.

Further Reading

- Bloomberg. 2024. "Russia Is Storing Up a Crime Wave When Its War on Ukraine Ends." Bloomberg, June 22, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-22/why-russia-is-facing-a-crime-wave-when-war-on-ukraine-ends>.
- Lemiasova, Lena, 2024. "Nasiliia bol'she, bezopasnosti men'she." iStories, September 16, 2024. <https://istories.media/stories/2024/09/16/nasiliya-bolshe-bezopasnosti-menshe/>.
- TASS. 2022. "Kolokol'tsev soobshchil o bol'shom ottoke kadrov iz MVD." TASS, November 16, 2022. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16343249>.
- Kommersant. 2024. "Nekhvatka lichnogo sostava v MVD Rossii sostavila pochti 20%." Kommersant, November 26, 2024. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7328120>.

Russia's Volunteer Formations: Instruments for Recruitment, Proof of Loyalty or Diffusion of Power?

Margarete Klein (German Institute for International and Security Affairs—SWP, Berlin)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000715606

Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to a proliferation of volunteer formations fighting alongside the regular armed forces. These include "private" military companies (PMCs) and units financed or recruited by governors, big corporations, Cossack groups or Donbas veterans. The advantages of this kind of "covert mobilization" for the Kremlin are threefold: enlarging the recruitment pool, financial burden-sharing, and containing domestic discontent by concealing the high number of casualties and avoiding or at least postponing yet another unpopular round of compulsory mobilization. At the same time, the mushrooming of various volunteer formations entails risks for the regime, too, as the Wagner mutiny revealed. After the failed mutiny, the Wagner model—which was based on controlling financial means and recruitment processes, together with extensive operational autonomy—was destroyed; the Kremlin initiated a new phase of dealing with the volunteer formations and subjected them to tighter control. Nonetheless, they could eventually become useful instruments for individual power projection in the event of a weakening of Putin's power vertical.

Compulsory and Covert Mobilization

Since the full-scale invasion, Russia has suffered heavy losses on the frontline. Mediazona and BBC Russia were able to verify the names of 75,382 killed in action as of October 25, 2024, and estimated that the real number is about 120,000 (Mediazona 2024). This means that after two and a half years of war, Russia's blood toll is already ten times higher than that of the Soviet Union in ten years of the Afghan war. Including the wounded, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte even estimates the Russian casualties by October 2024 at 600,000 men (NATO 2024). Besides outnumbering Ukraine in its war of attrition, the Kremlin counts on further instrumentalizing its military as a means of coercion against Western countries and NATO. In consequence, Putin has gradually increased the target size of Russia's armed forces from 1 million before the war to 1.5 million by the end of 2024. To achieve these goals, Russia will have to recruit large numbers of new personnel while compensating for the enormous war losses. The challenge is likely to be all the greater because even before the full-scale invasion, the number of active servicemen only corresponded to 90 percent of the officially declared figure—900,000 instead of 1 million in 2021 (Military Balance 2022, 193). The gap is likely to have widened significantly since the war. Research by iStories and CIT-Team shows that instead of the 640,000 contract soldiers claimed by the Ministry of Defense, only 426,000 soldiers appear to have been recruited as of April 2024 (Bonch-Osmolovskaya and Savina 2024).

With regard to military recruitment, Russia's leadership pursues two pathways, focusing on three differ-

ent categories of personnel. The first pathway consists of compulsory mobilization. On September 21, 2022, Putin called up 300,000 men. This measure was unpopular, triggering fear and anger, leading to arson attacks on enlistment offices and hundreds of thousands of men leaving the country. Although then-defense minister Sergei Shoigu declared at the end of October 2022 that the so-called "partial mobilization" had been completed, the surviving mobilized soldiers continue to be deployed in the war zone to this day, as Putin's decree sets no time limit and has not been formally revoked.

Given the risk of growing public discontent associated with another round of compulsory mobilization, the Kremlin decided to step up efforts aimed at so-called "covert mobilization." This term refers to persons who are recruited on a voluntary basis. They fall into two categories: regular soldiers who serve in the armed forces for a certain period of time (*kontraktniki*) and fighters from a wide range of longstanding or newly established volunteer formations. With recruitment and retention of *kontraktniki* increasingly facing problems, volunteer formations are gaining in importance as a very flexible tool to quickly generate manpower for the frontline by opening up new recruitment sources. According to Mediazona and BBC Russia, volunteer fighters—besides prison inmates who had been recruited by Wagner until May 2023—have borne the brunt of losses since early summer 2022 (Mediazona 2024).

Patchwork of Volunteer Formations

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian leadership drew on existing structures—such as

PMCs, militias in the Donbas, and Cossack groups—but quickly began to promote the ad hoc establishment of new units. As a result, a patchwork of volunteer structures emerged with different legal statuses, heterogeneous funding and recruitment bases, as well as varying degrees of operative autonomy from the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. The available data do not allow a comprehensive comparison with regard to the size; terms of service; and level of equipment, weaponry, and training of the different units. In terms of size, Wagner—before the mutiny—and Cossack forces stand out, each having (had) around 50,000 fighters in Ukraine. While the Cossack fighters appear to be more homogeneous in terms of their level of training, Wagner's forces were very heterogeneous, as the PMC consisted of a core of several thousands of experienced mercenaries but the majority of those fighting in Ukraine for Wagner were untrained prison inmates. The Kadyrovtsy are also very heterogeneous in their legal status and composition. The majority of the long-established Chechen units are formally subordinate to the National Guard, while the units created after 2022 are subordinated to the Ministry of Defense. Most of the fighters are Chechens, with the exception of the Akhmat Special Forces Battalion, in which 90 percent of the fighters are Russians from outside Chechnya. In August 2024, Kadyrov claimed that he had sent 40,000 fighters to the war, including 19,000 volunteers. As the fighters only sign a 4-month contract, an individual's renewal contracts are counted as a new contract, artificially increasing the number of fighters (Novaya Gazeta Europe 2024). Other volunteer units comprise only a few dozen to hundred fighters; regional volunteer battalions are usually formed of around 400 men each. The fact that the average age of volunteer fighters increased during the full-scale invasion, and that the physical and mental health requirements were massively reduced, clearly shows that the recruitment of volunteer fighters is primarily about quantity, not quality.

(Not So) Private Military Companies

The most diverse group with regard to recruitment, financing, and operational control are the PMCs. Illegal according to §359 of the Russian Criminal Code, which prohibits the founding, financing, and recruiting of irregular armed forces, they are either registered abroad or take the form of private security companies, which are allowed to operate in Russia. Latecomers to the global business of PMCs, Russian companies have been gaining visibility and importance since at least the 2010s. While most of them focused initially on protective services (Moran Security, RSB Group) or engaged in military consulting and training for foreign militaries, the beginning of the Ukraine war in 2014 became a turning point. Mercenaries from Wagner and E.N.O.T

participated in combat missions alongside pro-Russian forces in the Donbas. Thereafter, Russian PMCs mushroomed and began to significantly expand their activities as well as their area of operation, which came to stretch from Ukraine to Syria, Libya, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Up until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the relationship between the PMCs and the Kremlin was often described as a peculiar form of public-private partnership based on the promise to promote private business interests while simultaneously serving the Kremlin's geopolitical and military interests: by expanding Russian influence in regions from which Moscow was absent for a long time, by acting as a military force multiplier for Russia's armed forces, and by offering (plausible) deniability for Russia's military interference abroad. In 2012, Putin praised PMCs as a potential “instrument for realizing national interests without the direct participation of the government.” However, despite opaque ownership and management structures, many PMCs maintained from the beginning close ties to Russian security structures like the GRU, the FSB, and the Ministry of Defense, using their training facilities and getting equipment from them, among other things. Some, like Patriot, Redut, and Shchit, can even be classified as pure front organizations of the Ministry of Defense and the GRU.

The full-scale invasion changed the calculation of interests of the Kremlin, on the one hand, and the PMCs and their sponsors, on the other hand. Deniability became obsolete for Putin, while the ability to open up new recruitment channels and engage PMCs in combat missions became decisive. For example, the new PMC Espanola targets football hooligans, while the PMC Andreevskii Krest focuses on Orthodox believers. Prigozhin, in turn, was the first to recruit prison inmates en masse starting from August 2022, deploying them in “human waves” in the battle of Bakhmut.

Cossacks, Pro-Russian Militias, and the Russian Orthodox Church

While monetary incentives such as high recruitment bonuses and salaries play a decisive role in the enlistment of *kontraktniki* and mercenaries, ideological motives are more likely to be decisive when it comes to recruiting “patriotic”-nationalist forces. To date, Putin demonstrates an ambivalent attitude toward this milieu. On the one hand, he actively reaches out to them as part of his efforts to strengthen the “patriotic”-military education of society; on the other hand, he seems concerned about individuals and groups who criticize him for being too soft on Ukraine. Therefore, when it comes to recruiting fighters for the war, the Kremlin counts on “patriotic” forces considered loyal to him. These include pro-Russian militias like the Union of Donbas Volunteers, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Cossacks who have

been fighting on Ukrainian soil for Russia since 2014. In the tradition of warrior peasants in Tsarist Russia, “patriotism,” militarism, and Orthodox Christianity are their core values. According to the All-Russian Cossack Society, 50,000 Cossacks fought in Ukraine between February 2022 and the end of July 2024 (Vserossiiskoe kazach'e obshchestvo 2024). In April 2024, a law creating a Cossack reserve of 60,000 men was passed. Furthermore, both the Kremlin and the All-Russian Cossack Society are pushing for new Cossack organizations to be created in occupied territories like Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in order to strengthen Russia's rule.

Volunteer Formations Affiliated With Regions and Companies

While PMCs, militias, and Cossack forces existed before the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, two new categories of volunteer formations emerged only afterwards. In July 2022, the Russian government instructed the administrations of the 85 subjects of the Russian Federation (including the illegally annexed Crimea and Sevastopol) to form battalions of 400 men each. The burden-sharing model between the federal center and the regions envisages governors and regional businessmen sponsoring recruitment bonuses and equipment while the regular salary is paid by the Ministry of Defense. Given that bonuses vary significantly from region to region, some volunteer battalions—like the “Sobianin regiment” in Moscow—enlist not only men residing in these regions but also those coming from other areas of Russia. While the majority of these units serve primarily to share the financial burden and use the regions as a recruitment vehicle, and therefore cannot be defined as “governors' armies,” there is one exception: the Kadyrovtsy. Already before the full-scale invasion, the head of the Republic of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, had built up a private army. Although nominally under the auspices of the National Guard—and, to a lesser degree, the Ministry of Defense—in reality it is Kadyrov who controls the recruitment and training process in Chechnya. For example, the fighters are trained in the Russian Special Forces University named after Vladimir Putin in Gudermes, which is not part of the Russian armed forces or the National Guard but formally a private institution, yet is de facto an instrument for ensuring loyalty to Kadyrov. Kadyrov turned the requirement handed down from the federal center into an advantage for himself: By creating not only one but four volunteer battalions (“Akhmat” battalion East, North, West and South) in July 2022, he exceeded the expected proof of loyalty to Putin while increasing his own corps of loyal fighters.

Parallel to the regions, (semi-)state and private companies have been forming volunteer battalions since summer 2022. Recruiting among their employees and

private security companies, Gazprom (Potok, Plamia, Fasel), Roskosmos (Uran), and Rusal (Sokol) sent fighters to the frontline. In addition, wealthy individuals and entrepreneurs—like Gennadii Timchenko, Oleg Deripaska, Konstantin Malofeev, and Igor Altushkin—are said to be actively engaging in (co-)financing volunteer units of different origin (The Moscow Times 2023).

Lessons Learned From the Wagner Mutiny

Making use of existing and creating new volunteer formations helped Russia's leadership to rapidly recruit a large number of fighters while sharing the financial burdens with regions, companies, and individual entrepreneurs. However, the “proxyfication” of structures of violence entails risks for Putin's regime and the Russian state. These range from more practical questions of military interoperability on the battlefield—due to different levels of military training and equipment—to insufficient control over individual structures by the Ministry of Defense, up to the state monopoly on the use of force being eroded. The Wagner mutiny clearly demonstrated the challenges for the Kremlin and led to adaptations in dealing with volunteer formations.

In spring 2023, the looming dispute over the allocation of resources and competences between Prigozhin and then-Minister of Defense Shoigu escalated into an open power struggle. When Prigozhin switched from criticizing the military leadership as incompetent and decadent to questioning Putin's legitimization of the full-scale invasion, Prigozhin's feud with Shoigu turned into an open challenge to Putin's power. Not only did Prigozhin refuse to obey Shoigu's subordination order, which demanded that all volunteer formations sign a contract with the Ministry of Defense by July 1, 2023, but he also started his March for Justice toward Moscow on June 23, 2023.

Having successfully quelled the mutiny, the Kremlin responded by destroying the “Wagner model.” Among volunteer formations, Wagner was unique in that its peculiar private-public partnership with the Ministry of Defense and Kremlin included far-reaching freedoms: independent recruitment sources (having been given the right to offer amnesty to prison inmates in exchange for joining Wagner's ranks), operational command with regard to its frontline operations, and direct control over the financial means coming from the Ministry of Defense—allowing Prigozhin to build relationships based on personal loyalty with his commanders. Furthermore, Wagner was integrated into the broad corporate network of an entrepreneur of violence who had political ambitions to join the inner circle of Putin's power. In the wake of Prigozhin's mutiny, his business network was destroyed, and in August 2023 he was killed together with the founder of Wagner, Dmitrii Utkin. The Wagner

mercenaries were given the choice of signing contracts with the Ministry of Defense or going into exile in Belarus. Wagner as a fighting force was dissolved, although the brand name and a small unit led by Prigozhin's son Pavel still exist within the ranks of the National Guard.

Besides dealing with the peculiar case of Wagner, the Ministry of Defense and general staff seized the opportunity to enforce tighter control over all volunteer formations. To this end, either the volunteer formations or the individual fighters had to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense whereby even the hitherto illegal PMCs and their mercenaries de facto became legalized. Cross-financing through businessmen and regional actors is still encouraged and expected, but the money flows to the volunteer formations are now channeled through the Ministry of Defense. In consequence, the sponsors' ties with the commanders have been weakened. Furthermore, the volunteer formations have been administratively subordinated to three larger organizations controlled by the Ministry of Defense and/or GRU: BARS, the Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps, and the Africa Corps (Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds 2024). While originally founded in 2015 as an "Army Combat Reserve" dedicated to training reservists, the "BARS" label is now attached to a broad spectrum of units fighting in Ukraine, ranging from mobilized recruits and regional volunteer units up to volunteer formations based more on ideological bonds, like part of the Union of Donbas Volunteers, Tsar Wolves, or units of the All-Russian Cossack Society. While the BARS system can be described more as a formal umbrella organization for different units without the Ministry of Defense interfering too much into their internal structures, the establishment of the Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps in 2023 clearly demonstrates the desire of Russia's military leadership to enhance its administrative control of all volunteer and mercenary groups fighting in Ukraine. Led by Lieutenant-General Vladimir Alexeev from GRU, the new structure's task is to enhance interoperability by regulating training and command and control structures (Galeotti and Arutunyan 2024). The Africa Corps, in turn, was established in 2023 by the GRU mainly to take over Wagner's activities in Africa. BARS, the Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps, and the Africa Corps use PMCs like Redut or Konvoi, which are controlled by the Ministry of Defense and GRU, as front organizations to recruit volunteer fighters. This opaque structure reflects the desire to keep as many recruitment and funding channels open as possible in order to continue to target volunteers and to uphold financial burden-sharing while streamlining command and control and promoting interoperability.

Risks for Regime Stability?

Despite being formally subordinated to state structures, the risks for further "proxyfication" of structures of violence have not yet been eliminated entirely. Under certain circumstances, they could even grow, as a large number of actors outside the regular armed forces and GRU have gained or broadened their experience in different aspects of the process—ranging from financing to administrative issues like handling recruitment and procurement processes up to establishing or strengthening ties to groups that already have long experience in the realm of proxy structures.

Although most actors regard the founding and financing of volunteer formations as, above all, a means to show loyalty to the president, they also serve as a means to demonstrate their own standing within the elite. Under certain circumstances, volunteer formations and mercenaries could even become a safeguard for their patrons. For such a scenario to emerge, three factors would need to coincide: first, a significantly weakened president or an imminent succession crisis; second, a massive escalation among the elite of those conflicts that usually only smolder beneath the surface; and third, crumbling security services and armed forces. In such a situation, individual actors or groups of actors could draw on past experience and existing structures of violence to secure or strengthen their position. Regional volunteer formations could turn into governor's armies; the PMCs of large companies and rich individuals could become their military tool. However, such a scenario would require the third precondition: the weakening of the regular armed forces and the collapse of the security structures' overall control. Such a situation would only be possible if a sudden change at the top of the country were accompanied by a military defeat in Ukraine.

A more moderate version of this scenario might be more realistic. Given the neo-feudal relationship between Putin and Kadyrov, a change of leadership in Moscow could inspire the Chechen ruler to use the Kadyrovtsy to reshape the model of relations to his advantage.

However, as long as not all of these preconditions are met and the power vertical of the president remains unchallenged, there is no compelling reason for Putin to fundamentally question the current governance model of establishing volunteer formations as a means of winning the war against Ukraine. In the polycentric system of Russia's security structures, competition through financial overlaps and structural duplications is an important instrument of presidential control. Against this backdrop, the diversity of volunteer formations may thus serve Putin as an insurance policy against the military becoming more powerful in times of war.

About the Author

Dr. Margarete Klein is head of the Eastern Europe and Eurasia research group at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, Germany. Her field of expertise is Russia's military, security, and foreign policy.

Further Reading

- Arutunyan, Anna, and Mark Galeotti. 2024. *Downfall: Prigozhin, Putin, and the New Fight for the Future of Russia*. London: Ebury Digital.
- Bonch-Osmolovskya, Katya, and Sonya Savina. 2024. "More Soldiers at All Costs?" *Mediazona*, August 1, 2024. <https://stories.media/en/stories/2024/08/01/more-soldiers-at-all-costs/>.
- Galeotti, Mark, and Anna Arutunyan. n.d. "Prigozhin's Children. The New Wave of Russian PMCs and Implications for the Unity of Command." Accessed November 18, 2024. <https://mayak-intelligence.com/research-materials/>.
- International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2022. "The Military Balance 2022." Accessed November 18, 2024. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2022/>.
- Klein, Margarete. 2024. "How Russia Is Recruiting for the Long War. Covertly Mobilising Volunteers while Preparing for a New Round of Compulsory Mobilization." *SWP Comment* 24, June 2024. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C24_Russia_Recruiting-for_LongWar.pdf.
- Mediazona. 2024. "Russian Losses in the War with Ukraine. Mediazona Count, Updated." Mediazona, September 13, 2024. https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/20/casualties_eng.
- NATO. "Doorstep Statement by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte Following the North Atlantic Council Briefing on the DPRK's Troop Deployment to Russia." October 28, 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_230105.htm
- Novaya Gazeta Europe. 2024. "An Army of One." *Novaya Gazeta Europe*. September 4, 2024, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/09/04/an-army-of-one-en>.
- The Moscow Times. 2023. "Russian Copper Billionaire Bankrolling Military Unit Fighting in Ukraine." *The Moscow Times*, April 4, 2023. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/04/04/russian-copper-billionaire-bankrolling-military-unit-fighting-in-ukraine-a80702>.
- Vserossiiskoe kazach'e obshchestvo. 2024. "Zaporozhskomu kazachestvu byt'!" Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://vsko.ru/16345-2/>.
- Watling, Jack, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds. 2024. "The Threat for Russia's Unconventional Warfare beyond Ukraine, 2022–24." *RUSI Special Report*, February 2024. <https://static.rusi.org/SR-Russian-Unconventional-Weapons-final-web.pdf>.

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**Editors:**

Fabian Burkhardt, Robert Ortting, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

Coordination Layout and Publication:

Matthias Neumann

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (<https://www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de/en/>), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich) (<https://css.ethz.ch/en/>), the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich (<https://www.cees.uzh.ch/de.html>), and the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University (<https://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu>). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (<https://laender-analysen.de/russland-analysen/>), and the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (<https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>). The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

To subscribe or unsubscribe to the Russian Analytical Digest, please visit our web page at <https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to the interdisciplinary analysis of socialist and post-socialist developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The major focus is on the role of dissent, opposition and civil society in their historic, political, sociological and cultural dimensions.

With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world.

One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

The CSS combines research and policy consultancy and, as such, functions as a bridge between academia and practice. It trains highly qualified junior researchers and serves as a point of contact and information for the interested public.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich

The Center for Eastern European Studies (CEES) at the University of Zurich is a center of excellence for Russian, Eastern European and Eurasian studies. It offers expertise in research, teaching and consultancy. The CEES is the University's hub for interdisciplinary and contemporary studies of a vast region, comprising the former socialist states of Eastern Europe and the countries of the post-Soviet space. As an independent academic institution, the CEES provides expertise for decision makers in politics and in the field of the economy. It serves as a link between academia and practitioners and as a point of contact and reference for the media and the wider public.

Any opinions expressed in the Russian Analytical Digest are exclusively those of the authors.

Reprint possible with permission by the editors.

Responsible editor for this issue: Fabian Burkhardt

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Sabrina Glasmacher, Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2025 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: <https://css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html>