Changing Rules for Russian Roulette? Rethinking the Soldier, State and Society in Russia

Eva Busza
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The Russian military's attempt to shape the Kosovo peace settlement through its move into Pristina should not have come as such a shock to Western diplomats. It is only the most recent example of a disturbing and pervasive trend in Russia: the civilian leadership's inability to control and govern its increasingly weak, fragmented and frustrated military.

This action took the West by surprise because policymakers have grown to expect passivity from the Russian military. The Russian military did not resist the dramatic political changes in their country, they seemed resigned to huge budget cuts, they did not question the decline in the fighting capacity of their divisions, and they accepted the loss of their organization's status. As a result, a consensus emerged here and abroad that the Russian army would not pose an immediate political threat to the Yeltsin regime, nor be an important player in the international arena. This conclusion has led policymakers in the United States and in Russia to feel justified in putting Russian military reform on the back burner while they attend to more pressing issues like managing the economy.

What most people have failed to realize is that while an internally fragmented and increasingly weak Russian military is unlikely to launch a coup in the next decade or purposefully attack a NATO member, significant and disturbing changes are underway which not only may affect the future of democracy in Russia, but are also undermining the Russian government's ability to follow through on its commitment to international security agreements.

Some of these new trends in Russian civil-military relations can be seen in recent interactions in electoral politics, center-periphery relations, in the official and non-official economy, and in foreign policy.

The New Russian Military Politicians

Since the creation of the Russian state there has been public involvement of military officers in partisan politics. While Defense Minister Grachev did not publicly urge military officers to run for the 1993 parliamentary elections or support particular political parties, he did urge officers to vote in favor of the president's constitutional proposal. In these elections, only four of thirty political party lists did not include military officers. In

the end, 11 military officers were elected to the Duma, 9 from the single-mandate districts and 2 from party lists.

In the 1995 duma elections, the Ministry of Defense took a more aggressive stance urging officers to run for office. Articles and editorials in Krasnaya Zvezda began to promote the view that the armed forces needed to ally with the military industrial complex and become a more active political lobby. One Russian military commentator wrote: "The army needs its own people in parliament just like the agrarians and Gazprom, the banks and others." A number of officers ran on party lists and 120 officers were actually fielded by the Ministry of Defense to run as "non-partisan" candidates in the 225 single-mandate districts: 36 generals, 5 admirals and 67 colonels, 4 majors, 6 captains and one sergeant. The non-partisan military candidates did not fare well in the elections. Only 2 of the 119 officers who ran were elected. Those on winning party lists did better.

As Russia moves into its campaign season, it is clear that candidates for both the parliamentary elections to be held this December and the presidential candidates in the June 2000 elections are paying considerable attention to the military. Announcements of information meetings for soldiers held by different political parties on military bases are growing in frequency. In view of the failure in the previous elections of military officers running as non-partisan candidates, it is likely that in the upcoming December elections many more officers will try to appear on party lists or will overtly declare their party affiliation.

The importance of soldier involvement in electoral politics should not be underestimated. "Politicization" of the armed forces in the context of a pluralistic political system translates into opportunities for destabilizing military partisanship. It is instructive to note that traditionally democratic states have not allowed active duty officers to hold political offices. When a soldier puts on her uniform and goes to the podium she is making a political statement: she is indicating not that she is simply an independent citizen but that she is representing a powerful institution--or at least is closely connected to a powerful institution. This sets a dangerous precedent, for it helps to legitimize the idea that the military has a role to play in domestic politics. As historical experience has shown, military involvement in politics is in the long run incompatible with democracy.

Regional Government Officials and the Russian Military

Equally, if not more, important has been a series of new roles and behavior that is a direct consequence of the economic cutbacks and the ill-conceived reform program. One particularly important consequence of the declining allocation and distribution of federal funds to army units has been the forging of new economic ties between local military units and regional political authorities. Insight into the character of these developing civil-military relationships around the country is offered by the example of the ties which have been established between units located in and around the city of Severomorsk, a main base of the Northern Fleet, and the city's administration, headed by mayor Vitaliy Voloshin. According to federal law, servicemen are entitled to have subsidized housing,

free transport, and privileged access to social services. Moscow has failed to provide adequate funds to fulfill these legal obligations, so Mayor Voloshin and the city council have stepped in to fill some of the gaps. For example, the city has decided to compensate the Severomorsk Motor Transport Enterprise for offering free transport to soldiers. It has also taken over the administration and upkeep of housing facilities previously managed by the military. City officials have become involved in helping to resettle and retrain servicemen discharged into the reserve. They have further provided funds for the building of a cultural center, library, telegraph office, post offices and a savings bank.

These developments are important because there is every reason to expect that economic ties will translate into political loyalties. The new relationships are likely to play themselves out in local elections with military units increasing in importance as a potential voting bloc for incumbents seeking reelection. In the longer term, if tensions between the center and the regions continue to rise, a federal-regional struggle over the loyalty of the armed forces is likely to surface, potentially igniting regional violence and instability.

The New Russian Military Entrepreneurs

In addition to forging ties with local political authorities, in recent years soldiers and officers have been forced to enter into both the legal and illegal economy to an unprecedented degree. Activity organized by Captain Kuznetsov of the White Sea Naval Base of the Northern Fleet is a case in point. Units located in the Arkhangelsk Oblast and along the entire coastline of the White Sea during the winter rely on deliveries of food and basic supplies made by auxiliary fleet vessels during the summer navigational months. As a consequence of economic cutbacks, many of these vessels have been decommissioned, while others are in need of repair to stay afloat. Due to lack of federal funds, the auxiliary fleet itself has had to come up with funds to repair the boats, and negotiated contracts and financial arrangements with shipyards and commercial enterprises to get the job done. As a consequence of this entrepreneurial activity, last winter units were not deprived of basic supplies.

On an individual level, many soldiers have tried to supplement their meager and sometimes non-existent wages by getting other work. Some have hired out their services to local enterprises, various security forces, and the growing number of private armies, many of which are mafia-run. All of these examples point to a new phenomenon: the establishment of civil-military relations that revolve around economic gain as opposed to national security.

While some of these relations are relatively benign, many pose a direct threat to the stability and security of the Russian state. This of course is the central problem posed by Russian soldier involvement in criminal activities. Russian armed force involvement in criminal activity is far-reaching and ranges from narcotics to prostitution and gambling, from financial fraud to the illegal dumping of toxic wastes. According to Defense

Ministry statistics, in the first 11 months of 1998 10,500 crimes were reported in the armed forces, up from 10,000 last year.

One particularly disturbing activity is armed force involvement in theft and the illegal sale of weapons, ammunition and equipment. The severity of this particular problem was underlined in a recent study conducted by the US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies, which concluded that "Russian military and security organizations are the primary sources for the flourishing illegal weapons trade within and outside of the FSU." It further emphasized the importance of the links between military criminals and criminal organizations working within the Russian civil sector.

In the last month, Russian law enforcement bodies have uncovered three schemes which probably are just the tip of the iceberg. In Vladivostok, Russian intelligence officers seized large amounts of weapons and explosives which soldiers from the Russian navy's Pacific Fleet were trying to sell on the black market. Nikolai Sotskov, a senior official of the Federal Security Service, stated that police had been able to stop a number of similar operations over the last two years. In another episode in Kaliningrad, Russian law enforcement officials uncovered a scheme set up by a retired officer. He had founded a company Baltrybsbyt and was illegally transporting military equipment to a company in Poland. Supplies included equipment for defense against torpedo attacks and hydro-acoustic systems equipment for defense. A third, more creative scheme was discovered through the help of American law enforcement agents in Florida. The plot involved Russian military officers in St. Petersburg who had offered to sell a diesel-powered Russian foxtrot submarine for $5.5 million to Colombia drug barons for use in smuggling cocaine to North America. The transaction between the Colombians and the Russian officers was allegedly brokered by a Russian criminal group called the Redfellas.

The new roles that soldiers have been forced to adopt as a consequence of economic hardship have obvious negative implications for domestic stability. They encourage the establishment of civil-military relations that are not focused on developing the military's professionalism and defense capabilities. The increasing involvement of the armed forces in criminal activities is a particularly grave challenge to the integrity of the state. As President Yeltsin, commenting on the danger of this new phenomenon, recently stated: "corruption in the organs of power and administration is literally eating away the body of the Russian state from top to bottom."

Russian Military Players in Foreign Policy

Changes in military behavior and roles have implications not only for domestic governance but also for Russia's role in the international arena. The Russian military initiative in Kosovo is just the most recent example of how new military behaviors are undermining the civilian leadership's formulation of an integrated foreign policy. An earlier example can be found in the negotiations over the withdrawal of troops from Lithuania. On this occasion Russian military authorities took steps to curtail the ability of civilians in the Russian Foreign Ministry to affect the direction of policy. They drew up

an agreement on a timetable for troop withdrawal and sent it to the Foreign Ministry two days before it was due to be signed. Similar dynamics have been seen in Russian negotiations with former Soviet Republics over various "hot spots" like Abkhazia, Georgia, Tajikistan and Moldova. In these instances, Russian military leaders played a key independent role in negotiating cease-fires and peacekeeping operations. According to a report in Izvestia, Foreign Minister Kozyrev publicly complained that "Wholesale transfers of arms are taking place in the Transcaucasus and Moldova...Under what agreement is this effected, I would like to ask...? Why are the military deciding the most important political issues?"

The expanded role of the military in foreign policy decisions is particularly detrimental to Russia's role in the international arena and its future prospects for democratic development. First, independent military participation in international diplomacy hampers the ability of the state to articulate and follow a unified foreign policy. A particularly good illustration of this pathology can be found by looking at Russian negotiations during the Chechen crisis, when the policies declared by Defense Minister Grachev, chief negotiator General Lebed, President Yeltsin and the Foreign Ministry were frequently at odds with each other. A similar problem is emerging in the Kosovo crisis where the statements of Chief of the General Staff Kvashin, Foreign Minister Ivanov and Prime Minister Stepashin seem to be contradictory. A second consequence of the recent expansion of military prerogatives in the foreign policy domain is that civilians are in danger of losing some of their ability to set the foreign policy agenda and control policy formation. Such a development weakens the core of democratic governance.

On balance, many of the new civil-military alliances that have been forged, coupled with new norms for soldier behavior, are disturbing because they both impede future democratic development and give rise to potentially destabilizing domestic political forces. More importantly from the West's perspective, they challenge Russia's ability to formulate a unified foreign policy and adhere to its international commitments.

What Can the West Do?

How should the West respond to these developments? Unfortunately, the power to effect change primarily lies not in our hands but in the hands of the Russian president and parliament. It is essential that Russian civilian leaders implement a comprehensive military reform program that includes a realistic plan for streamlining and downsizing the armed forces--thereby creating permanent and transparent channels through which civilian and military expertise can be exchanged and used to develop policy, and establishing the means through which civilians can assert their political authority. This last goal requires that civilians clarify the boundaries and hierarchy of authority between different civilian elites and military elites.

The West can and should react to these developments in three ways:

1. We must prepare for the fact that in the near future we will have to deal simultaneously with a multitude of contradictory Russian foreign policies. We

must recognize that any international agreements we conclude with Russia may be undermined: not because of ill will on the part of civilian negotiators, but as a consequence of their inability to ensure that domestic actors like the military comply with the terms of official agreements. Most importantly, we must prepare for this eventuality in our own foreign policy planning.

2. We must encourage Russian civilian leaders to prioritize the task of restructuring their armies, urging them to both provide their soldiers with clear political leadership and to punish instances of military insubordination.

3. We should continue and intensify our cooperative programs with the Russian military: the military to military exchange programs, workshops on how to manage the relationships between military and civilian officials in a democratic state, and retraining programs for Russian officers. These initiatives are important not only because they supply seriously lacking financial resources, but more significantly because they provide an infusion of positive new ideas about how to restructure the Russian military.

The events in Kosovo should act as an early warning signal that civilian leaders in Russia and the West can no longer put Russian military reform on the back burner. It is time that western policymakers review their assumptions about the Russian military and realize that this limping, disintegrating organization has the potential to pose a serious threat to both its own civilian leadership and to the international community. Power is based on organized force; but when organized structures of power begin to disintegrate, new and unexpected forces are released that can be even more dangerous because of their sheer unpredictability.