

# **BRASS TACKS: WHY RUSSIA'S MILITARY FAILS TO REFORM**

**Kirill Shamiev**

May 2024

---

## **SUMMARY**

- Russia has initiated many efforts at military reform in the Putin era, but as the failures in the early phases of the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrated, these reforms have not solved persistent problems in Russian military effectiveness.
- The reasons for these failures stem less from measurable factors such as faulty equipment, poor doctrine, or inadequate training than from the more intangible imbalances in Russian civil-military relations and the dysfunctional system of civilian control of the Russian military.
- The Russian administrative state has ensured the political compliance of the military but, far from enabling better training and equipping of the Russian armed forces, it has often hampered their development and deployment.
- There will be another round of Russian military reform after war in Ukraine, but it will similarly likely fail due to endemic problems of political leadership and civilian control of the military

“On a freezing winter dawn, a column of Russian troops moved through what the leadership in Moscow considered to be Russian territory. By midday, commanders were receiving alarming reports. In one town at the border, local fighters had stopped the column and burned and overturned 16 trucks. Later, another convoy was ambushed. Heavy casualties began to appear in the reports of military commanders. Soon, a special military operation that was supposed to be small and aimed at crushing an unfriendly political leadership turned into a long, bloody war with thousands of casualties that would change the Russian nation for years to come.”[1]

This story sounds remarkably familiar. But it is not from an early memoir of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It is how Russian general Gennady Troshev described the beginning of the first Chechen war in December 1994.

But past is apparently prologue. In 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, a country that Russian president Vladimir Putin often implies is part of Russia. The plan was for the Russian military, supported by Russian intelligence agents, to quickly decapitate the government and occupy the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Within hours of crossing the frontier, the first reports of military setbacks and casualties began to roll in. In just a few days, it became clear that the most recent special military operation would in fact be yet another long, bloody war.

Nearly thirty years have passed, and yet the Russian government seems to have repeated the same old mistakes in its most recent war. Prior to the war, many analysts thought that the Russian military had finally reformed itself and put its past failures behind it. Yet, the Russian military significantly underperformed in Ukraine in almost every domain – strategic, operational, and tactical. It failed to achieve its objectives and demonstrated remarkably little progress in planning since the Chechen wars. The extent of its struggles and failures took many analysts, including some Ukrainians, by surprise.

The Russian leadership was no doubt somewhat perplexed as well. In 2000, Putin’s long reign began with military tragedy. Just three months after his taking office as president, the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk exploded and sank in the Barents Sea, killing the crew of 118 sailors. The outcry was so massive that Putin himself had to take part in a clearly

uncomfortable conversation with the families of the dead sailors. He promised the grieving relatives a smaller, better-equipped, more technologically advanced military. He has since devoted great effort throughout his tenure to improving the Russian military.

The effects of this effort are clear. From the beginning of 2000 to the end of 2021, the Russian defence budget almost tripled, from \$22.84 billion to \$65.91 billion (in 2020 US dollars). In those 22 years, Russia spent over \$1.1 trillion on the military, had three ministers of defence and four chiefs of the general staff who oversaw three military reforms, a short war with Georgia, an intervention in Syria, and several smaller deployments in former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet republics. Yet, when that military was finally tested in a full-scale conflict, almost nothing appeared to have changed.

Both Russian government and external military analysts have struggled to understand this persistent Russian military failure. Arguably, the issue is that analysts have paid too much attention to measurable factors – weapons, technology, doctrine, and training – and have neglected the more intangible factors such as morale, skills and leadership, which defy easy measurement.

This paper seeks to fill that gap. It starts from the idea that an adequate assessment of Russian military effectiveness must involve two interdependent aspects: material capabilities and the more difficult to quantify factors that lie at the interface between the civilian authorities and the military. These include Russia's political and administrative institutions, the social norms that regulate military conduct, and military culture, all of which enable the development and use of military force. The paper seeks to explain the role of intangible factors in the Russian military's failures and to derive lessons from the Russian military's experience in Ukraine.

**The essence of Russia's military problems stem from the imbalances in Russian civil-military relations and the dysfunctional system of civilian control of the Russian military.**

Under Putin, the Russian administrative state has ensured the political compliance of the military but, far from enabling better training and equipping of the Russian armed forces, it has often hampered their development and deployment.

During his first eight years in power, Putin was reluctant to argue with the military and failed to support and enforce the reform measures he announced. Later, however, the Kremlin over-centralised political and military decision-making and installed intrusive monitoring and flawed evaluation mechanisms. Such mechanisms only work when the civilians have sufficient expertise to judge the military activities, yet Russian civilian leaders have rarely possessed the necessary skills.

Worse, the civilian reforms failed to break up the competing institutional silos within the

Russian security sector, nor did they improve the skills of servicemembers. The reforms undermined Russia's pre-war material advantages and played a significant role in preventing Russia from achieving success in Ukraine. Even Putin's complete backing could not save Russian defence policies from the influence of stakeholders in the Ministry of Defence who sought to protect their various institutional interests, nor was Putin's support sufficient to improve the quality of civilian leadership in the development of the military.

Russia's poor battlefield performance in Georgia triggered a series of radical reforms in 2008-2012. These changes did improve the Russian military, as demonstrated in the seizure of Crimea in 2014, the hybrid war in eastern Ukraine after 2014, and the operation in Syria after 2015.

But Russian civil-military relations, the all-important interface between the Russian military and the civil authorities did not see effective reform and glaring problems remained. Before the war with Ukraine, for example, the Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Defence were not able to improve the human resource component of the military. Military officers lacked adequate training, including leadership and command skills, which undermined the adoption of innovative changes and the battlefield value of modern equipment. Ministry of Defence policies simply could not solve the military's long-standing quality problems, such as unsatisfactory service conditions, intra-military brutality, corruption, waste, and poor tactical command and control skills.

A similar reform effort is likely after the war in Ukraine, given assessment of the Russian military emanating from a variety of voices, including pro-government Russian ones. Since 2022, many Russian servicemembers, military propagandists (voenkory), retired officers, and Russian analysts have published critical analyses and opinions on the state of the Russian armed forces. The technological revolution in open-source intelligence has provided valuable evidence of Russian battlefield performance, making a mockery of official Russian Ministry of Defence press briefings. Moreover, the sheer number of personnel and amount of equipment lost in Ukraine leaves little room for business as usual after the end of hostilities in Ukraine.

Such a mass of criticism on Russia's war failures is unlikely to be dismissed by the political leadership in the Kremlin. They will attempt a reform. Previous experience demonstrates, however, that the ultimate outcome of any military reform will depend on improvements in Russian civil-military relations.

In fact, a few days before this report was released, the Kremlin appointed a new minister of defence, Andrei Belousov, dismissing Sergei Shoigu, who became the secretary of the Russian

Security Council. Belousov has spent years in the Russian government and presidential administration overseeing the economic portfolio and before this he was an academic economist. Putin's spokesman said Belousov was right for the job as the security services spend almost 7 per cent of Russia's GDP, the military and civilian economies need to be better integrated. In the past, Moscow has appointed two previous ministers, Serdyukov and Shoigu, on a similar public pretext, but both of them simply implemented military reforms.

This paper seeks to understand how that reform might proceed. The first section examines Russian military effectiveness in Ukraine and proposes a framework for assessing the military's performance. The second section explains how civil-military relations have affected Russia's military effectiveness since 2000 and why so many challenges remain. Finally, the report concludes with the identification of key reforms in Russian civil-military relations.

## Russian military effectiveness in Ukraine

“I couldn't quite figure out what was going on, are we firing on the advancing Ukrainians? Maybe NATO? Or are we attacking? Who's being shelled like hell? Where did the rocket artillery come from? The referendum in the LDNR? The seizure of Kherson? Is Ukraine attacking us? Is NATO helping it? Either way, we must have some kind of plan.”

— – Russian paratrooper Pavel Filatiev, a Russian army deserter describing the first day of the invasion.[2]

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022. Russian forces entering Ukraine along four main routes: north, north-east, east, and south. The northern group invaded from Belarus and Russia, with the goal of taking over Hostomel airport and the city of Chernihiv. Possession of Hostomel and Chernihiv would have allowed Russian forces to surround Kyiv. The north-eastern group targeted Ukraine's second largest city, Kharkiv. That city was supposed to be encircled, forcing Ukrainian troops to surrender. In the east, Russian forces and their Donetsk and Luhansk Republic proxies were to advance on the Donbas front. In the south, Russian forces would have split, occupying Kherson in the south-west and encircling Mariupol in the south-east.

So, there was a plan, but Filatiev was not alone in failing to understand it. The original strategy for the invasion was a high-risk operation and ended in failure. So profound was that failure that it effectively destroyed the pre-invasion Russian ground forces, forcing the

Russian military to do what it has not done since the second world war: to reconstitute its forces with mobilised draftees, convicts, mercenaries, volunteers, foreign fighters, and to ban servicemembers from leaving the force.

Of course, a complex invasion of Europe's second largest country could only be a monumentally difficult task. But it seems as if the Russian leadership did not really think it would be. Ukraine is about one-and-half times the size and population of Iraq (in 2003), Russia amassed at most 190,000 troops, compared to a US-led coalition force of 170,000 in the opening stage of the Iraqi invasion. Coalition ground forces advanced along a single major axis from Kuwait supported by 863 aircraft in the first month alone. Russia did it along five routes, without bothering to first achieve air superiority.

Ukrainian forces successfully halted the Russian advance, forced them to retreat from the north of the country, and by the end of October 2022, had liberated a large swathe of territory in the Kharkiv, Kherson, and Sumy regions. In response, Russia announced mobilisation, drafting up to 300,000 men, and formally annexed the Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine. The special military operation transitioned from there into a long war of attrition. Mobilisation soon created a new Russian military that had little to do with the pre-war Russian military Moscow sought to develop. From a semi-professional military force, Russia shifted to a mobilised structure with a complex mix of hundreds of thousands of personnel from a wide variety of different backgrounds and experience – professionals, draftees, volunteers, and convicts – all supporting the war effort.

This paper examines Russian military development before the full-scale invasion and its influence on the Russian performance in the first, pre-mobilisation, stage of the war. It seeks to understand why that pre-war Russian military development failed so spectacularly to create a military force and a military plan that could achieve the goals that Russian political leaders set.

## Understanding military effectiveness

There are several analytical challenges in understanding military effectiveness. The first is that the effectiveness of armed forces is dependent on the context in which they are deployed. For example, the Russian operation in Syria was seen as relatively successful because the Russian military was able to achieve the military objectives of defeating terrorist groups and the Syrian rebels. The Russian contingent operated in a specific Syrian context in which its opponents had no air defence capabilities and the Syrian military, Russian mercenaries, military police, and special forces conducted ground operations. The lessons learned from

the Syrian operation are thus not necessarily applicable to the war in Ukraine.

This paper adopts Risa Brooks's approach to assessing military effectiveness, which does not depend on the specific battlefield context and focuses on the state's capacity to use available resources for military development. Brooks defines military effectiveness as the ability of armed forces to generate military power using the resources of the state, such as wealth, technology, population size, and human capital.

In Brook's definition, military effectiveness consists of four main attributes: integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality. An effective military is one that demonstrates high levels of these four qualities. The more integrated, responsive, and skilled a military is, and the higher the quality of its hardware, the greater its ability to leverage its basic resources for warfare.

## Table 1. Elements of military effectiveness

Operational concepts	Description
Skill	The capacity to motivate and equip military personnel with the basic competencies required to execute their tasks.
Responsiveness	The ability to adapt to both its own and its adversary's constraints and opportunities in preparing itself for armed conflict.
Integration	The capacity to align activities at tactical and operational levels so that they collectively contribute to the achievement of overarching strategic objectives. Effective integration involves ensuring that force development activities such as acquisition, logistics, training, and education are consistent with the military's broader strategic and tactical efforts.
Quality	The state's ability to procure and equip the military with superior weapons and equipment.

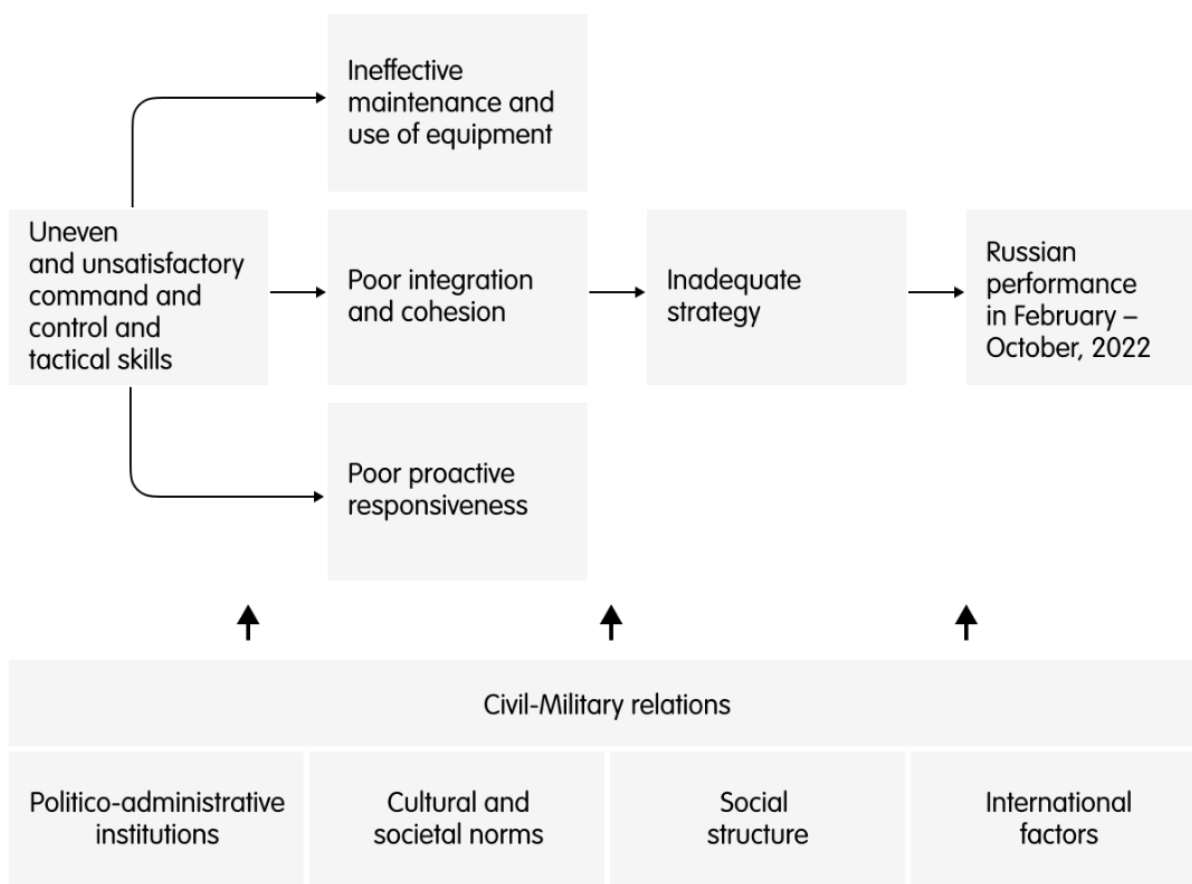
Source: *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness*, edited by Elizabeth A. Stanley and Risa A. Brooks. Stanford University Press, 2007.

ECFR · [ecfr.eu](http://ecfr.eu)



Brooks’s framework recognises that the extent to which the government can develop its military effectiveness is determined in part by the nation’s institutions, cultural and societal norms, and social structure. Those societal features condition the influence of foreign and defence ministries, intelligence agencies, and military services, as well as the relations between those entities and political leaders in the policy process. The relations between those civil entities and the military or civil-military relations are, in Brooks’s schema a key determinant of military effectiveness

**Figure 1. Value chain in Russian military effectiveness**



Source: adaptation to Russian context of the framework in “Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness”, edited by Elizabeth A. Stanley and Risa A. Brooks. Stanford University Press, 2007. ECFR · ecfre.eu

The figure above represents the links between some of the elements of Russian military effectiveness. A lack of operational and tactical **skills** and necessary enabling equipment undermined Russian military performance in several key areas. The uneven level of



organisational knowledge sharing and poor individual commander skills meant that Russian forces lacked the **quality** and organisational cohesion necessary to build a powerful military. This lack of cohesion in turn meant that Russian forces lacked the capacity to use their modern equipment effectively and led to the underdevelopment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

The practical inability to organise complex high-intensity military operations (in contrast to scripted exercises), the lack of proper tactical training, and serious procurement difficulties at the first stage of the war led Russia to poorly **integrate** its operational plan and combat tactics with the Russian government's loosely defined strategic objectives. The Russian military also struggled to conduct combined arms operations and integrate different levels of military activity. The lack of knowledge sharing and learning within the military about the Ukrainian armed forces, combined with the limited reconnaissance and delivery of information about Ukrainian positions, undermined Russian **responsiveness**. However, on the individual level, Russian forces demonstrated the capacity for improvisation on multiple occasions and a notable integration with Russian civil society.

The following section examines each of Brooks's elements of military effective in greater detail.

## Skill

In Ukraine, the Russian military demonstrated that often it had incoherent skills and use of equipment. Accordingly, to increase its military effectiveness, the Russian military is currently focusing on increasing its skills, its ability to respond and to adapt to its opponent's revealed strengths and its own weaknesses, and replenishing military equipment. The effectiveness of this development depends in large part on Russia's civil-military relations that can either enable the necessary changes or undermine the reform process.

One of the reasons why Western analysts tended to overestimate Russian military capabilities is the performance of the Russian military in yearly strategic exercises showcased to foreign observers and the media. Many observers saw mechanised combined arms warfare in large formations as a strength of the Russian armed forces, especially when compared to Western armies that had focused on counter-insurgency. In the war with Ukraine, however, the Russian army did not demonstrate this capacity.

The Russian military showed an uneven level of organisational readiness and individual commander's preparedness. In the Russian military, it is the diligence and competence of commanders that determine the level of readiness of their units. The quality of Russian

tactical command during the first year of the invasion was inadequate. Tactical command is typically the responsibility of junior officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), but it is also heavily influenced by the availability of support and signal capabilities. During the initial stages of the invasion, Russian soldiers often seemed unprepared and unprofessional, while their vehicles frequently broke down.

Most interviewees for the author's research agreed that the problem of tactical command stems from the system of education and training in the Russian military. That system consists of two pillars: (1) command structure training and (2) service and unit combat training. Command structure training is aimed at all headquarters as well as individual commanders responsible for command and control and specialised functions. The combat (tactical) training system targets battalions and smaller units down to the individual soldier (individual combat training). The Minister of Defence signs the annual military training plan, which is a key planning document for all the levels of the Russian command and control system (services, formations, units, including companies and platoons). As a rule, commanders assess the results of the training from the annual exercises, examinations, and control inspections.

This system therefore depends on the willingness and ability of the officer commanding a unit to organise training, obtain the necessary equipment and look after the welfare of his soldiers. However, the system of military higher education institutions (HEIs) is largely outdated and controlled by service headquarters, undermining the skills of junior officers and the overall integration of the Russian armed forces. There is often a lack of merit-based appointments in the higher education system, and service headquarters often appoint senior officers as heads of departments and research labs simply because they have a few years left before retirement and are on good terms with service headquarters or the leadership of the HEI. Teaching practices are outdated and often result in the written handbook being read as a lecture and the cadets having to memorise the slides. There is no independent assessment system for either the faculty or the cadets, as the military has had a shortage of junior officers for many years and accepted everyone who passed the minimal fitness exams. [3]

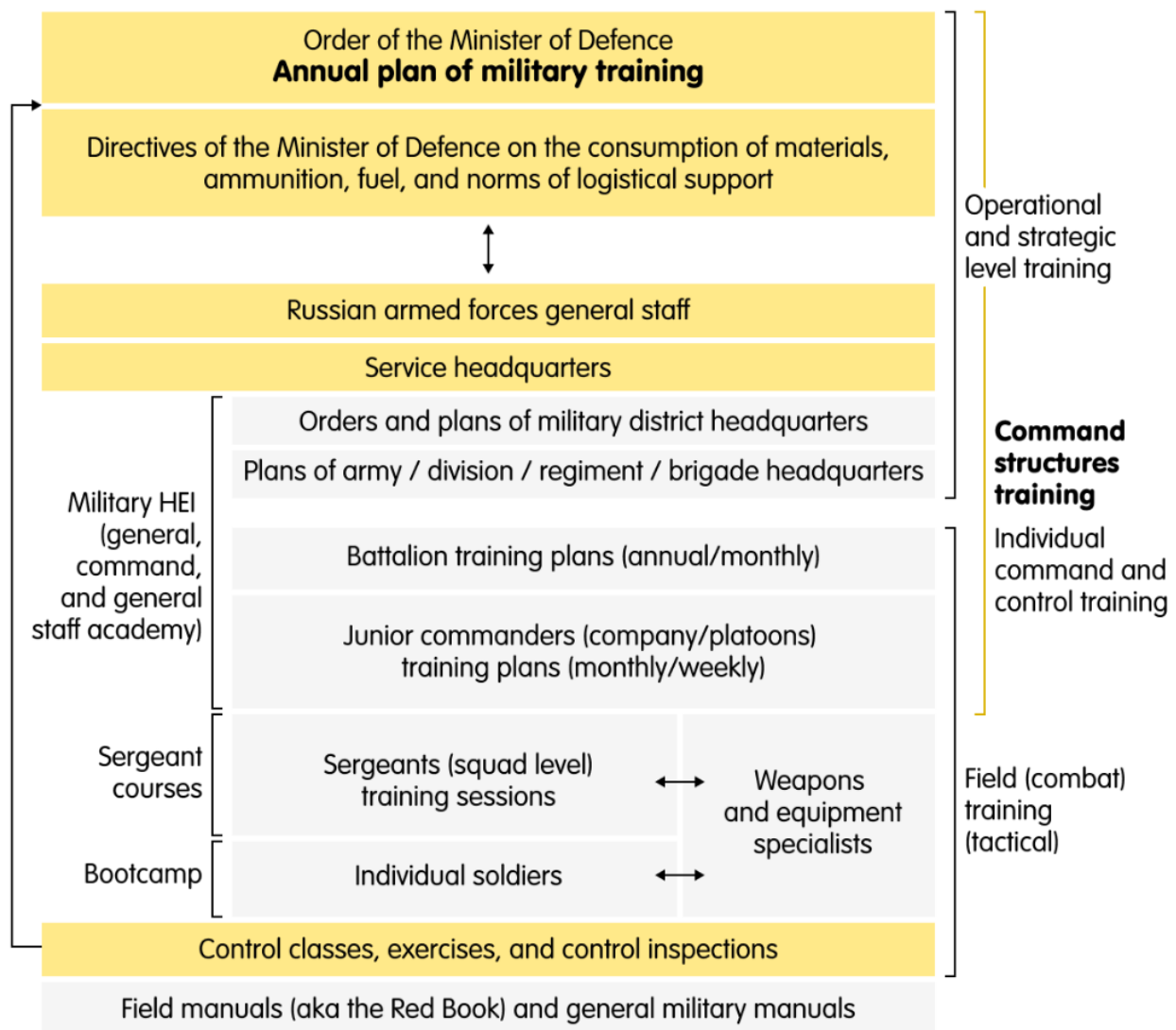
When a cadet becomes an officer, they find the same or an even worse system of training in the troops. In some units, it is easier to falsify the training system and manipulate control exercises due to enormous red tape or bribe inspectors than to run a functional system of military combat training. This also undermines the morale of the soldiers, as honest and personally committed commanders may face inertia or even hostility from their fellow officers. Less honest officers who fail to provide the necessary support (for example, ammunition and medicine) may then shift the blame for a more realistic but, on paper, imperfect exercise result onto these committed officers. The Russian education and training

systems and hence command and control systems lack what the Russians call fool proofing (zashita ot duraka) – the systems cannot detect and remove intellectually unfit servicemembers.

“For three and a half months there have been no training sessions, unless you count the pre-jump additional training. There is an atmosphere of apathy among the contract servicemen and 90% of them discuss in the smoking rooms how fast the contract would end. Conscripts do not understand why contractors serve at all. I also heard from a number of officers that they do not want to serve here.”

— – Paratrooper Filatiev about peacetime training in a Russian Airborne (VDV) regiment.[4]

**Figure 2**



ECFR · ecfre.eu

The Russian military lacks monitoring and accountability mechanisms in combat as well, as the case of the commander of the 205th brigade demonstrates. In that unit, the brigade’s leadership made several serious mistakes and harassed lower-level officers, but the Ministry of Defence initially launched an investigation against the whistle-blowers who had revealed the problems. Only after several waves of criticism from pro-Kremlin military bloggers did the Ministry of Defence decide to move the commander to a non-command post in the general staff.

The poor quality of education in Russian military HEIs and generally near absent continuous training or knowledge sharing with acting servicemembers effectively halted any exchange of knowledge and learning about the Ukrainian armed forces within the Russian military. This

was despite the fact that hundreds of Russian servicemen had already had combat experience in Ukraine prior to the full-scale invasion.

Moreover, for reasons of operational security, officers and soldiers were kept in the dark until just days or even hours before the operation. This secrecy may have achieved a degree of surprise, but it also undermined the readiness of Russian troops to go to war. Unlike in military exercises, Russian troops did not know the terrain, the real-time location of friendly forces, or the status of the adversary, including a hostile civilian population. The decision to keep knowledge of the special military operation so closely held led to a series of avoidable command and control errors, deconfliction problems, and logistical challenges for the Russian military.

As a result, when Russian forces faced resistance for the first time, they simply fell apart. Then, to compensate for tactical losses, Russian forces began to rely on their massive artillery capabilities, which criminally devastated urban areas and inflicted massive damage on the Ukrainian military and civilian population.

## Responsiveness

Failing to anticipate the war they had begun, the Russians showed varying degrees of responsiveness. Overall, the Russian government and military demonstrated a limited awareness of Ukrainian strengths and weaknesses as well as Russia's own internal limitations.

Strategic responsiveness depended on Putin's willingness to adjust his political priorities. In the first six months of the invasion, the Kremlin seemed to hope to defeat the Ukrainian military and avoid a politically costly mobilisation. When this failed, Moscow did adjust its priorities and allow the military to change its plans, but only after many costly mistakes and delays.

In the first six months of the war, despite retreating from northern Ukraine and sustaining casualties, the Kremlin opted for a costly and protracted assault in five regions of Ukraine. It resulted in devastating losses. The Ukrainians successfully exploited the lack of manpower on the Russian side and quickly recaptured a large part of their territory in the Kharkiv and Sumy counter-offensives. In Kherson, the Ukrainians forced the Russian military to retreat across the Dnieper River.

On 21 September 2022, the Kremlin made, rather late, a decisive strategic move and **partially mobilised Russian society**. The situation was so dire for the Russian military that some mobilised personnel were quickly sent to the front with little or no military training. These draftees were untrained and suffered high casualties, but they helped the military stabilise

the front and prevent further Ukrainian counter-offensives.

The Russian military also **adapted its tactics and unit structure**, reflecting manpower issues and the strengths of Ukrainian defences. Instead of heavy battalion tactical groups, Russian forces began to use adaptable assault units and detachments designed for fortified defences and urban warfare. The assault detachments rely on downscaled assault platoons supported by mortar and artillery fire. Moreover, the Russian military better integrated tactical drones and quadcopters into its companies and battalions, including mortar batteries and artillery divisions. This innovation improved Russia's situational awareness and allowed its commanders to conduct better integrated operations.

The Battalion Tactical Group (BTG) was Russia's main combat formation, based on a reinforced motor rifle battalion, prior to the all-out invasion of Ukraine. It comprises about 500-700 servicemembers with three to four motorised companies, tanks, air defence, artillery, reconnaissance, and support units. The conceptual idea behind the BTG was to create a fully self-sufficient formation capable of acting autonomously. It proved ineffective in Ukraine due to consistent manpower shortages, equipment losses, and communication problems.

An assault detachment is a small light infantry unit designed to conduct assaults on enemy positions. It is heavily equipped but lightly armored to prevent early detection and catastrophic losses due to anti-tank mines, artillery strikes, and missiles. The detachment can vary in size (from as little as three people to a squad of about 20 service members) but generally all of them are supported by artillery, mortar and fires from the rear during assaults.

Moreover, Russian military theorists now acknowledge that lightly armoured airborne forces are highly vulnerable to Ukrainian attacks that can negate any advantage in speed and lethality that the airborne forces are supposed to bring to the battlefield. They accordingly proposed a set of organisational and equipment changes. One is the experimental reintroduction of amphibious assault brigades within the combined arms armies, which the Soviet Union used extensively in Afghanistan for helicopter assaults into the enemy's rear. Their role is to break the enemy's defences in coordination with the frontal assault of the

traditional motor rifle units.

Russian military commanders have also improved the military's electronic warfare equipment, which jams Ukrainian military communications, missiles, and drones, including using civilian and privately made equipment. The Russian logistics support made adjustments, such as streamlining supply chains and relocating depots, which improved the delivery of basic critical resources, including the supply of artillery ammunition at the later stages of the war.

Russian volunteers and professional soldiers **self-organised training in small unit tactics and tactical medicine for the mobilised personnel**. The lack of institutional tactical medical preparation and the scarcity of official first-aid kits encouraged soldiers to seek support from civil society and organise knowledge-sharing within the unit. Even before the war, the Russian military had a poor reputation for medical care, with hundreds of soldiers contracting pneumonia every year.

Unable to provide the draftees with equipment, the Kremlin encouraged regional administrations and pro-government civil society organisations to purchase and supply non-lethal and dual-use equipment, such as tactical drones, night vision scopes, assault stocks, electric generators, radio stations, wheels, civilian 4x4 cars, combat apparel, and medical and personal protection equipment. Russian regional leadership and pro-war activists supported their mobilised compatriots (including via crowdfunding) and delivered the equipment to individual units on the frontline (see figure 3 below).



**Figure 3.** Machine translated screenshot of a Russian Telegram military blogger collecting money for the procurement of two DJI drones for the needs of air-tank guided missile (ATGM) and artillery units. Donations can be made via Russian banks, foreign payment gateways, and cryptocurrency.

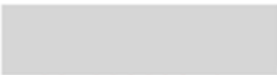


Interim report on the current drone collection, which has undergone minor changes (a second drone has been added for a familiar unit from the Belgorod region):

Collected 729654.24 rubles.

The collection is being carried out for two drones, Matrice 30T and Mavic 3T, with a full set of spare parts and batteries, for two different units, in the interests of ATGM operators and artillery.

The same details:



Sberbank  
Tinkoff

For foreign audiences, an additional link has been made to help with fees.

[https:](https://)

New crypto details:

• Ethereum

The Russian civilian government reacted swiftly to the crisis overall. In response to the collapse of tactical medicine in the first months of the invasion, the Duma amended the federal laws “On Defence” and “On the Fundamentals of Public Health Protection in the Russian Federation” in July 2022. In particular, **the amendment focused on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of first aid** provided to the servicemembers in combat and ensuring their health and safety during the war. It formalised first aid procedures and made the Russian Ministry of Defence responsible for developing and approving the list of conditions requiring first aid, the rules for its provision, and the standards for equipping first aid kits, bags, and sets of medical equipment. It also delegated the power to develop and approve first aid training programmes to the Russian Ministry of Defence.

In the same month, the Duma amended several laws **regulating military mobilisation, including economic mobilisation, as well as in the sphere of demining.** The Russian government was authorised to take special economic measures, including temporarily activating mobilisation capacities and private sector facilities, unsealing the banks of reserve equipment and materials, and changing legal regulations governing labour relations in certain organisations, such as rules on overtime, overnight, and holiday work, and the granting of annual paid leave. The amendment obliged enterprises to execute government orders on the procurement of goods and services required for the special military operation, potentially improving the speed of equipment production.

To support the war effort and restore Russia's defence sector, the Russian federal government also launched the Coordination Council for meeting the needs of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, other troops, military formations and bodies on 21 October 2022. Prime minister Mikhail Mishustin, the chairman of the council, claimed that it would deal with the issues related to meeting the needs of the military during the war, including setting performance indicators for the supply of weapons and equipment, budgeting, selection of suppliers and contractors, and the creation of specialised infrastructure. The main objective of the Council is to improve civil-military cohesion, by enhancing the co-operation between the healthcare system, industry, construction, transport and other spheres and to increase coordination between federal executive authorities, regions, and special services during the war with Ukraine.

One of the most consequential changes is the set of changes relating to the **integration of volunteer soldiers and units.** In November 2022, new amendments to the federal law on defence regulated the use of volunteer formations for specific defence tasks. They allowed the Russian president to integrate volunteer formations into the Russian Ministry of Defence and the national guard, including changing the composition, organisation, areas of operation, objectives, leadership, duration, and other operational aspects of volunteer units, which could eventually include both Russian volunteers and servicemen. Volunteers were required to take the military oath upon joining the formation.

The amendments provided volunteers with the same welfare benefits as the rest of the armed forces. It includes provisions for welfare guarantees and compensation for volunteers and their family members not less than that of servicemen of similar rank. These amendments integrated volunteer formations into the Russian defence sector, providing them with legal, financial, and social support similar to that of regular military personnel. Volunteer formations played an important role in supporting the war effort, as they employed ideologically committed individuals who were usually better trained and equipped than the

Russian Ministry of Defence rank and file.

Finally, in June 2023, **new amendments to the law on education expanded the scope of vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) for mobilised servicemembers**. They establish a framework for the development of additional VET programmes and allowed mobilised servicemembers to enrol in the VET and military HE programmes. The bill regulates the training of mobilised servicemembers in basic and supplementary VET and HE programmes in educational institutions operating under the Russian Ministry of Defence, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Investigative Committee, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and other federal executive bodies. These amendments will have lasting effects on the improvement of Russian military skills.

The legal developments in the Russian defence sector are, on the one hand, a symptom of how unprepared the Russian legal base was for a protracted military campaign. On the other hand, it shows that the defence system's ability to react to the limitations and institutional problems is relatively functional.

## **Integration**

Overall, **the Russian military failed to integrate its strategic, tactics, forces, and intelligence**. It struggled to maintain consistency in its operations and to create synergies between different levels of military activity. In terms of capabilities, the uneven levels of organisational and individual commander readiness indicate a lack of the organisational cohesion required to build a capable military, which is a critical aspect of military development.

Russia's Achilles heel is the integration of intelligence and strategic assessment. Russia's own doctrine has identified NATO as the primary adversary, emphasising the importance of rapid and widespread offensive action to overcome NATO's superior combat capability. Russian planners have adopted a more focused approach to regional and local warfare, relying on targeted strikes rather than the large-scale ground operations typically carried out by the Soviet military. Russia's doctrine holds that contemporary conflicts will involve:

- Massive use of weapon systems and military equipment, including high-precision, hypersonic weapons; weapons on new physical principles comparable in effectiveness to nuclear weapons (allegedly including non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse weapons); electronic warfare systems; information and control systems, as well as unmanned aerial and autonomous naval vehicles and guided robotic weapons.

- The ability to hit the enemy simultaneously in the global information space, in the air, in space, at sea, and throughout the entire depth of the enemy’s territory.
- Large-scale attacks on multiple, selected targets; rapid maneuver of troops and lethal weapons systems; and the use of various mobile groupings of troops.

Therefore, some analysts, including the author of this report, expected that Moscow would conduct an overwhelming artillery and missile bombardment of command centres, air defences, airfields, and critical infrastructure, such as grids and power stations, before launching the combined arms operation.

In the event, however, none of this happened. Russian strategic planners appear to have believed that the Ukrainian government would retreat or be betrayed by its own population, that resistance would swiftly collapse, and that Russian troops would be welcomed as liberators. In the leading Russian Ministry of Defence journal, *Military Thought* (*Военная мысль*), Colonel O.G. Tukmakov, a lecturer at the Russian general staff academy, acknowledged the poor quality of Russian intelligence in the war strategy. The available data, according to Tukmakov, “assessing the socio-political situation in Ukraine” did not fully correspond to reality:

“Instead of flowers and bread, as we expected, local residents of Russian-speaking areas met the rear columns of our troops with civil resistance. Additionally, information about the moral and psychological state of the Ukrainian Armed Forces proved to be incorrect. The supposed expectations of their unpreparedness for armed resistance and mass surrender were unjustified.”[5]

As the Chechnya vignette that opened this paper demonstrates, it is not the first time Russia has made this mistake.

In the case of Ukraine, investigative reporters claim that a small group of Putin’s trusted advisers and government leaders side-lined the general staff and drew up the invasion plan based on faulty assumptions and arbitrary political guidance. This may partly explain why the initial operation deviated from established principles of Russian military strategy and previous experience in eastern Ukraine, Syria, and annual combined arms exercises.

Both Chechnya and Ukraine illustrate the **systemic problem with Russian intelligence and strategic assessment**

. In both cases, the political leadership in Moscow failed to read the adversary and Russia's own limitations, which contributed to the unrealistic strategy and flawed launch of both wars.

The Russian intelligence services are critical to Putin's hold on power, but they also control the president's information flow. That position allows them to manipulate the evidence he receives. Various agencies such as the FSB, the foreign intelligence service, the federal protective service, and the main directorate of the general staff regularly report to the president and use this access to pursue their individual agendas, often tailoring their reports to Putin's preferences. This manipulation of information serves as a powerful tool in shaping Putin's decisions.

This problem is not uniquely Russian. Political decision-makers always need to critically assess incoming analysis and create institutions that reduce bias and improve the reliability of intelligence assessments. But in the Russian case, Putin's politicisation of the intelligence services to ensure the security of his regime limits his capacity to improve the system.

Russian military integration also extended down into the initial forces that invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Despite the problems with intelligence and strategic assessment, the Russian military still vastly outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces around Kyiv during the first stage of the invasion. However, the quantity of Russian forces did not transform into quality due to the problems with integrating ground and air operations in a mutually supportive way. Russian airborne forces spearheaded the first stage of the invasion by launching an air assault on Hostomel airport near Kyiv. However, the operation stalled due to the Russian inability to suppress Ukrainian air defences and artillery systems.

On several occasions, Russian ground forces shot down friendly attack helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft. Russian pro-war telegram channels complained about the lack of ability of the ground forces to "clear the corridor" for the air force by targeting and destroying Ukrainian SAM systems, such as Soviet-made Buk and S-300 systems, and then later Western-supplied equipment.

Early in the operation, Russian forces also had difficulty establishing **effective logistical arrangements** in a highly mobile offensive operation. This was exacerbated by a lack of trucks, which particularly affected units far from railways. The complexity of the campaign, involving multiple axes of advance, initially overwhelmed Russian logistics, leading to severe resource shortages for combat units.

During the retreat from northern Ukraine back into Russia and Belarus, hundreds of soldiers refused to return to the battlefield. The problem began to be felt in the spring and summer of 2022 when some officers began to put insubordinate soldiers in homemade cages next to the

front line. Combined with high attrition, Russian units had only about 20 per cent of their expected manpower by September before the stunning Ukrainian counter-offensive in the Kharkiv region. With the announcement of mobilisation in September 2022, the Kremlin banned soldiers from leaving the military.

Symbolically, Putin appointed the head of the Main Human Resources Directorate General Viktor Goremykin as the head of the main Political-Military Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defence in July 2022. He replaced General Andrey Kartapolov who had led the directorate from its inception in July 2018 to October 2021, when he became the Russian Ministry of Defence representative in the Duma. Neither Kartapolov nor Goremykin are specialists in military psychology, information warfare, or any other political-military related tasks. Goremykin, however, is a leading FSB representative (he graduated from the FSB Academy) in the armed forces, responsible for one of the pillars of civilian control – military education, recruitment, promotions, and appointments.

Goremykin served in the Main Human Resources Directorate from 2000 to 2022. Over the course of 20 years, he did not make any significant improvements to the education, recruitment, training, and appointment system in the Russian military, but he willingly carried out the wishes of all Russian defence ministers. He was replaced by General Yuri Kuznetsov, who had served in the security clearance directorate (the 8th Directorate, closely linked to the FSB) for many years.

## **Quality**

The quality of equipment is also an endemic problem for the Russian military. Russia can design and develop modern equipment, but scaling up production is a daunting task for its government. Despite Russia's military modernisation and improved capabilities, many technological advances, such as the T-14 Main Battle Tank or the Kurganets-25 Infantry Fighting Vehicle (IFV), have not been seen in combat. The Russian military had also lost key hardware, including anti-battery radars, T-90 tanks, and BMP-4 IFVs, which Russia is struggling to replace.

Yet, the key problem with the quality and availability of equipment was the lack of enablers used at the tactical and operational levels, such as night-vision and thermal imagers, intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance equipment, encrypted and reliable communications systems, navigation equipment, mine-resistant and armoured recovery vehicles, and trucks with armoured cabins. Russian military scholars argue that reconnaissance was a crucial deficit given the high mobility and tactical autonomy of Ukrainian forces. Russian forces lacked awareness of the battlefield and the ability to quickly



self-organise in a changing environment. The low quality of command at the first stage of the invasion that the report described above made the equipment shortage effects even more acute.

Despite Russia's military modernisation and improved capabilities, most Russian soldiers used obsolete Soviet-era equipment. For example, Russian war-bloggers claimed that before the war, a Russian reconnaissance unit within a regiment on average had a few surveillance radars, binoculars, Soviet-era BRM-1k Korshun, and laser rangefinders. The Ukrainians also gradually shot down or jammed division- and regiment-level drones, such as the Orlan or Supercam, leaving the over-centralised Russian command structure practically blind. This blindness led to devastating tactical losses when Russian troops were ambushed by assaults as they attacked concealed Ukrainian positions.

Russian missile and cyber-attacks were not significant enough to have a strategic impact on the course of the war. The Main Computing Centre, a special unit of the general staff, determines cruise missile targets based on multiple sources of information, including satellite reconnaissance. However, space satellites are a weak spot of the Russian military. Their utility has been very limited, especially in terms of detecting moving objects and movements of the Ukrainian forces. Therefore, the accuracy of missile and air strikes remained limited due to poor reconnaissance, Ukrainian air defence, and technical malfunctioning.

On the other hand, the Russian (and Ukrainian) militaries quickly adapted to each other's technological advantages on the battlefield. Russia dispersed its command posts and logistical hubs to avoid being hit by long-range precision strikes, and began producing guidance modules for its air-dropped munitions (UMPK), modernized its long-range missiles with electronic countermeasures and flares, began production of first-person view (FPV) drones, and procured Chinese tactical drones, radios, tactical vehicles and personal protection equipment.

As described above in the responsiveness section, thanks to crowdfunding and civilian donations, Russian forces received more rangefinders, including thermal scopes, fixed video cameras with night and thermal vision, listening devices, digital navigation tools, and tactical radars. Russian civil society also supported frontline units with first aid kits, cars, scopes, body armour, communications equipment, and anything else that could be bought on the civilian market.

However, the Russian government has yet to make systemic changes to improve its military procurement system and integrate the needed equipment into the official composition and training of the armed forces. As usual, a lot hinges on individual commanders and specialists



in the Russian military while the Ministry of Defence and its subordinate organisations can hardly catch up with the adversary's and its own field-level innovations.

## Civil-military relations in Russia

This review shows that Russian military effectiveness remained quite low during the all-out invasion of Ukraine, especially during the initial stages. The obvious next question is why did a general awareness of persistent problems and serial reforms to solve them fail to improve Russian military effectiveness?

The answer is that Russia's lack of military effectiveness in Ukraine is, to a large degree, the product of unbalanced civil-military relations. At the heart of civil-military relations is the need to ensure that the military, as an organisation designed to "break things and kill people," remains under civilian control while retaining the autonomy necessary for making professional military judgement and improving military effectiveness.

Russian civil-military relations have been complicated since the fall of the Soviet Union. There was no coup, or even a military coup attempt in that period despite a fairly autonomous military. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the civilian leader, be it Yeltsin or Putin, has maintained full political control of the armed forces, but that did not always translate into effective civilian leadership.

Russia's lack of strong civilian leadership of the military is at the root of its military effectiveness problem. Strong civilian leadership does not guarantee successful reform, but it is a necessary condition for reform to happen. The quality of political leadership defines as the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a specific problem. In the Russian case, the president needs to appoint key decision-makers such as the defence minister and his deputies, including the chief of the general staff. These officials should share a common understanding of a problem, have incentives and sufficient resources to act, and sign off on official reform programmes, including monitoring and evaluation criteria for assessing results.

Sometimes, strong civilian leadership has to reduce the autonomy of its armed forces to force through necessary changes, other times it needs to increase it. Regardless, an autonomous military under weak civilian leadership will protect its institutional preferences too effectively, undermining military responsiveness to internal constraints and the dynamic external environment, as happened during the first eight years of Putin's rule. A subservient military under weak civilian leadership is a stagnant force but if it doesn't experience the test of combat, it can still satisfy the needs of the civilian leadership.

As the shown below, over this period the various Russian defence ministers oscillated between creating an autonomous military and more a subservient model. But in all cases the persistent lack of civilian leadership ensured that reform could not succeed.

## Russian civil-military reform challenges

A prime example of a consistent problem with civilian leadership is the inability of the Russian government to solve the persistent problems in the Russian defence sector that revealed themselves yet again during the first year of the invasion. The tactical command of the Russian military was always deficient, mainly due to the limited skills and number of junior officers and NCOs, but also hampered by inadequate support and signal capabilities. Military officers and external [analysis](#) frequently [criticised](#) Russian poor situational awareness and organisational adaptability in the post-Soviet period. The lack of skills limited the military's ability to maintain operational consistency and synergy between different units and undermined military cohesion.

Russia struggled to produce and integrate advanced military equipment and technologies, such as night vision goggles, battlefield integration systems and encrypted communication devices, due to limitations in its manufacturing infrastructure and electronics supply. The Russian military industrial complex and its lobbyists in the government actively resisted any attempts to import this equipment from abroad before the full-scale invasion. These deficiencies contributed to low morale and a general inability to engage effectively in the conflict.

However, the military was neither able to reform itself for most of its years, nor was it eager to give away its prerogatives in defence matters. Despite Putin's success in building a personalist autocracy and crushing any dissent, the Russian armed forces have successfully protected themselves from what they see as excessive civilian influence.

In part because his presidency began with the Kursk disaster, Putin made military reform a key part of his overall effort to reform Russian governance. The Russian Defence Ministry

initiated military reform in 2001, with the aim of improving Russia's military capabilities in two main phases over the next eight years.

“We would always like more,” Putin said, disagreeing with the Ministry of Defence at his annual press conference, December 2003, “because today there are still many problems in the organisation of this work. Imagine: agreements on military contracts are usually signed in June, and only at the end of the year they start to disperse money under these contracts. Shipyards have already felt these injections, the Navy has given orders, but I don't understand about aviation. Modern warfare is primarily about aircrafts, and the Ministry of Defence has put aviation in eighth place in its list of priorities.”

The original reform goals sound remarkably similar to what Russian officials will need today. Reform was supposed to improve the quality of combined arms operations, optimise command and control structures, and overhaul recruitment and mobilisation processes. However, there was a lack of consensus between the military leadership and the defence minister on reform priorities, with the former preferring rearmament and improving the socio-economic conditions of the troops before addressing structural changes within the armed forces.

Ultimately, the government lacked the capacity and resources to implement the necessary changes. The reform faced serious setbacks, including bureaucratic resistance, limited resources and resistance from the military elite. The then defence minister Sergei Ivanov was reportedly indecisive and reluctant to actively push the reform process. In addition, Putin avoided expending his political capital on radical reforms that risked alienating conservative segments of Russian society.

In response to the challenges of the first attempt at reform, the Kremlin shifted its strategy to increase civilian control and reduce military autonomy. During the 2004-2008 period, political authority over the military was increasingly centralised, fostering a culture of political compliance within the officer corps. Putin initiated the practice of appointing civilian defence ministers, thereby strengthening civil-military coordination and distancing the general staff from the presidential administration. These measures laid the groundwork for more comprehensive military reforms in the next phase. On the other hand, the reduction of military autonomy contributed to the decline of the Russian Ministry of Defence's organisational evolution and increased the importance of civilian expertise and skills in defence affairs.

## Radical reform in the 2007-2012 period

**The 2007-2012 reform implemented radical structural changes** that made future investment in military equipment more fruitful. It was driven by the deteriorating condition of the armed forces, lessons learned from the conflicts in Chechnya and Georgia, and previous unsuccessful attempts at reform since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The reform generated unprecedented opposition from the officer corps. Service members resigned en masse, and some retired officers even dared to criticise the defence minister and the president.

In late 2007, for example, defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov and President Dmitri Medvedev decided to move the headquarters of the Russian Navy from Moscow to St Petersburg. The move was actively opposed by former chief of the general staff Yuri Baluyevsky (2004-2007) and many naval officers. In early 2008, a group of former navy chiefs, their deputies, and fleet commanders wrote a letter to Putin opposing the move. They argued that the move would cost at least 40-50 billion roubles (circa \$1.5 billion), deprive the fleet of funds to build ships, and destroy the command system, including the strategic nuclear forces of the fleet. In April 2008, navy chief of staff Vladimir Vysotsky said the move had been postponed indefinitely. The “indefinite” period lasted until April 2011, when the move to St Petersburg began. But the civilian leadership wasted three years trying to overcome military opposition.

**The reform included a mix of important achievements and shortcomings that has had lasting effects on Russia’s military effectiveness, including in Ukraine.** The decision to downsize the military from a Soviet-style mobilisation-based model to a leaner, more agile and permanently ready force was aimed at enhancing the operational effectiveness of the armed forces and making them more responsive to the fast-paced nature of modern warfare. In addition, by strengthening the role of the general staff in operational and strategic planning while at the same time reorienting service headquarters towards force development and peacekeeping roles, the reform aimed to create a more efficient command and control system. The reorganisation of military districts into joint commands further supported an integrated approach to military command across the services.

However, the ambitious reform of the military HEI, designed to modernise curriculums and align officer training with modern combat requirements stalled. The next defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, ultimately partially rolled back some of the changes. The HEI failed to adopt an evidence-based methodology for assessing the effectiveness of training. Serdyukov’s attempt to bring more civilians in the military HEI also failed as former military faculty members simply resigned and re-applied as civilians. Moreover, social and welfare reforms fell short of

fully fulfilling housing promises and eradicating the systemic problem of toxic military culture, abuse, and hazing.

**The Russian Ministry of Defence failed to implement some changes** because of the opposition inside the military and other security agencies that ultimately led to Serdyukov's resignation. Yet Serdyukov's commitment to making changes in the military and the strong administrative power of the minister of defence in Russian civil-military relations did enable a partial success of the reforms. The minister was still the main decision-maker in the military and Serdyukov appointed an obedient but administratively savvy chief of the general staff general, Nikolay Makarov, who willingly executed the Russian Ministry of Defence's decisions. However, Serdyukov's coalition of reformers was too small and consisted only of very high-level officers and ideological supporters of the minister in the public council that made his position weaker as the mistakes with the military reform accumulated.

### The façade of reform under Shoigu

Serdyukov's successor, Sergei Shoigu, took over in 2012 and **changed the style of the civilian relationships with the military**. That change included the allocation of significant responsibilities to the new chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov, while the Ministry of Defence focused on managing large financial investments and improving oversight mechanisms. Gerasimov's task was to work towards achieving reform objectives within the military as he saw fit.

Still, Shoigu represented the armed forces in the broader government structure, lobbied for the necessary decisions and resources, and enhanced his oversight mechanisms. The realities of better pay for the troops and a successful operation in Syria provided convincing arguments that conditions had indeed improved in the military.

**During Shoigu's tenure, the Russian Ministry of Defence's investments efforts included programs to improve command and control mechanisms, spur rearmament and advance military science.** Shoigu created the National Defence Management Centre, under the leadership of army general Mikhail Misintsev, for the purpose of centralising operational command and streamlining decision-making processes within the armed forces. At the same time, major rearmament initiatives poured billions of roubles into procuring new equipment, particularly in the air force and the navy. In addition, Shoigu directed that military science efforts should focus on research and development in high-tech military equipment. General Oleg Ostapenko (the former space forces commander) became the first deputy minister for this sector. A year later he was replaced by Shoigu's colleague General Ivan Popov from EMERCOM, the Russian emergency response ministry.

The current military doctrine, adopted in 2014, has redirected Russian military development towards greater centralisation of control over the military. As noted, it emphasises the need for the integration of information operations and strikes throughout the depth of the enemy's territory, including in the aerospace and information domains and with the use of externally funded political forces and social movements.

To do that, the Russian Ministry of Defence opted for costly police control-style oversight of the military. As public reports on the manning of units and hiring of all-volunteer soldiers showed, the intrusive oversight failed to solve internal military problems. Despite growing salaries and better service conditions, the Russian military struggled to fill open positions and to increase the size of the all-volunteer force. The pace of changes has slowed down under Shoigu. And, years after Shoigu became minister of defence, the Russian Ministry of Defence still has not improved military discipline and eradicated hazing and abuse.

For example, private Ramil Shamsutdinov shot and killed eight fellow soldiers in 2019 because, he alleged, they had hazed him and threatened him with sexual violence. The crime sparked outrage in Russia, but the military and members of the Russian parliament were quick to blame private citizens and even video games for the shooting. The armed forces have not publicly discussed the systemic causes of the crime, and the story has gradually faded away.

The authorities tend to blame such crimes, as well as poor performance in exercises and other incidents on the failure of an individual soldier, rather than a problem worthy of systemic review. Commanders tend to quickly find a scapegoat, who may or may not be objectively responsible for the incident and close the case.

The unreformed and outdated military education and training system is ill-equipped to (re-

)educate young Russian conscripts and improve their command skills and behaviour. The brightest and the fittest young Russians do not tend to join the military. The richer sections of society from Russia's largest cities could avoid service with the military, while the poorer social classes had to serve and were usually more dependent on defence-related procurement and industries. However, **the official response of the armed forces has always been to scapegoat civilian officials for failing to raise and educate patriotic young Russians who would then willingly join the military.** The Russian military has struggled to adapt itself to the nation it supposedly serves by moving away from the conservative, overly centralised organisational culture inherited from the USSR.

### **Old versus New**

The Russian military has for years been locked in this competition between a more horizontal and networked approach to military development and the conservative tradition of centralised control and the use of mass force. Part of the problem stems from the organisational concept of the Russian military which has as its cornerstone obedience to the commanding officer and his orders. Russian officers have the unilateral power to determine the future of their subordinates, from the general staff down to the platoon level of command. They are the ultimate decision-makers on promotions, bonuses, days off, and duties.

On the one hand, this tradition ensures strict adherence to orders, leaving little room for subordinates to appeal. On the other hand, the Russian military fosters toxic obedience, where the commander is always right. It encourages superficial compliance and flattering behaviour, undermines thoughtful leadership, unit cohesion and ultimately the quality of command. It creates a snowball effect in the assessment of capabilities in which soldiers, from first sergeants all the way up to senior generals, will only provide positive reports to superiors rather than real, objective, and sometimes critical information. The culture of personalised obedience ultimately also inhibits organisational learning and institutional development in the Russian military.



Excessive obedience also undermines the ability of civilians to control Russian soldiers' behaviour on the battlefield. Since the war in Chechnya, there have been numerous reports of indiscriminate bombing, artillery attacks and human rights abuses in the areas of Russian military operations. Every military commits human rights abuses at times, but the military in Russia has never been seriously reprimanded for its behaviour. The rule of law means little in Russian public affairs, but it has been particularly weak in holding military personnel accountable for their crimes, including against civilians and their own comrades. The Russian military still has considerable capacity to protect its own from being held accountable for crimes and abuses.

## Russia and its military state

Most of the problems exposed by the Russian military in Ukraine are not new. They have been visible and discussed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the Russian state has made little progress in solving them. Russia frequently demonstrated poor integration of its operational plan and combat tactics with loosely defined strategic objectives, failed to properly train and prepare its troops for war, and suffered serious procurement difficulties. These problems were widely recognised and discussed by Russian military theorists in the Russian Ministry of Defence official magazines.

One of the main reasons for Russia's slow military development is civil-military relations. On the one hand, Russian politicians have found it difficult to get the military to do what they want. Despite the growing power of the regime, Putin has been unable to overcome the military's objections to the reforms he has initiated over the past 22 years. For the first eight years, the Russian military enjoyed substantial military autonomy and disagreed on the priority and sequencing of changes. A brief period of intrusive and forceful imposition of orders in 2008-2012 brought much resistance, criticism, and avoidable mistakes that ultimately removed an unpopular defence minister from office.

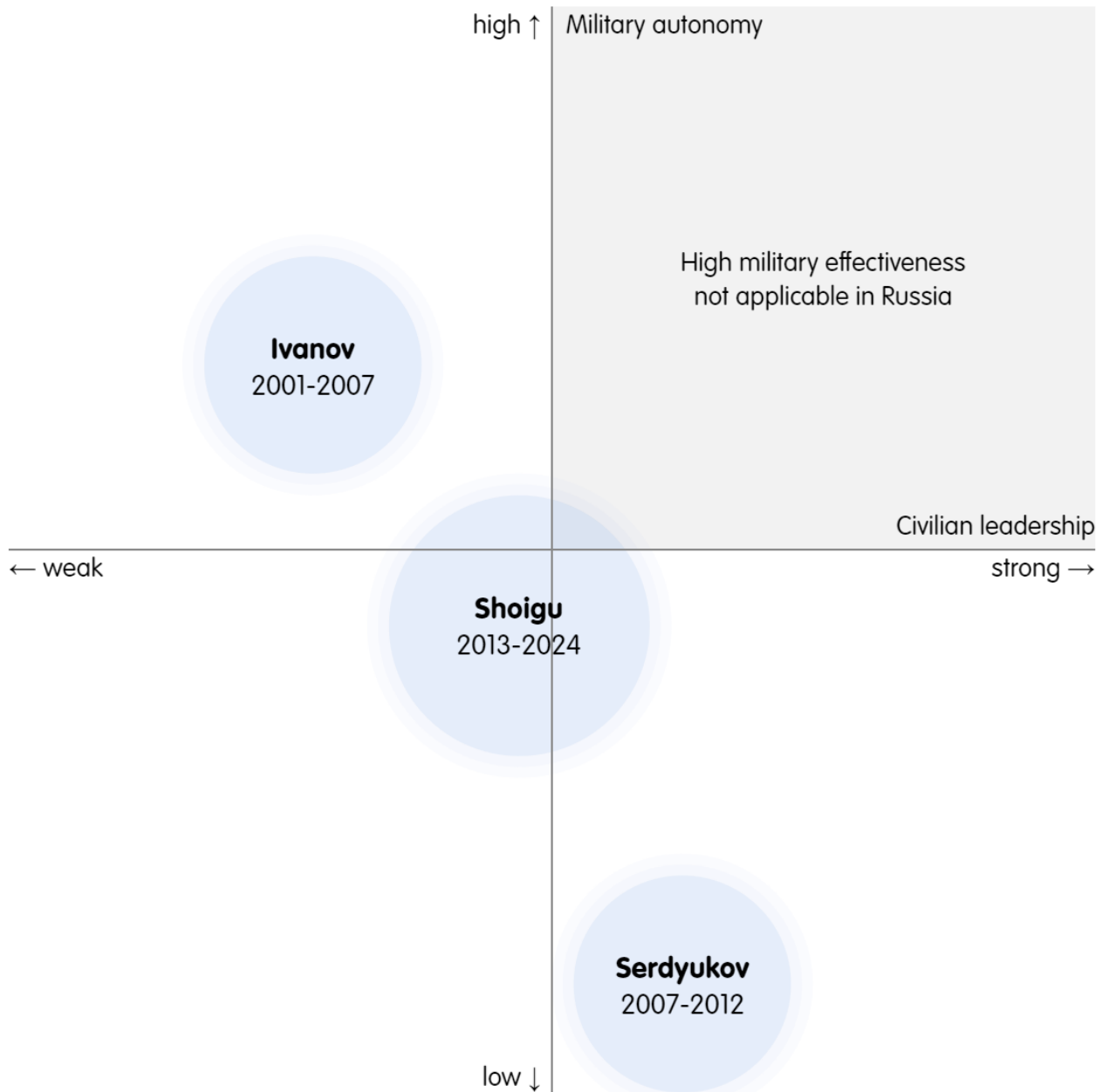
Developments since 2012 appear to have improved the balance of power between civilians and the military. However, the lack of functional monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (as opposed to intrusive oversight), the lack of civilian expertise in defence sector development, coupled with the lack of investment in military education and training, and the early successes in eastern Ukraine and Syria, blinded Russian military reform.

The appointment of the new minister of defence will not make this task easier. To implement the necessary changes, Belousov will have to build his own team by appointing new deputy ministers of defence. The positions of first deputy for financial and economic work, state

secretary for government relations, and deputies for the logistical support, will be crucial for streamlining his work and ultimately delivering the results. These officials will be spearheading the management of the military's gigantic financial flows and adapting the Russian legal system to the military's needs. They will also have to establish positive working relationships with the general staff and military-industrial representatives who may lack either the skills or willingness to reform the system.

As an outsider to the military world, Belousov is likely to rely on the chief of the general staff to enforce his reform aspirations among the military. It is difficult to find a suitable candidate for this position as this general should be highly experienced in managing (in headquarters) and commanding (in the field) the military and possess little political ambition. The current chief, Valery Gerasimov, has already spent more than a decade serving as the chief of the general staff, which is a record in Russia's post-Soviet history. He may not be up to the scale and quality of the tasks that Belousov will have to undertake. To curtail military autonomy, Belousov may need a younger and obedient chief with war experience.

**Figure 4**



The level of military autonomy determines how loyal the military is in implementing civilian decisions. Too much military autonomy creates the need for a very capable and professional civilian leadership, otherwise autonomy may produce a disloyal military that threatens the reform efforts and can potentially endanger the entire state.

The quest for loyalty in Russia has a cascading effect. If the Kremlin wants a loyal minister and chief of the general staff that would limit the military autonomy, they will seek to surround themselves with loyal senior military officers and Russian Ministry of Defence officials. That high command then prefers reliable subordinates who will always carry out its decisions, who then logically look for similarly obedient more junior officers and officials. In the end, the natural desire to surround oneself with trustworthy supporters contributes to the

vicious circle of finger-pointing and false reporting as everything depends on the decision of the ultimate commander.

On the other hand, a completely autonomous force under weak civilian leadership can potentially threaten the state, as Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny demonstrated. Prigozhin's private military company, Wagner, developed informally and outside the official defence sector and its regulations. It became a highly autonomous paramilitary group whose leadership challenged the Russian state. Clearly, the correct balance of military autonomy is crucial for ensuring a loyal but functioning military.

The war with Ukraine has naturally produced thousands of highly experienced soldiers and commanders in the Russian military. This means that the Kremlin now has a large pool of qualified military personnel who can potentially significantly improve the Russian military. The level of expertise in the Russian high command and Russian Ministry of Defence leadership will determine whether the next reform addresses the key components of military effectiveness. However, improving the education and training system in the Russian military will require decisive institutional changes, a radical overhaul of the personnel system, and decades of stable military development to improve Russian military culture. Even if the veterans of the war in Ukraine can replace some commanders at several levels, institutional changes without a chance of civilian leadership would be a challenge for Russia.

Even experienced military commanders need reliable information about adversaries and new military developments, as well as evidence of their own troops' readiness. The quality of monitoring and evaluation determines how well the Russian Ministry of Defence can identify problems, monitor implementation, and evaluate the results of reforms. The proliferation of information about the Russian military partially solves this problem, but the outcome of the war with Ukraine will determine whether this evidence will be about a defeated or victorious military.

A Russian defeat in Ukraine without regime change in Moscow would make radical reform more likely, while a success would more probably postpone significant changes in the military again. Regardless, Russia will require strong and effective civilian leadership that can tolerate but also control military autonomy to find balance in civil-military relations and improve its military effectiveness. Will Putin's new term bring this?

Russia has never had that type of civilian leadership in the post-Soviet period. Paraphrasing a Russian idiom, Russian leaders speak with Suvorov's flair, but their actions rarely match his daring.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the support of the ECFR Wider Europe programme, Jeremy Shapiro, the editors, and Nastassia Zenovich for their invaluable help in preparing the report. The author is grateful to the participants (in chronological order) of the BASEES conference (Cambridge, United Kingdom), the PONARS online conference, the Biennial Conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society (Reston, Virginia), and the guests and hosts of the many seminars and workshops in Europe and the United States.

## About the Author

Kirill Shamiev is a visiting fellow with the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He focuses on Russia's civil-military relations and domestic politics and policymaking. Shamiev left Russia in 2017 and completed his MA and PhD at the Central European University. He currently also works as a senior research consultant with European Commission tenders related to public administration and security topics.

## Methodology

The report relies on interviews, memoirs, laws, and public speeches of military and civilian elites. In three waves of interviews in 2018-2021, the author spoke to 36 former politicians, officers, and officials, as well as civil society activists. The majority of interviewees were born in the 1960-70s, while most civilians represented the 1970-80s generation. Some civil society members interviewed were involved in the political process during the 2000-2012 period. However, the interviews themselves have limited explanatory power for current events because the interviewees were expressing their views on events that happened in the past. Therefore, the author used memoirs, media articles, and laws to supplement the interview data.

[1] Author's translation

[2] Author's translation

[3] Author's interviews with civilian and military officials involved in defence policymaking in 2018-2021, Moscow, Russia

[4] Author's translation

[5] Author's translation

## ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. [ecfr.eu](https://ecfr.eu)

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR May 2024. ISBN: ISBN: 978-1-916682-34-4. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.