DEMOCRACY AND RUSSIAN MILITARY PROFESSIONALISM

WHY FULL NATO PARTNERSHIP IS STILL A LONG WAY OFF

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THE PURPOSE OF the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is to safeguard the freedom and security of its democratic membership by political and military means. The alliance is based on the common values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Indeed, NATO was created to thwart the spread of authoritarianism westward from Moscow, but the fall of communism presented the alliance with the opportunity to weigh the costs and benefits of expanding toward its former enemies. The Partnership for Peace initiative launched in January 1994 indicated a willingness to offer the security guarantees and obligations of NATO membership to the former Warsaw Pact states when each had fulfilled the requirements of accession.

Although the military and political criteria for membership have been criticized for being vague and ambiguous—intentionally so, according to some people—the lion’s share of assistance to partners from developed democracies has focused
# Democracy and Russian Military Professionalism. Why Full NATO Partnership is Still a Long Way Off

## Abstract

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on issues of defense-force interoperability. Most assistance has been designed to relieve the problems of logistical and resource deficiencies, equipment obsolescence, and operational short-comings that have hampered partnership participation. For example, the $100 million in funds allocated by the United States in fiscal year 1996 through President Bill Clinton’s Warsaw Initiative to assist the partners’ NATO activities will focus on these goals.2

“Democracy in the army is not possible. We have suffered through democracy with the army and saw the results in Chechnya. It has been difficult to call it an army since democratization came.”

However, little attention is being paid to problems experienced by partners in adjusting to democratic civilian control in their states and to the infusion of democratic values into their societies.3 Three dangerous possibilities arise from focusing on functional interoperability objectives without ensuring that partner states have become consolidated democracies or that their militaries have adapted to democratization. First, the alliance may admit states that will revert to authoritarian rule. Second, the alliance may admit states that do not have firm democratic political control over their militaries. Third, new NATO members may have militaries whose democratic military professionalism is so far behind that of militaries in developed democracies that working together in an integrated command structure will be extremely problematic.

Each of these possibilities is serious and requires earnest study; however, this article limits itself to the question of democratic military professionalism in partner states. Specifically, it focuses on democratic deficits that limit the Russian military’s ability to work with the democratic militaries of NATO.

Democratic Military Professionalism

Significant differences in military professionalism exist between democratic and nondemocratic states. Transitioning states still lack societal consensus on whether or not democratic norms of accountability should displace the norms that characterized the authoritarian regime. These states remain perilously perched between ideologies. As a result, military professionalism also remains caught between two systems.

When a state makes the political transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, the infusion of democratic values begins to permeate all of its institutions—including the military— afecting the expectations of people within the institution and those to whom the institution is accountable. Democratic military professionalism balances the dual goals of developing professional competence as a means of protecting the democratic state and of reflecting in institutional practices the societal values of the democracy that the military defends. Democratic states have long recognized the benefits of building military institutions reflective of their societies. A number of contrasts exist between military professionalism in democracies and military professionalism in Russia (table 1).

Transitioning states are still learning the interconnectedness of building competent militaries and fostering military professionalism that embraces democratic values. Such states tend to address these issues sequentially rather than simultaneously, often classifying the latter as a luxury to concentrate on at some later date or not at all. Furthermore, transitioning militaries caught between two models of military professionalism may only partially adopt democratic norms within their institutions. An analysis of the Russian military’s adaptation to the infusion of democratic values illustrates tensions that persist when Soviet-style military professionalism meets Western-style military professionalism marked by inclusion of democratic norms.
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<td>Conscript-based system avoided by much of the population. Serious retention and recruitment problems due to hazards and hardships of service.</td>
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<td>Education and Training System</td>
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<td>Prestige and Public Relations</td>
<td>Public accountability high. Full disclosure of information. Responsive to outside inquiries. Media has full access. Military actively fosters a positive relationship with society.</td>
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<td>Compatibility of Military and Socie­tal Values</td>
<td>Accepts legitimacy of democratic institutions. Conceptualization of democracy is similar to society’s. Adapts internal operations to reflect democratic societal values.</td>
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<td>Implications for Officership and Leadership</td>
<td>Styles of officership and leadership reflect democratic principles and respect for individual human rights. Preference for nonauthoritarian style of leadership.</td>
<td>Individual rights sacrificed beyond the constraints necessary for military competence. Preference for authoritarian style of leadership. Abuse of soldiers common. No noncommissioned officer corps to assist with leadership functions.</td>
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<td>Norms of Political Influence</td>
<td>Recognition of necessity of some limited degree of political interaction with oversight institutions. Direct participation in politics not accepted. Nonpartisan attempts to influence political process. Some capacity to lobby for resources.</td>
<td>Former apolitical behavior overshadowed by direct involvement in elections and the political process. Inexperience in playing appropriate political role vis-à-vis oversight bodies.</td>
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The Russian Military’s Democratic Deficits

In Russia, the resistance to change along professional dimensions (see table 1) is great. The Russian military has not yet considered even the most basic questions regarding the military’s adaptation to democratization. Indeed, many Russian military personnel and military observers blame the advent of democratization as the cause of the Soviet—and now Russian—military’s decline: “It’s interesting. Democracy in the army is not possible. We have suffered through democracy with the army and saw the results in Chechnya. It has been difficult to call it an army since democratization came.”

Lack of respect for the rule of law and for any obligation of democratic accountability has also led to a culture of corruption within the Russian military that has only grown worse in the era of democratization.

General economic decline and failure to implement reforms that would downsize the force have resulted in a precipitous decline in living standards. Paychecks often arrive months late. In the first half of 1995, the average pay owed to servicemen was 1 million to 2 million rubles. When it does arrive, real pay—when indexed for inflation—has declined and is meager. For instance, the salary of a captain in January 1994 was $186 per month, but by February 1995 it had declined to $89 per month. Additionally, 25 percent of the officer corps has no housing. Attempts by the president to increase the loyalty of the border guards, federal intelligence service, and internal ministry troops have decreased the pay of defense ministry troops by one and one-half to two times. In a 1994 survey, fewer than one-quarter of defense ministry officers described their overall living conditions as good or very good. One in three described their living conditions as poor or very poor.

Observers agree, though, that senior military leadership has no will to deal seriously with the critical needs of the armed forces through reform. Military reform will not come from within. With regard to the adaptation of the military to the distinct demands of a democratic political system, “practically no state policy [has been] directed toward a sensible transition from an army of a totalitarian government to the army of a legal one.” The present power relationships and trade-offs of loyalty for quality have also ensured that reform spurred by the government is also unlikely. The national political leadership interferes little in military affairs, preferring to stay out of such internal matters while it simultaneously calls on the military to play the role of arbiter between the executive and legislative branches of government. Pandering to military leaders by all sides in the parliamentary elections of December 1995 indicates that placating the military in return for votes is the top priority of political parties. Such dependence on the military in domestic political battles reduces the likelihood that the government will insist on a path of reform unsupported by the military elite.

As a result, Soviet-era patterns of military professionalism have been allowed to persist, unchecked by democratic oversight bodies, disclosures of a free press, or protests of citizens and servicemen. Chief among these patterns of post-Soviet professionalism that conflict with democratic norms are the persistence of a broken leadership system, tolerating and fostering corruption, and lack of an ideological commitment to democracy and democratic institutions. Each of these behaviors poses a threat to the Russian military’s ability to work within an integrated NATO force structure.

Broken Leadership System of the Russian Military

Abuse of positions of power prevailed throughout the Soviet system and also characterized the behavior of officers toward their sub-
ordinates. Indeed, the phrase *the order of the commander is law* appeared in armed forces manuals. Unlimited one-man command continues in the Russian army and has actually become more severe with the removal of political officers who used to restrict some actions of the commander. Consequently, practices that respect the dignity of each soldier and that do not suppress the individual are still absent. In democratic states, laws come from people who are elected to create them, and all citizens are subject to them. No individual’s order—even that of a military commander—can override the law of the land.

These factors led to a different concept of leadership among Soviet-era officers that persists today and that negatively affects the competency of the Russian armed forces: “The conscript-officer relationship has always been unhealthy, and even Soviet-era people have acknowledged this as a crucible of corruption.” This situation became especially evident in the Afghan War, when the poor quality of the non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps and the poor socialization of troops were identified as key reasons why Soviet troops were performing poorly on the modern battlefield. Atrocities committed in Chechnya by Russian troops indicate that negligent leadership and poor discipline persist today.

Practices of Soviet-era leadership continue virtually unaffected by change in the political system. One indication of the poor leadership of Russian officers is the high death rate among conscripts in military service. A particularly atrocious incident occurred on Russkiy Island, where conscripts were allowed to die of starvation. The commander was eventually relieved of command but never faced criminal charges. It remains unclear, though, whether he was reprimanded because of this incident or because he opposed a commission set up to investigate his corrupt behavior involving the sale of property belonging to the Ministry of Defense (MOD).

Perhaps the greatest evidence of inhumane leadership is the persistence of dedovschina (i.e., hazing) in the Russian military. The number of reported incidents increased markedly in 1994, but official statistics do not accurately portray the problem since commanders are still more likely to conceal than to report incidents in their units. The system of disciplining through corporal punishment and allowing unsupervised harassment in the conscript ranks arises from two phenomena: the detached leadership styles of commanders who permit the practice to continue and the warped sense of interpersonal relations of the conscripts themselves, who perpetuate such behavior against each other. This pattern of mistreating conscripts, sometimes to the point of death, is evidently another blind spot of many Russians: “Kids and mothers are against it but not really the people at large. We in the West play it up a lot more than it matters in Russia.” Another Western expert noted, “They’ve tried to stop it, but it’s too cultural.”

Unfortunately, in Russia, no discussions of potential military reforms address these issues. Motivation for professionalization of the force is to increase its technical competency—not to improve the broken leadership system. Russian commanders serving within an integrated NATO force will experience rejection of their severe leadership styles by subordinates and colleagues from developed democracies.

### Tolerating and Fostering Corruption

Lack of respect for the rule of law and for any obligation of democratic accountability has also led to a culture of corruption within the Russian military that has only grown worse in the era of democratization. Corruption is widespread and widely known to exist: “It is known that [Chechen president Dzhokhar] Dudayev got weapons from Russian military sources and that high military circles use their influence to gain riches. Much of the money put in the budget to improve officers’ salaries was never seen by them.”

Charges of corruption also plague MOD. Under the Soviet system, ministries controlled vast areas and their resources. Officers with access to military property have been selling it for personal gain. As much as $65 million may have been
pocketed by Russian generals in the past two years. Transition to a market economy and the sale of military assets within a generally unregulated environment have created conditions for rampant corruption. Indeed, a major rise in Russian mafia activity is attributed to crime rings set up by officers in Germany who sold Russian military assets and ferried stolen German cars to Russia after the fall of the Berlin Wall. US naval attachés report corruption involving ship-scraping activities and Russian naval officers who benefit from such sales. Few MOD assets sold off in recent years have found their way back to the national treasury.

Russian commanders in the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia have been linked to corruption. Their activities have ranged from black-marketering and running prostitution rings to actively aiding Serb military units by granting them unauthorized access to military equipment and UN fuel. Continuation of these practices within the NATO peacekeeping mission worries Western officers, who fear that such behavior could jeopardize the success of the mission.

Lack of an Ideological Commitment to Democracy

Incompatibility between democratic militaries and the post-Soviet Russian military is also evident in the failure of Russian officers to embrace democratic principles or to institutionalize democratic ideology in place of Marxist-Leninist teaching. Indeed, Marxism-Leninism remains a legitimate choice among political systems taught at Russian military academies. There is no expectation that democracy will become the political system of choice for graduating cadets to defend. Such a practice indicates the fluidity of power in Russia and the unwillingness of people to hold to multiple sources of power to advocate the supremacy of any single political ideology. In advanced democratic states such as the US, military cadets may hold varying political views, but they are taught that challenging the Constitution—is not acceptable. This trip wire against legitimate military involvement in politics is completely absent in the Russian case.

Russia also continues to train officers specializing in the ideological instruction and socialization of Russian troops: “When we made the inclination toward the de-ideologization of the armed forces, we committed a mistake. . . . The smashing of the communist ideology, though, left a big vacuum which is very dangerous and which was started to be filled by [Vladimir] Zhirinovsky and others.” As a result, the Lenin Military Political Academy, which used to specialize in the training of political officers for the Soviet military, has been renamed and redesigned to train the “educational” officer—the political officer’s counterpart in the postcommunist era.

The problem, though, is that there is still no consensus on what this new orientation should be. Faculty at the reshaped officer academy in Moscow agree that military personnel who take up arms should be convinced of for whom and for what they are serving, but people responsible for answering these questions fall back on “the motherland” as the motivation for postcommunist troops in Russia. Lt Gen Sergey Zdorikov, chief of MOD’s Main Educational Work Directorate, stated that the position of his department and the army is clear: “We serve not leaders, but the state. We are responsible to the people.”

People who settle on the motherland as the object of their loyalties must specify which motherland. Should Russian soldiers dedicate themselves to defending the boundaries of the present-day Russian Federation or the territory of the former Soviet Union, where many of their Russian compatriots live in the near-abroad? This approach to service is flawed if defense of the state does not include the defense of democratic institutions. Indeed, such an approach can lead to defending the dismantling of democratic institutions if military leadership perceives that such institutions run counter to the people’s interest.

This failure to embrace democratic institutions and to recognize the proper role of military professionals in democracies has also led to inappro-
appropriate participation in the election process. Although many officers still adhere to the idea that apolitical behavior is a hallmark of military professionalism, others endorse a more direct political role. The All-Russian Officers’ Assembly, created in the first half of 1995, is led by some of the top plotters of the 1991 coup. The movement seeks active duty officers, reservists, and sympathetic civilians to support candidates of communist, agrarian, and nationalist blocs. Additionally, every major political party or bloc has recruited a senior officer to serve in its leadership to help sway the military vote—approximately one-third of the nation’s registered voters.

NATO commanders must also be wary that Russians placed within an integrated command structure by the order of Russian civilian leaders may decide that their allegiance to the motherland justifies disobeying orders from the NATO command and/or the Russian government.

Even more disturbing is MOD’s endorsement of a slate of 123 officers, many of them still on active duty, to run for office in the parliamentary elections of December 1996. Even Defense Minister Gen Pavel Grachev himself indicated a desire to run and authorized the collection of signatures on his behalf to qualify. In some cases, officers from the official MOD slate were ordered to run against retired officers, such as Gen Boris Gromov, who have fallen out of favor with Grachev and the ministry. Officers’ participation in elections dates to the first Russian elections, in which civilian candidates allied with officer candidates to woo the military vote. The Constitution of December 1993 does not allow serving officers to sit in parliament but does not prohibit them from becoming candidates. Observers worry that MOD intends to circumvent the ban by allowing active duty officers to assume an inactive status while in Parliament with the understanding that they may return to active duty when their terms are up. These officers would continue to have institutional incentives to heed MOD’s policies and interests in order to avoid punishment when they return to their military posts.

Some officers justify increased direct political involvement as a fulfillment of their duty to ensure that problems of the armed forces are adequately addressed in order to protect the state. Such rationalizing results from the evolution of postcommunist military professionalism within a context of ambiguous ideological allegiance. Loyalty to the motherland has been preserved as the ideological point of consensus from the communist era. Clearly, allegiance to democratic norms of political participation for soldiers has not yet taken root—especially when they may perceive adherence to such norms as contrary to the interests of the motherland as understood by the military. The lack of an ideological commitment to democracy means that some uncertainty exists regarding Russian troops’ responsiveness to democratic civilian control. NATO commanders must also be wary that Russians placed within an integrated command structure by the order of Russian civilian leaders may decide that their allegiance to the motherland justifies disobeying orders from the NATO command and/or the Russian government.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the differences in military professionalism between democratic and transitioning states. Military professionalism in all states is measured by the degree of civilian supremacy over the armed forces. In democratic states, however, it is differentiated further by loyalty to democratic political systems and their inherent democratic values. States undergoing transition from authoritarian to democratic political systems face the unique challenge of adapting inherited forms of military professionalism so that norms of democratic accountability are evident in their militaries. Evidence presented here
suggests that the Russian military is caught between two incompatible systems of military professionalism. The prevalence of Soviet-era military professionalism threatens Russia’s potential to contribute to NATO military missions.

As noted, specific deficits in democratization occur across three areas crucial to democratic military professionalism. First, the broken leadership system of the Russian military impedes Russian officers from leading or serving under officers from democratic militaries. Second, the prevalence of corruption within the officer corps indicates a widespread lack of respect for the rule of law—a situation that could jeopardize the integrity of joint NATO operations. Third, the lack of an ideological commitment to democracy or to democratic institutions raises the question of whether Russian troops will remain subordinate to the democratic political control of either the Russian civilian political leadership or the leadership of the North Atlantic alliance.

We need to pay greater attention to the democratization needs of partner states. NATO nations have been reticent in offering a model of democratic political control and democratic military professionalism for partner states to follow or in offering assistance in achieving these democratic principles. In addition, creators of US-run military democratization programs have been criticized for failing to adequately think through their democratization objectives. This article has attempted to suggest how transitioning militaries—the Russian military in particular—can work to achieve greater interoperability of thought and democratic military professionalism with their future NATO partners.

Notes

3. NATO’s $3 million military-to-military contacts budget for 1995 focused on defense-force interoperability issues. The amount spent on democratization issues was “so small we don’t even want to talk about it, much less publish it.” Brooks Tigner, Defense News, 20–26 November 1995, 35.
10. Maj Anna Bukharova, scientific associate (faculty member), Higher Military Humanities College on Scientific and Research Work, interview with author in Moscow, April 1995.
12. Bukharova interview.
15. According to Ministry of Defense statistics, in the first eight months of 1993, 1,222 servicemen died. Twenty-five percent of these deaths were attributed to suicide. Ministry of Defense officials reported that 518 deaths, including the deaths of 74 officers, occurred in the first six months of 1994. For reports on Russian human rights practices in 1993 and 1994, see US Department of State Dispatch, February 1994 and March 1995, respectively.
23. Lt Col Robert Hughes, assistant air attaché, US Embassy, Moscow, interview with author in Moscow, April 1995.
25. Justice interview.
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27. Lt Col Yuri Runaev, head, Social Science Department, Kachinsky Higher Military Aviation College, Volgograd, Russia, to author, letter, subject: Differences in Approaches to Teaching Social Science in US and Russian Military Academies, August 1995.


29. The current name is Military University.

30. Bukharova interview.


32. A Russian journalist who accompanied a group of visitors from London to a Russian military college reported that the British delegation was shocked when the chief of the college told them that no version of political science was taught there. The chief justified this curriculum decision by saying, “The army is not involved in politics.” Alexander Golz, reporter for Krasnaya Zvezda, interview with author in Moscow, April 1995.

33. The chairman of the All-Russian Officers’ Assembly defended his movement by saying, “The army is an instrument of politics, so it should take part in the fate of our country.” Deborah Seward, “Former Soviet Generals Vow to Oppose Yeltsin in Parliamentary Vote,” AP Worldstream, 17 August 1995.

34. Ibid.


36. This estimate includes the military-industrial complex, pensioners, and relatives of active duty forces. Carey Scott, “Russian Army Drafted for Vote Rigging Duty,” Sunday Times, 1 October 1995.

37. Verbin.


39. A Russian newspaper reported that in the district where Gromov is running, the commander of the local military school was ordered to nominate himself to run against Gromov. Ibid.


41. Verbin.

42. Kalinina.

43. Ibid.

44. Tigner, 35.


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