

1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

THE LOOMING RETURN OF THE POLITICAL RUSSIAN SOLDIER

FRANKLIN HOLCOMB

ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the changes in how the Russian state perceives the political nature of a Russian soldier within the wider context of increasing dissatisfaction with the Russian state in Russian society. The paper identifies and analyzes the indicators that the Russian state is increasingly unpopular due to a wide range of factors including economic stagnation, mismanagement, and social friction. The paper then examines recent signs that the Russian government is concerned that this dissatisfaction may be spreading to the Armed Forces, including the establishment of the new Main Military Political Directorate intended to oversee the political education of Russian servicemen. The author uses a variety of sources from Russian and Western media including news sources and scholarly works to demonstrate that it is likely that Kremlin is concerned about the political reliability of Russian servicemen who are likely losing confidence in the Russian state as Russian society does.

KEY WORDS

Russian Armed Forces, Russian Government, President Putin, Political Directorate.

FRANKLIN HOLCOMB

Texas A&M University.
University of Tartu

Kremlin does not believe that many Russian servicemen are politically reliable, and it is afraid of the situation where this lack of reliability might lead in coming years to socio-economic conditions worsening. There is a widespread impression in Western culture that a Russian soldier is a determined and fanatical servant of the state. This impression is incorrect, and while Russian soldiers have fanatically defended their homeland throughout history, it should not be seen as done primarily in the service of the state. Indeed, Russian soldiers have frequently had highly adversarial relationships with Russian state structures.

No matter what image Russia's elites might promote in the media or through cultural programs, it is unlikely that they share the Western view of the Russian soldier. It is likely that they see soldiers as not 'us', but as 'the other', or at least 'one of the others', in the constant struggle for power in Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin cannot serve as President of Russia forever and a political transition is coming, as Russian elites consider what will come next, it is likely that they are examining and attempting to correct the political nature of the Russian soldier.

The Russian Armed Forces have a long history of direct political involvement in times of political turmoil or dramatic social change. This legacy ranges from the conservative Streltsy uprisings under Peter the Great, to the liberal Decembrist Uprising, stretching through the volatile Russian Civil War to the heights of the Red Army's influence in the Soviet Union and into the short-lived reactionary coup against Gorbachev in 1991. Russian elites are looking at their soldiers again, assessing the servicemen's loyalty to the current political regime, as economic conditions and social conditions worsen and are underwhelming. The deeply paranoid and suspicious Russian elites are likely to worry that Russian servicemen's loyalties may lie with Russia and not with the governing elite. This paper examines recent changes in how the Russian government views its soldiers as political entities, and the greater political, economic, and social context in which they are viewing them.

The Steady Decline in Popularity of the Russian Government

Kremlin popularity is in decline and it might face serious stability issues in coming years, particularly as Russian President Vladimir Putin's inevitable transition of power approaches. Kremlin own mismanagement, corruption, and aggressive and reckless foreign policy have led to a significant decline in public support for the institutions of the Russian government. It is most likely that President Putin will contain or survive the looming political crisis and serve at least one more term as a President without facing significant challenge. However, it is unlikely that he has built a political system that can survive his transition. This is particularly true if the state continues to face economic and political challenges which

it proves itself incapable of managing, or simply refuses to alter its doomed course.

Recent polling indicates that Kremlin popularity is steadily decreasing on domestic and international issues. Polling from the Russian Levada Center indicates that Kremlin foreign policy, which once played a huge role in maintaining the popularity of the Putin regime, is no longer as popular as it used to be. The Levada Center reported that less than one third of Russians believed that Russia's intervention in Syria has benefited Russia in January 2018¹. Another poll by Levada indicated that the number of Russians who indicate Putin's foreign policy as a plus dropped by 6% from 2016-2018². President Putin has suffered notable blows to his popularity since his re-election in March 2018. Polling by the Levada Center reported that the support for President Putin dropped by a significant 17% down to 58% by October 2018. Putin has not had such a low approval rating since before the popular decision to occupy Crimea in 2014³. Much of this may be due to the recent hugely unpopular decision by the Russian government, backed by Putin, to push through a controversial piece of legislation on pension reform which increased the national retirement age. This unpopular decision was described by President Putin as an "economic necessity" and prompted widespread protests across Russia and a large drop in public support for Putin and

¹ "Poll: Russian Public Opinion is at Odds with Putin's Foreign Policy in Syria," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 16 January, 2018. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/press-release/poll-russian-public-opinion-odds-putins-foreign-policy-syria>.

² "Popular Support for Putin's Foreign Policy on the Decline, Pollster Says," The Moscow Times, 09 August, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/popular-support-for-putins-foreign-policy-is-dropping-62482>

³ Shamardina Lada, "Pension Reform Overtook Crimea," Kommersant, 04 October, 2018. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3759662>

the Russian government⁴. However, as observed by the Russian Civil Initiatives Committee, it is likely that long simmering public anger over government incompetence was catalyzed by the crisis over the pension reform, partially explaining the remarkable backlash against the state⁵.

Kremlin has stumbled from domestic crisis to domestic crisis, seemingly increasingly incapable of managing domestic issues ranging from infrastructure to ethnic tension and civil discontent to maintaining infrastructure. Spontaneous nationwide protests against the incompetence of Russian government erupted as a result of the March 25th, 2018 fire at the Kemerovo shopping mall that killed 64 people, including 41 children, as a result of the gross negligence of government officials indicate the increasingly frustrated mood of Rus-

sian society⁶. The Russian government's response to the crisis was completely tone deaf and likely enflamed the crisis in the short term. Government officials accused grief-stricken protestors of participating in a "clearly orchestrated event aimed at discrediting authorities" and even accused the family members of those killed in the fire of engaging in "self-promotion"⁷. In another inexplicably mismanaged incident, the central government decided to give control of much of the Russian province of Ingushetia to Kremlin ally and leader of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov. This decision was strongly opposed by the local Ingush and it has ignited deep-rooted ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus which the Russian government has so far struggled to control⁸. Domestic victories which should result in a relatively large popularity boost for the Russian government such as the generally successful 2018 World Cup, are usually quickly undermined by fiascos ranging from bridge collapses and embarrassing failed rocket launches, to the recent

⁴ Bennetts Marc, "Putin appeals to Russians to accept 'painful' pension changes," *The Guardian*, 29 August, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/29/vladimir-putin-russia-pension-reforms-retirement>; Ivanova Polina, "Despite Putin's concessions, Russians protest pension reform law," *Reuters*, 02 September, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-protests-pensions/despite-putins-concessions-russians-protest-pension-reform-law-idUSKCN1LI0DU>; Inozemtsev Vladislav, "Russia's Mysterious Pension Reform," 22 August, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russias-mysterious-pension-reform-op-ed-62617>; Hodges Nathan, "Pension outcry in Russia shows Putin's popularity isn't bulletproof," *CNN*, 29 August, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/29/europe/putin-pension-outcry-analysis-intl/index.html>; "President Drops to 5-Year Low," *The Moscow Times*, 04 October, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/trust-russian-president-drops-5-year-low-poll-63080>

⁵ DmitrievMikhail, Belanovskiy Sergey, Nikolskaya Anastasiya, "OIG Presents a Report "Signs of a Change In Public Sentiment and Their Possible Consequences," Civil Initiatives Committee, 11 October 2018. <https://komitetgi.ru/news/news/3902/>

⁶ "Kemerovo fire: Russia crowd condemns officials over disaster," *BBC*, 27 March, 2018 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43552165>; "Chief of Kemerovo's fire department charged with criminal negligence," *Crime in Russia*, 11 April, 2018. <https://en.crimerrussia.com/gromkie-dela/chief-of-fire-department-detained-in-kemerovo-charged-with-negligence/>; "Thousands Protest After Russian Mall Fire; Putin Vows to 'Punish the Guilty,'" *RFE/RL*, 27th March, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-travels-kemerovo-blams-criminal-negligence-deadly-mall-fire/29126036.html>; "Russian Official Accuses Mourners of 'Discrediting' Authorities With Protest After Kemerovo," *The Moscow Times*, 28 March, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-official-accuses-mourners-discrediting-authorities-with-protest-after-kemerovo-fire-60967>

⁷ 'Clearly Orchestrated': Russian Official Calls Protest Over Deadly Fire a Bid to Credit State', *RFE/RL*, March 28th, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-official-clearly-orchestrated-demonstrations-kemerovo-fire/29130522.html>

⁸ TashayevAznaur, Ingushetia Crisis deepens as protesters demand resignation of head," *OC Media*, 12th October, 2018. <http://oc-media.org/ingushetia-crisis-deepens-as-protesters-demand-resignation-of-head/>

hugely unpopular pension reform bill⁹. The Russian government has so far weathered these crisis despite the fact that that these incidents are often primarily, if not entirely, the state's responsibility and the reality that the crisis are usually exacerbated by the state's inept responses. Regimes such as Putin's are usually able to make numerous such errors without fear of public backlash, but it is unlikely that even the Russian state can continue to make such errors forever while socio-economic conditions worsen.

The Russian economy is weakening over time because of mismanagement, corruption, over-reliance on oil exports, and Western sanctions over the Russian occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and invasion of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and it shows no signs of improvement. The Russian economy is critically undermined by chronic mismanagement and endemic corruption. The resulting brain-drain of Russian economists and intellectuals who are taking their skills elsewhere has also had a serious impact on Russian businesses¹⁰. The Russian economy is over-reliant on oil exports, inherently unstable, and quite brittle as former Russian Finance Min-

ister Alexei Kudrin has continued to warn¹¹. Meanwhile, Russian GDP growth remains incredibly weak and according to Russian professor Konstantin Sonin under current conditions "boosting growth will be impossible without deep structural reforms"¹². The Russian government has given no sign that it is willing, or capable, of beginning the market-liberalization and anti-corruption reforms necessary to reverse this trend. The Russian ruble has weakened in recent years and continues to do so. The Russian Ministry of Finance projected on September 29th, 2018 that the value of the ruble against the dollar would continue to decline through 2035¹³. The value of the Russian ruble continues to fluctuate but there is little doubt that it is in steady decline, undermining the Russian economy and the state's spending power¹⁴. These effects, combined with the ongoing damages to the Russian economy caused by Russia's belligerent foreign policy, will increase economic dissatisfaction in Russia in coming years, erode the state's domestic credibility, put pressure on Russian oligarchical circles, and weaken the state's ability to act in the long term.

Kremlin's foreign policy has exacerbated its economic woes, but despite this reality it has showed no intention of making even cursory efforts to make the sorts of foreign

⁹ "Trust in Putin Drops to 39% as Russians Face Later Retirement, Poll Says," *The Moscow Times*, 08th October, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/trust-putin-drops-39-percent-russians-face-later-retirement-poll-says-63110>; "Commemorative accident: The Shame of Russian Cosmos," *Gazeta.ru*, 11th October, 2018. [New Civil Engineer, 11th October, 2018. <https://www.newcivilengineer.com/latest/video-russian-motorway-bridge-collapses-onto-trans-siberian-railway/10036098.article>](https://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2018/10/11_e_12017317.shtml?utm_source=push; Sholli Sam,)

¹⁰ Guriev Sergey, "Corruption has laid waste to the Russian economy," *Financial Times*, 05 April, 2014. <https://www.ft.com/content/939659ae-b67d-11e3-b230-00144feabdc0>; Klesnikov Andrei, "Russia's Brain Drain: Why Economists are Leaving," *Forbes*, 26th May, 2015. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesinternational/2015/05/26/russias-brain-drain-why-economists-are-leaving/#930905635fda>

¹¹ Barnato Katy, "Russia too dependent on oil-and it's hitting the ruble, says ex-Russian fin min," *CNBC*, 17th June, 2016. <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/06/17/russia-too-dependent-on-oil-and-its-hitting-the-ruble-says-ex-russian-fin-min.html>

¹² Ballard Barclay, "Russia's Stagnating Economy," *World Finance*, 18th July, 2018. [Project Syndicate, 01 February, 2018. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-economic-stagnation-structural-reform-by-konstantin-sonin-2018-02?barrier=accesspaylog>](https://www.worldfinance.com/markets/russias-stagnating-economy; Sonin Konstantin,)

¹³ "Russian finance ministry expects ruble's exchange rate to weaken by 2031-2035," *TASS*, 29th September, 2018. <http://tass.com/economy/1023631>

¹⁴ "Russian Ruble Briefly Falls to Lowest Level Since 2016," *RFE/RL*, 23rd August, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-ruble-briefly-falls-to-lowest-level-since-2016/29449315.html>

policy shifts necessary to improve the Russian economy. Some key Russian intellectuals such as former Finance Minister Kudrin have urged the Russian government to start trying to improve relations with the West to improve Russia's economic outlook. However, these calls have so far fallen on deaf ears in Moscow¹⁵. Kremlin continues its bogged-down invasion of Eastern Ukraine despite the ongoing economic cost of European and American sanction regimes, and the costs of the conflict itself. Western sanction regimes, which Kremlin initially loudly proclaimed would actually help the Russian economy, have predictably seriously undermined it¹⁶. Despite some effort, Moscow has been unable to weaken the Western community's resolve to enforce economic consequences on Russia for its aggression against its neighbors. Kremlin has very simple paths to de-escalation with the West available to it, but it chooses every day to remain fixed in its course. Unwilling to back down, Kremlin seems to have instead doubled down on an increasingly brazen and aggressive policy towards Europe and the United States. This policy is unlikely to create much sympathy for Russian economic woes in the West, will likely turn many of Kremlin's potential partners in Europe into foes, and will also likely lead to new and increasingly severe sanctions in time.

President Putin's United Russia (UR) party, dubbed the "Party of Liars and Thieves" by Russian opposition political Alexei Navalny, suffered serious electoral defeats in regional elections in the fall of 2018 indicating its vulnerability and embarrassing the Russian government. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the nationalist Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) scored significant electoral victories against Putin's chosen candidates in elections in the provinces of Primorye, Vladimir, and Khabarovsk¹⁷. In September 16th elections in the Eastern province of Primorye, Communist candidate Andrei Ischenko was decisively beating his opponent from United Russia, the acting-Governor Andrei Tarasenko, until a sudden and unexplained surge of votes pushed the UR candidate ahead. The local voting commission then reported that they were unable to determine who won the election due to potential irregularities.¹⁸ Ischenko called for protests against the decision claiming that "at least 30,000 votes were stolen from us" while the head of the CPRF Gennady Zyuganov condemned the vote as "criminal lawlessness" and threatened nation-wide protest action¹⁹. On September 21st, the UR candidate in the Russian republic of Khakassia in south Siberia unexpectedly withdrew from the gubernatorial elections citing

¹⁵ "Happening Today," BMB Russia, Accessed on 14th October, 2018. <https://mailchi.mp/804dc474f946/kream-kudrin-rules-everything-around-me>

¹⁶ "Russian companies feel severe effect from U.S. sanctions: Fitch," Reuters, 13th April, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-sanctions-ratings/russian-companies-will-feel-severe-effect-from-u-s-sanctions-fitch-idUSKBN1HK1XP>; "This time, sanctions on Russia are having the desired effect," Financial Times, 13 April, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/cad69cf4-3e40-11e8-bcc8-cebcb81f1f90>; "Russia's Rating Agency Says More Sanctions are Key Economic Risk," The Moscow Times, 10th July, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-rating-agency-says-more-sanctions-key-economic-risk-62186>

¹⁷ Rudnitsky Jake, Reznik Irinia, Karvchenko Stepan, "Putin's Party Suffers Rare Losses as Russian Protest Votes Grow," Bloomberg, 24th September, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-24/putin-s-party-suffers-rare-losses-as-russian-protest-votes-grow>;

¹⁸ "In Primorye, the results of the elections of the governor were cancelled," Radio Svoboda, 20th September, 2018; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29499675.html>

¹⁹ "Russian Election Authorities Annul Results of Fraud-Marred Regional Vote," RFE/RL, 20th September, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-elections-primorsky-authorities-annul-results-of-fraud-marred-vote/29499711.html>; "Russia communists protest against 'rigged' elections," Al Jazeera, 17th September, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/russia-communist-party-workers-protest-rigged-elections-180917182807881.html>

health concerns, despite previously claiming good health, likely fearing decisive and humiliating electoral defeat by the LDPR or the CPRF²⁰. In the Eastern Russian province of Khabarovsk, nationalist LDPR candidate Sergei Furgal defeated UR governor Vyacheslav Shport in elections on September 23rd ²¹. In the western Russian province of Vladimir LDPR candidate Vladimir Sipyagin defeated UR regional governor Svetlana Orlova in gubernatorial elections on September 24th ²². Both the CPRF and LDPR are strongly aligned with Kremlin, and these defeats will not lead to any noticeable policy changes nor should they be construed as indicating the looming collapse of United Russia. For the moment, there is no serious challenge to United Russia on a national level. However, these defeats in regional election point to both United Russia's vulnerability, and the increasing discontent of Russian citizens, particularly outside major metropolitan centers such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

Russian President Vladimir Putin plays a stabilizing role in Russian politics in the short term, but there is likely little in his system that will survive him. Putin's Russia is a kleptocracy, held together by force and loosely tied together by a general fear of change in Russian society, Soviet nostalgia, and nationalism, which often prominently

features Russian Orthodox Christianity²³. Such a system has little staying power, and will face serious issues during political transitions. President Putin claims that he will step down as President of Russia after his current term ends in 2024²⁴. It is too early to say whether this will happen. However, even if it does not happen in 2024, Putin cannot be President of Russia forever and he and his allies in Russia's elite circles know this. However, according to the Levada Center over half of Russians want Putin to stay on beyond 2024. Head of the Levada Center Lev Gudkov suggests that this is because "there are no successors shaping up, people are treating this pragmatically" and that people believe Putin will at least be able to "ensure the status quo."²⁵ This relatively strong belief in Putin, and general dislike and distrust for other politicians, poses dangers for the Russian elite. If current socio-economic trends continue, it is unlikely that even Putin could manage to contain rising discontent in Russia forever. Putin's successor will likely not have the political strength to manage a transition smoothly in the first place, and doubly so if there is not a dramatic turnaround in

²³ Lansky Miriam, Myles-Primakoff Dylan, "The Rise of Kleptocracy: Power and Plunder in Putin's Russia," *Journal of Democracy*, January 2018. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/article/rise-kleptocracy-power-and-plunder-putin%E2%80%99s-russia>; "Majority of Russians Regret Soviet Collapse, Poll Says," *The Moscow Times*, 25th December, 2017. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/majority-of-russians-regret-soviet-collapse-poll-says-60039>; Aslund Anders, "How the United States Can Combat Russia's Kleptocracy," *The Atlantic Council*, 31st July, 2018. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/how-the-united-states-can-combat-russia-s-kleptocracy>; "The return of Russian nationalism," *The Financial Times*, 12th October, 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/edb595d8-aeba-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>

²⁴ "Putin says will step down as President After Term Expires in 2024," *The Moscow Times*, 25th May 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/putin-says-will-step-down-as-president-after-term-expires-in-2024-61589>

²⁵ "Poll: Half of Russia Wants Putin for President Beyond 2024," *The Moscow Times*, 19th June, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/levada-poll-putin-2024-61889>

²⁰ "LibDems crush ruling party rivals in Russian Far East and Central Regions' governor elections," RT, 24th September, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/politics/439178-ldpr-candidates-win-governor-elections/>

²¹ "Russian Opposition Candidate on Track to Win in Gubernatorial Runoff," RFE/RL, 23rd September, 2018. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-governor-elections-united-russia-putin-communist-ldpr/29504248.html>

²² "Candidate from LDPR wins Vladimir Region gubernatorial election," TASS, 24th September, 2018. <http://tass.com/politics/1022819>

Russia's socio-economic outlook. Russia's elites will likely continue to turn their focus inwards, trying to identify potential threats to their wealth and power during Putin's last years in office, and more importantly the threats in the years after Putin.

Russia's leadership is afraid of revolution in Russia and likely learned from the downfall of their former ally President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovych that public protests against unpopular leaders are serious threats to kleptocratic regimes. Russian officials regularly describe the 2014 EuroMaidan revolution in Ukraine as a "color revolution" orchestrated by hostile Western states. "Color Revolution" is a vague term that is generally used by Russian officials to describe civil discontent that Kremlin does not approve of. Fear of a color revolution in Russia, and a determination to prevent it, is a staple of Russian national security officials' talking points²⁶. Yanukovych's fall can primarily be blamed on the horrible climate of corruption and incompetence that his government created, and ultimately on Yanukovych's own poor decision making during the EuroMaidan revolution. Yanukovych's blatant dishonesty, acts of bad faith, and use of lethal force against protesters managed to escalate a fairly minor protest movement in favor of increasing trade with Europe to an enraged and determined revolution aiming to remove him and his circle

from power²⁷. Despite the use of paid thugs, the so-called Titushkiy, police, interior ministry forces, and the brutal Berkut special police force Yanukovych was unable to suppress the EuroMaidan movement. Notably absent from the ranks of pro-Yanukovych forces were the Armed Forces of Ukraine, who generally remained neutral. In Lviv in Western Ukraine, the mothers of soldiers successfully surrounded and blockaded military bases when rumors spread that their sons might be sent to Kyiv to support Yanukovych²⁸. Facing international pressure to back down, and unsure of how the Ukrainian people and the Armed Forces of Ukraine might react to a complete massacre of protestors Kyiv, Yanukovych fled to Russia in 2014²⁹.

Russian President Vladimir Putin created the Russian National Guard in 2016 to provide himself and his circle with a loyal and capable security force was able to conduct operations throughout Russia and suppress any unforeseen protests or anti-government movements. The National Guard is a consolidated force comprising former units from the Russian Interior Ministry, Special Operations Center of Rapid Reaction Forces, and other security agencies. President Putin appointed his close ally and former bodyguard Viktor Zolotov to head the organization which is tasked with suppressing discontent and fighting terrorism and generally has wide license to act

²⁶ Korsunskaya Darya "Putin says Russia must prevent 'color revolution,'" Reuters, 20th November, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security/putin-says-russia-must-prevent-color-revolution-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>; "Russian Ministry of Defense to Fund Prophylactic 'Color Revolution' Research," The Moscow Times, 21st June, 2015. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-defense-ministry-to-fund-prophylactic-color-revolution-research-47559>; "Minister: Russian operations in Syria stopped chain of color revolutions in the Middle East," TASS, 21st February, 2017. <http://tass.com/politics/932137>

²⁷ "A timeline of the Euromaidan revolution," EuroMaidan Press, February 19th 2016. <http://euromaidanpress.com/2016/02/19/a-timeline-of-the-euromaidan-revolution/>; "The Ukraine Crisis Timeline," CSIS, <http://ukraine.csis.org/kyiv.htm>

²⁸ "In Lviv the mobilization and blockade of military units," Radio Svoboda, 20th January, 2014. <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/25236350.html>

²⁹ "Putin: Russia helped Yanukovych to flee Ukraine," 24 October 2014, BBC, 16th October, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29761799>

as needed in pursuit of these objectives³⁰. In practicality, the Russian National Guard is best understood in a political sense as Putin's army. What exactly will become of the national guard, and its leader Zolotov, when Putin leaves office remains unclear. However, the National Guard may serve as a vehicle by which Putin and his circle can maintain control of key locations during a transition period. Putin's successor will likely hope to rely on these forces to suppress discontent, whether it is related to the transition or not. The National Guard can conduct such sensitive assignments, particularly so long as they do not face coordinated equivalent forces. But in the event of a crackdown on the Russian people conducted by the National Guard during a period of political turmoil, Kremlin elites likely worry about where the loyalties of Russian soldiers would lie.

The Re-Emergence of Politics in the Russian Army

The Russian Armed Forces are increasingly popular in Russia at a time when the government is losing prestige and influence. A Levada Center poll in 2018 indicated that Russians trusted the Armed Forces more than President Putin and Russia's security services, and far more than the Russian Orthodox Church and state institutions³¹. The senior levels of the Russian Armed Forces, particularly Shoigu and Gerasimov, are also increasingly influential. President Putin took only Russian Minister of Defense

Sergei Shoigu and head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov with him on his summer hiking trip, a telling signal about the Shoigu's importance to Putin. Russian political analyst Tatyana Stanovaya claims that "Putin believes that Russia is in a state of war" and that "the army's influence will rise"³². This rise in influence will likely make Shoigu and Gerasimov increasingly important in Kremlin's inner circles and will likely ensure budget prioritization for the Armed Forces. However, despite its soaring popularity among Russians, some Russian elites likely see potential long-term rivals both in the Russian Ministry of Defense headquarters, and in the barracks.

The Russian government claims to have strong support from Russian servicemen, but the actions of Russian leadership indicate that Russian servicemen are perceived as not sufficiently politically reliable. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu announced after Russia' March 18th, 2018 Presidential election, which was widely criticized as unfair, that 89.7% of Russian soldiers voted for Putin. He also claimed that Putin remarkably received 100% of the votes from Russian soldiers in deployed in Syria³³. Shoigu's claims are of dubious reliability, but the fact that he felt the need to so publicly emphasize how strongly Russian servicemen supported Putin and Putin's United Russia indicates that whether they support the government or not is an open question for some in Kremlin. In contrast to

³⁰ Sliwa Zdzislaw, "The Russian National Guard: A Warning or a Message?" National Defense Academy of Latvia the Center for Security and Strategic Research, February 2018, <https://www.baltdefcol.org/files/files/publications/RussianNationalGuard.pdf>

³¹ "Russians' Trust in Military Grows While Political Parties Falter-Poll," The Moscow Times, 12th October, 2017. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russians-trust-in-military-grows-while-political-parties-falter-poll-59256>; Lucian Kim, Twitter, 04th October, 2018. https://twitter.com/Lucian_Kim/status/1047763168141950976

³² "Espionage Scandals Show Russian Army's Growing Clout," The Moscow Times, 09th October, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/espionage-scandals-show-russian-armys-growing-clout-63134>

³³ "90% of Russian Military Votes for Supreme Commander Vladimir Putin," The Moscow Times, 20th March, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/90-of-russian-military-votes-for-supreme-commander-vladimir-putin-60879>; "Conference Call with the leadership of the Armed Forces," Russian Ministry of Defense, 20th March, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSh-0U2Maf0>

Shoigu's fervent assurances, some Russian media reports indicate that the wider public dissatisfaction is naturally spreading into the ranks of the Armed Forces. Russian MBKh Media released a recording, reportedly of a political briefing given to Russian contract soldiers in Khabarovsk in which the instructor orders the soldiers to vote for United Russia, warns them specifically not to vote for the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, and even goes so far as to threaten them and their families before elections in the region³⁴. Other reports indicate that Russian soldiers and cadets were forced to vote, and one member of the Russian Armed Forces claimed that he was threatened when he destroyed his ballot³⁵. Russian BBC service reported that the Russian Ministry of Defense had started to distribute political questionnaires to Russian servicemen in Russia's Southern Military District before the March 18th, 2018 presidential election. The questions on these questionnaires ranged from the generic, such as who the soldiers supported politically, to the paranoid "how do you feel about unauthorized gatherings" and "who, in your opinion, of the pro-Western politicians have the greatest support from the people of the country and are ready to call for a change in the state system of Russia through a color revolution?"³⁶. The soldiers were also asked if they would be willing to use force against those who wanted to forcefully change the

Russian government³⁷. Access to information on these topics is limited, but if these reports are remotely true it indicates that Russian servicemen are not as supportive of Putin, United Russia, and the Russian government as Shoigu claims.

The Russian government is actively taking steps to try to improve the political reliability of Russian servicemen. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the creation of a new political directorate, the Main Military Political Directorate (MMPD), in the Russian Ministry of Defense. Putin appointed a rising star in the Russian Ministry of Defense, deputy defense minister Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov, to lead it. Kartapolov recently commanded Russia's Western Military District and led Russian forces in Syria³⁸. The decision to place such a veteran commander as Kartapolov as the head of the directorate demonstrates how important the new organization is to Kremlin, and how seriously it takes the issues that Kartapolov's directorate will address. Kartapolov claimed that Russia is the target of an "absolutely undisguised information war... on all fronts" and that the new directorate would provide "informational protection" to Russian personnel. Kartapolov further claimed that the "raving propaganda and absolute lies on many issues, the intolerance to our point of view or attempts to hush it up, all of these are changing society's political conscience and in modern conditions such changes

³⁴ MBX Media, Twitter, 23 September, 2018. <https://twitter.com/MBKhMedia/status/1043800047937355776>

³⁵ "#ElectionWatch:VoterFraudinRussia," DFRLab, Medium, 18th March, 2018. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-voter-fraud-in-russia-4a0dc75c4fa8>

³⁶ Soshnikov Andrey, "Elections, rallies, revolutions: What the Russian Ministry of Defense is asking the soldiers," BBC Russian Service, 06th February, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42954314>; Alexey Navalny, Twitter, 01st February, 2018. <https://twitter.com/navalny/status/959056698290966529>

³⁷ "Russian Military Tests Soldiers' Willingness to Quash Opposition Protests," The Moscow Times, 06 February, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-military-tests-soldiers-willingness-quash-opposition-protests-60404>

³⁸ Osborn Andrew, "In Soviet echo, Putin gives Russian army a political wing," Reuters, 31st July, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-military-politics/in-soviet-echo-putin-gives-russian-army-a-political-wing-idUSKBN1KL1VA>

can have very serious consequences”³⁹. The new directorate will attempt to ensure the “political unity” of the Russian Armed Forces according to Alexander Kanshin, a spokesman for the Public Council of the Russian Ministry of Defense. Kanshin also observed that the “socio-political situation in the country must be carefully taken into account... to strengthen the country’s defense capability and increase the combat readiness of the troops”⁴⁰. Both Kartapolov and Kanshin made explicit references to what they see as an information war shaping the views of Russian society, and implied that the new directorate will address these issues among servicemen. If the Russian Armed Forces were not concerned about the reliability of its servicemen, and society more broadly, it is unlikely that they would put these statements in these terms.

The new Main Military Political Directorate (MMPD) is being rapidly developed due to the “urgent need” for its work according to General Kartapolov. Kartapolov announced that the MMPD would be created in three phases before March 1, 2019. According to Kartapolov the first stage of the directorate’s development, intended to be finished before 01st October, 2018, would primarily focus on creating the overarching structure for the department. The second phase of its development, intended to be finished before 01st December, 2018, would focus on building out the structure and all unit levels. The third stage, intended to be finished before 01st March, 2019, would focus on organizing training activities for Russian soldiers and military cadets⁴¹.

³⁹ “Russia’s new political directorate vital in battle against ‘raving propaganda’-general,” RT, 05th September, 2018. <https://www.rt.com/politics/437687-new-political-directorate-russia/>

⁴⁰ “In the Russian Army a governing political organ will be recreated,” Interfax, 05th February, 2018. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/598553>

⁴¹ “Ministry of Defense of Russia explained the return of political officers for protection in the information war,” Interfax, 05th September, 2018. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/628021>

Kartapolov also emphasized that the new department would prioritize work with Russia’s youth. What the training provided by the MMPD will consist of remains unclear. Russia lacks a unifying ideology beyond a simplistic nationalism, which is often barely distinguishable from nostalgia for the Soviet Union, intermixed with Russian Orthodox Christianity⁴².

The increasingly close ties between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church, including an effort to build a major new military cathedral, indicate that Russian Orthodoxy will likely play a sizeable role in the ideological training conducted by the MMPD. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu announced plans in September 2018 to construct a major new military cathedral in Patriot Park, indicating the increasingly important role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Russian Armed Forces. The cathedral complex will reportedly be surrounded with 2,000 square kilometers of grounds that will be covered in monuments to patron saints of the military, military museums, and exhibition centers⁴³. President Putin and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kiril I participated in an official ceremony consecrating the foundation stone of the new Cathedral on 19th September, 2018. During the ceremony, Kirill claimed that “it is common knowledge that Russia has never conducted wars for land grabbing” while President Putin emphasized that the church will be a “symbol of our invincible national tradition, our fidelity to the memory

⁴² Kolesnikov Andrei, “Russian Ideology After Crimea,” Carnegie Moscow Center, 22nd September, 2015. <http://carnegie.ru/2015/09/22/russian-ideology-after-crimea-pub-61350>

⁴³ “Russian Defense Ministry Collecting Donations for New Military Cathedral,” The Moscow Times, 04th September, 2018. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-defense-ministry-collecting-donations-for-new-military-cathedral-62771>; “Russian Defense Ministry to Build the Main Temple of the Armed Forces in the Patriot” park,” Russian Ministry of Defense, 09th April, 2018. https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12194035@egNews

of our ancestors, and their deeds for the benefit of the homeland"⁴⁴. This nationalist rhetoric in a religious setting will likely be a theme expanded on by the MMPD of the Russian Ministry of Defense in coming years.

These efforts are not likely to address the concerns about the political reliability of servicemen that Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense are trying to resolve. While such structures may help weed out dissent and provide a united narrative to Russian servicemen, Kremlin may be misjudging the source of discontent both in Russian society and in the Armed Forces. It is unlikely that many Russians who are dissatisfied with Kremlin are primarily dissatisfied because they have been indoctrinated by a foreign power. Fewer still of those who are unhappy with the chronic mismanagement, declining standards of living, corruption, and international isolation would be mollified by the construction of a new cathedral, and those whose parents' can no longer afford rent due to pension reforms and the devaluation of the ruble may react poorly to instruction telling them that their concerns are evidence of the influence of "raving propaganda" on their minds. The development of the MMPD over coming years, and the role it plays in the Russian Armed Forces, is worthy of dedicated study. But its creation is the strongest signal, among many, that Kremlin is unsure about the reliability of its servicemen on political questions, as socio-economic conditions in Russia worsen, regional tensions rise, and the elites and government officials try to conceptualize life after Putin.

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⁴⁴ "Putin takes part in blessing of foundation stone of Russian Army's main cathedral," *TASS*, 19th September, 2018. <http://tass.com/society/1022366>

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