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Putin's Way of Reforming the Army

By Alexander Golts

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For several weeks, analysts have been discussing whether the concentration of Russian troops on Ukraine's border means an imminent military intervention into eastern Ukraine. Some believe that Moscow, inspired by its rapid takeover of Crimea, hopes to duplicate that success. But this is highly unlikely.

The Crimean annexation demonstrated that Serdyukov's military reforms were successful and that the Russian Army is capable of carrying out a military operation successfully.

Although Moscow cut off Crimea from the rest of Ukraine with the aid of just a few hundred soldiers, to seize Ukraine's southeast regions Russia would have to create a new and extended

border, requiring the deployment of at least 100,000 soldiers. That is, Moscow would have to commit at least one-eighth of its entire army, including practically every major combat-ready command unit created by the recent military reforms implemented by former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. They include airborne forces, marines, special forces and two or three elite divisions of ground forces. The requirement that all of Russia's combat-ready forces would have to be committed to a single theater of operations might itself dissuade President Vladimir Putin from risking such a venture.

Interestingly, it was Serdyukov's military reforms that made Russia's success in Crimea possible. In fact, the whole operation was so fast and painless it looked almost like a farce. The Russian Army seized the entire peninsula practically without firing a shot and without any casualties, other from two deaths that occurred under very strange circumstances.

Ukrainian fans of conspiracy theories have already put forward the crazy suggestion that Kiev promised in advance to hand over Crimea in a secret agreement with Moscow. But the real reason the peninsula fell so quickly is because of the great differences between the two armies and their respective military reforms. The Maidan protests and Russia's annexation of Crimea proved too formidable for Ukraine's armed forces.

Six months ago, Ukraine decided to make the transition to an all-volunteer army. As a result, when these crises hit, Ukraine's few remaining conscripts were just months away from going home and were hardly in a fighting mood. What's more, most of Ukraine's officers and enlisted men clearly had little allegiance to those gained power after President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted in a coup. In addition, the authorities in Kiev simply did not know what to do when soldiers wearing no insignia showed up in Crimea and began seizing administrative buildings and military installations, including Ukrainian military bases.

Throughout the entire crisis, the government's leaders in Kiev were never able to formulate definite instructions to their forces in Crimea. Some expected to reach an agreement with Moscow for the demilitarization of the peninsula, while others hoped that the blockaded Ukrainian soldiers would heroically give up their lives fighting for Crimea.

The success of Russia's Army in Crimea speaks volumes about Serdyukov's military reforms. Above all, the Crimean annexation demonstrated that the Russian Army is capable of deploying its forces rapidly and carrying out a military operation successfully. Although the 40,000 Russian troops were massed on Ukraine's border will not likely invade Ukraine, they will serve as a powerful deterrent to Kiev that it is meaningless to resist and that it would be dangerous to crack down on ethnic Russians living in Ukraine.

As a result of recent reforms, Russia can claim military superiority throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. This raises the question: What is the role of "liberal" military reforms in an authoritarian state? Do they contribute to the country's positive development, or does that more efficient and modern army instead become a tool enabling the authoritarian leader to pursue his personal prejudices and illusions?

For 36 months, Russia has carried out its most radical military reforms of the past 150 years. By drastically cutting the officer corps and the number of skeleton units that had comprised about 80 percent of units of all ground forces, Moscow effectively abandoned the idea of a mass mobilization army.

But the decision to move away from a mass mobilization army had the potential to create a radical change in the relationship between Russian citizens and the state. By seemingly rejecting the image of Russia as one giant military camp or a "besieged fortress," the authorities risked destroying their ideological foundation for maintaining a highly militarized state.

Up until now, the country's Army was formed on the ideological necessity of a mass mobilization army. The half-completed reforms gave the Putin regime the few combat-ready units it needed to seize Crimea, and the well-trained and well-paid units of enlisted soldiers dutifully carried out this act of aggression against a small, poorly defended target.

This sad example indicates that even the seeming correct reforms to the military in no way guarantee that an authoritarian regime will evolve in a positive direction. On the contrary, such "reforms" might only strengthen its hold on power.

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