

The Future of Russia's Armed Forces, After Putin (Op-ed)

In today's Russia, the Army is failing in its core functions

By [Pavel Luzin for Riddle](#)

August 18, 2017



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Any country's army is a direct product of its socio-economic and political system.

The relationship goes the other way, too: The condition of an army exerts a powerful influence on its country's political system and society in general.

In this, Russia's Armed Forces are no exception. They are part and parcel of the current corrupt, quasi-feudal system, which dates back to Soviet times.

That is why every attempt to reform the Army — including the most comprehensive military reforms of 2008–2012 — eventually petered out. The need for an effective fighting force constantly clashed with Russia's ineffective political and economic model.

The most recent reform ended in a compromise: In an army formally consisting of 1 million troops, only 30,000 or so are capable of meeting today's military goals.

But even here there's a contradiction. The authorities regularly bypass officers and soldiers and assign military tasks to so-called "private military companies," the security strongmen who answer to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and the recently formed [National Guard](#).

This leads us to the question: What type of Armed Forces would a democratic, post-Putin Russia need?

The Army in a Democratic Republic

The shape a country's Armed Forces takes on is first and foremost defined by the external threats it faces.

In a democratic republic, the army's main aim is to protect society. A republic will only commit to this or that international obligation on behalf of its own well-being and security. And, in some situations, such obligations might require the use of military force.

The second factor influencing the shape of the Armed Forces is its social role. Most importantly, the army should act as a social boon to everyone who serves in it. If it fails in this function, the Armed Forces not only loses its effectiveness, but it can become a threat to society.

The Reality

The current design of the Russian Armed Forces runs counter to both society's fundamental interests and its financial means. The army ostensibly has 1 million troops, though publicly available data on the number of conscripts, contract soldiers, officers, military school graduates indicates the number is closer to 700,000–750,000, with another 900,000 civilians working for the Defense Ministry.

In 2017, Russia will spend approximately 3 trillion rubles (\$50.5 billion) on its Armed Forces, with 50 to 70 percent of that sum going to maintenance, and the remainder to purchasing weapons.

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Against this backdrop, the military brass is attempting to increase the number of fully combat-ready troops serving in battalion battle groups to 100,000–120,000 people, at least.

In fact, Russia's Armed Forces today are a huge bureaucratic entity that employs one government official for every soldier — and only one in 10 of those, at best, are prepared to go to combat.

The Russian people foot the bill, and yet the blood those officers and soldiers have shed since the collapse of the Soviet Union has advanced only the interests of the ruling elite.

The Russian Army also fails in its function to act as a means of social development for its personnel — It provides no substantial economic, professional, intellectual, or social benefits to soldiers.

Army officers receive only average material compensation and are neglected almost entirely in terms of their professional and intellectual development, as well as their physical and mental health, both during service and after retirement. A person's military career has absolutely no bearing on their subsequent professional life as a civilian.

There also exists an extremely severe form of gender inequality within the Russian Armed Forces that creates an unhealthy psychological atmosphere in and around the army.

One of the key requirements, therefore, will be to create a Russian Armed Forces that can benefit socially those who serve in it.

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The Real Threats

After Russia experiences a change in the ruling regime and undergoes a process of democratization, its Armed Forces should protect Russian society from the following threats:

- Countries that rely on radical ideologies and authoritarian practices for their existence, and that develop nuclear weapons and missiles.
- Authoritarian regimes close to Russia's borders. Over time, such regimes often spark domestic and international conflicts and humanitarian disasters with their consequent outflow of refugees. This also threatens the long-term prospects of Russian companies operating on their territory.
- International movements that engage in armed struggle against human rights and civil liberties and market economies — groups such as Islamic State (a terrorist organization banned in Russia), the Taliban, Hezbollah, etc. as well as states that support these movements.
- The proliferation of technologies used for military missiles and weapons of mass destruction as their production and export become cheaper and easier.
- Threats to the free movement of international trade and marine navigation resulting from territorial disputes and potential conflicts in East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The instability and conflicts upsetting the current system of international trade could complicate Russia's ability to achieve stable economic recovery and development after its

democratization.

International Obligations

Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, and therefore a guarantor of international peace, security and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

According to existing treaties, Russia should act as a guarantor of the security and territorial integrity of its neighbors in the post-Soviet space, and a mediator in the peaceful settlement of conflicts in Moldova's breakaway region of Transdnestr and the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Once Russia ends its conflicts with Ukraine and Georgia, it must return to fulfilling these obligations fully.

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A democratic Russia should forever abandon confrontation with the West and rule out any possibility of military confrontation with NATO. That means Russia should also abandon the idea that its army should spend enormous amounts of taxpayers' money to prepare for such a clash.

Only cooperation with the West will contribute to the well-being and security of Russia's citizens.

A New Armed Forces

Given an increase in quality, the Russian Armed Forces could be reduced to 350,000-375,000 staff. This can be achieved by eliminating units that lack a sufficient number of qualified troops and equipment, excess forces, and branches of the Armed Forces which duplicate their functions.

There are several big hurdles. First, the current system of staffing the army with soldiers and junior commanders, using both conscripts and contract soldiers, has proven highly ineffective.

Second, given the relative weakness of Russia's nascent democratic institutions and this country's past experiences, the army could be used to usurp power in the event of a political crisis.

Third, there is a threat that the multi-ethnic and multicultural nature of the country, coupled with the mixed and voluntary systems for staffing the army, could result in an uncivilized, or barbaric, Armed Forces.

There are several solutions to these problems.

First, regular forces must be formed on a voluntary, contractual, basis, ending conscription.

Second, personnel should be recruited into the armed services and given opportunities to advance without regard to gender, and based not only on their physical and psychological health, but also on their intellectual development and education.

Considering the wide variations in the quality of education throughout Russia's regions and the impossibility of overcoming that problem in the near future, military recruits should hold at least a high school diploma and pass exams demonstrating a basic knowledge of Russian, math, physics, the Constitution and human rights. This would help prevent the army from becoming increasingly uncivilized.

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Third, defense units should be set up in each region to recruit volunteers regardless of gender and taking into account their physical and mental health.

Conscripts would serve in their own region, and for terms short enough not to interrupt their work or studies. They would receive remuneration and have the right to store their weapons at home.

Regional authorities would be allowed to use the defense units in emergency situations, thereby reducing the likelihood of military coups of the political center. This would also correct the current imbalance in which citizens in some Russian regions possess a large number of firearms and others do not.

Fourth, training for officers should focus on giving conscripts a broader foundation in science, the humanities, and foreign languages. Officers would then specialize in their military task while in the field. This would contribute to officers' development throughout their military career and enable their reintegration into civilian life after retirement.

The number of military educational institutions should be reduced to only several universities, in accordance with the military needs of Russia as a democratic republic.

Finally, the position of Defense Minister should be occupied by a civilian — without exceptions.

Implementing these measures would meet Russia's need for fully fledged military forces that would defend the republic and its democratic foundations, while also making it an effective means of social advancement for its personnel.

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**Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.*

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