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Why Russians Now Trust the Army More Than Putin (Op-ed)

That doesn't mean the Kremlin should embark on another military campaign abroad.

By Ella Paneyakh

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

The army is now the most trusted institution in Russia, eclipsing long-time frontrunner President Vladimir Putin. The two traded places when Putin's approval rating of 78 percent plummeted last year to only 58 percent now. In the meantime, support for the army has remained a constant 66 percent to 69 percent.

The number of respondents to a recent Levada Center poll who expressed a lack of faith in the army rose from 6 percent to 10 percent over the same period. But those who had lost faith in Putin more than tripled, from 4 percent to 13 percent.

In 2012-2013, prior to the Crimean crisis, the Russian Orthodox Church ranked second with a 48-percent approval rating. Although that support has not wavered, subsequent events on the peninsula boosted approval of Russia's intelligence services, pushing them to third place to today, after the army and president.

But five years ago, President Putin held a strong lead in the rankings, a suitable balance for Russia's moderate authoritarianism. In a worrying development, however, the army is now the clear leader. It seems that Putin – whose popularity had long seemed immune to crises and blunders – has lost his "Teflon coating" to other institutions.

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In fact, all the central governing bodies experienced a drop in support in line with Putin's decline: approval of the government fell from 35 percent to 27 percent, for the Federation Council from 35 percent to 25 percent and for the State Duma from 33 percent to 25 percent.

That downward trend did not extend, however, to the municipal authorities – whose approval rating remains a stable but unimpressive 27 percent – or to the country's administrative regions.

Confidence in charities was up from 30 percent to 34 percent – a sign of society's developing sense of self-awareness and its ability to help itself. Approval for banks also rose from 20 percent to 25 percent – perhaps a sign of the opposite given the current condition of the economy. Meanwhile, approval of the Prosecutor's Office fell by a similar margin, from 33 percent to 29 percent.

The army was not among the main beneficiaries of the post-Crimean groundswell of support for the federal authorities. The civil authorities — and especially Putin himself — enjoyed the highest uptick in ratings, while those who actually carried out the operation were somehow overlooked in all the talk about "polite men in green" and Putin's initial denial that Russian forces were even involved.

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The reason behind the army's surge in support after Crimea was the Kremlin's saber-rattling. Now that citizens have finally managed to recognize the link between the unsatisfactory domestic political situation – and especially the economy – and the activities of the central government, the army seems least to blame for the difficulties they face.

This high opinion of the army's rank and file, however, does not extend to its chief, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The same Levada Center survey found that his drop in ratings surpassed even the president's decline, falling from 31 percent to 19 percent.

All of this indicates that if Putin and his inner circle embark on yet another foreign policy adventure to rally the people and distract them from the decline in their standard of living – as many observers predict they will do – it might very well backfire on them.

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