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Moscow's military malaise

By Theodore Gerber and Sarah Mendelson

It is no secret that Russia's military has fallen on hard times, but it is difficult to capture the extent of the disarray, disintegration and poverty that have replaced what was once the jewel in the Soviet crown.

Some in the US and Europe may take quiet satisfaction in this state of affairs - until they remember that Russia is a partner in the war on terrorism. The Russian armed forces work alongside troops from NATO countries, and their dysfunctionality has now become a problem for everyone.

First and foremost, of course, the Russian military's decline is a problem for the Russian people. Surveys and focus groups that we ran recently show the decline has become a big frustration for Russians. That could make it President Vladimir Putin's problem, too, if he fails to act and rival candidates or political parties seize the issue.

While trust in the military was nearly universal at the end of the Soviet era, our poll of Russians shows barely 50 per cent now express confidence in the army. Other polls show that the profession of "soldier" is now one of the least prestigious in Russia.

We were startled by the emotion, the fear and the anguish provoked by the mere mention of the army. In each of our focus groups, participants - all of them ordinary Russians of different ages and levels of education - bemoaned the terrible decline of a military they had once been proud of. They expressed fears that their armed forces could not protect them from foreign attack, as well as shame that the Russian military could no longer compare to that of the US. Those with loved ones currently serving or soon to be of draft age feared for their well being.

The participants in our groups did not need to read expert analyses of the military's troubles. They themselves described the entire litany: low and unpaid wages, bullying, corruption, drugs, crime, brutality and the lack of equipment, training, discipline and professionalism. Some participants even cited violent conditions within the military as a source of another big problem in Russia: police brutality. They noted that police work provides many demobilised soldiers with an opportunity to use the only training they received in the military: how to apply brute force and intimidation to extract gain.

Most Russians realise that conscription lies at the root of the myriad problems facing the armed forces. Some in the focus groups described it as "slave labour". Not surprisingly, the Russian public clamours for the professionalisation of the military: our poll data show that the majority of Russians - and 65 per cent of those under 50 - support a contract-based military. This number goes up to 70 per cent for males under 30. Meanwhile, only

about a third of Russians overall and only about a quarter of those under 50 support the current conscript system.

Military reform faces serious obstacles. The most important of these is the war in Chechnya. This vicious and tragic conflict serves the personal interests of a small but entrenched group of officers at the expense of the rest of the military and the country. The war enables them to block changes and it creates a climate where proponents of reform are easily intimidated. It wastes scarce economic resources needed to fund reforms, while helping to institutionalise corruption and corrode the professionalism of the soldiers serving in Chechnya.

The obstacles to reform are surmountable. The opponents of reform in military circles do not face elections. But members of parliament do - in 2003 - and so does the president - in 2004. When politicians who publicly advocate military reform find that their approval ratings jump, the bandwagon will start to roll. The generals had better get on it or get out of the way.

The repercussions of the military's decline stretch way beyond even Russia's vast borders, not least because the US, Europe and Russia work together in peacekeeping, counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism missions. While it is not the job of the west to reform the Russian military, US and European political and military leaders can and should promote the cause.

Through formal and informal channels, they can work with the Putin administration to negotiate a settlement in Chechnya and to put military reform firmly on the political agenda. This would facilitate renewed discussions within military-to-military programmes of the lessons learned from, say, US military reform following Vietnam - a topic untouched since 1997, when there was a brief spark of interest from senior Russian military officials.

With no other arguments in their favour, defenders of conscription often fall back on the claim that Russia cannot afford to professionalise its armed forces. A growing majority of Russians understand the truth: Russia cannot afford not to.

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