



Russia's President Vladimir Putin with Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. (July 16, 2013. Photo: en.kremlin.ru)

## Professionalism and Politics in the Russian Military

By Jason Gresh

*“As mutual professionals, I am confident that your forces will take appropriate measures to avoid any unnecessary escalation.”*

—common refrain exchanged on U.S.-Russia deconfliction hotline for operations in Syria, 2019

The recent Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border has raised yet again questions of Russian intentions in Ukraine, seven years after annexing Crimea. Intentions aside, how can we expect the Russian military to execute their tasks? How professional is this force, and what competencies or traits define this professionalism?

Fortuitously, we have learned much about the modern Russian military. In Syria, where we have had U.S. and Russian forces in relative close proximity, both sides, consciously attempted to avoid actions that could lead to escalatory situations, since both sides wanted to avoid a larger conflagration. At several junctures this dynamic was challenged, not only by the intense threat environment that our

forces operated within, but also in no small part by the larger political and historical framework of relations between our two countries. It required discipline on both sides to avoid a confrontation that could have wider effects beyond the Euphrates River, possibly affecting security in other regions of the world. As chief of ground deconfliction efforts under Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, I listened to the words of our Russian counterparts over the phone.<sup>1</sup> We chose our words carefully, while cognizant of Russian statements and their own underlying messages. During conversations meant to deconflict our respective operations, both our command and the Russians cited the *professionalism* of both our forces as welcome insurance to guard against provocative or otherwise foolhardy activity between our forces in Syria.

But what did each side intend when using *professional* in this sense? Professionalism is a subjective term that is employed without a precise definition, or worse yet, with an intention by the user which contradicts the audience’s understanding. The literature of military professionalism is rich and it offers multiple viewpoints on what constitutes a professional servicemember. Even in the U.S., different conceptions of a *professional soldier* exist. In the U.S., professionalism largely coalesces around expertise, disciplined and ethical behavior, and acceptance into a democratically oriented legal framework. So what does it mean to be a professional in the Russian Armed Forces? What are the values that prevail when speaking of the forces in this manner? In Russia, professionalism is viewed from more of a technical perspective, rather than an ethical one. One possible framework to analyze the contours of professionalism in any society comes from Professor Sam C. Sarkesian, who offered three

different perspectives: military-technical, ethical, and political.<sup>2</sup> These categories help frame the most commonly discussed issues that surround any professional army, regardless of the socio-cultural environment in which it serves. Examined from these three perspectives, efforts to professionalize the Russian military has a mixed record of success. While its military has made great advances in the level of technical expertise, its efforts to assert state-sponsored patriotic values undermine a deeper professional ethic.

To start with this framework, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and General Staff have given

---

Professionalism is a subjective term that is employed without a precise definition, or worse yet, with an intention by the user which contradicts the audience’s understanding.

---

much attention in recent years to the importance of *military-technical* expertise. In fact, most contemporary Western analysis of the Russian military has exclusively drawn attention to the proficiency gains displayed in the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Probably unfairly, the current literature takes as its point of departure the relative chaos with which the Russian military grappled with the Soviet collapse in the 1990s and ensuing turmoil on its periphery, including the transformative experience in Chechnya. Increasingly visible evidence from current military operations shows that the Russian Armed Forces have employed and synchronized joint and combined arms operations

to an effectiveness not demonstrated in recent history.<sup>3</sup> Their improved capacity proves not only their ability to learn from Western concepts, but also innovate their own concepts of military operational art.

Many of the advances in Russia's military expertise have their roots in reforms initiated by former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. Coming from a business background, Serdyukov set out to streamline many of the systems of the MoD, cut excess personnel numbers, eliminate corruption, reform military education, and modernize equipment. While Serdyukov certainly took bold steps in implementing long overdue reforms, his record of success is mixed. Many of those initiatives rightly attempted to reduce endemic corruption through restructuring. While not immediately successful, those efforts nevertheless introduced new organizational cultural norms to show that corruption would not be tolerated. His cuts to the officer corps and military educational system took the approach of cutting the fat to help optimize the military, but without asking the harder questions about what type of military the Russian state really needed. His reforms were loathed by the senior uniformed ranks, who accused him of taking unilateral action. Yet his reformist approach shook the system and prompted the military officer class to take more ownership, since they knew that changes were overdue.<sup>4</sup> Serdyukov deserves credit for embarking on personnel reforms that cut the conscription term and increased focus on improving work conditions to attract *kontraktniki* (volunteers who enlist on a contractual basis). These structural changes were given a boost after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and helped drastically raise the public image of the Russian military, which suffered a series of setbacks in the '90s and early 2000s.

Russian nationalist sentiment and general antipathy towards the West had been increasing since the mid-2000s, but the 2014 events in Ukraine entrenched these differences. Taking advantage of positive public opinion at home, President Vladimir Putin endorsed budgetary increases for the military, along with significant increases in the 10-year State Armament Program. Modern equipment increased, addressing long concerns over a poorly equipped military with historically low readiness rates.<sup>5</sup> The conflict in Ukraine (and later, in Syria) gave the military much-needed combat experience that both raised morale and drove innovation in military art and technical proficiency.

But any army's ability to increase and sustain its expertise depends on its ability to secure support and funding within a larger *political* framework. The Russian Armed Forces have proven itself an adept political actor, even though its individual servicemembers will always reject any such description. The military establishment receives unabashed support from Putin, and the corresponding budgetary disbursements have generously contributed to its modernization. This is not unlike the unassailable position of the military in American society; "support to the troops" is a bipartisan patriotic position. Yet in Russia, the military as an institution constitutes a large part of its national identity. Fundamental and historic insecurity over its lack of natural borders has caused the Russian state to invest heavily in defense. Despite a seemingly interconnected and uniform civilian-military vision in the highest levels of the Russian government, some disagreements over the military's role remain.<sup>6</sup> For example, force developments in the structure of the Russian Armed Forces reveal a military both signaling its capacity for expeditionary operations and simultaneously

warning of an impending NATO attack.<sup>7</sup> Before examining this, a brief note about how to frame the Russian military as a political actor is merited.

Given the complex disintegration of the Soviet Union, the subsequent chaotic 1990s under Boris Yeltsin, and the enduring regime of Putin, the Russian Armed Forces has had to reinvent itself amidst tumultuous events and periods that now form part of its identity. The loss of the Soviet Empire, the struggles in Chechnya, and past funding challenges have all left an indelible mark. Moreover, the Russian Armed Forces (more so than its American counterpart) has been an overt political actor since Peter the Great established the tables of ranks. Observers have offered competing explanations of how power is shared

---

In hindsight, it is tempting to think these reforms allowed the Kremlin to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy—that the Kremlin implemented them to give itself more tools abroad.

---

in Russia between the military and its political masters. Several scholars, like Roman Kolkowicz, described the contest between the military and the political establishment as a zero-sum contest, with the military claiming autonomy, while the party apparatus exerts control over the military via ideological instruments (political officers, or *politruk*). Others, like William Odom, pushed back against this interpretation, explaining that the political and military class had similar values and interests in maintaining the status quo. Timothy

Colton and Thane Gustafson attempted to further refine both approaches by delineating how each block respected each other's sovereignty over various issues to varying degrees. In all these interpretations, there is consensus about the fact that the military ultimately aims to preserve state power.<sup>8</sup> Given the fortune of inheriting the presidency when the state coffers were filling up, Putin sought to rehabilitate Russia by, among other things, rehabilitating its armed forces.

Putin saw that the best way to “make Russia great again” and solidify his power was to leverage the enormous latent value of Russian and Soviet military tradition. Reforms enacted after the Chechen wars, aimed at improving military effectiveness, have bolstered the image of the Russian military at home. Putin now controls the military like many other institutions in Russia—by granting partial autonomy in return for loyalty. Military reforms enacted under former Defense Minister Serdyukov were strongly opposed by senior officers, not only because of the way they were carried out, but also because they diverged from more traditional concepts of a defense based on mass mobilization.

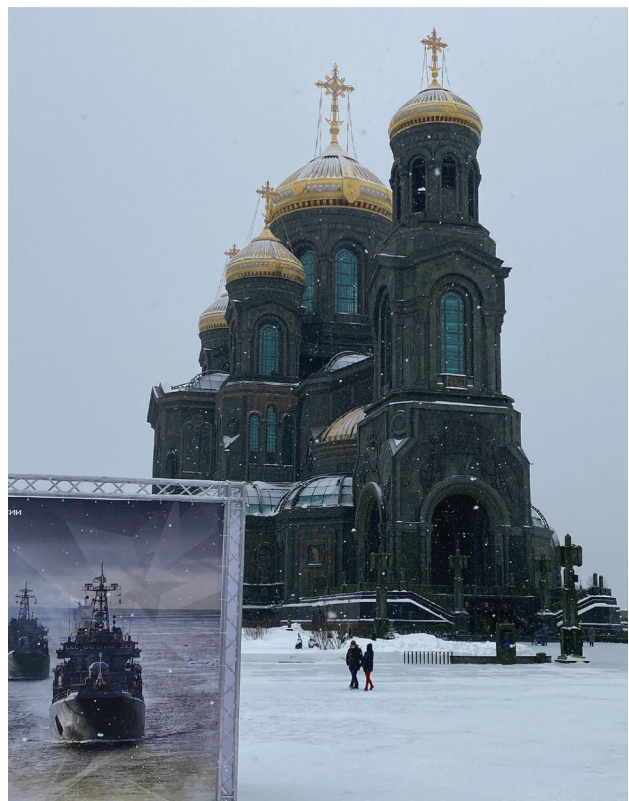
In hindsight, it is tempting to think these reforms allowed the Kremlin to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy—that the Kremlin implemented them to give itself more tools abroad. Yet in reality, implementation was a result of a mixture of internal and external pressures: internal pressures to reform its army after negative publicity surrounding *dedovshchina* (hazing), and external pressures from observing the U.S. modify its force in the wake of the Cold War. Some of these reforms planted the seeds of combat effectiveness that allowed Russia to pursue a more aggressive policy in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. Debates will continue about

how much of this transformation was strategic or reactive. Yet a more assertive use abroad of the military as an instrument of foreign policy has its limits, even in a country like Russia. The Russian government has always been sensitive to reports of its servicemembers being killed in action abroad—from the conscript-based force in Afghanistan through today’s secrecy surrounding military casualties in Syria and parts of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

To meet both defensive and expeditionary objectives, the Russian military had to enact a balanced force structure. Although popular support for the military has increased, this support is still dependent on a force that is (1) successful and (2) professional, as it still depends on mandatory conscription for all males between the ages of 18 and 27. The continued reliance on military conscription to fill the ranks serves both a practical role, to help provide defense, and a broader aim, to remind the populace of its inherent duty to serve the motherland. Most sources estimate that at least a quarter of the Russian military is made up of conscripts.<sup>10</sup> But the military under current policies must also prepare itself for limited expeditionary operations to project Russian power on the global stage. The military decides how to govern and manage itself within these objectives and constraints, so long as it serves the assertive foreign policy of Putin and maintains the public’s trust.

Recent government initiatives betray anxiety over the military’s ability to successfully operate in this framework. If anything, the military is becoming more political, which is reminiscent of past policies. New Ministry of Defense policies to reinstate political officers among the ranks to raise morale harkens back to the time when Soviet political

officers were installed in units to ensure political loyalty. When questioned about the reintroduction of this concept, General Kartopolov, the Chief of the Military-Political Directorate of the General Staff, said that the current information environment demanded the creation of a separate body to cultivate patriotism, spirituality, and duty to serve the motherland. Kartopolov framed it as a necessary policy to insulate service members—and future soldiers—against the “propaganda and lies which obscure our point of view” that leads to the “very serious consequences witnessed in neighboring countries.”<sup>11</sup> Critics claim that this action is creating a reactionary structure to instill values absent a clear guiding ideology. The Russian military seeks to



Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces (Photo: Jason Gresh)

change this by creating political officers dedicated to not only morale and psychological support, but to elevating patriotism as *the de facto* ideology. Moreover, the Ministry of Defense now actively cultivates Russian orthodoxy as a part of this patriotic strain. One need only see the recently completed Cathedral of the Armed Forces to see this on full display. Patriotism in and of itself, extolled in sufficient quantities, is not a bad thing. Yet the dilemma is not about fostering patriotism; it is about creating special officers who need to reinforce it. The installment of these officers at the unit level betrays a lack of confidence in the military's ability to generate loyalty to the state—or to Russia itself.

The re-installation of the *politruks* in the ranks exemplifies the apprehension that senior military leaders have about those they lead and speaks volumes about how they envisage professionalism. The new structure to ensure political loyalty defines acceptable values that servicemembers should hold, like patriotism and duty to their motherland. This pressure risks obscuring more traditional military *ethical* norms, such as honor and discipline.

The Russian military has a strong tradition, again dating back to Peter the Great, of cultivating honor within the officers' corps as the basis for ethics in the army writ large.<sup>12</sup> These values have been legally codified as criteria for service in the military. There is a lengthy description in Article 51 of the annual federal law of "Military Obligation and Military Service" which describes offenses that merit separation from the military, which include "discrediting the honor and dignity of a servicemember," analogous to the U.S.'s UCMJ Article 134 of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman."<sup>13</sup> Yet this offense is difficult to precisely

define, inviting criticism that it could be used to prosecute those who merely disagree with higher-ranking officials. It is difficult to cite hard data about either the degree to which this article is enforced, or the attitudes that servicemembers themselves hold about military ethics. In Western militaries, if leadership perceives an erosion of ethical values and norms in the ranks, unit-level commanders are held accountable. But in Russia, the General Staff chose not to impart this duty to commanding officers and created instead a parallel cadre to foster these values. Could they not trust their own officer corps, built on three centuries of military tradition, to instill these instead?

### Two further issues speak to the trajectory of professionalism in the Russian Armed Forces.

Any discussion of professionalism in the Russian military is incomplete without addressing *dedovshchina*, which is the act of physical hazing and humiliation (sometimes violent) of new recruits by older service members. This is obviously frowned upon, because of the destructive way it undermines cohesion and morale in military units. Instances of *dedovshchina* have drastically declined over the years, an incredibly positive development which can be attributed to both civil society pressure and the halving of the term of conscription.<sup>14</sup> According to the Russian high court, the number of convictions of individuals "violating military rules of mutual relations between service members" decreased from around 1,900 in 2010 to 300 in 2018. But the complete picture is harder to decipher. Cases of abuse may be difficult to expose, given the closed nature of the Russian military. Increased esprit de corps among the ranks exerts strong pressure to

contain any such abuses, but also to prevent their exposure. Today, cases of *dedovshchina* may be as much an issue of identity as discipline. Violence in the ranks could be ethnically motivated, as fostering unflinching loyalty to the Russian state may take on ethno-historical nationalistic tones that would drown out other concepts of honor, integrity, and discipline.

Examining how well the Russian military polices its own ranks, as well as the grounds for dismissing enlisted soldiers or officers, is another important metric for understanding its military values and professionalism. Recent shifts in the structure of legal jurisdiction over service members are notable. Enforcement of breaches of military discipline and other offenses were centralized in 2017 into a separate and autonomous body of the General Prosecutor's Office, which now reports directly to the president.<sup>15</sup> Previously, each uniformed service (of which the Armed Forces is one) had its own military courts and jurisdiction over its own servicemembers. Now a centralized inspector general apparatus maintains officers in each of the uniformed services. This apparatus also controls the disbursement of salaries and pensions, another role previously performed by the services. Formally, this means the military and civilian leadership of the Armed Forces, the National Guard, and other uniformed services are not the final arbiters of military justice within their ranks. The 2017 reforms were supposedly introduced to combat instances of corruption connected with military contracting and procurement. When asked in 2017 about the general trends of crime in the Armed Forces, Chief Military Prosecutor Valeriy Petrov admitted that crimes, such as *dedovshchina*, still exist, although instances of violent abuses of power had decreased.<sup>16</sup> While his comment seems positive, the actual data are not available to the public.

In terms of operational capacity and effectiveness, the Russian military has greatly increased the level of professionalism within its ranks. From certain perspectives, such as technical expertise, the level of professionalism has increased significantly, thanks to developments in military education and training, investment in new technologies, and a greatly increased training regime—all given further impetus after the events in Ukraine and Syria. Small-scale and successful expeditionary deployments inculcate a learning culture, drive innovation in military doctrine and tactics, and foster pride in Russia's military institutions. These developments point towards a more professional force by encouraging discipline and competency that naturally curbs unwanted or undesirable actions. It is in this sense that respective commanders in Syria employed the "professional" refrain.

President Putin and the General Staff have initiated a set of rear-guard actions to consolidate these gains, perhaps sensing that some of these successes are short lived and subject to pressure from internal forces. The top-down re-introduction of political officers who enforce patriotic and conservative themes among the ranks risks misinterpretation as a loyalty to a particular set of people, and not to larger and more permanent values. Patriotism is a worthy value in any society, except when people in power have to remind you of its importance. No army is immune to political forces that surround it. Recent events in the U.S. have borne witness to this. The arc of Russian history suggests that periods of stability are followed by periods of social upheaval. How the Russian military responds to inevitable change could be the real test of its professionalism.

---

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.

## Endnotes

1. Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) Operation Inherent Resolve splits responsibility for the deconfliction with Russian Group of Forces of air operations from ground operations.
2. John A. Nagl, Tony Pfaff, and Don M. Snider, *Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, December 1999), 3–4, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/army-professionalism-the-military-ethic-and-officership-in-the-21st-century/>
3. Seth G. Jones, ed., *Moscow's War in Syria* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020), [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones\\_MoscowsWarinSyria\\_WEB\\_update.pdf?J1rQM6.th1g6DA034fNCT\\_DmxTFYpJPx](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/Jones_MoscowsWarinSyria_WEB_update.pdf?J1rQM6.th1g6DA034fNCT_DmxTFYpJPx)
4. Dale Herspring, "Anatoly Serdyukov and the Russian Military," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 60:6 (2013): 54, DOI: [10.2753/PPC1075-8216600604](https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216600604)
5. Michael Kofman, "The Durability of Russian Military Power: Moscow's Prospects for Sustaining Direct Competition," *Russia Military Analysis*, May 25, 2018, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/tag/state-armament-program/>
6. David W. Rivera and Sharon Werning Rivera, "The Militarization of the Russian Elite under Putin," *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 65, no. 4, (2018): 221–232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1295812>
7. Andrew Radin et. al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 61–66, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR3099>
8. Gomart, Thomas. *Russian Civil-military Relations: Putin's Legacy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), 16–17.
9. Peter Zwack, "Russia," in *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration*, ed. R. D. Hooker, Jr., (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press December 2016), 225–248, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/charting-a-course/Article/1026986/chapter-11-russia/>
10. Fredrik Westerlund and Susanne Oxenstierna, eds., *Russian Military Capability in a Ten Year Perspective—2019* FOI-R–4758–SE (Stockholm: FOI, 2019), 24, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R–4758–SE>
11. Viktor Demin, "Генерал-полковник Андрей Картаполов: «У советской системы позаимствуем лучшее, но содержание изменим,» [Colonel-General Andrei Kartapolov: "We are borrowing the best from the Soviet system, but are changing the content"], *Yezhenedel'nik Zvezda [The Weekly Star]*, September 10, 2018, <https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/2018910933-EN4aF.html>
12. Fyarit Aizyatov and Yuliya Burova, "СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ КАТЕГОРИИ ЧЕСТИ КАК ОСНОВЫ РУССКОГО ВОЕННОГО ИСКУССТВА: КУЛЬТУРНО-ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ" [The Establishment of the Category of Honor as the Basis for Russian Military Art: A Cultural-Historical Analysis], *Общество: философия, история, культура, [Society: Philosophy, History, Culture]* 74, no. 6 (December 2020): <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/stanovlenie-kategorii-chesti-kak-osnovy-russkogo-voennogo-iskusstva-kulturno-istoricheskiy-analiz>
13. Aleksandr Kruglov and Bogdan Stepovoi, "Военных обяжут беречь честь и достоинство, [The Military will be Obligated to Protect Honor and Dignity]," *Izvestiya*, March 6, 2018, <https://iz.ru/715007/aleksandr-kruglov-bogdan-stepovoi/voennykh-obiazhut-berech-chest-i-dostoinstvo>
14. Lada Lindell and Margarita Alekhina, "Дедовщина выходит из строя, [Dedovshchina is Disappearing from the Ranks]," RBC, November 29, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2019/11/29/5dd6b5749a79479efffb5771>
15. Timofei Borisov, "Силовой прием, [Power Reception]," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, August 31, 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/08/31/valerij-petrov-za-korrupciiu-v-silovyh-vedomstvah-osuzhdeny-500-chelovek.html>
16. Borisov, "Силовой прием, [Power Reception].










Colonel Jason P. Gresh is a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer (FAO) serving as the Army Attaché to the Russian Federation at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. He was previously a military fellow at both the Kennan Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Previously, COL Gresh was the Chief, Russian Deconfliction Cell, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) – Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). He also recently served as Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation, U.S. Embassy Tallinn. He has past assignments with U.S. European Command and the U.S. Defense Attaché Office in Kyiv, Ukraine. COL Gresh started his Army career as an Armor officer and served in Iraq with 1st Infantry Division.

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

## The Wilson Center

-  [wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)
-  [facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter](https://facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter)
-  [@TheWilsonCenter](https://twitter.com/TheWilsonCenter)
-  202.691.4000

## The Kennan Institute

-  [wilsoncenter.org/kennan](http://wilsoncenter.org/kennan)
-  [kennan@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:kennan@wilsoncenter.org)
-  [facebook.com/Kennan.Institute](https://facebook.com/Kennan.Institute)
-  [@kennaninstitute](https://twitter.com/kennaninstitute)
-  202.691.4100