

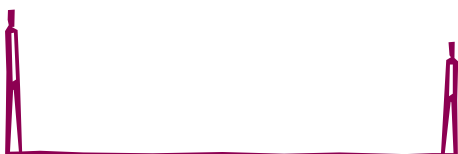
# PROTECTORS OF PUTIN'S VERTICAL

86

RUSSIAN POWER MINISTRIES  
BEFORE THE 2011–2012 ELECTIONS

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FIIA BRIEFING PAPER 86 • September 2011



ULKOPOLIITTINEN INSTITUUTTI  
UTRIKESPOLITISKA INSTITUTET  
THE FINNISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

# PROTECTORS OF PUTIN'S VERTICAL

## RUSSIAN POWER MINISTRIES BEFORE THE 2011–2012 ELECTIONS



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FIIA Briefing Paper 86  
September 2011

- Contrary to the traditional behaviour during the election period, the Russian government is risking irritating the security ministries and agencies by conducting extremely painful reforms in the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior. However, the authorities cannot avoid such reforms because of the total inefficiency of these two “power ministries”.
- In the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008, the Defence Ministry decided to carry out the most radical military reform undertaken in Russia over the past 100 years. However, it is still unclear whether the reformers will be able to resolve the main problem concerning the military construction – the repeal of conscription.
- In contrast to the Armed Forces, the reform of the Ministry of the Interior does not even touch the major deficiencies in the law enforcement agencies, namely their centralization, lack of public control, and the prevalence of repressive functions over protection of citizens. The ongoing reform is merely a great purge. The country's leadership believes that by firing corrupt police officers, it can solve the problem of corruption in general.
- The reform of the Security Council and the rejection of any reform of the Ministry of the Interior troops is a prescription for possible public unrest rather than an attempt to improve inter-agency coordination.
- The genuine reason for these reforms is the complete exhaustion of Prime Minister Putin's model of organizing the security forces. Yet, the next president will need their complete loyalty because of the real possibility of public unrest in the next few years.

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia research programme  
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs



Russian Honour Guard standing in attention at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow. Photo: Chad J. McNeeley / United States Navy

The Russian authorities are currently undertaking reforms of the two main “power structures” – the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior. Such reforms are always precarious, especially in Russia and particularly at a time when the political establishment is preparing for the election period. The Russian authorities have traditionally been very cautious in their attitude towards the so-called “power structures” (*silovye struktury*)<sup>1</sup> during the pre-election period. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, the Armed Forces, together with the law enforcement and security agencies themselves constitute a vast cohort of voters – about 3 million (and no less than 10 million if one includes family members). Second, the military personnel, some of whom vote in closed military installations, are ideally placed when it comes to rigging the election results. Thirdly, the loyalty of the leaders of the “power structures” is a critical factor, especially when the name of the next president is not known. Divided loyalties and inter-agency conflicts, like the one in 2007 between the Federal Security Service and

the Federal Drug Control Service<sup>2</sup> or the current one between the recently created Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General’s Office, add to the general uncertainty over the political situation.<sup>3</sup>

However, at the present time the Russian political authorities are demonstrating different behaviour,

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2 General-lieutenant Alexander Bulbov, chief of the operational department of the Federal Drug Control Service, was arrested during the conflict and spent two years in custody. His chief, Victor Cherkesov, published a famous article in *Kommersant* in which he blamed those who betrayed the “brotherhood” of security service officers by becoming “merchants”. The conflict was brought to an end by firing both Cherkesov and the FSB Head Nikolai Patrushev, even though both were close to Putin.

3 The Investigative Committee was created under the General Prosecutor’s Office in September 2008. Two years later, in September 2010, the committee was turned into an independent agency under President Medvedev’s orders. As a result, the Prosecutor’s Office lost its most important functions, which had provided it with administrative weight, namely the right to initiate and close a criminal case and the right to conduct investigations. All of this led to a bitter conflict between the General Prosecutor’s Office and the Investigative Committee. Incriminating materials were leaked to the press and directed against the head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, and against the Attorney-General, Yuri Chaika. In Spring 2011, the Investigative Committee opened a case against high-profile prosecutors in the Moscow region, accusing them of providing protection for an illegal casino owned by a son of Moscow’s Prosecutor General

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1 This specific Russian term covers more than ten ministries and agencies, such as the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the Federal Security Service (FSB).

which is evidenced both by the security structure reforms and the unwillingness or inability to end the inter-agency struggle. Some commentators have jumped to the conclusion that this indicates a point of conflict between Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev. This hypothesis is more than questionable as not a single important decision in the defence and security sphere can be taken without Putin's approval. A more plausible explanation for the large-scale reforms is the complete exhaustion of Putin's "power vertical". This became evident in 2008 and 2009. The Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior are unable to perform their essential functions, and in their current form consequently pose a threat to the existing regime.

### **The Armed Forces: Rejecting mass mobilization**

The Russian-Georgian conflict in August 2008 was a clear indication of the need for reform in the Russian Armed Forces. It turned out that even with the annual increases in the military budget of 20-25 per cent, the Armed Forces could not readily defeat even a weak enemy such as Georgia. Russian officers who had served 20 years in the "skeleton units"<sup>4</sup> refused to assume command over fully-manned detachments during the war. The units themselves were not prepared for combat. Even if they were armed with modern weapons, the organization of the armed forces was such that they could not use the military equipment effectively. Russian commanders did not understand the concept of joint operation, and as a result different branches of the forces acted separately and in isolation from each other.

Proceeding under the slogan of "optimization" – that is, the elimination of disparities ostensibly resulting from the collapse of the Soviet army and the mass layoffs of the 1990s – the launched reform represents the first attempt at a final rejection of the framework of a mass-mobilization army, which has been in use in the Russian armed forces during the last fifty years.

Under this reform, which should be completed in 2012, 135,000 out of 355,000 officer positions will be

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4 Units with officer cadre and stored weapons, which were supposed to receive the necessary enlisted personnel in case of war-time mobilization only.

eliminated. All skeleton units are being disbanded. As a result, the number of units has been reduced 11 times. Out of 1,187 units in the Ground Forces before the start of the reform, only 189 remain today, while one third of the officers in the Armed Forces have already been dismissed. The scale of the reductions makes it clear that, contrary to the official statements, this has nothing to do with ordinary "optimization" or balancing the structure. The elimination of skeleton units and the dismissal of surplus numbers of officers means that the Russian political leadership has decided to abandon the idea of mass mobilization for good. If not so long ago defending the country in the event of aggression meant mobilizing four to eight million reservists, then today the Ground Forces, according to their former Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Boldyrev, plan to deploy only 60 brigades (about 300,000 soldiers). According to the Chief of the General Staff, Nikolay Makarov, in the event of war, a total of 700,000 reservists are to be mobilized.

Under these circumstances, it would be logical to phase out the draft and gradually proceed towards all-volunteer armed forces. Indeed, the main reason for the existence of a conscription-based army is the preparation of a trained reserve that will be available on demand and will increase the size of the Armed Forces several times over. In situations where the number of reservists amounts to about two-thirds of the size of the Armed Forces in peacetime (which is characteristic of a voluntary, but not a conscription-based army), the draft simply does not make sense. If, in the event of military action, only 700,000 reservists are to be called up, why allocate considerable resources to the training of 750,000 conscripts each year?

Until recently, the answer to this fundamental question has been extremely controversial. A year ago, the Chiefs of the Defence Ministry insisted that the Armed Forces would be formed mainly through conscription, thus making it known that the federal programme for the partial transfer of the Armed Forces to a service contract had failed. At the same time, they tried to ignore the fact that in the next 10 years only 600,000-700,000 youths will reach the draft age of 18 annually. According to calculations by Vitaly Tsimbal from the Economic Policy Institute named after Yegor Gaidar, by 2014 all recruiting resources will be exhausted.

But suddenly there was a 180-degree turn. First, on March 18 2011, the Defence Minister, Anatoliy Serdyukov, said that the Russian Armed Forces should have 425,000 contract soldiers. Only a few months earlier, it had been suggested that 100,000 would suffice. A little later, the same Chief of the General Staff, Makarov, declared that the Russian army has been conceived as a volunteer army. Conscripts, according to him, should not exceed 10-15% of the total number of the Armed Forces. With this approach, the draft is needed only for the selection of candidates for future contract soldiers.

Another indication of this inconsistency concerns the size of the officer corps. In the first two years of the reform, the Ministry of Defence was extremely tough, firing around 120,000 “redundant officers”. But suddenly, on the pretext of creating air and space defence forces (an excuse which is more than doubtful), it was announced that the size of the officer corps will be *increased* by another 70,000. The most likely explanation for this turn of events is that the state simply failed to provide apartments for the retired officers.

This type of zigzagging with the reform is due to the fact that it takes place in an authoritarian state. The authorities are not anxious to explain to the public the need for such a reform. After all, to make it happen, the Ministry of Defence needs the support of the top political leadership only. But the lack of public involvement means that the Russian tandem can halt the reform any time it decides that it is fraught with political risks. It was no accident that the decision to increase the size of the officer corps was made after meetings of paratroop veterans, which were held under anti-government slogans. That’s why, until now, it has been impossible to say that the point of no return for military reform has already been passed.

### **The Ministry of the Interior: Purges instead of reforms**

The reform of the Interior Ministry, despite the differences between the two agencies, started for the same reason as the reform of the Armed Forces. The main law enforcement agency in the country was unable to perform its functions. By 2010, it became clear that public reaction to the criminal activities of the police demonstrated that the people are just

as afraid of police officials as they are of criminals.<sup>5</sup> Later, the case of the so-called “Primorye partisans” demonstrated that if criminals declare that their intention is to “take revenge against the cops”, public sympathies would not be on the side of the law enforcement officers.

The authorities responded with the “Police Act”, suggesting, if not radical reform, then at least a move to make the law enforcement agencies more humane (statutory prohibition of torture, a desire to regulate the use of physical force and weapons, and so forth). However, the reform of the Ministry of the Interior is much more superficial than the reform of the Armed Forces, mainly because it does not address the fundamental questions of the organization of law enforcement. The Ministry of the Interior remains a heavily centralized structure. Due to its rigid vertical structure, the Ministry does not have the necessary manoeuvrability in the sphere of the fight against criminality (the preventive maintenance, uncovering, suppression and investigation of crimes).

In fact, the reform has been reduced to the mere re-certification of employees, which allows the authorities to conduct an extensive clean sweep in the Ministry to get rid of corrupt employees. At the same time, the Kremlin shuns the notion that maintaining the existing system of law enforcement agencies will inevitably increase rather than decrease corruption.

### **Preparing for the next president: Seeking safety guarantees**

It seems that it would be a mistake to assume that in conducting the reform of the Armed Forces and Interior Ministry, President Medvedev is acting against Putin and his legacy. Recalling the helplessness of the mass-mobilization army against the invasion of Chechen fighters into Dagestan in 1999, Putin noted in 2006 that: “In order to effectively repel the terrorists we needed to put together a group of at least 65,000 men, but the combat-ready units in the entire army came to only 55,000 men, and they

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5 The most notorious case concerned the chief of one of Moscow’s regional police departments, Major Denis Yevsyukov. On March 27, 2009 he killed two supermarket customers and wounded seven others, while drunk.

were scattered throughout the entire country. Our armed forces came to a total of 1,400,000 men, but there were not enough men to fight. This is how kids who had never seen combat before were sent in to fight. I will never forget this. And it is our task today to make sure that this never happens again.”

However, according to certain sources, in 2003 Putin refused to undertake radical military reform, saying that he did not want to play the role of Gaidar for the Armed Forces. Now, such a reform is being carried out by Defence Minister Serdyukov. It seems to be no accident that the reform is scheduled for completion by 2012. Thus, the “dirty work” related to the dismissal of thousands of officers is to be completed during Medvedev’s presidency. The new president would then obtain Armed Forces consisting of two components. First, a modernized nuclear force that can be used as an important foreign policy tool. And second, relatively small conventional forces capable of succeeding in a local conflict, like the one between Georgia and Russia, without additional mobilization.

At the same time, the reform of the Ministry of the Interior has become a “great purge”. The *Lenta.ru* news website reported in August that 183,000 officers have been fired since the re-accreditation started in March 2011. By 2012, the Ministry plans to reduce its staff by 22 per cent, after which the total number of employees will have been reduced to a little over a million.

Although the Russian leadership is aware that such reforms are a pre-defined risk, they have decided to see them through. Many experts anticipate that in the first three years the next president will be doomed to implement many “unpopular” measures: to increase the pension age, to switch to paid services in healthcare and education, and to introduce a sharp increase in the price of housing and communal services. In these circumstances, the most acute problems of the “power structures” have to be resolved before the election.

With the decision to carry out such painful reforms before the elections, the authorities are hoping to avoid protests. They are relying on the inertia of the Armed Forces as well as the law enforcement agencies, and the inability of both to self-organize in order to protect their interests. The main carrot is the expected threefold increase in salary, after

which it would be quite comparable with salaries paid to the military and the police in the West. After the increase, a police lieutenant should receive about 45,000 roubles (about 1,100 euros), and a lieutenant in the Armed Forces over 50,000 roubles (1,200 euros). Waiting for these salaries very effectively prevents the spread of protest. In connection with that, around 1,600 graduates from the military academies agreed to take sergeant rather than officer positions in 2010.

At the same time, the reforms should strengthen the government’s capability to act and respond in crisis situations. It is no accident that Interior troops are not subject to the same kind of drastic cuts as the army. At present, there are 190,000 internal troops, with 170,000 being planned for retainment in 2016, which is two-thirds the strength of the ground troops.

#### **The Security Council: A coordinating body or a new political springboard?**

In May 2011, President Medvedev signed a decree inconspicuously named “Security Council Questions”. Unexpectedly, the decree grants unprecedented powers to the Security Council Secretary. Within the bureaucratic hierarchy itself, the Security Council Secretary has always been more of an organizational post. The Secretary was originally responsible for making preparations for Security Council meetings, drafting decisions and writing up pointless doctrines and policy papers.

All of a sudden, Medvedev’s decree endows the post with an importance almost rivalling the authority of the ruling tandem. Accordingly, the Security Council Secretary will be responsible for “the control of Russia’s armed forces, other forces, military formations and bodies”. That is to say that the Secretary will control not only the armed forces, but also the law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Moreover, Medvedev’s decree stipulates that the Security Council Secretary will “participate in formulating and implementing foreign policy”. The Secretary will also “make proposals to the Security Council for coordinating the work of federal and regional executive bodies in national emergencies”. In effect, the country’s power structures, who previously answered only to the president, now have their own “tsar”.



Advertisement of military-style clothing at the Kursk railway station in Moscow. Photo: Katri Pynnöniemi

Even in the ultra-centralized Soviet state no official wielded that degree of power. True, certain administrative departments of the Communist Party's Central Committee carried a great deal of weight in supervising the power structures. But their superiors were the Politburo members who, in turn, answered to the Central Committee members. What is significant is that the Security Council Secretary is a member of the consultative body consisting of the defence minister, foreign minister and director of the Federal Security Service – all of whose functions the Secretary now controls. In effect, he is the first among equals.

In addition, the Security Council itself is now empowered to monitor budgetary spending for defence, national security and law enforcement – fully one-fourth of the national budget. What's more, the Security Council is charged with controlling the government, in part by analyzing a consolidated annual report on its main activities and results. In short, the Security Council will now run the government.

It seems highly unlikely that all of this new-found power will be vested in the current Security Council Secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, who was given the post as a sort of honourable discharge from his previous job as the director of the FSB after the above-mentioned conflict with the then head of the Federal Drug Control Service, Viktor Cherkesov. Besides, Patrushev gained notoriety in his role as Secretary for having made ill-advised statements that Russia's

military doctrine would spell out the rules for using nuclear weapons in local conflicts and that Moscow was prepared to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike if necessary. That major gaffe was quietly disavowed by officialdom soon afterwards. Obviously, it would be unwise to hand over so much power to such a figure.

Those well versed in Kremlin intrigues are convinced that somebody else will soon be appointed Security Council Secretary. And that choice will reveal a great deal. It is highly likely that strengthening the Security Council is part of Putin's election campaign strategy, in that he wants a trustworthy person in control of the power structures to make sure there will be no more political inter-agency infighting. But on the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that the national leader, given his obsessive suspicion of everyone around him, would risk giving so much authority to any single individual.

Finally, it is highly likely that the post of Security Council Secretary is being prepared as a springboard for a new successor. It suffices to recall how Putin himself was appointed prime minister in 1999 as a means to showcase himself to the people.

To conclude, the large-scale reforms that are taking place in the Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior indicate two related trends. First, the government has stopped fearing and is ready to undertake very tough experiments with the "power structures". The leaders of the law enforcement

agencies and the Armed Forces are an essential part of Putin's elite. They have no intention of countering the orders of senior management. Second, Putin has authorized the painful and unpopular security force reforms during Medvedev's presidency, hoping for their loyalty after 2012.

The background to the need for the current reforms lay in the Putin era "stability" which, in effect, was due to a decisive rejection of the reform of the key state institutions. Primarily, this concerned the force structures. Virtually all that the state policy amounted to during Putin's years in power was an annual increase of 20-25 per cent in their budget. But this was not enough to maintain the Armed Forces, which were a replica of the Soviet Army. As a result, the force structures have degraded to the point where they have become a serious threat to national security.

At the same time, Putin did understand the need for reform. However, he did not want such painful reforms to be associated with his name. Seen in this light, Medvedev's presidential term has focused on preparing for a 12-year Putin rule. Medvedev has increased the term of the presidency, and he has got rid of many of the regional bosses – including the leaders of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan. Finally, when the extent of the degradation of the security forces was revealed, Medvedev had no choice but to start the reforms.

During his next presidency, Putin may find that the goals established for the reforms have not been achieved completely. For example, the readiness of the Armed Forces will be low due to an insufficient number of professional soldiers. This may become evident during the course of a possible local conflict, such as that between Russia and Georgia. And it may give grounds for a return to the Soviet model of mobilization of the Armed Forces. Thus, Putin is likely to agree to the reforms as long as they do not morph into problems. If they do, it may result in a return to the Soviet model.

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ISBN 978-951-769-314-1  
ISSN 1795-8059  
Cover photo: Sergey / Wikimedia Commons  
Layout: Juha Mäkinen  
Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

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