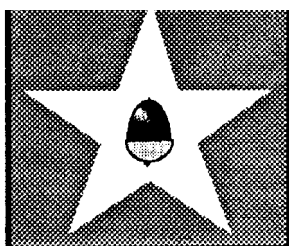


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

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**The Russian Armed Forces:  
Threat or Safeguard?**

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## Foreword

The following article, completed in June 1999, should be read as a kind of balance sheet of Boris Yel'tsin's record in terms of civil-military relations, and as a background for the new Russian leadership's military policy.

The rise to power of Vladimir Putin, the new Russian president, has been accompanied by the emergence of a new tone in civil-military relations. The "military factor", as a consequence of the Kosovo crisis and of the second Chechnya war, where the military has been given a leading role, seems to be growing in importance. 1999 was marked by a revision of Russia's Security Concept and of its military doctrine. Vladimir Putin has stressed the necessity to restore the army's prestige, professionalism and self-confidence. He has repeatedly promised an increase in defence spending and signed a decree on reintroducing military training in schools.

All this has certainly contributed to erase part of the military men's disillusion with the civilian leadership that was so strong under Yel'tsin. Yedinstvo (Unity), the political movement that ran on behalf of Putin in the December 1999 Duma election, won 40 to 60% of the military votes. Vladimir Putin got up to 80% of the military electorate's vote in the March 2000 presidential poll. Over the past few months, the Russian media has started publishing rather positive articles on the state of the armed forces once again. Polls tend to show that public opinion now makes a better assessment of the army's operational capabilities, which looks like a confirmation of Putin's recent statement that "the army has regained trust in itself and the society believes in and trusts its army".

Several questions need to be addressed, though, among which are: will Vladimir Putin use this improvement in the climate of civil-military relations to strengthen the civilian authorities' control over the armed forces? What is one to think about some Western experts' analysis that both the Kosovo crisis and the new Caucasus war have empowered the military?

# The Russian Armed Forces: Threat or Safeguard?

Isabelle Facon

The Russian National Security Concept<sup>1</sup> published in December 1997 deplored “*the extremely acute social problems of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces*” and described “*the implementation of a package of measures designed to provide social protection to servicemen, raise the prestige of military service*” as a priority. Other elements have revealed the concern of the Russian political authorities regarding their relations with the armed forces. This concern is not entirely new – since 1992, the issue of the armed forces’ politicisation and the speculations about a military coup have been the subject of debates as numerous as contradictory in the press and within the circles of power. It is true that the Russian government has tended to rely on pessimistic speeches about the state of the armed forces in order to arouse the political and financial “kindness” of its Western partners. However, some hints support the theory stating that the Russian armed forces are losing their patience. In this context, it may seem necessary to question the continuity of their traditional reserve towards the political game and the potential risks which the crisis they are undergoing creates for political stability.

## The Russian Armed Forces, Outside Politics?

The literature dealing with civil-military relations in Russia systematically emphasises the Russian armed forces’ professionalism and their strong reluctance to become involved in political adventures; their conviction that they should not intervene in “high politics”, especially on their own; the absence of a military coup tradition throughout the history of the country. During the last decade, and in spite of the political and economic upheavals which have deeply affected the armed forces, various elements have confirmed that the army remains attached to these values, a posture which was reinforced by a number of events in the Gorbachev era. On several occasions the Red Army had to intervene in the republics which were restive to the authority of the Soviet central power. This cost the armed forces violent criticism on part of public opinion. In August 1991, the Soviet Minister of Defence, Marshal Yazov, sided with the putschists, following the example of some of his peers. This provoked the indignation of a large part of the officers’ corps<sup>2</sup>. They saw in these “incidents” a confirmation that internal missions fall outside the armed forces’ scope, all the more so that such missions harm their image in the society as well as their internal cohesion. If the soldiers hesitated so long before siding with the executive power against the Supreme Soviet in October 1993, it was mainly because they considered this intervention as a betrayal of the tradition of non-interference in political conflicts. Many Russian officers put these arguments forward when they denounced the Kremlin’s decision to engage the armed forces in Chechnya in December 1994 (some general officers even refused to obey the orders of the President, though the Commander in Chief of the armed forces, and questioned the conformity of these orders with the Constitution and the law).

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<sup>1</sup> The National Security Concept, worked out by the Security Council, assesses the place of Russia in the world, defines its national interests as well as the main threats to its security.

<sup>2</sup> Among others: Pavel Grachev, Boris Gromov, Aleksandr Lebed and Yevgeniy Shaposhnikov. Dmitriy Yazov for his part appeared as the most hesitant of the putschists.

Even today, many officers mistrust those of their peers who do not seem to act in accordance with this tradition of political neutrality and obedience to civilian authorities. Thus, even though General Lebed's ideas may have attracted the interest of a number of officers, many of them consider his political ambitions as a deviancy from military ethics<sup>3</sup>. In the same way, the Union of Officers<sup>4</sup>, which received quite a lot of attention in 1992-1993 and which sided with the Supreme Soviet in the autumn of 1993, has not succeeded in obtaining the support within the armed forces the analyses of that time predicted. The radicality of its views has made numerous officers turn away from it; dissatisfied though they are with their current living and working conditions, they refuse to support the extremist programme of the Union. Recent polls and inquiries carried out among Russian officers confirm that in spite of their deplorable material fate, the majority keep a strong intention to serve the state. In this connection, they stress their aim to focus exclusively on external threats, which reflects the fact that they reject not only the civilian missions that have traditionally been imposed on them and which divert them from their military tasks (assistance in harvests, building of roads, etc) but also, and above all, any intervention of the armed forces in the case of a political crisis. According to the sources available, 75 to 90% of the officers think that the army should not play any part in this type of crises and are opposed to the eventuality of a military regime in Russia<sup>5</sup>.

### **Divisions Within the Armed Forces**

The military's reluctance to get involved in the political game is largely motivated by the fact that these crises tend to widen the internal divisions within the armed forces. It is this acknowledgement, among other factors, which led the armed forces to intervene, in the autumn of 1993, against the Supreme Soviet. A number of officers and generals were siding with the Supreme Soviet camp and encouraging their peers to join them. The military leadership considered these appeals were likely to worsen the fractures within the armed forces that had been perceptible already in the Gorbachev era. The first burgeoning of political pluralism, the progressive decline of the Communist Party, the possibility given to the military personnel to take part in legislative elections...: all these factors had created differences within the officer corps, differences linked with their respective interest in politics, their political preferences, their views on the reforms proposed by Gorbachev, etc. More than a hundred officers stood as candidates in the legislative elections in December 1995. But while so doing some of them were responding to

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<sup>3</sup> These strong reservations on the part of the officers' corps are undoubtedly one of the elements which convinced Aleksandr Lebed to try to assert his legitimacy as a politician (he was elected the governor of the *kray* of Krasnoyarsk in May 1998) and not only as a military man.

<sup>4</sup> The Union of Officers, usually described as «reactionary» or «ultra-nationalist», is led by Stanislas Terekhov and has always been known for its proximity to the extremist forces. The main topics on its programs have been: the necessity to restore the USSR, opposition to the downsizing of personnel in the armed forces and to converting the defence industries, as well as the rejection of the ratification of the START II Treaty. Since 1991, Stanislas Terekhov has struck a number of alliances with various political forces, but has never succeeded in consolidating the credibility of his organization.

<sup>5</sup> A survey presenting the views of officers from several military regions states that only 30% of them would be ready to intervene in an operation aiming at restoring the constitutional order; most of them think that police functions should be carried out by the entitled power agencies (S Burda, «V zerkale chelovecheskikh dush» - *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, June 1998, p15-17).

the appeal of their Minister, General Pavel Grachev, who intended to reinforce the «military lobby» in the Duma, others preferred to join the lists of parties with diverse orientations and inclinations. The heterogeneity of the officers' reactions to the October 1993 events, then to the Kremlin's decision to engage a military intervention in Chechnya in late 1994 revealed these internal divergent trends within the military community.

All polls recently carried out in military units show this diversity in attitudes in the officer corps towards the political élites. The personalities whom they say they (more or less) trust cover quite a varied spectrum of political leanings – from the head of the Communist Party, Gennadiy Zyuganov, to General Lebed, as well as Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, the leader of the liberal opposition party Yabloko. Divergences can also be found in the «projects» men in uniform are willing to support in terms of the future anatomy of the state, of internal restructuring, of foreign policy priorities, etc. The financial crisis which has been striking the armed forces since 1991-1992 has strengthened these disparities as it has created a competition for funds between the army's services, between unit commanders, etc. The military personnel living in regions which are rather co-operative with the units located on their territory do not have the same life vision as those of their colleagues who are based in regions which consider «their» units as a burden. There is another line of division: some officers have opted for an attitude of complete indifference towards politics, others join some organisations in the hope that this can help support the interests of the armed forces. All of this shows how strongly the crisis has harmed the cohesion of the military, which less and less asserts its interests as an institution with a single voice.

It is true that the inextricable difficulties the Russian armed forces have been living through since the breakup of the USSR have undermined the professionalism of the military personnel; these often have to fulfil tasks below their qualification level, or to find a second job in order to make ends meet, they are under-trained, they have questions about the sense of their missions, and they are aware of the growing fracture between the armed forces and society. These difficulties have caused some of them to move away from the army's traditional distance towards political life. This evolution is nevertheless balanced by the fact that the Russian armed forces less and less represent a homogeneous block.

### **Confidence Crisis**

The tenacity, though it has been increasingly challenged, of the armed forces' tradition of non-interference in political games combined with the internal divisions of the military community, is in itself a «reassuring» sign for those who worry about the risk of a military coup. Still, Russia's civilian authorities have expressed concern about the obvious deterioration of their relations with the military. On the one hand, they can no longer be certain they can rely on its support in the case of another internal political conflict; on the other hand, they fear the army can represent, in the longer run, a threat to political stability. So there's a real confidence crisis between the armed forces and the political leadership. Russian officers and soldiers have been expressing in a more and more open way their negative perception of the government's policies. The «freedom of speech» that some of them now dare allow themselves is evidence of this<sup>6</sup>, as is the way the military

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<sup>6</sup> General Rodionov produced an intense turmoil when he declared in October 1996 that the armed forces were “*on the brink of insurrection*”. At that time, Igor Rodionov was still the

men have voted over the past years: since 1992 their vote has tended to be a vote of defiance towards the ruling team. True, it is quite difficult to find accurate data on this particular point, since military men for the most part vote in the same polling stations as civilians. It appears, however, that the «anti-Yel'tsin» vote has always been sizeable in constituencies with a high density of military personnel<sup>7</sup>. Several surveys carried out within the armed forces give the same indications, by showing that the officers' political preferences massively go to representatives of opposition parties, whatever the political colour of the party chosen. In such a tense climate, one may wonder about the future of the armed forces' tradition of obedience towards the political authorities, since the credibility of the latter seems to be more and more questioned by the military community. The widening gap between the political leadership and the armed forces is not due solely to the fact that 80 to 90% of the officers are displeased with their material situation, and that they almost unanimously think that the government's only reaction to these difficulties is near total indifference and neglect<sup>8</sup>.

*“A firm conception of the state must exist if the army is to understand its relationship and its responsibilities to the government”*, wrote a Western expert<sup>9</sup>. The Russian state's crisis is a key factor of tension in civil-military relations. The political authorities' «legitimacy deficit», as it is perceived by the military, owes much to the fact that they had to call on the armed forces in the October 1993 crisis, and in Chechnya at the end of 1994. Russian officers understood these two events as proofs of the state's paralysis. The fluidity of institutional and political balances, from the beginning the hallmark of the “Yel'tsin regime”, has been vehemently criticised in military circles, where it is widely considered that the very nature of the political system, in which officials and institutions pursue contradictory objectives without the Kremlin showing its capacity or its willingness to arbitrate conflicts, is at the root of the unacceptable incoherence in the state's policies<sup>10</sup>. Besides, this unease of the military towards the relative «power vacuum» they perceive at the Kremlin appears to be one explanation of the armed forces' answer in decisive

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Defence Minister, and through these words he distanced himself from the governmental solidarity to present himself as a representative of the interests of the armed forces. The virulent exposure of the government's policy by General Lev Rokhlin, the chairman of the Duma defence committee and the founder of a movement in support of the armed forces, also sparked irritation and worries on the Kremlin's part (some sources even contend that Lev Rokhlin's assassination in July 1998 was ordered by some high-level officials). This irritation gained momentum when General Rodionov joined General Rokhlin's movement, which was also supported by General Lebed. That these military figures with such different profiles rallied to Rokhlin's organisation created fears that the movement might well “erase” to a certain extent the armed forces' internal divisions in uniting the interests of several “categories” of military personnel.

<sup>7</sup> According to one source, only 7 to 8% of the military had voted for the “party of power”, Our Home is Russia, in the 1995 legislative elections, then 10 to 12% for Boris Yel'tsin in the 1996 presidential elections (V V Serebryannikov, “Armiya: sotsialnyye aspekty”, *Svobodnaya Mysl'*, May 1997, p13-25.)

<sup>8</sup> Officially, the financial effort made towards defence remains considerable in relative terms, since it has been representing since 1992 15 to 20% of the total federal budget expenditure provisions. This should however be compared to the actual defence effort of other major international actors, which is extremely difficult to do, if only because of the scarcity of Russian data on this problem. Moreover, it has to be noted that the Russian defence budget has normally been systematically reduced during the year.

<sup>9</sup> R H Epperson, “Russian Military Intervention in Politics, 1991-1996”, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, September 1997, p90-108.

<sup>10</sup> In the view of several generals, these phenomena are partly responsible for the failure of the Russian federal forces in Chechnya in 1994-96.

situations in the recent past. For instance, the armed forces observed the collapse of the Soviet Union without trying to intervene, even though many officers considered that the agreements which put an end to the USSR were a treason<sup>11</sup>. They nonetheless decided to «follow» Boris Yel'tsin because the Soviet power embodied by Mikhail Gorbachev seemed lifeless<sup>12</sup>. In the same way, Russians generals and officers had hoped for a long time that unified armed forces for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) could be re-established. But in May 1992 they finally welcomed President Yel'tsin's decision to create Russian armed forces with relief. If this decision did put an end to their hope of a unified CIS force, at least it freed the military men - in Russia and in all former Soviet republics - from the uncertainty about which authority they should be faithful to.

The Russian military personnel deplore the absence of clear and firm directives from the political leadership on the main guidelines of the security and defence policy and hence, on the missions the armed forces must be ready to fulfil. A *“consolidating national idea, which determines Russian society's world-outlook basis and long-term development goals, as well as the main ways and methods of achieving them, still remains to be finalized”*, acknowledged the authors of the National Security Concept of December 1997. The armed forces, which used to be so closely engaged in the realisation of the Soviet state's “grand project” are, without a doubt, one of the components of the Russian society which is suffering the most from the absence of a genuine strategic plan for the country, which the military tend to explain by the incompetence of the Russian political leaders. The obvious decline of Russia's influence on the international scene is another major factor of the crisis of confidence in civil-military relations. This is due mainly to the obvious contrast with the previous period. In their security policy, the Soviets used to put the stress on the military element. The armed forces' privileged status was primarily due to the fact that the Kremlin had a militarised view of international relations. A recent declaration by the current Defence Minister, Marshal Sergeyev, stating that a *“strong and active foreign policy, based on the state's military power”* allows Russia to preserve its authority on the international scene, probably reflects a taking into account of the military's nostalgia in this respect, rather than a sign of renewed aggressiveness on the part of Russia towards the external world.

Boris Yel'tsin's statements that the armed forces must feel that they live in a country which is experiencing reforms, and where the financial resources are limited, was very badly perceived within the armed forces. By saying so, the Russian president seemed to disregard the fact that many officers no longer live with a blind attachment to traditional conceptions. Many of them have now come to accept the necessity to put a lower priority on defence objectives and to give priority to economic recovery. However, on the whole, officers, including those who are most convinced of the need to conduct radical restructuring of the military tool, denounce the “irresponsible” management of military reform by the political authorities<sup>13</sup>. True, the fact that the High Command has been denouncing, since

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<sup>11</sup> An opinion poll carried out among Russian officers in January 1992 showed that 71% of them really hoped for the restoration of the USSR (J H Brusstar, E Jones, *The Russian Military's Role in Politics*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, January 1995.)

<sup>12</sup> In this perspective, it would not seem absurd to think that one of the reasons for the military's hesitations before intervening in October 1993 was that, given the obvious volatility of the political situation, it was by no means certain that President Yel'tsin would come out of the crisis victoriously.

<sup>13</sup> Only 25% of the officers and NCOs are in favour of the reforms undertaken by the government in the economic and military domains (*Armeyskiy Sbornik*, art cit).

1992, the absence within the government of personalities having real knowledge of military issues could be the expression of some corporatist thinking. The Soviet military personnel used to resent any civilian intervention in military affairs. Mikhail Gorbachev experienced this when he decided to involve more extensively civilian experts in the security and defence debate. In the same way, the "civilian" Yuri Baturin, the secretary of the Defence Council from July 1996 to September 1997, had to face the High Command's obstruction to his military reform plans. The opposition of the military to the appointment of a civilian as Defence Minister is a further mark of this way of thinking.

It is however to be noted that the numerous changes which have taken place since 1992 in the government teams in charge of the definition and of the implementation of military reform have certainly not contributed to counterbalance the officers' feeling that this reform has not been based on a really deep dialogue between the government and the military institution. Many Western analysts have estimated that when General Rodionov, who was Defence Minister from July 1996 to May 1997, demanded additional funds to implement the reform of the armed forces, he was only showing his opposition to the latter. However, and even if Igor Rodionov is probably not one of the most reform-minded representatives of the Russian military community, he had the support of many officers who did not deny the need for this reform but thought that it should be carried out rationally, follow clear objectives and not be dependent on the zigzags of the Kremlin political life. In this connection, it is important to underscore that the debate on the military reform has evolved. For the military, the real issue is no longer the size of the armed forces or the attachment to massive conventional forces based on conscription, but rather the financing of the restructuring of the army and its long-term consequences. Besides, a few elements tend to confirm the military's accusations that the reform is led in a hazardous way. In summer 1997 for instance, the government announced that it intended to carry out the reform with a defence budget not exceeding 3.5% of the GDP, considering this amount sufficient since it was based on a projected yearly GDP growth of 5%. This forecast has been considered nearly unanimously, and with some reason, as excessively optimistic, and has not been met.

In this context, one might wonder whether the Soviet military's allegiance to the political authority was not determined mainly by the privileged status, in political and economic terms, it had because it was the warrantor of the USSR's national security and of its authority on the international scene. True, there still are many different analyses on which the factors were that motivated the "fidelity" of the Soviet armed forces towards the political authority. The possibility that this "legitimism" was mainly based on the military's conviction that the terms of the mutual relationship with the political authority were positive, and that they would have had more to lose than to gain by showing themselves less "co-operative", should not be discarded. This question is all the more important for the current political leaders in Russia that they no longer have at their disposal the various control mechanisms and political relays which ensured their "presence" within the armed forces in the Soviet system.

In this hazy context, the Kremlin seems to be aware that it should probably not count on the intervention of the armed forces in the event of a crisis such as the one which took place in October 1993. In August-September 1998, during the conflict about the appointment of Viktor Chernomyrdin as Prime Minister which divided the presidency and the Duma, Boris Yel'tsin finally decided to designate another compromise candidate (Yevgeniy Primakov) rather than dissolve the Duma to impose his choice. The Russian president's considerable political weakening was



probably the main cause for this “surrender”. However, the prospect of a new resistance action on the part of the Duma, and the uncertainties concerning the reactions of the military, may have influenced Boris Yel'tsin's decision to renounce a new wrestling match with the lower house of the Parliament. Indeed, many of the president's advisers thought that the military might not have adopted the attitude they had in 1993.

### **The Military Leadership, Losing Credit?**

The Russian leaders have been living in an environment dominated by randomness for several years. Such circumstances have intensified the unease they feel in their relation with the armed forces, and this is enhanced by the diversity of the military's reactions to the multiform crisis of the Russian society. It is all the more true that the civilian authorities have to take into account another element which is, in this respect, puzzling: the existence of a rupture between the higher military hierarchy and the rest of the armed forces. A number of signs show that the Russian officers consider that the processes that have led to the definition of the successive governments' military policies have been determined to an excessive extent by the personal relations between the civilian leaders, especially within the presidential team, and the military leadership. This situation annoys the military as they consider that it has created a very prejudicial opaqueness which does not favour the taking into consideration of their interests. Such practices, in their view, are in contradiction with the strong declarations of the military leadership representatives saying that the armed forces should keep out of politics. Thus, a great number of officers consider they are taken hostage by those in the High Command who have become involved in the intrigues of the Kremlin.

This can partly explain why General Grachev generated mixed reactions within the armed forces. Many officers and generals, such as Aleksandr Lebed, considered his proximity with Boris Yel'tsin unwholesome<sup>14</sup>. Pavel Grachev often expressed his alleged understanding of the “*bitterness*” felt by the armed forces because “*they were forced to help solve problems created by political confrontation*”<sup>15</sup>. But most military men resented such declarations, charging the minister with being motivated above all by the preservation of his personal political positions, regardless of the interests of the military institution as a whole<sup>16</sup>. The Russian officers frequently criticise the mode of selection of Defence Ministry cadres which, in their view, is too largely based on the Minister's “preferences”, in accordance with the President (some officers would say “in collusion”). This phenomenon of “personalisation” of the decision-making processes at the top of the military hierarchy was significant above all in the “Grachev era”. But there is no doubt that

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<sup>14</sup> He had a very specific profile as he essentially defended the interests of the airborne troops from which he came. This accounts for the fact that he was relatively isolated and thus needed Yel'tsin's support. The reverse was true in the troubled context which prevailed when the Russian armed forces were formed. Several generals publicly deplored that some crucial decisions (START II, first intervention in Chechnya...) had been taken by an extremely reduced circle of officers, including Pavel Grachev and some of his closest collaborators, who showed no real interest in consulting their Ministry of Defence colleagues.

<sup>15</sup> Interfax, April 1 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Pavel Grachev was accused of convincing Yel'tsin to launch the first war in Chechnya in order to distract the attention of the public opinion from the corruption existing inside the military apparatus on the one hand, and to demonstrate the preservation of the operational capacities of the armed forces through a lightning success in Chechnya on the other hand.

the memories of that period will continue to undermine the confidence the armed forces place in the military leadership, perceived as being preoccupied mainly by the preservation of its positions and privileges, and more and more indifferent to the realities of the military life "on the ground". The replacement of Pavel Grachev by General Igor Rodionov, who has a more traditional profile, was interpreted in the Western world as a concession of the political power to the increasingly exasperated armed forces. It is a fact that the latter saw in Rodionov a professional, acquainted with military realities, and an efficient spokesman likely to defend their interests. It is worth noticing that the current Defence Minister, Marshal Sergeyev, has not succeeded in getting the support of the whole military institution, as a lot of officers consider him too accommodating with the political power and motivated only by the aim of promoting the interests of the service he comes from, ie the strategic missile forces. Such reactions reveal that a major part of the military community feels its leaders, whether civilian or military, have no real interest for the situation in the army.

There is a vivid debate in Russian military circles about whether the armed forces should take part in domestic interventions, especially those aiming at bringing under control a region that would be considered too independent-minded. We have previously underlined that the armed forces refuse nearly unanimously to fulfil such domestic missions. According to a survey to which 600 officers responded, 68% did not wish the armed forces to be called on to prevent the secession of a region<sup>17</sup>. Although the military leadership shares this opinion, it still has ambiguous positions on that matter, which creates some tensions with the rest of the armed forces. The High Command is still deeply traumatised by the break-up of the USSR and if the integrity of the Russian Federation was to face serious pressures from a region, the military leadership could accept to send troops to reduce these pressures. Besides, the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff tend to consider that if the "monopoly" of operations in the country should be abandoned to the Ministry of Interior (MVD) forces, the political leadership might be inclined to give these forces greater financial and political assets. These elements may partly explain why the participation of armed forces in domestic operations remains an option, as shown by a lot of information leaking out on the content of the future military doctrine.

The endless rumours on the development of corruption in the very heart of the Russian high military hierarchy have also contributed to widen the gap between the latter and the rest of the armed forces. Admittedly, this phenomenon does not only concern the top of the institution. A growing number of cases come to the fore that show the increasing penetration of criminality within the military units all over Russia. However it seems that military men have less trouble understanding a unit commander who illegally sells weapons or ammunition (which, they think, can be explained by his harsh living conditions or his will to improve those of his subordinates) than a member of the Ministry of Defence who embezzles for his personal benefit. Such problems raise many questions.

For example, one can wonder to what extent, in some cases at least, the campaigns denouncing corruption within the military leadership are not part of a strategy of the political leadership allowing it to dismiss those of the military personnel which it considers as not compliant enough, to set examples, to counterbalance the

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<sup>17</sup> D Y Ball «The Pending Crisis in Russian Civil-Military Relations», Program On New Approaches to Russian Security (Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Harvard University), Policy Memo No 4, October 1997.

pressures from the military, etc. As has already been underscored, the tradition of the Russian military institution goes against a direct intervention in the political game. Still, the Soviet military was associated in the decision-making process, and was used to it. It seems that it is nowadays not prepared to renounce it, even if the pressures it exerts do not aim at “remilitarizing” the State, as some American experts contend, but rather at increasing the defence budget, at having the General Staff get the other force structures<sup>18</sup> under its control, or at influencing the political leadership on some foreign policy issues<sup>19</sup>. The widening gap between the High Command and the armed forces could be viewed by the political leadership as an obstacle in its dialogue with the army. But it has rather tended to consider this can be indirectly beneficial in so far as this phenomenon, an additional source of divisions within the armed forces, relativises the risk of a global hostile movement of the army against the political leadership.

This is not the only ambiguity on the part of the political leadership in its relations with the armed forces. Given the chronic financial difficulties of the federal state, the rumours that the government has envisaged several times having the military units’ stationing costs taken care of by the regional administrations do not seem totally absurd. However, the risk of collusion between the military units and the authorities of a rebellious republic or region is one of the civil-military crisis scenarios. This hypothesis derives from the current context in which Centre-regions relations are growing tense and in which the day-to-day life of military units depends increasingly on the action of the authorities of the region in which they are based. In the case of a major crisis, all these factors combined could lead the military to support the regional leaders (some of whom have already claimed increased prerogatives in the security field). Even more seriously, a local problem of this kind could possibly spread to several regions, thus harming not only the federal leadership’s credibility in the regions’ and the military’s eyes, but also the stability of the Russian Federation.

### **A Threat “From the Inside”?**

The current debate within the Russian political élite on the risk of the military destabilizing the political situation seems to be full of contradictions. Indeed, the government has trouble identifying the nature of this potential threat: mutinies, increased support of the military voters to the opposition in upcoming elections, collusion between mafia formations and military units, harmful local rapprochement between military and regional authorities... The hypothesis of a military coup is no longer presented as totally unlikely. This accounts for the fact that the armed forces’ tradition of non-interference in political affairs has been

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<sup>18</sup> The force structures include the ministries and agencies belonging to the state security system and thus having military or paramilitary forces: Ministry of Interior, Federal Border Service (FPS), Federal Agency for Governmental Communications and Information (FAPSI), Federal Security Service (FSB).

<sup>19</sup> Many elements relativize the thesis according to which the Russian military has a strong influence on decision-making processes. As concerns the military service for instance, the government has tended to be more sensitive to the pressures of public opinion, which is more and more hostile to it, than to those of the Ministry of Defence. The questionable peacekeeping operations led by the Russian armed forces in the CIS and Russia’s active policy aimed at establishing close security and military cooperations in the former Soviet space correspond to the priorities of the military leadership. However, these priorities are also those of the civilian leaders. Consequently, there is more a civil-military consensus than a submission of the political leadership to the military’s “demands”.

somewhat shaken over the past few years. Besides, the increase in the number of elderly officers due to the massive departure of the youngest officers can create a certain homogenisation of disillusion on the part of military officers that were trained in the same Soviet military schools, and thus compensate, at least partly, for the lack of cohesion within the armed forces. The fact that the level of the officers' pay, whatever their ranks, tends to be more and more unified<sup>20</sup>, may also contribute to this trend.

The political leadership bears a high responsibility for these evolutions. It has not succeeded in improving the military's service and living conditions. It has dragged them down in several domestic political crises, and thus reduced the credit it enjoyed within the forces. The armed forces' material crisis is hence coupled with an identity crisis reinforced by the political leadership's deficit of legitimacy. The armed forces suffer from the decline of their prestige in the eyes of the public, and from the erosion of their country's authority on the international scene. They do not recognise themselves in the governing power as they consider that it is indifferent to their situation, and they do not trust it. Undoubtedly, it was in 1997 that the civilian authorities became aware of the dangers of such a situation. However, their efforts to enhance their hold on the armed forces have so far proved disappointing. This can be partly explained by the high instability of political balances, which has hindered the establishment of long-term strategies. The gap that exists between the military leadership and the rest of the forces is another part of the explanation.

In its relationship with the army, just as it has done on other issues, the Russian government has contented itself with handling emergencies. The problem of civilian control of the military institution has not triggered very lively debates. In any case, it does not seem to be on the political leadership's agenda of urgent matters. Playing on the competition between the various force structures has been one of the main strategies of the government under Yel'tsin. In this logic, the armed forces have kept a nuisance capacity, a residual power of influence that the political authorities have to reckon with.

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<sup>20</sup> *Svobodnaya Mysl'*, art cit.

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