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'Red Dawn' redux: Russia begins massive military modernization effort

Some 36,000 officers are expected to be cut this year and many Soviet-era 'phantom divisions' eliminated. But will the economic crisis undercut reforms?

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MOSCOW - After nearly two decades of false starts and failures, the Kremlin appears determined to begin the radical military reforms needed to fashion a modern army from the tangled wreckage of its Soviet-era armed forces.

Unlike previous attempts, little public fanfare accompanies the current effort to modernize Russia's army, begun in earnest after the dismal assessments began rolling in of the military's performance in last August's war with the tiny Caucasus republic of Georgia.

But behind-the-scenes infighting has reportedly been furious, pitting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev against most of the military's general staff, as well as some powerful nationalist and conservative political forces.

In the past month, several top generals and defense ministry officials have been sacked by the Kremlin, including chief of the GRU military intelligence Valentin Korabelnikov and head of the main personnel directorate, Mikhail Vozdakin, effectively crushing institutional resistance to the reforms, experts say.

Although the overall size of Russia's armed forces will slip modestly from just under 1.2 million to 1 million men, the planned changes will slash the 355,000-strong officer corps, particularly the bloated upper ranks, by almost 150,000. More importantly, it will reconfigure the forces to eliminate many Soviet-era "phantom" divisions, which have generals but no troops. In their place, a smaller number of fully staffed units will be formed and – eventually, it is hoped – retrained, equipped with modern weapons, and handed a fresh mission that expresses Russia's post-Soviet national priorities.

Supporters of the reform are jubilant. "By the end of this year Russia will have a new army," says Vitaly Shlykov, a former deputy defense minister who now works as a civilian adviser to the defense ministry. "All these skeleton formations from Soviet times will be replaced with real, functioning units. This alone is an achievement we have not seen in Russia for 150 years, a triumph of common sense over bureaucratic inertia."

But opponents insist this reform, which comes after almost two decades of futile tinkering with the military, will only hasten the collapse of Russia's once-proud armed services.

"This is not a reform, it is the final blow to the army," says Viktor Ilyukhin, a leading Communist parliamentarian and deputy chair of the State Duma's Security Committee. "The essence of these measures seems to be to cut staff, especially the officer corps. We are losing the professional basis of our army, and demoralizing those who remain. Officers have been constantly under stress of these endless reforms for the past 15 years or more, and they are exhausted and harassed by the constant threats of dismissal or demotion. This is the biggest damage."

A MORE EFFICIENT FIGHTING FORCE

At the heart of the debate are sweeping plans to abolish the Soviet-era "mobilization" army, which was designed to fight World War II against the massed forces of the West. In line with that model, the Russian military still maintains far-flung facilities, vast stockpiles of armaments, and an organizational structure that is meant to be filled out with millions of reservists in short order.

Besides streamlining the army's structure, the plans call for the military to sell off many assets that will not be needed in future, including factories, tracts of land, massive fuel dumps, and armories stuffed with outdated weapons.

"Our authorities are spurred by genuine necessity to make these changes," says Viktor Myasnikov, a military expert with the independent Moscow daily newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta. "The mobilization army utilizes the resources of the entire country; the whole economy serves its needs first, the country's needs second. It's expensive and threatens to bring Russia to the brink of bankruptcy. If we're to have a market economy, the army must be separated from the economy."

A 'COMPLETE OUTSIDER' IS LEADING THE REFORMS

The Kremlin's point man in this effort is Anatoly Serdyukov, the former head of a furniture company, who was appointed as defense minister by Mr. Putin two years ago. Although Mr. Serdyukov's immediate predecessor, the former KGB general Sergei Ivanov, was technically Russia's first-ever civilian defense minister, experts say that Serdyukov's advantage is that he's a pure politician, with no ties to any segment of the former Soviet military machine.

"Attempted military restructurings failed in the past because a minister would come into office, start favoring his branch of the service at the expense of others, and call that 'reform,'" says Mr. Shlykov, who was a war planner for the GRU intelligence service in Soviet times. "That's why a minister who's a complete outsider was the right idea."

Another difference is that Serdyukov is open to fresh ideas, Shlykov says. "In the past, to mention US or German experience was anathema" to the military brass, he says. "But we need to learn from the experience of other countries, and Serdyukov is willing to listen. That's a big change."

NO END TO CONSCRIPTION

One reason the Kremlin has waged a low-key battle for military change, without attempting to mobilize public support, is that most Russians view abolition of the hated military draft as the most urgent [priority of reform](#), and that does not appear to be in the cards anytime soon. Like his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, Putin [reneged on pledges to end conscription](#), though he did shorten the length of obligatory service to just one year.

Supporters of the current reform argue that conscription will have to remain until all the preconditions of a professional army have been put in place, though they admit this is unlikely to attract much popular support. "The task right now is to make structural changes, equip the military with modern arms, and improve social welfare of army people," says Valentin Rudenko, a military expert with the independent Interfax-Military news agency. "It's still too early to say how it's going to work, because we don't see any results yet."

PAYING FOR THE REFORMS?

One glowering threat on the horizon is the growing economic crisis, which could force the Kremlin to scale back its ambitious [\\$200 billion rearmament program](#), thus validating critics who argue that the army is simply being gutted, not rebuilt.

Another threat is that some of the officers to be let go – an estimated 36,000 this year – might fail to find new jobs in Russia's economy, where unemployment now tops 10 percent, and end up turning to crime. Following the collapse of the USSR, thousands of trained military and KGB specialists poured into the private sector, many of them going to work for the notorious Russian "mafia."

"The economic crisis has broken the plans for military reform," says Viktor Baranets, one of Russia's best-known military experts who has a regular column with the popular Moscow daily Komsomolskaya Pravda. "My computer is literally burning with all the letters I get from officers complaining. We see serious reductions in supplies, procurement of modern equipment, and cutting off of social programs for officers" due to the economic downturn, he says.

"Military officers seem to lack any confidence in the future, and if this continues the army is going to go into shock and nothing else."