



Putin and the military elite: From admiration to arrests

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Executive summary

After Sergei Shoigu was dismissed as Defence Minister on 12 May 2024, the Kremlin launched an unprecedented campaign of repression against senior officials in the Ministry of Defence. Four deputy ministers have been arrested, as well as heads of the main directorates at the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff and more than ten heads of division or department. All of them face standard charges related to corruption. Some have already been sentenced to long prison terms. Pro-Kremlin commentators claim that Vladimir Putin is attempting to combat corruption, which had reached epic proportions during Shoigu's tenure since 2012.

The measures could be seen as part of a wider crackdown, in which around 700 high-ranking civilian officials at federal and regional level have been arrested since the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, such an explanation is hardly satisfactory. Having been in power for over 25 years, Putin understands that corruption is a way of life for both military and civilian officials at the Ministry of Defence under the existing authoritarian regime. There is a complete absence of public oversight, which is at least formally maintained in the civilian sphere, over the activities of the armed forces. In fact, a rejection of any form of such oversight in the military sphere is fundamental to Putin's regime. Thus, the fight against corruption cannot be the main reason for the purge of the armed forces. Another possible explanation for why repression has been unleashed now is that the Kremlin needs to shift responsibility on to the leadership of the ministry for errors in decision making and for the failure to achieve a decisive victory in Ukraine. Putin's desire to prevent a repeat of the military mutiny by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the late owner of the Wagner Group private military company, in June 2023 is the main rationale. Prigozhin blamed corruption in the highest echelons of the military leadership for the military defeats suffered by the Russian armed forces. The arrests of ministry officials are intended to demonstrate to the army that the causes of the shortcomings in the supply of combat troops have been eliminated.

The Kremlin should be concerned about how Prigozhin's mutiny has affected the mindset of Russian officers. The mutiny is bound to have left at least some Russian officers with the impression that they could use the thousands of armed men under their command for their own interests, rather than merely to carry out the orders of the Russian leadership. The real reason for the crackdown is the Kremlin's fear of military opposition. Relations between the Kremlin and the Russian military are not as rosy as official propaganda would have everyone believe. The General Staff repeatedly used retired military officers to convey dissent to the highest authorities, and to speak out against the invasion of Ukraine before it began. These fissures could widen in the event of a domestic political crisis. The arrest of senior defence ministry officials is part of a campaign to prevent the army from becoming a political player.

Tensions between Putin and the military are also mounting against the backdrop of an inevitable generational change in the leadership of the armed forces. Repression is being used by the regime to ensure loyalty at the start of this rotation. This is a serious challenge for any authoritarian regime. In the absence of a clear system for renewal, dictators are forced to invent reasons for personnel changes.

Corruption as a way of life

At least 70 people have been arrested as part of the purge, half of whom are Ministry of Defence officials.¹ Four deputy ministers have been arrested, as well as heads of the main directorates and the General Staff, and more than ten heads of division or department. All of them face standard corruption-related charges. Some have already been sentenced to long prison terms. Arrests that started in 2024 are still on going. Viktor Tarazevich, head of the Food Supply Directorate in the Ministry of Defence Logistics Department, was arrested in May 2026, Alexander Dembitsky, former commander of the 44th Army Corps of the Leningrad Military District, in July and Major General Sergei Nikitushkin, Head of the Training and Logistics Department of the Main Combat Training Directorate, in October. According to pro-Kremlin researchers and analysts, the crackdown, which is taking place alongside large-scale crackdowns against officials in the non-military sector,² is taking place because the war against Ukraine has revealed the extent of corruption in the armed forces, and Putin is unwilling to tolerate this state of affairs. Some conclude that despite having led Russia for more than a quarter of a century, Putin was unaware of the depth and scale of the problem. This seems highly improbable as corruption has always been a key element of life in the armed forces and has been and remains a way of life for both military personnel and civilian officials at the Ministry of Defence.

The most recent statistics, published in 2021, show that in 2020, 12.3 percent of the officials found guilty of corruption offences were from the armed forces. Only law enforcement officials (17.4%) committed more such offences.³ According to the Chair of the Investigative Committee of Russia, Alexander Bastrykin, 497 criminal cases were opened in 2024 relating to offences committed in the defence industry.⁴

Official surveys of service personnel have highlighted the extent to which corrupt practices have permeated the military. Even these massaged figures have been deemed inconvenient by the Ministry of Defence, which shut down its research unit. The most common forms of corruption in military service are: the provision of favours and patronage through the promotion of friends and relatives; the receipt and giving of bribes and gifts; embezzlement through abuse of authority; and abuse of official position or authority to obtain housing, holidays or other benefits and privileges.

Data from a rare survey of military personnel conducted in 2016 provides an indication of the scale of corruption.⁵ It suggested that the overwhelming majority of officers (80%–95%) were involved in corrupt practices. Respondents stated that it would otherwise be impossible

1 Mixail Komin. Putin trebuet bolee e'fektivnoj bor'by s korrupciej v armii Михаил Комин. Путин требует более эффективной борьбы с коррупцией в армии. *cepa.org*. 26.03. 2026. <https://cepa.org/article/putin-demands-more-efficient-military-corruption/>

2 Mariya E'rlix. Za vremya vojny v Rossii zaderzhali pochni 700 chinovnikov rukovodyashhego urovnya. Мария Эрлих. За время войны в России задержали почти 700 чиновников руководящего уровня. *Novaya gazeta – Evropa* 03.04. 2026. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2026/04/03/za-vremia-voiny-v-rossii-zaderzhali-pochti-700-chinovnikov-rukovodiashchego-urovnnya?ysclid=mnoh6mt3hc562979054>

3 Liderami po korrupcii v Rossii v 2020 godu okazalis' siloviki. Лидерами по коррупции в России в 2020 году оказались силовики. *Newsru.com*. 24.04.2021. <https://www.newsru.com/russia/24apr2021/genproc.html>

4 Shestopalova P.S. Vliyaniye korrupcii v vooruzhenny'x silax na bezopasnost' gosudarstva. Materialy' Mezhdunarodnoj nauchno-prakticheskoy konferencii studentov, aspirantov i molody'x uchyony'x. V 2-x chastyax. Шестопалова П.С. Влияние коррупции в вооруженных силах на безопасность государства. Материалы Международной научно-практической конференции студентов, аспирантов и молодых учёных. В 2-х частях. Melitopol 2025 p 878

5 P. P. Hachikyan Protivodejstvie korrupcii v vooruzhenny'x silax Rossijskoj Federacii. П. П. Хачикян Противдействие коррупции в вооруженных силах Российской Федерации <https://www.flibusta.is/b/477148/read>. As far as I can tell, the monograph has not been published.

to carry out their official duties. They also admitted that they regularly paid bribes or gave expensive gifts in order to keep their jobs. Involvement in corruption increased as officers rose through the ranks and gained increased access to or control over material assets. It is likely that corrupt practices by those with access to material assets primarily involve theft and fraud. Those without access to material assets are likely to be involved in extortion from subordinates. The reasons for this pervasive corruption are no secret. Under the existing system for organising the armed forces, legitimate opportunities for military personnel to progress in their careers do not exist. In the army hierarchy, the possibility of promotion is heavily dependent on personal connections and the goodwill of superior officers.

A distinctive feature of corruption in the armed forces is that access to military units by representatives of public oversight bodies, civil society organisations and the media, which formally retain the right to scrutinise and observe particular areas of public administration, is severely restricted. A regime of secrecy makes it possible to conceal corruption, which ultimately leads to its recurrence. In addition, the focus on discipline and minimising public scrutiny means that military service is regulated not only by federal laws, but also by subordinate classified regulations (statutes, instructions, orders and directives), which deny access.

Under current regulations, military personnel are entirely subordinate to their commanders and at the mercy of their whims. The “rights” of service personnel can only be exercised with the consent of the superior commander.⁶ The principle of a single chain of command in the armed forces is one of the contributory factors in the development of corrupt behaviour among service personnel. Even a member of the armed forces with high moral standards is doomed to acquiesce to the prevailing culture of corruption.

War as a catalyst for corruption

The sharp increase in military spending since 2022 has inevitably created more opportunities for corrupt practices. Fighting service personnel are entitled to various forms of financial allowance, which opens up a range of opportunities for corruption among the officials responsible for paying the financial allowances to military personnel and their families, primarily the immediate or direct military commanders of the troops. An extensive system of extortion has developed within the active military, whereby service personnel are forced to pay for virtually any improvement in their living conditions or safety. Servicemen have to pay between 500,000 and 1 million roubles (€6,000–€12,000) to be granted leave or transferred to a rear unit.⁷ Those who are unable to avoid being sent to the front are forced to hand over between 1.5 and 3 million roubles (€18,000–€36,000) to their immediate commanders to avoid taking part in assault operations. That said, there is no guarantee that those taking bribes will keep their promises for any length of time. Soldiers are doomed to pay again and again. Schemes involving fraud and bribery in which staff from military recruitment offices and medical personnel are implicated are taking place throughout the country.⁸ Amid widespread

6 Russian military personnel formally enjoy all the rights of citizens, subject to certain restrictions that arise from the nature of their service. They also have specific rights, such as the right to receive numerous allowances in addition to their basic pay, the right to be provided with service accommodation and the right to have the state transfer ownership of their accommodation to them after a certain period of service. Finally, they formally have the right to appeal against decisions made by their superiors if they consider them unlawful.

7 Irina Novik. «Vy` vse millionery`. Vy` vse trupy`»Ирина Новик. «Вы все миллионеры. Вы все трупы». Meduza. 13.04.2026. <https://gejgxsuluvdmgay.lz7ywf73njy9.lat/feature/2026/04/13/vy-vse-millionery-vy-vse-trupy>

8 Rossijskie voenny`e massovo zhaluyutsya na vy`mogatel`stva v armii. E`xo. 18.09.2025. Российские военные массово жалуются на вымогательства в армии. Эхо. 18.09.2025 <https://echofm.online/news/rossijskie-voennye-massovo-zhaluyutsya-na-vymogatelstva-v-armii>

corruption and equipment shortages – including of quality uniforms, body armour, medical supplies and weapons – soldiers are forced to purchase items out of their own pockets. Commanders urge service personnel to make regular contributions to so-called common funds in their units.⁹ If the purge within the Ministry of Defence is intended to at least reduce these levels of corruption, it is unlikely to be successful as the prospect of making windfall profits unthinkable in peacetime outweighs any fear of punishment.

The powerlessness of the authorities

There would be an obvious solution to combating corruption in the military sphere, if the authorities were willing to adopt it. First and foremost, this would mean subjecting the military sphere and all defence expenditure to civilian oversight to make them as transparent as possible. This would also apply to the system of career development for military personnel. However, this would fundamentally undermine the entire character of an authoritarian state, the very purpose of which is to usurp power and prevent any form of public control. This explains why corruption is one of the main characteristics of authoritarian regimes.

It is telling that in their recommendations on combating corruption within the armed forces, Russian experts inside Russia confine themselves to the most general calls for greater transparency in military affairs. Many see signs of a new openness in the wave of reprisals against officials at the Ministry of Defence since Shoigu's removal.¹⁰ However, specific proposals on combating corruption amount to insignificant measures, such as setting up public advisory boards within law enforcement agencies or populist calls to equate corruption offences with treason.¹¹ Corruption within the armed forces is so widespread that some researchers can see no effective way to tackle it and instead suggest that it should be regarded as “an objective, historically established norm of social development”.¹² In other words, they are suggesting that corruption should be regarded as a normal part of military life.

Official Ministry of Defence documents demonstrate an apparent unwillingness to wage a meaningful fight against corruption within the armed forces. For instance, the Plan to Combat

Frontovoj re'ket i total'ny'e pobory – v zone SVO vsplyli li sotni faktov korruptcii. 04.02. 2025. Sib.fm Фронтовой ракет и тотальные поборы – в зоне СВО всплыли сотни фактов коррупции. 04.02. 2025. Сиб.фм. <https://dzen.ru/a/Z6lCm8B7RE8y6AOs?ysclid=mowxcn8vzw765362866>

Putinu i Belousovu dolozhili o «kry'sax» na SVO: «Komandiry» bespredel' nichayut». 17.04.2025 Kapital strany' Путину и Белоусову доложили о «крысах» на СВО: «Командиры беспредельничают». 17.04.2025 Капитал страны https://kapital-rus.ru/news/415593-putinu_i_belousovu_dolozhili_o_kry'sah_na_svo_komandiry_bespredelnicha/.

Grozhat obnuleniem, esli ne dal deneg: skandal s poborami v armii prokommentiroval volonter. Pro nedra. Грозят обнулением, если не дал денег: скандал с поборами в армии прокомментировал волонтер. Про недра. <https://pronedra.ru/grozhat-obnuleniem-esli-ne-dal-deneg-skandal-s-poborami-v-armii-prokommentiroval-volonter-809793.html>

9 <https://echofm.online/news/rossijskie-voennye-massovo-zhaluyutsya-na-vymogatelstva-v-armii>

10 A. Antusheva. Glasnost' korruptcionny'x prestuplenij v vooruzhenny'x silax Rossijskoj Federacii, kak osnovopolagayushaya mera bor'by' i e'ffektivnaya forma presecheniya pravonarushenij v sfere korruptcii. Flagman nauki №2(25) February 2025. А. Антушева. Гласность коррупционных преступлений в вооруженных силах Российской Федерации, как основополагающая мера борьбы и эффективная форма пресечения правонарушений в сфере коррупции. «Флагман науки» №2(25) Февраль 2025. https://flagmannauki.ru/files/225-Antusheva_Alina_Aleksandrovna_3002.pdf

11 Bober, A. Yu. Sovershenstvovanie mer protivodejstviya korruptcii v deyatel'nosti ministerstva oborony' vo vremya provedeniya Special'noj voennoj operacii / Chernomorsko-sredizemnomorskij region v sisteme nacional'noj bezopasnosti Rossii: k 80-letiyu Pobedy' v Velikoj Otechestvennoj vojne : Materialy' Mezhdunarodnoj nauchno-prakticheskoy konferencii, Krasnodar, 22–24 maya 2025 goda. – Krasnodar: Kubanskij gosudarstvenny'j universitet, 2025. – pp. 336-338. Бобер, А. Ю. Совершенствование мер противодействия коррупции в деятельности министерства обороны во время проведения Специальной военной операции / Черноморско-средиземноморский регион в системе национальной безопасности России: к 80-летию Победы в Великой Отечественной войне : Материалы Международной научно-практической конференции, Краснодар, 22–24 мая 2025 года. – Краснодар: Кубанский государственный университет, 2025. – С. 336-338.

12 Damm I. A. Korruptciya voennosluzhashchix kak predmet dissertacionnogo issledovaniya. Pravoporyadok: istoriya, teoriya praktika № 4 (31) / 2021. P. 35. Дамм И. А. Коррупция военнослужащих как предмет диссертационного исследования. Правопорядок: история, теория практика № 4 (31) / 2021. p 35

Corruption in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, 2025–2028 says nothing about transparency but instead reiterates blandishments about efficiency. It calls for “the effective functioning of the Ministry of Defence Commission on Compliance with requirements regarding the official conduct of federal civil servants”, a “strengthening of the work of the Ministry of Defence’s Main Personnel Directorate and personnel service units on the prevention of corruption offences [as well as] officials responsible for work on the prevention of corruption and other offences” and “the organisation of all manner of inspections to strengthen control”.¹³

Russia-based researchers on corruption in the armed forces maintain that it can be overcome “only through the political will of the Russian state’s top leadership”,¹⁴ which means Putin. Since a genuine fight against corruption would inevitably be linked to the dismantling of the foundations of the current regime, the wave of repression will be superficial in nature, just as previous attempts to tackle corruption in the army have been. The Kremlin must know that in a situation where corruption is a way of life for military personnel, the deterrent effect of the crackdown will be short-lived.

The battle against Prigozhin’s shadow

At the same time, it is clear that by conducting a high-profile crackdown on corrupt army officials, the highest authorities are sending a signal to the armed forces and wider society. There may be other explanations for why the crackdown has been unleashed on the leadership of the armed forces at this particular time. One explanation is an attempt to tackle the causes of the military mutiny in 2023 and prevent its recurrence.

In the autumn of 2022, Putin authorised the recruitment of convicted criminals into the Wagner Group, the private military company owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Alongside the partial mobilisation of reservists, this enabled Russian forces to stabilise the situation on front line. However, the transformation of the Wagner Group into a mass military unit had far-reaching negative consequences. In effect, a military structure emerged that was subordinate to neither the armed forces command nor any other security agencies. Attempts to bring Wagner under the command’s control met with fierce resistance from Prigozhin and was one of the main causes of the mutiny. Prigozhin held no military rank or position in the military hierarchy, but took pleasure in demonstrating that high-ranking Russian generals, both retired and serving, were under his direct operational command. According to Prigozhin at the time, the Deputy Commander of the Joint Group of forces in Ukraine, General Sergey Surovikin, was responsible for Wagner’s supplies, while Colonel-General Mikhail Mizintsev became Prigozhin’s deputy after he was removed from his post as Deputy Minister of Defence. In other words, Prigozhin was establishing an alternative command structure for his own army, involving prominent figures from military circles. The example of Mizintsev was, of course, noted by the officer corps came to believe that in the event of a conflict with the senior authorities, they could offer their services to a rival military corporation, which threatened to undermine the army’s entire chain of command. (After the failure of the coup, there were no further reports of Mizintsev in the press, although he has not been officially discharged from military service.)

13 Prikaz Ministra oborony` Rossijskoj Federacii ot 3 aprelya 2025 g. N 214 Ob utverzhdenii Plana protivodejstviya korrupcii v Vooruzhenny`x Silax Rossijskoj Federacii na 2025-2028 gody` Приказ Министра обороны Российской Федерации от 3 апреля 2025 г. N 214 «Об утверждении Плана противодействия коррупции в Вооруженных Силах Российской Федерации на 2025-2028 годы» <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/411880752/#1000>

14 Glushhenko, Demidov ...p 68

It is well known that the confrontation between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence escalated into an armed mutiny on 22–23 June 2023, when Wagner units marched on Moscow. Regardless of its aims and eventual failure, the mutiny opened a Pandora's box, providing a path for the military to direct intervention in domestic politics. Even Prigozhin's failure and subsequent death did not reverse the changes in the mindset in the Russian military brought about by the attempted coup. Russian officers realised that they could use the thousands of servicemen under their command to further their own interests, rather than merely to carry out the orders of the high command.

The arrests of senior defence ministry officials are part of a campaign to prevent the army from becoming a political player. In the months leading up to the mutiny, Prigozhin repeatedly accused Shoigu of failing to ensure supplies for his troops, particularly of ammunition. Most of the arrests were of members of Shoigu's inner circle. As well as a warning not to act on any similarly mutinous thoughts, they seek to demonstrate to the army that the causes of the supply shortfalls affecting fighting troops are being addressed. Nonetheless, the Kremlin must be concerned about how Prigozhin's mutiny has affected the mindset of Russian officers.

The purge should be seen as evidence of a serious crisis in relations between the military establishment and Putin. The real reason for the crackdown is the Kremlin's fear of potential military opposition. The "next Prigozhin" may well turn out to be not a former convict, but a general popular inside the army. The case of Ivan Popov, Commander of the 58th Army, is indicative. He was sacked and imprisoned after openly arguing with Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, addressing his subordinates to explain the real reasons for conflict with Gerasimov, and referring to them in his address as "my gladiators".¹⁵ Popov's call sign is Spartacus and the historical parallels are all too obvious.

That the Kremlin's fears of a possible mutiny are not unfounded is evidenced by the story surrounding two videos recorded by war veteran Alexander Lunin, which describe how commanders on the front line are robbing their subordinates, and torturing and beating those who refuse to hand over money. Lunin demanded a face-to-face meeting with Putin, claiming that he had been encouraged to make these statements by certain high-ranking officials at the Ministry of Defence, in the security services and in the Voronezh regional administration. Crucially, he threatened that if his demand was refused, the army would turn its weapons against the Kremlin.¹⁶ Following his statement, he was arrested and spent 11 days in custody. He later expressed remorse, explaining that his statement had been the result of concussion. Such statements are indicative of the mental state of the person making them, but the fact that they were viewed by around 12 million people in four days suggests that the idea of using weapons against the Kremlin is quite popular.

15 Komanduyushhego 58-j armiej Ivana Popova odstranili za kritiku Minoborony' RF. Vot chto on skazal svoim podchinenny'm .Meduza. 13.07.2023. Командующего 58-й армией Ивана Попова отстранили за критику Минобороны РФ. Вот что он сказал своим подчиненным. Meduza. 13.07.2023 <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/07/13/komanduyushhego-58-y-armiej-ivana-popova-otstranili-za-kritiku-minoborony-rf-vot-cto-on-skazal-svoim-podchinennym>

16 Obrashchenie voennogo Aleksandra Lunina, prigrozivshego Putinu myatezhom, sobralo desyat' millionov prosmotrov v instagrame. Kto on takoy? Obrazhenie voennogo Aleksandra Lunina, prigrozivshego Putinu myatezhom, sobralo desyat' millionov prosmotrov v instagrame. Kto on takoy? Meduza. 26y.06.2026. <https://meduza.io/feature/2026/06/26/obraschenie-voennogo-aleksandra-lunina-prigrozivshego-putinu-myatezhom-sobralo-desyat-millionov-prosmotrov-v-instagrame-kto-on-takoy?ysclid=mqup0f60ep278309133>

The war has altered the composition of the Russian army, in terms of both numbers and quality. Protracted hostilities amid deadlock, the presence of a significant number of service personnel with criminal records, and rampant corruption and violent crime within the army have had a detrimental effect on discipline and the willingness to follow orders. Negative trends are also evident among the officer corps. The authority of career officers has plummeted, particularly those who joined the army straight from military school.¹⁷ At the same time, the significant losses among officers mean that the command is having to train junior officers from among the ranks of sergeants, and training periods can as short as one month.¹⁸ Ethical principles or an understanding of professional duty cannot be instilled in such a period, even assuming that this is the aim. This new command structure has its own views on how orders from the command should be treated, which do not coincide with the official line.

The Kremlin and the army: mutual irritation

There was already tension between the military elite and the Kremlin. Putin had previously been happy to participate in military displays, wear every conceivable uniform designed especially for him, fly in fighter jets, dive beneath the waves in submarines and give orders to launch strategic missiles during exercises. In return, he spared no expense on the army, handed out awards and turned a blind eye to corruption. This mutual adoration reached its peak just after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. The idyll came to an end when Putin, believing the defence ministry's exaggerated claims about the unprecedented combat readiness of the armed forces, decided to launch larger-scale aggression.

Today, he should be frustrated that the armed forces have failed to secure victory after more than four years of fighting. For their part, the military should blame the country's top leadership for ordering them to take part in a war that cannot be won. Even now, veiled criticisms of the Kremlin can be found in the pages of the military press, noting that planning failed to anticipate the coalition of western states providing military aid to Ukraine or the Ukrainian army's readiness to defend its homeland.¹⁹ ²⁰ Even before the war began, members of the military elite tried to convey to the country's top leadership just how serious the consequences of an invasion of Ukraine might be. Just three weeks before, Colonel-General (retired) Leonid Ivashov – a former high-ranking official at the Ministry of Defence and leader of the All-Russian Officers' Assembly, an ultra-conservative organisation of retired officers – published an open letter to the president and the people of Russia.²¹ It stated that: "The use of military force against Ukraine will call into question the very existence of Russia as a state; and will turn Russians and Ukrainians into mortal enemies for all time. ... There will be thousands (tens of

17 A. Zy'kova, D. Malevannyj. Formirovanie avtoriteta. Armejskij sbornik № 11, 2025 pp. 44-49. А. Зыкова, Д. Малеванный. Формирование авторитета. Армейский сборник № 11, 2025 с. 44-49

18 V. Evgrafov. Uskorenno i kachestvenno. Armejskij sbornik № 10, 2025 pp 29-33. В. Евграфов. Ускоренно и качественно. Армейский сборник № 10, 2025 с. 29-33.

19 A.D. Gavrilov, I.V. Grudinin, D.G. Majburov, V.A. Novikov. Dva goda special'noj voennoj operacii: nekotorye itogi, veroyatnye perspektivy. Vestnik Akademii voennykh nauk № 2 (87) 2024, p 58(A. Д. Гаврилов, И.В. Грудинин, Д.Г. Майбуrow, В.А. Новиков. Два года специальной военной операции: некоторые итоги, вероятные перспективы. Вестник Академии военных наук № 2 (87) 2024, с 58) .

20 O.G. Tukmakov. Main Directions of Improvement of Military-Political Work in Preparation of Operations. Voennaya misl' #2, pp. 47-48

21 Irina Popova. Obrashhenie Obshherossijskogo oficerskogo sobraniya k prezidentu i grazhdanam Rossijskoj Federacii. By'straya Moskva. 06.02.2022. Ирина Попова. Обращение Общероссийского офицерского собрания к президенту и гражданам Российской Федерации. Быстрая Москва. 06.02.2022
<https://mskfast.ru/blog/echomsk-2976084-echo> <https://mskfast.ru/blog/echomsk-2976084-echo>

thousands) of young, healthy men killed on both sides, which will undoubtedly affect the future demographic situation in our dying nations". He went on to demand "an end to the criminal policy of provoking a war in which the Russian Federation would find itself alone against the united forces of the West", and to call for Putin's resignation. Following publication of the letter, Ivashov was dismissed from his position at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), a prestigious university that trains diplomats and other staff involved in international relations. Almost five years into the war against Ukraine, the warnings set out in Ivashov's letter appear prophetic and the sentiments of those who formulated the ideas in that letter are not likely to have faded. Published almost simultaneously with Ivashov's letter was an article by the well-known military commentator, Mikhail Khodarenok, who was formerly head of a group within the General Staff's Main Operational Directorate, warning that the assertions by Russian politicians that Russia was capable of inflicting a crushing defeat on Ukraine within hours did not correspond to reality.²²

It should be borne in mind that in the years preceding the writing of this letter, Ivashov, who has conservative views, was repeatedly used by Russian generals to vocalise the military elite's disagreements with the Kremlin. In particular, he was one of the loudest critics of former defence minister Anatoly Serdyukov's military reforms, which tried to professionalise the Russian army after its poor performance in Georgia in 2008, and voiced the military's outrage when Putin shied away from criticising Israel after a Russian aircraft was shot down over Syria while the Assad regime's air defence forces attempted to repel an attack by the Israeli Air Force.²³

The problem of generational change is also beginning to cause rifts between Putin and the army. Since the head of state remains in power indefinitely, the same applies to his closest aides. Putin signed a decree in 2021 stipulating that the term of service for army generals may be extended for any period at the president's discretion, and that colonel-generals can serve until the age of 70.²⁴ Such a system is unsuitable for a military service, where promotion through the ranks and the awarding of posts are strictly tied to age limits. Armies need clear rules with no exceptions. When the highest authority responsible for maintaining the established order violates these rules, it causes discontent.

At the same time, Putin has every reason to fear the arrival in top command posts of the next generation of commanders that came of age in the 1990s, when the army was in a state of decay. These commanders have gained experience during an unjustified, aggressive war that looks like it will be unsuccessful. Being brought up in an atmosphere of constant lies and posturing has weakened their morale and ethics. They will have closely observed the experience of Prigozhin's parallel army, while the subsequent mutiny will have changed their

22 Mixail Khodarenok. Prognozy krovozhadny'x politologov. Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie. 03.02.2022. Михаил Ходаренко. Прогнозы кровавых политологов. Независимое военное обозрение. 03.02.2022. https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2022-02-03/3_1175_donbass.html

23 Leonid Ivashov: Na konu stoit suverenitet Rossii. Izborskij klub. 26.10. 2018. Леонид Ивашов: На кону стоит суверенитет России. Изборский клуб. 26.10. 2018. <https://izborsk-club.ru/15895?ysclid=mpgunldzlh326287615>

24 Federal'nyj zakon ot 29.11.2021 № 388-FZ O vnesenii izmeneniya v stat'yu 49 Federal'nogo zakona O voinskoj obyazannosti i voennoj sluzhbe. Федеральный закон от 29.11.2021 № 388-ФЗ «О внесении изменения в статью 49 Федерального закона «О воинской обязанности и военной службе» <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202111290028?rangeSize=1&index=2>

understanding of the specific nature of the relationship between the military and the political authorities. In a climate of widespread corruption and declining discipline, and in the absence of clear or transparent rules for promotion, the Kremlin has few tools at its disposal for influencing military personnel.

Ideological indoctrination – the methods of which have remained unchanged since Soviet times – is unlikely to continue to be effective. The Kremlin's attempts to declare war veterans the "new elite", and reward them with senior posts in the civilian sector, are meeting resistance from regional and federal bureaucracies.²⁵ The "Time of Heroes" presidential initiative, designed to promote military personnel to senior positions in the civilian sector, has yielded only modest results. Over 44,000 applications were submitted for the first intake,²⁶ and 66,000 for the second. Only 160 people took part over the course of two years, just over half of whom were appointed to various administrative posts.²⁷ In theory, a cushy civilian post as a pay-off for service and obedience was a good idea. In practice, the chances of military personnel being given prominent positions in the civil service are negligible. The Kremlin therefore has no positive incentives at its disposal for resolving its differences with the officer corps.

Repression is what remains. That the arrests were coordinated suggests that they were based on compromising material that had been gathered by the FSB's military counterintelligence department over a long period. Some were related to minor offences committed 10 to 15 years before. The Military Counterintelligence Department is the largest division of the FSB. It has offices in all military districts, armies and fleets, and military counterintelligence officers are present in every unit of the armed forces and maintain an extensive network of agents. The department has always been a tool for keeping the military obedient and loyal. Putin realised the need for such an organisation immediately after he came to power. He signed new "Regulations for FSB Directorates in the Armed Forces" into law in 2000, expanding the functions of military counterintelligence and giving it a remit to "fight organised crime". The decree broadened the role of FSB officers in the army to include the detection of possible threats to the regime. The expanded mandate involved the fight against "illegal armed formations, criminal groups, and individuals and public associations which have set as their goal a violent change of the political system of the Russian Federation and the violent seizure or violent retention of power".²⁸

25 Il'ya Golovnev. Formirovat' «novuyu e'litu» ne prosto. Slovo. No 5 (1113) 22.05.2026. Илья Головнев. Формировать «новую элиту» не просто. Слово. No 5 (1113) 22.05.2026. https://www.gazeta-slovo.ru/publikatsii/publikatsii_8462.html?ysclid=mpck24862375615851

26 Pervy'e 83 uchastnika nachali obuchenie v ramkah programmy 'Vremya geroev' – Interfax. 27.05.2024. Первые 83 участника начали обучение в рамках программы «Время героев» – Интерфакс. www.interfax-russia.ru. <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/moscow/news/pervye-83-uchastnika-nachali-obuchenie-v-ramkah-programmy-vremya-geroev?ysclid=mpv8o7lo4e525388035>. 27. 05.2024. V otbore na programmu «Vremya geroev» chislo Geroev Rossii vy'росло на 53%, Vedomosti 04.02.2025 В отборе на программу «Время героев» число Героев России выросло на 53%, Ведомости 04.02.2025 <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2025/02/04?from=breadcrumbs>

27 Vstrecha s vy'pusknikami pervogo potoka programmy' «Vremya geroev». Kremlin.ru 22.05.2026 Встреча с выпускниками первого потока программы «Время героев». Kremlin.ru 22.05.2026 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/79814>

28 Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan. Russia's Military Shaken as Top-Level Purge Unfolds. Cepa. Org. 23.05.2024. <https://cepa.org/article/russias-military-shaken-as-top-level-purge-unfolds/>

Conclusions

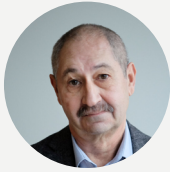
The fight against corruption is not the main reason for the purge at the Ministry of Defence. The Kremlin understands that corruption in the armed forces is endemic and central to its organisation and functioning. Corruption is a fundamental part of the military way of life.

The current purge is a form of repression with the specific political aim of shifting the blame for failures in the war against Ukraine – primarily in supplying troops– on to the previous leadership at the ministry. The Kremlin is attempting to mollify potential opponents within the military and prevent a repeat of the Prigozhin mutiny.

The crackdown serves as a thinly veiled warning to the military that expressing dissatisfaction with the authorities is unacceptable. The Kremlin and the military have every reason to be dissatisfied with each other. Putin is unhappy that, for nearly five years, the army has proved unable to secure victory. The military, for its part, is frustrated that Putin is issuing orders that are impossible to carry out. This frustration can be seen in certain articles in the military press.

Amid the widespread corruption, a breakdown in discipline and the absence of clear and transparent procedures for promotion, the Kremlin has few means of exerting influence over military personnel. Furthermore, the composition of the armed forces has changed. A generation of military commanders has risen to the top whose formative years coincided with the 1990s when the army was in a state of decay. At the same time, the authority of career officers has plummeted, particularly of those who joined the army straight from military academies, while significant losses among the officer corps mean that the command is forced to train junior officers from among the ranks of sergeants. As a result, the army bears less and less resemblance to an obedient instrument of Putin's policy.

Putin will increasingly have to rely on repression to maintain control over the army, and the FSB's counter-intelligence department will serve as the primary instrument of this repression.



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The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Guest Commentaries are written based on the views of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of SCEEUS.

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