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[A Political Renewal in the Russian Army](#)



Representatives of the Public Council of the Russian Ministry of Defense [announced](#) the reinstatement of political administration in the armed forces in early February 2018. What does that mean? The clue is in the word reinstatement. As an idea, it is distinctly Soviet and therefore nothing new. However, this is the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union that the Ministry of Defense has officially [mentioned](#) the “moral-an-political” role of political officers (deputy commanders for political affairs – *zampolits*) in the army. This a significant development.

The demise of Russian political officers

In August 1991, President of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev [issued](#) a decree abolishing political departments in the uniformed services of what was by then a swiftly disintegrating Soviet Union. Since then, political activity within the armed forces has been banned, and the Communist Party is no longer the ideological backbone of the military.

From the point of view of institutional management, the party’s presence in the uniformed services ensured full control by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Officers had to be members of the Party, and

disciplinary matters were [adjudicated](#) by political officers. In addition to political supervision, they were also responsible for discipline and raising awareness of various issues. In practice, these missions were not always properly executed, since not all political officers took their duties seriously. Additionally, they were quite often at odds with unit commanders.

Naturally, political activities in the armed forces came to a halt in the aftermath of the formal reform accompanied by the renaming of posts and educational institutions. The delegitimization of communism in the first half of the 1990s came with the end of political officer training. Soviet political officers were replaced by graduates of military command colleges with no knowledge of team-building or team management. This affected discipline and morale. That prompted a [resumption](#) of the training of morale officers in 2002. However, already in 2008-2009 (when only two five-year courses were completed), the number of morale officers was [reduced](#) by nearly 70%. Thus, the Russian army gave up on formal morale building. However, in [2013](#), Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu announced the re-establishment of the position of a morale officer.

New approach, new meaning

Unexpected scandals accompanied the Russian intervention in Crimea and the involvement of the Russian military in Syria and the Donbas in Eastern Ukraine. In particular, Russian servicemen posted photos from combat zones on social media, thus disclosing unofficial or classified information about the activities of the Russian Army. Despite a formal ban on publishing information about military service, such photos can still be found on the Internet. The Ministry of Defense perceives posting photos and videos online as a clear sign of insufficient control within the armed forces. Commanders have failed to explain the issue to their subordinates, nor have they restricted access to mobile devices. Since mobile phones are indispensable in the Russian Army for peacetime command and control, and for communication with relatives, any ban on posting photos should have been explained by commanders through a professional process of awareness-raising of across all levels of the military hierarchy.

In addition to enhancing control, political work in the uniformed services could help make military service more attractive. A paradoxical situation can be observed in Russia today: On the one hand, the Russian army is second only to the president when it comes to the level of public [confidence](#). Its combat-readiness is highly [valued](#) by society, and 58% of respondents are in favor of retaining compulsory military service. On the other hand, the Ministry of Defense has failed to form a professional army. Despite the initial target of 440,000 non-conscript soldiers by January 2017, as few as 354,000 were [enlisted](#) in November. Based on available data, it appears that an average of 10,000 soldiers per year do not renew their contracts. An increase in average monthly pay to 30,000 rubles (given the proper level of physical fitness and the absence of penalties) has not been enough to form and maintain a large-scale professional army in line with government targets. Besides, additional expenses should be taken into account, such as bonuses, purchase of additional or upgraded equipment and an increased number of inspections and drills.

In other words, the State Military and Political Administration (GVPU) can enhance control over military personnel and help ensure complete execution of all orders from the Defense Minister. The GVPU will serve to reproduce Soviet-era morale and strengthen political presence in the armed forces. In addition, steps to increase the attractiveness of military service should be expected. Financial incentives have reached their limits, so the Ministry of Defense will be attempting to increase the meaningfulness of serving.

It's all about leadership

Currently, morale building is in the hands of the State Personnel Department of the Ministry of Defense. In May 2017, 39-year-old [Colonel](#) Mikhail Baryshev became the head of the department, replacing Major General Mikhail Smyslov (in office since 2013). Smyslov had served in the armed forces since 1979, the year after Baryshev was born. The general had received a specialized education, served as a morale officer and took part in military operations including in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Before 2012, his successor served in the 154th Commandant's Regiment, which comprises silent drill teams. Baryshev moved to the Federal Guard Service (FSO) in 2012 and became the head of the Central Army Sports Club of Moscow (TsSKA) in 2014. The appointment of Baryshev is surprising: a person lacking impressive professional experience, who had moved from the armed forces to a different uniformed service, took over from a general. Moreover, according to media reports, Baryshev was appointed the head of TsSKA following a personal [recommendation](#) from Shoygu.

Baryshev is [considered](#) the main architect of the GVPU. Alexander Kan'shin, deputy chairman of the Public Council of the Russian Ministry of Defense, has already [announced](#) the need to transform Baryshev's department into the GVPU, endowed with greater powers, and a vertical structure reaching from the ministry down to the company level. Kan'shin himself [held](#) political posts from 1977 to 1993; he started as secretary of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (Komsomol) in college, and continued as an assistant director of the Komsomol political administration of the North Caucasus Military District (now part of the Southern Military District).

Baryshev's State Personnel Department of the Ministry of Defense recently became famous for a tendentious [survey](#) among military personnel in the Southern Military District. According to a picture posted on Twitter by a conscript, the questionnaire contained questions about Alexei Navalny's political campaign, color revolutions, support for opposition politicians and readiness to deter individuals "who call for a change of the constitutional order by force". Obviously, the survey was not meant to study soldiers' and sailors' opinions, but to shape their beliefs on socio-political matters. This is what Baryshev's administration is going to do.

Researchers who study authoritarian regimes and revolutions believe dictatorships face three main threats: conspiracy of the elites, external invasion and mass riots. Despite the statements of Russian politicians, there is no threat of an invasion aimed at changing the regime. On the contrary, Russian society is inclined to give more support to the president in times of international confrontation. Moreover, the costs of an invasion would be colossal, and disproportionate to the benefits stemming from a regime change. Consequently, a conspiracy by the elites and mass riots are the only potential threats, and the *siloviki* are successfully coping with all manifestations of those problems. The GVPU will be a powerful structure, endowed with control functions exercised down to the company level, dealing with ideological work among soldiers and officers. The administration will be run by an exceptional young officer who served in the Kremlin regiment and the FSO. Although he lacks sufficient experience in awareness-building, he enjoys immense trust from Shoygu and the Defense Ministry's civilian elites. Russia's leadership is, it seems, revisiting the role of the armed forces in Russian politics.

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