



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

RUSSIAN MILITARY CAPABILITIES

EUGENE KOGAN

65

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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It can be said that the Russian military has indeed learnt their lessons from the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008. The manner that the military operated in Crimea, and most recently, in Syria demonstrated that military operations combined three most important components: surprise, mobility and swiftness (SMS). Whether or not the same lethal combination would be successfully replicated elsewhere remains to be seen. On the other hand, to state unequivocally that the Russian military is not capable of competing in conventional warfare beyond the post-Soviet space or in confrontation with NATO would be short-sighted and inaccurate. Such an assumption is no longer far-fetched but rather realistic even though experts in the field may disagree with the author. The Western perception of the current Russian military is undergoing a sea of change. It is evident that the agility and the rapidness of the military to perform before other actors intervene took the West at large by surprise. As a result, there is more and more talk about Russian military operations against the Baltic States even though they are NATO members and NATO famous dictum: an attack on one is an attack on all, appears to no longer be deterring Russia. In other words, the West at large can no longer take for granted that the Russian military will not seize the opportunity to intervene if they see fit. After all, President Vladimir Putin showed repeatedly his flair for being an opportunist and not being shy of military adventurism.

Although the 2008-2012 military reform degraded Russia's combat capabilities in its western regions, Moscow's shift towards operations in *limited conflicts* [author's italics] riveted more attention to mobile and special operations forces. As a result, not only did the Airborne Forces avoid manpower cuts but they also kept their divisions and amplified their strength. Special Operations Forces (SOFs), too, began their build-up and increased combat readiness. The modernisation of Army Aviation units began swiftly and was accompanied by the procurement of a large number of *new* [author's italics] helicopters² and a substantial number of new combat aircraft. As Barabanov continues, the procurement of a large

* Prof. DDr. Erich Reiter was the Director of the Vienna-based International Institute for Liberal Policy (IILP) where the author was employed as a defence and security expert.

number of new but not modernised helicopters accentuated mobility. In addition to mobility, large investments in human resources and combat training paid off generously in 2014 with a better army and more skilful personnel, especially among officers. Another positive factor is a large number of officers with real combat experience acquired in the Chechen wars, counter-terrorism operations in the North Caucasus and various local conflicts in the post-Soviet states. Additionally, numerous exercises have been held at all levels, including regular strategic manoeuvres, new education and combat training methods introduced and more professional soldiers recruited.

New arms and hardware supplies since 2007 have considerably improved the army's material status and equipage, primarily in the Air Force and Army Aviation units.

A major breakthrough was also made in logistics. After the Georgian campaign, the Russian army has been enhancing its strategic manoeuvre capabilities for years and practicing deployment over great distances which proved highly instrumental during the Ukrainian crisis.

However, the Ukrainian crisis showed once again that the Russian army's *weak spot* [author's italics] was the dominating number of conscripts, the reduced length of military service (one year) and the lack of a sufficient number of contract servicemen. Although Russia had declared the goal of creating a permanent readiness army, many military units and formations were not used in full in 2014 due to both the *shortage of personnel* [author's italics] in the majority of units and the *cyclic nature of conscript training* [author's italics]. As a result, "permanent readiness" formations could send no more than two-thirds of their personnel to the operational area, leaving behind untrained soldiers drafted in the fall.

Another serious issue is the *reserve* [author's italics]. No optimal reserve model has so far been worked out for the 'new look.' Additionally, there are still no clear-cut mechanisms for deploying additional units and formations and replacing lost personnel during wartime.³

Despite the abovementioned shortcomings, the efficiency with which Russian forces have assumed control over Crimea is hard to reconcile with the *image* [author's italics] of an inadequate military close to collapse. Despite claims to the contrary, Russia is much closer to having the military it needs that has often been suggested.⁴ In other words, the Western

perception of the not sufficiently prepared Russian military was deeply mistaken.

The 2008-2012 military reform prepared the military for the year 2013. The Kremlin began to set up a pool of rapid deployment forces in 2013 in order to be able to intervene in its neighbourhood. These well-equipped, well-trained, modern forces consist of Airborne Forces (four divisions, five brigades), Marines (four brigades, eight separate regiments), GRU Intelligence Forces (GRU Spetsnaz) brigades and three or four elite Ground Forces units as well as air and naval support. The MoD planned that, in the coming years, all of these units would be made up of professionals. On this basis, the Airborne Forces already count up to 20 battalions. There is every reason to believe that the 30,000 to 40,000 troops transferred to the south-eastern border of Ukraine in February 2014 were the *backbone* [author's italics] of these rapid deployment forces⁵ that realistically may have 100,000 and more troops ready for rapid deployment.

The GRU Spetsnaz forces, in particular, have both expanded – with two new brigades: the 100th and the 25th – and developed. Most of the 15,000 to 17,000 Spetsnaz are essentially very well-trained light infantry and intervention forces. However, a growing awareness of the need for truly ‘tier one’ special forces able to operate in small teams and complex political environment led to the decision to create the Special Operations Command (or KSO in Russian) in 2010.⁶

Becoming operational in 2013, the KSO first saw action in the seizure of Crimea in 2014. Numbering about 500 operators with integral airlift and close air support assets, the KSO represents a genuine enhancement of Russian capabilities and one designed for precisely the kind of military-political operations described for the first time in the 2014 doctrine.

On the other hand, attempts to increase the proportion of the Armed Forces staffed on a professional, volunteer basis continue to *lag behind* [author's italics] plans. As of December 2014 the total such *kontraktniki* in the military numbered 295,000: a solid increase from 2013's 186,000 but still well short of the 499,000 meant to be in the ranks by 2017.⁷ As of December 2015 the total of such *kontraktniki* in the military numbered 352,000 while their number should reach 384,000 in 2016.⁸ It can be assumed that the number of professional soldiers is likely to increase until 2017. Thus, the term lagging behind will become obsolete.

General Yuri Borisov, Deputy Minister of Defence for Procurement (hereafter cited as General Borisov), said in late January 2015 that: “The segment of *modern equipment* [author’s italics] in the Aerospace Defence Forces (or VKO in Russian), the Navy and the Strategic Missile Forces (or RVSN in Russian) is at the rate of more than 40%.” Currently, only 28% of the Russian Air Force inventory consists of modern equipment while the figure stands at 26% for the Ground Forces and the rest of the Russian military.⁹ RIA Novosti reported in early October 2015 by citing General Borisov that: “Modern hardware now makes up 45.8% of the Aerospace Forces (or VKS in Russian).”¹⁰ Finally, in early February 2016 General Sergei Shoigu, Minister of Defence, said that: “Forty seven percent of the country’s arms and equipment inventory is now considered ‘modern.’” The most modern area is its nuclear deterrent which between the three elements of its nuclear triad are reported to be 55% modernised. The Aerospace Forces are at 52% with the Navy sitting at 39% and the Ground Forces at 35% at the close of 2015.¹¹ The further increase in modern equipment requires substantial funds that, despite the current economic crisis, President Vladimir Putin and his administration are ready to shoulder. Therefore, the pronounced target for the Armed Forces to have 70% of modern equipment by 2020 is no longer a far-fetched scenario but a fact that the West at large need to acknowledge, carefully monitor and think through as to what it can do about it. The author’s assertion may be dismissed out of hand by the expert community but facts presented above reinforce the author’s assertion. Furthermore, the section below, entitled Defence Spending, reinforces the author’s view that the reshaping of the Russian military and equipping it with modern weapons is on the right track.

Defence Spending

The State Armament Programme (SAP) represented 38% of the defence budget in 2013, 44% in 2014 and 62% in 2015¹² and we can foresee a continued increase in the coming years. According to figures released by the Ministry of Finance, Russia has reduced its defence budget for 2015 by 5.3% to RUB 3,110,2 billion (USD 57 billion). Despite the downward revision, defence expenditure remains 25.6% *higher* [author’s italics] than in 2014.¹³ According to Tatyana Shevtsova, Deputy Minister of Defence: “The SAP, which has encompassed the bulk of procurement, R&D, repair and upgrade activities for the Russian Armed Forces, represents

about 60% of the defence budget for 2015 and has been protected from proposed cuts. The cuts to spending were largely limited to personnel and the operating costs of the Russian military."¹⁴ In addition, while the depreciation of the rouble has cut the budget's value in dollar terms, the majority of the SAP's costs are rouble denominated, minimising the effect on this issue. Despite repeatedly expressed doubts and reservation in the West regarding Russian defence spending and its procurement programme compounded by the drop in oil revenues and increased inflation, there have been no indications as of 4 February 2015¹⁵ (confirmed by the State Duma announcement on 24 October 2015) that spending for 2016 set at RUB3,145 billion¹⁶ under the three year budget (2015-17) has been revised downward.¹⁷ According to *Vedomosti* online, about 68% or RUB 2,142 billion (about USD 30.6 billion) of the overall defence budget in 2016 is being allocated to defence procurement.¹⁸

The Russian defence budget spending for 2017 is forecast to reach RUB 3,237,8 billion.¹⁹ Thus, it can be said that President Putin sees no ground for cuts in the procurement programme despite the current economic downturn and the European Union's (EU) ongoing sanctions against Russia. What is more, he sees any potential cuts as undermining national security that should prevail over any other considerations.

To conclude, the modern Russian military continue to undergo substantial changes. The number of professional soldiers increases as well as the percentage of modern equipment. The performance of the Russian military is vastly improved both in terms of interoperability between various services as well as individual service operations. What is not less important is that the Kremlin has committed financially to continue the modernisation of its Armed Forces *at all cost*. Therefore, Putin's plan to have 70% of the Armed Forces modern by 2020 is not off the mark.

The projection of Russia's power is central to Putin's maintaining the image that he is making the country a force to be feared and respected while Shoigu is implementing his Commander-in-Chief clearly spelled out orders. The Kremlin strongly believes that it is threatened by the malign West. As a result, the rearmament programme is seen by the Kremlin as an absolutely essential element for regime survival that requires the maintenance of a lean but mean Armed Forces while at the same time the West as an adversary must learn a lesson in deterrence and be pushed back. As a result, Shoigu's introduced snap exercises will continue and

Russia will not inform the West at large on the dates and the nature of the exercises. Russian pilots will continue to buzz over the Baltic Sea region and harass the Alliance forces stationed there. Whether or not Russian harassment of the NATO forces stationed in the Black Sea region will take place is a matter of time. One thing is certain since the annexation of Crimea - the Peninsula has been strengthened militarily in order to be used as a potential platform for military operations in the Black Sea.

Despite the often stated that the new Russian military is not capable of confronting NATO forces, it is not far-fetched to say that reality is likely to be different and that NATO forces, including the biggest American contingent, may find the Russian Armed Forces an equal adversary or perhaps as close to an equal adversary as possible. To repeat Pauli Jarvenpaa, it is obvious that the EUR 500 billion planned for the development of the military forces is *producing results* [author's italics]. It is a long-term work in progress but, as Zapad-2013 demonstrated, that work is proceeding and is producing *a new military reality* [author's italics] on the ground.²⁰ This should not be dismissed out of hand but wake up the West at large. The nay-sayer in the West should finally understand that Putin has no qualms about using military in order to test Russian capabilities and the resolve of the West at large to respond.

Russian Military Inventory (as of August 2016)

The inventory includes both upgraded and new aircraft, helicopters and air-defence systems that are gradually changing the look of the Russian Air Force that was renamed Aerospace Forces on 1 August 2015. It should be emphasised that the current inventory is incomplete. Nevertheless, it highlights the current trend in the Russian military.

Early-Warning and Control System (AEW&CS) aircraft

Russia operates ten A-50 and three upgraded versions of the A-50U aircraft.²¹

Combat Aircraft

MiG-29. In early July 2015 it was reported that the Air Force has over 200 MiG-29s.²²

MiG-29SMT. The air force has 28 MiG-29SMTs in service. Back in April 2014, the Russian Aerospace Forces ordered 16 extra craft. It is believed that the 16 extra MiG-29s are divided between 14 MiG-29SMT fighters and two MiG-29UB trainers.²³

MiG-29K/KUB. Back in December 2015, 24 carrier-based MiG-29K/KUB fighters were delivered to the Russian Naval Arm.²⁴

MiG-31BM. General Borisov said on 9 April 2015 that: “The first 24 of the foreseen 130 upgraded MiG-31BMs were delivered to the Air Force.” The plan also foresees the delivery of ten craft to the Air Force annually starting from 2016 onward.²⁵ The Air Force is currently upgrading 130 of its approximately 200 MiG-31s to the latest MiG-31BM standard.²⁶

Su-30SM. In mid-September 2015 it was reported that General Borisov stated: “Deliveries of 60 Su-30SMs is being completed. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) intends to sign a new deal for purchasing up to 75 more over a three-year period. Up to 50 of the Su-30SMs will be delivered to the Naval Air Arm.”²⁷ Apparently, the new deal was reduced to the purchase of 30 Su-30SMs that are about to be delivered to the Aerospace Forces before the end of 2018.²⁸ There was, however, no change in regard to purchasing 50 Sus by the Naval Air Arm.

The Aerospace Forces has already deployed an unknown number of Su-30SMs on the Crimean Peninsula²⁹ while eight aircraft were purchased for the Naval Air Arm which operates the Su-30SM as a maritime strike aircraft from the Saki (Novofedorovka) Air Force Base (AFB) in Crimea.³⁰ Ultimately, the Naval Air Arm will have about 16 Su-30SMs stationed in Crimea.³¹ So far, four Su-30SMs have been deployed in Syrian operations.³²

Su-35. The Aerospace Forces order for 48 Su-35s was completed in 2015. In late December 2015, the MoD approved a five-year contract for purchasing a further 50 Su-35s with delivery starting from 2016.³³ So far, four Su-35s have been deployed in Syrian operations.³⁴

Frontal Bomber

Su-34. In late December 2015, it was reported that the Aerospace Forces have about 80 of the 92 ordered Su-34s in its inventory. The Aerospace Forces plan to purchase about 200 Su-34s.³⁵ So far, six Su-34s have been deployed in Syrian operations.³⁶

Strategic Bombers

Tu-22M3/95/160. In mid-January 2016, it was reported that Long-Range Aviation (LRA) took delivery of ten upgraded bombers in 2015, including two of the 16 Tu-160Ms, three of the 61 Tu-95MSs and five Tu-22M3s.³⁷ So far, two Tu-160Ms have been deployed in Syrian operations.³⁸

Combat Trainer Aircraft

Yak-130. In mid-April 2016, it was reported that the Aerospace Forces already operate 77 craft, including 12 with an aerobatic display team. The Naval Air Arm has a requirement for ten, with at least five the subject of firm orders.³⁹

Strategic Transport Aircraft

An-124-100. Aviastar-SP has announced that it finished the upgrade of six An-124-100 strategic transport aircraft for the Russian Air Force. Meanwhile, Sergei Dementyev, Director General of Aviastar-SP, said that the plant is going to upgrade five more An-124-100s in 2014-2016 under the State Defence Order.⁴⁰ In other words, we speak about six upgraded An-124-100s and five more to be upgraded. This constitutes about 50% of the transporter fleet (a total of about 20 aircraft).

Il-76MD-90A. In late February 2016, it was reported that the Aerospace Forces have received the first two of the 39 upgraded Il-76MD-90A transporters that are expected to be delivered through 2021.⁴¹ Lieutenant-General Vladimir Benediktov, Commander of the Air Forces Military Transport Aviation (MTA), said back in the second half of August 2015 that: "The MTA operates about 120 of the older Il-76M/MDs."⁴²

Il-78/78M. The Air Force has about 20 Il-78/78M air-refuelling tankers.⁴³

Naval Aviation

Il-38N. By mid-July 2015, it was reported that six of the 28 Il-38 maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs) have been upgraded to the Il-38N standard and delivered to the Russian Naval Air Arm on 30 June 2015. Russia awarded the company a contract for a second batch of Il-38Ns in May 2015 although the number of aircraft involved was not disclosed.⁴⁴ According to Yury Yudin, Deputy Director-General of Ilyushin Aviation Complex:

“Two additional upgraded Il-38Ns will be delivered to the Naval Air Arm in November 2016.”⁴⁵

Il-142. At the moment, the Naval Air Arm has about 27 Il-142s. The first Tu-142 was recently spotted in Syria.⁴⁶

Helicopters

Ka-52. In early March 2015, it was reported that the Russian Air Force has a current fleet of 63 Ka-52s with confirmed orders for an additional 93.⁴⁷ So far, four Ka-52s continue to be deployed in Syria.⁴⁸

Mi-8MTPR-1. The Russian Air Force received three new electronic warfare (EW) helicopters on 4 March 2015. The EW helicopters are deployed at a Western Military District (WMD) headquartered in Saint Petersburg. Additional Mi-8MTPR-1s are under construction with the Air Force set to eventually receive 18 of the EW helicopters.⁴⁹

Mi-28N. More than 100 Mi-28Ns have been delivered to the Aerospace Forces since 2013. On 9 March 2016, (known as the day of the battle for Palmyra), the Mi-28N was deployed in Syria for the first time.⁵⁰ So far, about ten Mi-28Ns continue to be deployed in Syria while one of ten crashed on 12 April 2016.⁵¹

Mi-35M. The Aerospace Forces operate 49 Mi-35Ms.⁵² So far, four Mi-35Ms continue to be deployed in Syria.⁵³

Air-Defence Systems

S-300. It is known that S-300 is stationed in the WMD, the Eastern Military District (EMD) headquartered in Khabarovsk and the Central Military District (CMD) headquartered in Rostov-on-Don and Yekaterinburg.⁵⁴

S-400. The Aerospace Forces have thus far equipped 19 of its planned 56 air-defence divisions with the S-400, each with eight launchers.⁵⁵ It is known that Russia set up four S-400 regiments defending national airspace in the Moscow Region, the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad, the EMD⁵⁶ and the WMD.⁵⁷

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