
David J. Betz
The Swedish Defence Research Agency has published over the years a good number of high quality analyses of Russian foreign, defence and security policies, including civil-military relations. This report on Civilian Control of the Russian State Forces by Jan Knoph stands in good company.

There are many good things to say about this report so it may seem perverse to begin with a criticism but I have one major problem with the work which it is useful to get out of the way in the beginning. Knoph sets himself the brief of looking at civilian control both as a matter of theory and of practice. This troublesome marriage of perspectives causes him a number of problems. Far too much time is spent discussing the theory of civilian control, which is a shame because the civil-military relations literature is already voluminous and, frankly, rather dull when compared to the frequently fascinating things Knoph has to say about the Russian practice. More importantly, it begs the question: what do Western theories of democratic civilian control really have to say about the reality of Russian civil-military relations?

I would argue not much. What is more I think from what he has written that Knoph would agree. The main preoccupation of civil-military relations theory has tended to be the prevention of coups, but as Knoph makes clear “the main problem of Russian civil-military relations is not coups, but the habit of applying military solutions to civil problems...” (p.24) Later on he continues in a similar vein: “Russia is united on the principle of civilian control but divided on the contents and purposes thereof. Generally in Russia civilian control has the purpose of improving budgetary control and reducing...
corruption.” (p. 64) Based just on these criteria, the state of Russian civil-military relations is perhaps not that bad. It isn’t democratic and it’s not at all transparent but budgetary control of the Ministry of Defence is better under Putin than it was under Yeltsin and—though this is obviously hard to judge—one hears fewer stories of egregious corruption in the ranks than one did in the mid to late ‘90s. In the past, Russian civil society has played essentially no role in the oversight of the armed forces. Nor does it now—but then the masses are not exactly clamouring for that right either because “Russian political culture does not hinder authoritarianism and militarization.” (p. 19)

4 This is not to say that there are not grave problems at hand. There are a great many in which the status quo in civil-military relations does harm to Russian society. But what really alarms the man or woman on the street is not that their system of civil-military relations departs from a notional liberal democratic norm but that they’ve an army which consumes their sons for whom army service means squalor, disease, brutal hazing and the risk of death in Chechnya or some other unwinnable brushfire war. Knoph acknowledges this in more formal terms: “Looking into the contemporary Russian state forces the absence of civilian control is less shocking than the absence of organisational control.” (p. 111)

5 Knoph is on top of what is being written by Russians about these issues which makes the report useful for researchers not able to monitor the Russian language press. The report is strongest when it focuses on the practical challenges.

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