



## "Za Rodinu" – "For the Fatherland": the officer's new place in Russian society

BRENNUS 4.0

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**Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, the government has tended to rehabilitate the prestige of its army. Indeed, if the Soviet officers were erected as heroes, victorious over Nazi Germany, the fall of the USSR has tarnished the image of the army. In a context of economic and social crisis leading to a reduction in defence spending, military personnel were living in dramatic conditions. In 1997, researcher Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski testified: "The Russian army is a malnourished, poorly housed, disoriented, trampled, abandoned army, whose primary objective is no longer to maintain its combat capability but to subsist by all means." [1] Once adulated, the officer has lost his prestige and has become a social, economic and identity issue. How has the Russian government contributed to improving the image of the officer and the army in general since the end of the USSR?**

### **Giving a new political role to officers**

In the course of its history, the Russian army has rarely played an important political role. This was the case during the Soviet period. Following the Revolution of 1917, a separation took place between the Tsar's followers and those who joined the Red Army. The missions and objectives of the officers of the Red Army were to protect and promote the interests of the Party-State, to be loyal and obedient to the wishes of the people and to protect the interests of the people to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), to avoid political interference and not to use the men under their command for private purposes [2]. 2] Thus, the officer belonged to a corps that exceeded his own individuality. However, the Bolsheviks, distrustful of the loyalty of officers to the Communist Party-State, introduced control mechanisms. On the one hand, the Main Political Directorate, an intra-military organization of political officers, ensured the ideological purity and political reliability of the armed forces. On the other hand, the CPSU used regular and military intelligence to ensure the reliability of the armed forces. Political advisers were also attached to army units to ensure the loyalty of officers and to make political propaganda to the troops. These commissioners thus allowed a double control: orders given by a

military officer had to be approved and countersigned by a political commissioner [3].

3] Nevertheless, from the late 1980s onwards, the officer corps played an increasingly important political role. A distinction must be made between "military political activism", i.e. political participation and commitment, and "political influence"[4], i.e. the ability to influence political decision-makers. The increased presence of officers in the power elite is said to be due to Russia's opening up to the market economy in the early 1990s[5]. 5] Former members of the Soviet special services, notably those of the Committee for State Security (KGB), were the only ones to have been elected to office. They were the only ones authorized by the Soviet government to study and visit the West (economics, politics, language, law). These men therefore seemed the most qualified to help Russia insert itself into the new world emerging from the rubble of the USSR.

Thus, the militarisation of power would result in the over-representation of officers in the upper echelons of power, allowing the armed forces to have a more important position in Russia. The most striking examples are the roles played by the Minister of Defence Sergei Choïgou, or General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Staff, who in particular supervised operations in the Crimea and launched the Russian operation in Syria in September 2015. Nevertheless, more than a "militarisation" of the government, we could above all speak of an "FSB-ization"[6] or an " FSB-ization"[7]. 6] or a " special force-ization " of which Vladimir Putin, from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), would be the first representative.

### **Federating officers and the population thanks to the glorious past**

During the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), Soviet leaders chose to bring the army and the population together as a united whole, ready for battle. This task became a reminder of Russia's glorious past: the heroic experience of defending freedom. Special attention was paid to the liberation of Russia from "foreign interventionists": Alexander Nevsky against the Teutonic Knights in 1240 and 1242, Dmitri Donskoy against the Tatars in 1380, Dmitri Pojarski against the Lithuanian-Polish interventionists in 1630, or the Soviet officers against Nazi Germany. Since Vladimir Putin came to power, the Great Patriotic War has become a new stage in the development of traditions of military heroism. The exaltation of Russia's heroic past has made it possible to unite civil and military forces around common values, as demonstrated by the celebrations of Defender of the Fatherland Day on 23 February and Victory Day on 9 May.

Defender of the Fatherland Day has existed since 1919, but took its current name from a decision by Vladimir Putin to declare it a public holiday in Russia in 2002. Officially, the holiday celebrates those who serve or served the Russian armed forces (men and women, military and civilians), while parades and processions honour veterans. Victory Day is celebrated on 9 May and commemorates the signing in Berlin of the act of surrender of Nazi Germany with the Allied troops (at 11 pm on 8 May French time, but at 1 am on 9 May Moscow time). This day has been a public holiday since 1965; however, in the 1990s, its celebration fell into disuse. After Vladimir Putin came to power, national holidays and commemorations once again became a source of national pride. Victory Day has gradually become a celebration in which popular culture plays a central role. In Moscow, a large military parade takes place and the population wears the St. George's ribbon[7] to celebrate the event. The 60th and 70th anniversaries of Victory Day in Russia (in 2005 and 2015) were thus the largest popular celebrations organized since the

collapse of the Soviet Union.

These two celebrations illustrate the return of a patriotism with military accents. Although other festivals exist, such as the Day of National Unity (4 November) and the Day of the Russian Federation (12 June), which is also considered a national holiday, Victory Day remains the festival that unites the population. It is celebrated by the whole of Russian society. Thus, on the occasion of a survey by the independent research centre Levada [8] carried out in December 2018, to the question "what makes you proud of past events?" 86% of the respondents answered "victory in the Great Patriotic War". Similarly, to the question "what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of your people?" 53% declared "our past and our history", compared to 37% in 1994 and 46% in 2016; 17% declared "our military power", compared to 5% in 1994.

The success of military operations is an essential component in restoring the prestige of the officer profession, and of the military in general. That is why the government is communicating a lot about the success of operations in Syria. For example, it has recently reused a Soviet-era method to disseminate military successes and promote patriotism: a travelling train exhibition. Between June 1943 and October 1948, such an exhibition carried Nazi war trophies captured by the Soviet Union. Similarly, in 2019, a train consisting of twenty cars travelled a distance of 28,500 kilometres. It stopped at sixty stations where captured weapons and equipment, photo galleries glorifying the Russian army and even a souvenir shop were displayed. The exhibition was also accompanied by singing and dancing, and by Russian soldiers who had returned from Syria to tell of their exploits.

### **Making an officer's career more attractive to young people**

In order to make a military career more attractive, the first step was to develop patriotism in Russian society, especially among young people. In his Millennium Manifesto [9] announcing the programme for his candidacy in the 2000 presidential election, Vladimir Putin evoked the idea of 'values' to be defended, three of which were of prime importance: patriotism (patriotizm), power (derjavnost') and the sense of state (gosoudarstvennitchestvo). According to V. Putin defines patriotism as "a sense of pride in one's homeland, its history and achievements. It is the aspiration to make one's country more beautiful, richer, stronger, happier" [10].

Since the election of V. Putin in 2000, four programmes of "Patriotic Education of the Citizens of the Russian Federation" (2001-2005, 2006-2010, 2011-2015, 2016-2020) have succeeded one another in order to inculcate patriotism in the youth. Patriotism is defined in these texts as "love of the Fatherland, devotion to the Fatherland, willingness to serve its interests and preparation for its defence, including self-sacrifice" [11]. 11] Patriotic education should thus make it possible to give "a new impetus to the spiritual rebirth of the people of Russia", to "maintain social stability, restore the national economy and strengthen the country's defensive capacity".

12] In fact, young people more often define patriotism as "love for one's country" and see it little as "the will to defend their country in situations of emergency or extreme danger". For young people, patriotism means first of all having a good knowledge of Russian history, traditions and culture, or feeling respect for one's country, but does not imply commitment or concrete actions [13]. However, young Russians seem fascinated by public



manifestations of patriotism, including mass actions, electoral activities and historical commemorations. Official educational institutions and the mass media therefore play a key role in the way young people represent their country and their connection to it. The Government is aware of the declining sensitivity of young people to patriotism and their appetite for mass events. In April 2019, for example, it launched the Pobeda (Victory ) channel aimed at young people [14]. 14] This channel broadcasts Soviet films, the latest big productions praising the heroism of the army (such as Kim Druzhinin's Tanks for Stalin, released in 2019), documentaries on the Great Patriotic War and broadcasts the May 9 parade. The channel was set up to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War (in 2020) and is, according to the director-general, the most important channel in the world. According to Perviy Kanal's (1st channel) director-general, Konstantin Ernst, it is "a tribute to our elders and witnesses, which we want to pass on to our descendants".

The military domain is only one aspect of patriotism in which paramilitary associations, supported by the government, are key players. One of the most recent is Yunarmia (The Young Army), created on 29 July 2016 by decree of the Russian Ministry of Justice. Patriotic education is at the heart of its objectives, since its charter defines as a priority "the preservation and promotion of patriotic values". Yunarmia has 272,000 members aged between 8 and 17. Its activities are divided into four categories: spiritual and moral education, intellectual development, physical and sports education, and social actions. This association is reminiscent of the Pioneers and the Komsomol , Soviet youth organizations from 1918 to 1991, or the DOSAAF (Society for the Development of the Social Sciences and Humanities). (Voluntary Society for Assistance to the Air Force, the Army and the Fleet), founded in 1927 by the Ministry of Defence. Its 2010 charter[15] recalls the need to offer patriotic education to a larger part of society and to be a source of mobilization.

More generally, paramilitary associations seem to meet three objectives:

- To develop civic engagement and a sense of community

"Only by resorting to the notion of patriotism can he be brought back into the collective. Patriotism presupposes the abnegation of individuals towards the national community as a whole"[16]. 16] This civic reengagement or the "re-politicization of societies"[17] does not therefore have military integration as its sole aim. It would come close to the operational superiority factor "moral force" in the French Army; this is based in particular on the "moral force" of the French army. development of the meaning and legitimacy of the commitment", and "individual training, especially in ethics and deontology"[18].

- Mobilizing and gathering against an external threat

The theme of the threat, whether internal or external, is important, even if it is not always clearly defined. Young people are directly concerned by these threats. On the one hand, because it is presented by the government as the bulwark that would defend Russia from abroad, and on the other hand, because the youth should be protected from foreign influences, especially from decadent progressive ideas [19]. 19] The Russian Ministry of the Interior is indeed actively fighting against "the manipulation of children's consciousness through social networks", and plans to send "problem" children to patriotic camps.

- Promoting "prospective integration"[21].

Younarmia makes it possible to transmit military values to young people and to provide them with preliminary military training that would make conscription, reduced to one year, more effective, since the young people thus trained would already have learned the first rudiments of combat. One of the objectives also seems to be to make military service and careers more attractive[22]. 22] Very few conscripts actually do their military service, since with the right means it is possible to avoid it. Many conscripts therefore come from disadvantaged social strata. Younarmia therefore encourages its recruits to embark on a military career. In addition, members who wish to become officers can put themselves forward by distinguishing themselves in the association's competitions - weapons assembly, shooting accuracy, physical endurance. In addition, twenty universities across the country would award association members additional credits based on their achievements. However, Younarmia, despite its mass communication, has so far only 1% of the population in its ranks.

**In conclusion**, Vladimir Putin wished as soon as he came to power to restore the image of an army tarnished by the economic and social crisis following the fall of the USSR. To this end, he strengthened the power of the army by appointing officers to key government posts. He also brought together the military and the civilian world around military exploits, past and present, notably through mass ceremonies. Finally, in order to attract more and more young people to the military career, it has promoted the development of activities in paramilitary associations that offer significant advantages for the pursuit of secondary and higher education. However, the growing employment of contract workers and private companies such as the Wagner group have lasting social and identity-related consequences for the Russian army, reinforcing the need to develop patriotic sentiment among the entire population.

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