

Address *Dedovshchina* or Face the Consequences of a Weakened and Ineffective Military Apparatus

By Lea Lavut

Executive Summary

This policy memo serves to evaluate and provide policy recommendations on the practice of *dedovshchina*, “the harassment of junior recruits by senior ones” in the Russian military¹. The century-old abuse of recruits in the Russian military has become something of an epidemic. With little to no recourse for the victims, and without adequate processes in place to address this problem, the consequences are numerous. Specifically, the failure to remedy this matter will inevitably continue to weaken the military apparatus. This scenario is one that should be avoided at all cost especially in light of the context within which Russia exists today. With immediate and long-term threats of terrorism, its military cannot afford to suffer the consequences of this internal problem.

Therefore it is critical to implement the recommendations offered. Some steps include examining the triggers and the reasons that have continued to enable this practice to exist. Other recommendations include introducing a broad reform framework, which encompasses robust procedural mechanisms for higher-level officers charged with misconduct. Another important step is to implement frequent training and follow up programs. Additionally, it is important for an effective reporting mechanism to exist. Therefore, it is critical to implement the recommendations offered which include the employment of an effective reporting mechanism, frequent medical checkups, substance abuse monitoring, comprehensive surveillance, and effective leadership training and accountability of perpetrators.

Background

Although it has afflicted the Russian military since conscription was in place in Russia, *dedovshchina* has increasingly gained more prevalence in the post-Soviet military. The systematic bullying of junior conscripts by their more senior counterparts is expressed in numerous ways ranging from being forced to polish shoes to more violent behaviors such as beatings and other forms of cruel and degrading punishment. The viciousness of the abuse continues to surface in frequent cases that are made public. The 2006 case of Pvt. Andrei S. Sychyov, which took place in Chelyabinsk Tank Academy demonstrates the extent of the brutality that conscripts face as well as the ineffective mechanisms to address the abuses.² Complicating the issue further, is the “endless cycle

¹Dale R. "Herspring Dedovshchina in the Russian Army: The Problem That Won't Go Away." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18.4 (2005): 607-29. Print.

²Pvt. Sychyov was forced to execute squats for three and a half hours by a drunken superior, which resulted in a severe infection leading to the amputation of his legs and genitalia. The subsequent investigation was fraught with corruption and attempted bribery of officials to the family of the victim in order to conceal the crime. Myers, Steven Lee. "Hazing Trial Bares a Dark Side of Russia's Military." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Aug. 2006. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.

of vengeance”³ in which second year conscripts are avenging the abuse they suffered as junior recruits.

One of the problems victims face are the repercussions for complaining about abuse. Moreover, when high-level officials visit military bases, victims with visible injury from the abuse are often hidden so as not to trigger any questioning. The practice is ingrained in the military to such an extent that it requires a significant effort and will on the part of the government to overcome it. Although there are existing mechanisms in place to rectify this, there is a wide gap between policy and implementation. So far, this issue has been mostly left out of the dialogue on military reform.

A key contributing factor hindering the resolution of this problem has been a failure on the part of the government to change its attitude. Recent actions such as the reduction from the mandatory two year service to one year conscription indicate a shift from categorical denial to weak measures at best. Currently, the lack of comprehensive and effective government action paints a grim scenario for any future hope of eradication of the practice. The recommendations should be implemented in order to change the culture in the military, because only this will allow for real reforms to take place.

Dedovshchina Contributes to Insecurity

This practice is a clear violation of the army code of conduct. It occurs so frequently and on such a massive scale that it becomes status quo, ordinary, and a part of fabric of the military. It threatens the cohesion of Russian army- “first it turns soldier against soldier and second, soldier against non-commissioned soldier (NCOs) and against junior officers.”⁴ Furthermore, it “undermines the military’s ability to attract the country’s ‘best and brightest’.⁵ Consequently, young men and their families attempt to evade draft in a number of ways such as medical cause and bribery. Because of “the experience of systematic violence young men acquire during 2-3 years of service, first as objects and later as subjects of hazing, is transferred to civil life, which is equally damaging both to society and the army.”⁶ The result is a slew of societal ills, which include rampant alcoholism in Russian society.

The abuse therefore, leads to negative dynamics between the military and civil society which in turn results in an “erosion of military preparedness”⁷ This also diminishes the possibility of the eventual creation of a professionalized instead of mass conscription derived military. This status quo is unlikely to draw competent and

³ Lohman, Diederik. "Russia: Systematic 'Hazing' a Serious Abuse." Human Rights Watch, 20 Oct. 2004. Web.

⁴ Dale R. "Herspring Dedovshchina in the Russian Army: The Problem That Won't Go Away." The Journal of Slavic Military Studies 18.4 (2005): 607-29. Print

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Bankikov, Konstantin L. "Regimented Communities in a Civil Society." *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 1 (2004): n. pag. Web. <<http://pipss.revues.org/40>>.

⁷ Lohman, Diederik. "Russia: Systematic 'Hazing' a Serious Abuse." Human Rights Watch, 20 Oct. 2004. Web.

professional individuals. It diminishes the efficacy of the military, which is crucial for an effective defense and the security of the state.

Recommendations:

- **Frequent Medical checkups**

Servicemen should be required to receive frequent medical checkups. Army medics receiving information of abuse or suspecting it should be required to immediately report findings to the anonymous review board. This practice should be made a part of the medical ethics code of conduct. Failure to do so should result in escalation to the review board, which will examine the situation and offer possible penalties for army medics

- **Substance Abuse Monitoring**

The abuse often occurs in a state fueled by alcohol. It is crucial to require servicemen of all ranks to submit to alcohol and drug testing, both regular and random. Servicemen found to be in violation of the policy should be subject to strictly enforced penalization

- **Comprehensive Surveillance**

Comprehensive surveillance technology should be implemented in army barracks to catch abnormalities. The monitoring mechanism will enable the supporting of testimony against perpetrators accused of abuse. This will also serve to minimize false reporting of causes of injury and death. This component is especially critical as the footage will offer irrefutable evidence and act as a strong deterrent against future abuses.

- **Effective Leadership Training**

Prevention from top down is often key to effectively controlling abuse. Commanders should pay close attention to dynamics between conscripts under their supervision. Commanders should attend mandatory comprehensive training on effective leadership and protocol on handling and preventing misconduct.

- **Implementation**

Implementations of reforming the policy of *dedovshchina* is a vital component to military reform. This practice is not simply an issue of human rights violations; it has far reaching consequences. At stake is Russia's defense apparatus and as a result, the security of the Russian state. Without your assistance on this matter in galvanizing immediate action and implementation of the recommendations, the security of the Russian Federation is at risk.

Bibliography

- Bankikov, Konstantin L. "Regimented Communities in a Civil Society." *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 1 (2004): n. pag. Web. <<http://pipss.revues.org/40>>.
- Herspring, Dale R. "Dedovshchina in the Russian Army: The Problem That Won't Go Away." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18.4 (2005): 607-29. Print.
- Lohman, Diederik. "Russia: Systematic 'Hazing' a Serious Abuse." Human Rights Watch, 20 Oct. 2004. Web.
- Myers, Steven Lee. "Hazing Trial Bares a Dark Side of Russia's Military." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Aug. 2006. Web. 25 Apr. 2014.