Corruption and competing norms in the postcommunist Russian military

Brinkhorst, Laura

Corruption and competing norms in the post-communist Russian military

Laura Brinkhorst

Introduction

'Stop the epidemic of theft in the forces.' This was what defence minister Sergei Ivanov had to say about the state of the Russian military in 2002. At that time, he had labelled counteracting theft in the military as the most important current task of the Ministry of Defence.[1] These might have been big words at the time, but today corruption in the Russian military is still a tenacious problem which does not seem to be effectively countered. This article therefore deals with the question why corruption in the post-communist Russian military is such a pervasive problem and what role the transition to the post-communist era plays in this.

Today, it is well-known that embezzlement of defence budgets and theft of military equipment have always been major issues, both in Soviet times and post-Soviet times. It is estimated that in the 1990s about fifty percent of the defence budget simply disappeared. However, the manner in which corruption happened has changed over time. It seems that corruption in post-communist times has become more sophisticated. Where theft and resale of military equipment was particularly prominent in the Yeltsin period, in the Putin period embezzlement of budget money has been most prominent. One can thus observe a shift from plain, old-fashioned theft in the late communist period, towards more white-collar type crimes related to embezzlement and fraud in the post-communist period. This is illustrated by the fact that even though budget allocations rose dramatically in the Putin period, very little new equipment entered the military since 2000 and 2001.[2] All these crimes are related to corruption and in the following I will attempt to explain why and how this happened and why Russia has been unsuccessful so far in countering it.

Before one can start analysing corruption, a definition is needed. Ever since antiquity there has been talk of and discussion about persons

[1] T. Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (8-11-2005), 7.
[2] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 11, 12 and 13.

misusing their power for personal gain.[3] The most widely used definition of corruption is the one by Joseph Nye: 'behaviour that deviates from the formal duties of a public servant for personal, financial or political gain, that of family, or a private clique, through bribery, nepotism, embezzlement or fraud.'[4] Unfortunately, for a historical study this definition is somewhat limited because it does not take the historical context in which corruption occurs into account. Political scientist Michael Johnston fills up this gap by arguing that corruption takes place in a certain socio-historical context which one needs to investigate in order to arrive at a proper definition of corruption.[5] He emphasizes that one should look at the interaction between social and legal norms on the one hand and the meaning of corruption on the other. According to him, social norms play a significant role in what is seen as corruption during a certain period in history.[6] This idea, that one should closely examine the historical context in which corruption takes place, is central to the method employed in this article.

Besides knowing what corruption is, one needs to know how it arises. This can be explained by the concept of 'competing norms'. Norms are rules by which, in this case soldiers, live. They are derived from common values such as truthfulness and integrity and serve to prevent things like power abuse. If these norms are however unclear or if there are multiple sets of norms present in a social situation, it could be that these norms will conflict. This is called 'competing norms' and it is a breeding ground for corruption.[7] In the case of the Russian military, it will become

[3] R. Kroeze, A. Vitoria and G. Geltner, *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era* (Oxford 2018), 2.

[4] J. Mendilow, 'Introduction – Corruption and Governmental Legitimacy. A Twenty-First-Century Perspective' in: J. Mendilow and I. Peleg eds., *Corruption and Governmental Legitimacy: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* (Lanham 2018) 1-19: 3, 4.
J.S. Bos, *Corruptie in Nederland en Duitsland: Incidenteel of ingebed? Corruptiebestrijding in Nederland en Duitsland in internationaal en nationaal perspectief* (Heerlen 2015), 34.

[5] T. Kerkhoff, R. Kroeze and P. Wagenaar, 'Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics in Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of Modern European History* 11:1 (2013) 19-30: 25.
D.B.R. Kroeze, *Een kwestie van politieke moraliteit. Politieke corruptieschandalen en goed bestuur in Nederland, 1848-1940* (Hilversum 2013), 10.

[6] M. Johnston, 'The Political Consequences of Corruption. A Reassesement', *Comparative Politics* 18:4 (1986) 459-477: 461.

[7] A. Karsten and H. von Thiessen, 'Einleitung: Normenkonkurrenz in historischer Perspektive', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 50 (2015) 7-20: 9.

clear that there is a major discrepancy between the formal military norms and informal work floor norms which lead to actual cases of corruption.

Another helpful methodological device is the corruption categorization of the German historian Frank Bajohr. Firstly, he describes institutional corruption which has to do with corrupt practices being part of the system. Integrated systems of patronage are examples of this. This type of corruption is not about individuals who abuse their power, but about a system that allows and forces them to do so. Secondly, there is tolerated corruption which is more concerned with the individual. Tolerated corruption occurs when someone abuses their power and breaks a formal norm, but no action is taken. Tolerated corruption is often the result of a dominance of informal norms over formal norms. For example, a soldier knows that stealing military equipment is strictly forbidden, but does it anyway because he knows that the informal norm (stealing is permitted) is what dominates that social situation. Tolerated corruption is also often the result of a system incapable of countering corruption effectively. This brings us to the third type: countered corruption. Countered corruption occurs when issues that directly harm the state are actively countered. This article will make clear that in the Russian military, this is very problematic. Lastly, it is important to note that the boundaries between these types of corruption are not static but also merge into and reinforce each other.[8] To sum up, by identifying corruption cases as institutional, tolerated or countered one gets a better grip on the nature of these crimes and by examining competing norms one can get a better understanding of the reasons why and how it occurs.

Institutional corruption

In modern Russia, corruption is present in all layers of government. The Defence Ministry and the military are considered one of the most corrupt branches of government.[9] As said, corrupt are those practices that are

[8] F. Bajohr, 'The Holocaust and Corruption', *Networks of Nazi persecution: bureaucracy, business and the organization of the Holocaust* (2005) 118-138: 132.
F. Bajohr, *Parvenüs und Profiteure Krorruption in der NS-Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main 2001), 11.

[9] P. Beliakova and S. Perlo-Freeman, website World Peace Foundation 'Corruption in the Russian Defense Sector' (11-5-2018), 3.

formally prohibited because they undermine the state, but happen anyway. This is of course a contradiction. If a government knows that practices like bribing and theft by officials are harmful to the state, why not counter that harshly? This is because sometimes corrupt practices become so ingrained in the state system that the system cannot function without it. This way, corruption becomes something functional that is part and parcel of the system: institutional corruption.

In terms of the Soviet and Russian military, scholars argue that corruption is at least in part caused by institutionalized informal norms among military officers. This is illustrated by an example from the early 1990s with the Soviet troops in the Western Group of Forces stationed in Germany. It is widely recognized that corruption in this group was particularly serious. In 1995, a Belgian businessman told the Moscow News: 'It was a revelation for me when I came to understand shortly after, that their [the officers'] personal gain overshadowed everything else: the interest of the cause, the state of their own army. You cannot even imagine what sums of money were thrown to the wind for some official to be able to receive a bribe.'[10] Over time it has become apparent that in the Western Group accepting bribes, selling off state property, and other corrupt activities had become common practice and were often well organised. It is clear that somewhere along the way the formal Soviet military norms have clashed with the informal work floor norms and that this clash has resulted in a breeding ground for corruption.

The conflict between the formal army norms and corrupt informal norms can be explained by a number of things. One factor is that officers might feel a certain disillusionment with military service. This has to do with the fact that the military profession in Soviet days was both prestigious and relatively well paid. In post-Soviet times, this is no longer the case. The military has suffered a decline in status and budgets which has led to a certain degree of neglect. This in turn, has led to disappointment and dissatisfaction, especially among the officers' ranks. As a consequence, at least some officers have turned to illegal practices in order to cope with post-communist conditions. The idea is that because of the inability of the state to distribute (military) resources evenly, corruption is necessary to take care of oneself and is therefore justified. The example of a prosecuted officer stating to the Military Procuracy 'we are not stealing, just compensating for what the government is not giving us' is very telling in

[10] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 21-23.

this respect.[11] One part of the problem thus seems to be that officers no longer trust the state. They take matters into their own hands and try to ensure their own wellbeing by means of power abuse and corruption.[12]

The difficult conditions of the Russian military in the post-communist era and the 'compensation response' is not the only factor that has to be taken into account when trying to explain institutional corruption. One must not forget that the Soviet and Russian military have a tradition of patronage and permitting high-ranking officers special privileges. These privileges have ranged from patronage, which protected and promoted family of officers, to the usage of soldiers' labour, to build holiday homes for generals.[13] Next to the disillusionment of the officer corps after the fall of communism, there has thus been a long-standing tradition of corrupt practices such as patronage and misuse of power. In connection to the 'compensation argument', it is safe to say that the corruption following the post-communist era was made easier by these already existing corrupt systems. The fact that one can point to a tradition of corruption within the military means that countering corruption is not very high on the government's agenda.

The institutional corruption described above has various implications for the Russian military in terms of its strength and effectiveness. First of all, corruption breaks down military discipline, something that is immensely important for an institution concerned with the safety and protection of the state. Also, if a soldier sees his commander getting away with doing illegal things, he might think he can do the same and act on it. This top-down development then makes the whole Russian military prone to corruption. As a consequence, it becomes nearly impossible to punish subordinates for illegal activities since the higher officers, who should be prosecuting them partake in these activities too. The result is that corrupt military personnel is rarely punished for their crimes. The notion that one can get away with corruption becomes widespread which results in the idea among military personnel that there is virtually no penalty for bribing, accepting bribes, selling off state property or otherwise putting one's own interest in front of that of the state.[14] This

[11] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 22 and 23.
[12] J.G. Mathers, 'Corruption in the Russian Armed Forces', *The World Today* 51:8/9 (1995) 167-170: 170.
[13] Mathers, 'Corruption in the Russian Armed Forces', 169.
[14] Ibidem, 170.

undermines the whole system. Corruption might thus be fruitful in the short run and on the individual level, but in the long run it is very damaging indeed.

As a result of widespread corruption Russia has sometimes been labelled a 'kleptocracy'.[15] In such a system, the personal enrichment of the ruling elite is a primary goal of regime policy. To achieve this, the resources of the state are systematically plundered for the benefit of this elite.[16] In a 'kleptocracy', corruption is not necessarily a 'problem' within the system, it is part of it. Since corruption in Russia has become so common, the public is quite tolerant towards corruption too. Researcher Vitaly Nomokonov has argued that 'corruption has a social role in Russia', and that at this point a certain degree of corruption is required to keep the system going.[17]

Tolerated corruption

The second type of corruption I wish to address is tolerated corruption. Tolerated corruption differs from institutional corruption in the sense that the latter type has to do with the workings of the state whereas tolerated corruption is generally about crimes that are recognized as damaging and should be countered when stumbled upon. One example of tolerated corruption is the very common practice of bribing army officials to avoid conscription. This is such a common practice that young people save their money for it just as they would when buying a car. It has been estimated that more than half of the young men exempted from military service obtained the exemption by means of bribery.[18] The paradox here is that offering a bribe to avoid conscription is an unwanted practice because it could weaken military potential, while at the same time this specific corrupt act almost ceases to be a crime because it is a tolerated practice.

Another example are officers that manipulate data about their troops by presenting their number of staff members to be higher than they actually are. Since budget allocations are calculated based on the number of subordinates an officer has, they are capable of receiving more money than

[15] Beliakova and Perlo-Freeman, 'Corruption in the Russian Defense Sector', 2.
[16] Ibidem, 2.
[17] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 29 and 20.
[18] M. Levin and G. Satarov, 'Corruption and institutions in Russia', *European Journal of Political Economy* 16 (2000) 113-132: 124.

they actually need. This way, they are able to take the surplus money for themselves. Important to note in this respect is that this practice is enhanced by the fact that military salaries are paid in cash. They are not directly transferred to bank accounts, which makes detecting this type of crime incredibly difficult.[19]

One of the most poignant cases of tolerated military corruption took place during the Second Chechen War from 1999 to 2009 when Islamic fighters from Chechnya, a constituent republic of Russia located in the North Caucasus, infiltrated the Dagestan region declaring it an independent state. Russia reacted by sending troops and was able to restore Russian control in May 2000. Still, Chechen militant resistance continued until 2009.[20] During this conflict various corrupt acts were committed by Russian military personnel. Russian officers and privates sold weapons to the Chechen resistance, thereby helping their own enemies and weakening themselves. Fuel for army vehicles was also sold to citizens in the area for personal enrichment, again weakening their own combat potential. There have also been cases of higher officers granting themselves a sum of money called 'boyevie' for taking part in combat when they in fact did not participate in the fighting at all. They hereby deprived lower rank personnel who did take part in the fighting of their reward, losing credibility and trust. Events like these have had a negative effect on both the Russian combat potential and troop morale among military personnel in Chechnya, but were tolerated all the same.[21]

One would think, and perhaps hope, that in an international setting corruption would not be as bad. However, corruption has plagued international peacekeeping operations as well. It seems that Russian officers have taken their habit of taking big shares of military budgets for themselves abroad. The reselling of fuel also happened during United Nation missions. Furthermore, in 1999, a Russian soldier deserted from the Russian Kosovo Force (KFOR), because his officers lived luxuriously whereas soldiers received poor food and accommodation. In 1994 the Washington Times reported that according to US military officials 'corruption among the Russian peacekeeping forces in Croatia has been a major problem since they were first deployed there in 1992', 'the corruption

[19] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 15.
[20] Internet Website BBC News: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/2357267.stm (consulted 28-5-2021).
[21] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 17- 18.

among the Russian troops has reached unbelievable proportions' and 'the Russians have got to send down better soldiers'.[22] It is made clear from these examples that corrupt practices such as theft and embezzlement were tolerated, just like in the home country. The question then becomes: why do privates and officers do these kinds of things? This has to do with competing norms. There is a clear discrepancy between the formal norms, namely that abusing one's power or resources for personal gain is strictly forbidden, and the informal norm that this is somehow acceptable. But why are these practices apparently acceptable? Why are they tolerated?

One answer could be that soldiers and lower officers find it difficult to earn a decent living in the military caused by, unsurprisingly, corruption within the higher ranks of the organisation. The budget money that is stolen does damage exactly where you do not want it: the lower ranks. In fact, the Military Procuracy states that the majority of officers investigated in corruption cases claim that the state is making it impossible for them 'to provide a decent living' as their main motive for what they have done.[23] Some might say that this is a rather noble motive for actions actually motivated by less noble intentions. Still, it cannot be ruled out. It seems that the informal rule of stealing from state property as a compensation for their shortcomings overrules the formal army rules and has now become institutional. Another reason is that the mechanisms of countering corruption in Russia are jammed. As will be described below, the army inspection services often engage with corruption themselves which makes countering corruption effectively very difficult, but the tolerance also has to do with more political considerations and creating leverage.

Countered corruption

Even though corruption is often tolerated and institutional, there have been efforts made by the Russian government to counter corruption. In 2002 Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that the most important task for his ministry was to 'stop the epidemic of theft in the forces'.[24] The Russian government often names fighting corruption as one of its top priorities. Judging from the literature, this has not always gone to plan, but there have

[22] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 18 and 34.
[23] Ibidem, 22.
[24] Ibidem, 7.

been incidents that have been too serious to ignore. In 1997 for example, it became known that admiral Oleg Yeorfeev, commander of the northern fleet from 1992 to 1998, had stolen massive amounts of money from the fleet's budget. In total, he had stolen 65 million roubles and was consequently prosecuted and found guilty. Still, Yeorfeev was punished mildly considering the amount of money that he stole. After returning some of the money, he was amnestied. Further career advancement was blocked, but all of this is in stark contrast to the losses the fleet sustained due to his actions. Despite prosecuting severe cases like admiral Yeorfeev's, in 2004 corruption-related incidents still made up 38% of all registered military crimes. Moreover, a 2005 defence report on the state of corruption in the military found that a 'fantastic rise' had taken place.[25] This leads us to the question why anti-corruption efforts have been unsuccessful in the post-communist era.

As described above, there have been several serious cases of corruption, especially during the Chechen conflict and in the Western Group forces. This included illegal sales of military equipment such as armoured vehicles, Kalashnikov rifles and even a fighter aircraft. There have also been cases of officers running shops selling tobacco and alcohol from their homes on military bases. Senior officers were reportedly aware of these practices but chose not to take action and tolerate the illegal activities. This is further complicated by the fact that even officials working at the military inspection services tasked with putting a stop to activities like these, are sometimes guilty of such crimes themselves and as a result often tolerate it when they see others do it. To give an example, an official tasked with investigating serious corruption cases within the Western Group in Germany was gifted a new Mercedes car by the commander of the forces, general Matvei Burlakov, in order not to judge the situation too harshly.[26] Incidents like this prove that even the Russian anti-corruption mechanisms are prone to corruption. This is an incredibly difficult cycle to get out of. Thus, at the individual level it seems that military officers use a rational cost-benefit analysis for deciding whether or not to engage in corruption. Judging from the numbers and examples described it seems that there is a low chance of getting caught and a high profit.[27] As said, there are strict formal rules for crimes like theft and bribery, but military officers are

[25] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 7, 9 and 20.
[26] Mathers, 'Corruption in the Russian Armed Forces', 168.
[27] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 19.

apparently prepared to take the risk since the chances of being prosecuted are so low. Essentially, there is no reason to fear committing corrupt acts because they are either integrated in the system or tolerated at large. An inability to effectively counter corruption is the result.

Another explanation might be found at the institutional level. During the Yeltsin period, the government found itself in situations where the loyalty of the upper ranks of the military were strongly needed. It is argued that by turning a blind eye to corruption the loyalty of the generals and admirals was ensured. As analyst for the International Institute for Strategic Studies Oksana Atonenko puts it: 'If they are allowed to steal, they do not rebel.'[28] This example clearly shows an element of fear coming from the government about possibly losing the loyalty of the military. This way, not countering corruption becomes a tool for ensuring political continuation. Russia's current president Putin has positioned himself somewhat more independent from military elite. Despite this relative independence, Putin has not embarked on a more active anti-corruption campaign than his predecessor. It seems that Putin does not want to associate himself more closely with the military elite, but on the other hand he also does not have the courage or power to strongly counter the corruption that harms Russia's international prestige.[29]

Closely related to this is the idea that the Russian government tolerates military corruption in order to create leverage to influence high ranking officers. It is well known today that the government often registers corruption but chooses not to act on it only to address it later to influence the behaviour or opinion of officials, or in this case military officials. Knowledge of corruption thus gives the presidency power over the military elite. Knowing of the illegal things they have done, creates leverage which can then be used to push through a political agenda or policy without having to deal with criticism. This practice is widely known and has become a part of the Russian state system.[30] Institutional corruption then leads to widespread tolerated corruption and a situation where corruption is purposely not countered only to use it as a power tool at a later moment.

[28] Bukkvoll, 'Russian Military Corruption – Scale and Causes', 31.
[29] Ibidem, 28 and 31.
[30] Ibidem, 30.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to give an overview of the state of corruption in the Russian army in post-communist times. The article has shown that corruption is one of the most pressing matters the military has to deal with. The potential damage of corrupt acts such as the tolerated practice of stealing from budgets and selling off military equipment is great. We have also seen that it remains extremely difficult to counter corruption effectively. This is because Russia finds itself in a cycle of corruption in which the three types of corruption described strongly reinforce each other. Because of certain historical developments and traditions, corruption in the officer corps has become institutional, which has led to a high degree of tolerated corruption which in turn, cannot be countered effectively exactly because it has become institutional and is now something functional as well.

A solution is difficult to provide. What is clear, is that somehow the clash between the formal and informal norms needs to be resolved. A situation needs to be created where the formal norms triumph over the informal norms and are respected and adhered by all layers of the military. This would include restructuring and rebuilding the entire system, starting from the top so that the higher ranks can no longer disadvantage the lower ranks with their corrupt acts. It would then become possible to take some of the disillusionment and dissatisfaction away from the lower ranks so that they will be less likely to commit corrupt acts too. Lastly, the Russian military needs a proper inspection system which can be relied upon to carry out its duties no matter what temptations it faces. Only then might Russia be healed from it corruption epidemic.