

*Michał Romańczuk**

The transformation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation: Implications for NATO and Ukraine

Transformacja Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej. Implikacje dla NATO i Ukrainy

ABSTRACT:

The Russian Federation's armed aggression against Ukraine in 2022 constitutes one of the most significant challenges to the security architecture of Central and Eastern Europe. Russia's military policy and ongoing modernisation efforts pose a tangible threat to regional stability, compelling Central and Eastern European states to reassess their defence strategies and enhance cooperation within NATO. This is particularly urgent given the Russian Federation's engagement in both conventional and hybrid operations. Consequently, the threat to NATO member states – especially those situated on the so-called “eastern flank” – is intensifying, necessitating greater cohesion among NATO allies and increased investment in defence and armed forces modernisation. This article aims to examine the reforms undertaken within the Russian Armed Forces following the dissolution of the USSR and to evaluate their implications for regional security. The central research question explores how successive stages of military modernisation have influenced the operational capabilities of the Russian army and the utilisation of its military potential in pursuit of the Federation's security policy objectives. The paper is of a review nature and is based on the analysis of available academic sources.

KEYWORDS:

transformation of armed forces, NATO, implications for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, eastern flank

* Dr Michał Romańczuk – University of Szczecin, Poland, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1160-4208>, e-mail: michal.romanczuk@usz.edu.pl.

STRESZCZENIE:

Zbrojna agresja Federacji Rosyjskiej przeciwko Ukrainie w 2022 r. stanowi jedno z najpoważniejszych wyzwań dla architektury bezpieczeństwa Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Polityka militarna Federacji Rosyjskiej oraz prowadzone przez nią działania modernizacyjne tworzą realne zagrożenie dla stabilności regionu, zmuszając państwa Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej do ponownej oceny strategii obronnych oraz pogłębienia współpracy w ramach NATO. Jest to szczególnie istotne w kontekście zaangażowania Federacji Rosyjskiej w operacje zarówno konwencjonalne, jak i hybrydowe, co stanowi zagrożenie dla państw członkowskich NATO, zwłaszcza tych położonych na tzw. wschodniej flance. Sytuacja ta wymusza potrzebę podjęcia bardziej spójnych działań w ramach NATO, redefinicji narodowych strategii obronnych oraz zwiększenia nakładów na obronność i modernizację sił zbrojnych. Celem artykułu jest analiza reform przeprowadzonych w Siłach Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej po rozpadzie ZSRR oraz ocena ich wpływu na bezpieczeństwo regionalne. Kluczowe pytanie badawcze dotyczy tego, w jaki sposób kolejne etapy modernizacji wojskowej wpłynęły na zdolności operacyjne armii rosyjskiej oraz wykorzystanie potencjału militarnego w realizacji celów polityki bezpieczeństwa państwa. Praca ma charakter przeglądowy i opiera się na analizie dostępnych źródeł naukowych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

transformacja sił zbrojnych, NATO, implikacje konfliktu rosyjsko-ukraińskiego, flanka wschodnia

Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation had to meet the changing challenges and threats in the world of the 21st century. They were formally established on 7 May 1992, based on the decree of the then-President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin¹. Since the early 1990s, the Russian authorities have tried to rebuild the role and importance of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and strengthen its military potential. After Vladimir Putin took power, the Russian Federation increasingly began to use the Armed Forces to achieve its own political and military goals in the international arena, including in Georgia, Syria, and Ukraine. These activities were also reflected in Russian strategic documents, including the military doctrine and security strategy.

¹ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii O Sozdanii Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii, 7 May 1992, https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_118699/ [12.04.2025].

The reforms undertaken by Vladimir Putin in relation to the Armed Forces were aimed at increasing the power and military strength of the Russian Federation and pursuing revisionist attitudes towards the international system, questioning the established international order. The Russian authorities claim that the security system formed after the collapse of the USSR is disadvantageous to them and does not take their interests into account. The expansion of NATO to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is a particular threat to them. Before the fullscale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, the authorities in the Kremlin intensified their demand for the United States of America to create a new security architecture in Europe. In connection with this, in order to achieve its goals, the Russian Federation has been carrying out actions with the threat or direct use of military force, along with a combination of hybrid actions.

The aim of this article is to analyse the process of transformation and reform of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This process carries significant implications for regional security, particularly for NATO and the countries of the so-called “eastern flank”. The central research question is: How have the reforms of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation evolved since 1991, and what currently determines the direction of their transformation? This is a review article that takes into account both internal and external factors influencing the evolution of the Russian Armed Forces. This study is based primarily on secondary sources, including analyses of policy papers and open-source. Due to the classified nature of many aspects of military reform in the Russian Federation, certain conclusions are based on publicly available data. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the conflict in Ukraine may render some assessments provisional.

1. The process of the formation and reform of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

After the collapse of the USSR, the process of the formation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was a major challenge and encountered many structural problems. The main challenges included reorganisation, modernisation of the command structures, and modernisation of equipment to meet new challenges in the field of security. In the early 1990s, the

President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, did not pursue any coherent political vision or strategy to fundamentally change the situation in the armed forces. This approach shows the low priority of then-President Boris Yeltsin regarding strengthening the potential of the Russian army. At that time, the reform plans were based primarily on a radical reduction in the number of soldiers².

In addition, the Russian authorities did not have the financial resources to maintain such a large army. Especially since military funds were drastically reduced due to the economic crisis and hyperinflation in Russia³, which also had a major impact on research and development in the arms industry. For comparison, at the end of the USSR, military spending was huge. In subsequent years, however, it was drastically reduced; in 1993, it amounted to 28.7 billion USD, in 1994 – 40.2 billion USD, in 1995, 21.1 billion USD, and in 1996, 18.2 billion USD. The reduction in financial resources for military purposes also had a negative impact on the morale of soldiers, who were often not paid their salaries. This resulted in a decrease in combat readiness and the prestige of the Armed Forces among the public⁴.

The poor situation in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the need for urgent reforms were revealed by the first war in Chechnya in 1994–1996, which showed that the Russian armed forces were not able to operate even within their own state borders. Additionally, this conflict showed the problem of the lack of adequate funding, the decline in military morale, and the lack of discipline among soldiers⁵. For this reason, the first attempt at a comprehensive reform of the Russian Armed Forces was launched in 1997 by the then Minister of National Defence of the Russian Federation – Igor Sergeev. In its first phase, it was mainly limited to reducing the number

² N. Olszanecka, *Armia kontraktowa czy z poboru? Kazus Federacji Rosyjskiej*, “Europa Orientalis. Studia z dziejów Europy Wschodniej i Państw Bałtyckich” 2014, no. 5, p. 214.

³ The economic reforms implemented in the Russian Federation under the framework of so-called “shock therapy” during the 1990s resulted in a dramatic contraction of the national economy, with GDP declining by approximately 50%. In January 1992, amid a severe economic crisis and the collapse of the state budget, widespread unemployment ensued, and many workers went unpaid. The most acute phase of economic hardship occurred between 1992 and 1995. The magnitude of the crisis is exemplified by the inflation rate, which soared to 844.2% in 1993, before gradually declining to 11% by 1997.

⁴ J. Zalewski, *Wokół nowej tożsamości sił zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej*, [in:] A. Bryc, A. Le-gucka, A. Włodkowska-Bagan (eds.), *Bezpieczeństwo obszaru postradzieckiego*, Warsaw 2011, pp. 405–406.

⁵ N. Olszanecka, op. cit., pp. 214–215.

of soldiers in the Armed Forces over the two years up to 1999 by 600,000. Additionally, air defence and the Air Force were combined, and the number of military districts was reduced to six. The second stage of Igor Sergeyev's military reform plan was to cover the years 2001–2005. During this time, actions were to be taken to strengthen the military command and control system and raise the level of operational training. However, most of the goals, including the professionalisation and modernisation of the army, were not implemented due to insufficient defence spending, especially after the economic crisis in 1998. This stopped Igor Sergeyev's efforts to significantly reform the armed forces⁶.

The change in the position of the President of the Russian Federation in 1999 significantly changed the approach of the Russian authorities towards the Armed Forces. For President Vladimir Putin, reform of the army was one of the main priorities, which led to the centralisation of command and his taking on personal supervision of the power structures in the country. The General Staff was subordinated directly to the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation. One of the priorities was also to take action to implement new weapons and military technology⁷.

The event that initiated the largest reform in the history of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation was the Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008. Despite the quick victory and the achievement of military and political goals by the Russian authorities, this conflict revealed many weaknesses in their army, such as problems in communications, logistics, and the lack of appropriate military equipment to increase the efficiency and operability of the armed forces, as well as poor training of soldiers and a lack of strategy and tactics for conducting military operations⁸. In this regard, the then Minister of National Defence, Anatoly Serdyukov, on 14 October 2008, officially announced plans for the largest military operation in history to reform the armed forces following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which were

⁶ S. Rogov, *The Evolution of Military Reform in Russia, 2001*, H.H. Gaffney, D. Gorenburg (eds.), Alexandria 2001, https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/d0004857.a1.pdf, pp. 14–16 [5.05.2025].

⁷ A. Dańda, *Czy należy obawiać się Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej? Subiektywne i obiektywne ujęcie bezpieczeństwa w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich*, "Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny" 2010, no. 4, pp. 81–82.

⁸ M. Banasik, *Nowe spojrzenie na proces transformacji Sił Zbrojnych Federacji Rosyjskiej*, "Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego" 2020, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 52.

to be carried out in the years 2009–2020. The main goal of this reform was to create an army better adapted to the challenges of the modern battlefield. This was to be achieved through structural changes, the professionalisation of the army, higher combat readiness, and a departure from the mass mobilisation of reservists in favour of an increase in the share of contract soldiers. However, general conscription was not abandoned; only the period of basic military service was shortened from 24 to 12 months⁹. Additionally, the number of military districts was reduced from six to four larger ones (Western, Central, Southern and Eastern)¹⁰. Central command bodies were also merged and more closely coordinated, and structural changes were ordered. They consisted of abandoning the previous four-level command system (military districts, armies, divisions, and regiments) in favour of a three-level service hierarchy (military districts, operational commands, and brigades)¹¹. The aim was to generate units capable of more independent, self-sufficient combat operations, because each military district should have the military capabilities to manage local conflicts in its own zone of responsibility. This was the basis for the challenges of contemporary threats and conducting military operations¹².

Another element of the reform was the replacement of officers and non-commissioned officers with younger soldiers, and a further reduction in the number of Armed Forces from 1.35 million to 1 million soldiers. Re-education was primarily concerned with reducing the number of higher-ranking officers from 355,000 to 155,000 and the number of generals from 1,100 to 900¹³. The main goal of reducing the number of soldiers was to cre-

⁹ B. Sokołow, *Armia Rosyjska dawniej i obecnie*, "Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny" 2010, no. 4(56), p. 70.

¹⁰ R. Pukhov, *Russia's Army Reform Enters New Strategy*, "Moscow Defense Brief" 2010, no. 2, pp. 22–24.

¹¹ *Russia's top brass gather in Moscow to discuss military reform*, http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20090902/155996512.html [5.05.2025].

¹² A.M. Dyner, *The Next Reform of Russia's Armed Forces: Is It a New Threat or Just for Appearances?*, "PISM Strategic File" 2023, no. 6(127), pp. 3–4.

¹³ The principal aim of the reform was to reduce the number of military units across the Russian Armed Forces. By 2020, the Ground Forces were projected to comprise 36% of the total military structure, up from 30% at the time the reform was announced in 2008. In the Navy, the number of units was to be reduced from 240 to 123, while the Air Force was expected to decrease from 240 to 120 units. Other branches of the military were also slated for substantial restructuring. The Strategic Missile Forces were to retain their divisional organisational structure; however, the number of divisions was to be reduced from

ate an armed force (it was assumed that it would be a smaller army) based mainly on professional soldiers – well-trained and equipped with modern equipment, who would be able to act against contemporary threats¹⁴. As part of the reform, significant emphasis was placed on acquiring new military technology and modernising the armed forces. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Armed Forces had received very little new military equipment, and so, in 2008, Anatoly Serdyukov launched a modernisation program aimed at increasing the share of modern military equipment in the total inventory. The initial goal was to reach 30% of modern weaponry by 2015¹⁵ and to raise this share to 70% by 2020. In 2009, the level of modern equipment was estimated at approximately 10%¹⁶.

2. Modernisation and increasing the role of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in foreign policy

The resignation of the Minister of National Defence of the Russian Federation, Anatoly Serdyukov, in 2012, caused by a corruption scandal, did not lead to a decrease or the abandonment of the process of reform and modernisation of the Armed Forces. The newly appointed minister – Sergey Shoigu, continued the subsequent stages of the reform. In addition, the impetus for their intensification was primarily the change in the security strategy and challenges taken on by the Russian authorities. In the 2021 national security strategy signed by the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, the list of threats was expanded, and among the most important threats indicated was “the ability of the North Atlantic Alliance and the approximation

12 to 8. Similarly, the Space Forces were to be downsized from 7 to 6 divisions. J. Grätz, *Russia's Military Reform: Progress and Hurdles*, “CSS Analyses in Security Policy” 2014, no. 152, p. 3.

¹⁴ M. Banasik, op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁵ J. Cooper, *Russia's state armament programme to 2020: a quantitative assessment of implementation 2011–2015*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, March 2016, <https://sv-4.ptn.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--4239--SE> [4.10.2025].

¹⁶ L. Borges, N.R. Smith, M. Eslami, *State capacity, military modernisation, and balancing: A conditional model of state capacity neoclassical realism*, “Review of International Studies” 2025, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/state-capacity-military-modernisation-and-balancing-a-conditional-model-of-state-capacity-neoclassical-realism/959E7A15AE5E2962443F00F80FD1F427> [4.10.2025].

of the organisation's infrastructure to the borders of Russia". The main threats indicated in the strategy for the Russian Federation are the United States of America and NATO, as well as their interference in the politics of the countries of the post-Soviet area, where Russia considers this area to be its internal zone of influence. The strategy indicates that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are to play a key role in responding to and eliminating these threats, especially since in this document, the authorities of the Russian Federation reserve the right to use armed forces to protect their own citizens outside the country's borders, which constitutes the possibility of armed interference in countries in the post-Soviet area¹⁷. Another element of the activities introduced by Sergey Shoigu was the increase in large-scale military exercises. This was to allow for a thorough testing of military formations in order to identify shortcomings in command systems. The exercises also seemed to confirm the general direction of the reform, while demonstrating the improvement of Russia's military capabilities and readiness¹⁸.

Sergei Shoigu, despite the emerging information about plans for professionalisation and the abandonment of the conscription army, stated that the Russian army will never be based entirely on contracts. He argued that Russia has a vast territory and threats to the country's security were emerging, including NATO's approach to the borders of the Russian Federation¹⁹. In addition, the Russian authorities conducted propaganda activities to increase the number of people willing to join the army and increase the prestige of the armed forces among the public. These activities brought a positive effect since, according to research conducted by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), in 2006, it showed that the Armed Forces in Russia were positively assessed by 32% of surveyed Russians, while by 2015 it was already 82% and in 2018, 87%²⁰. It is worth noting that over the last 7 years, Russians' assessment of the Russian army has significantly improved. In 2024, 61%

¹⁷ *Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation*, 2021, https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/nss_rf_2021_eng_.pdf [10.04.2025].

¹⁸ K. Hird, *Restructuring and Expansion of the Russian Ground Forces Hindered by Ukraine War Requirements*, "Institute For The Study of War" 2023, no. 12, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia's-military-restructuring-and-expansion-hindered-ukraine-war> [12.04.2025].

¹⁹ *Rossiyskaya armiya nikogda ne budet polnost'yu kontraktnoy*, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2340082> [12.04.2025].

²⁰ VCIOM, https://wciom.ru/fileadmin/user_upload/presentations/2016/2016-02-18-armiya.pdf [12.04.2025].

assessed it as “good” or “very good” (compared to 11% in 2013), while only 6% spoke of a “bad” or “very bad” condition of the Armed Forces²¹. These results show significant dynamics of change over several years. Additionally, public opinion polls indicated that the vast majority of respondents were in favour of creating a strong army, which corresponded with the increasingly intensive propaganda showing external threats to Russia and the need for rearmament. In addition, the army was listed among the main social institutions shaping moral and patriotic attitudes in citizens. In turn, 64% of Russians believe that military service is a good school of life for young people, a share that has almost doubled over a quarter of a century (33% in 1990)²².

A key element of Sergei Shoigu’s reform was the technical modernisation of military equipment to meet new challenges on the battlefield and achieve full combat readiness. This was possible thanks to an increase in military spending, through an increase in revenues from the sale of energy resources²³. The basis for the modernisation of the armed forces was the adoption in 2010 of the State Armament Program (SAP), which was to be implemented in 2011–2020²⁴. The purpose of this program was to purchase new equipment and implement research and development work in the field of new military technology. Despite the economic sanctions²⁵ imposed on the Russian Federation in 2014, this program continued to be successfully

²¹ *Armiya i obshchestvo*, VCIOM, 2018, https://wciom.ru/fileadmin/user_upload/presentations/2018/2018-12-24_army_society.pdf [12.04.2025].

²² *Obshchestvennyy prestizh vooruzhennykh sil sushchestvenno vyros*, <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/armiya-i-obshchestvo> [12.04.2025].

²³ T. Smura, R. Lipka, *The modernization program of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation – the state of implementation and the prospects for success*, https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pulaski_Policy_Papers_No_02_15_EN.pdf [12.04.2025].

²⁴ Prior to this, the State Armament Programme (SAP) for the period 2007–2015 was implemented, with the primary objective of ensuring that modern weaponry would constitute 30% of the total armaments within the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. The programme was allocated a total budget of 720 billion USD. Of this sum, 70% was designated for the procurement of new military equipment, while the remaining 30% was earmarked for the modernisation and maintenance of existing assets.

²⁵ As a consequence of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Russian Federation’s defence industry faced significant challenges in sourcing specialised components. These difficulties arose not only from the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States, but also from the cessation of cooperation with Ukraine’s defence sector. Ukrainian enterprises had previously played a pivotal role in the modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces, supplying essential components for ballistic missiles such as the RS-20V Voevoda, RS-18, and RS-12M Topol, as well as guidance systems for air-to-air missiles, including the R-73 and R-27. Ukraine was also a key supplier of aircraft engines; Russia

implemented. However, during its operation, a number of changes were introduced in connection with the military operations conducted in Ukraine and Syria²⁶. Thanks to this program, 70% of the weapons introduced in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation were new and modernised (in 2009, this percentage was 10%). The largest percentage, as much as 81%, was received by the Russian Strategic Forces, which corresponded to the challenges written into the military doctrine of the Russian Federation. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of new weapons went to units in the west of the Russian Federation, which was to enable a response to the threat from NATO and to strengthen its eastern flank in connection with the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas²⁷.

Significant advances in artillery and missile systems were achieved with the introduction of the 9K79-1 "TochkaU" (NATO designation SS21 Scarab), a shortrange ballistic missile system that entered service with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the late 1980s. The system has an approximate range of 120 km and is capable of carrying a variety of warhead types, including conventional, nuclear, and cluster munitions. It is notable for its mobility owing to the 9P129 wheeled transportererectorlauncher, which enables rapid deployment and quick launch²⁸. A key element in the development of tactical ballistic missiles is the 9K720 "IskanderM", fielded in early 2010. "IskanderM" has an operational range of up to 500 km and

had relied heavily on engines produced by the Zaporizhzhia-based Motor Sich plant for its combat helicopters, including the Mi-28N, Ka-50, and Ka-52 models. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

²⁶ It is important to note that this intervention marked the first large-scale military operation conducted by the Russian Federation beyond the post-Soviet space. The campaign provided an opportunity to test military equipment and operational tactics under real combat conditions. Notable examples include the deployment of advanced weaponry such as Su-34 and Su-35 fighter aircraft, Kalibr cruise missiles, and T-90 main battle tanks, enabling an evaluation of their operational and technical performance. From a command and control perspective, the military engagement in Syria facilitated an assessment of the effectiveness of Russia's command and communication systems, which in turn contributed to the refinement and standardisation of operational procedures within the Russian Armed Forces.

²⁷ A.M. Dyner, *Assessment of the Russian Armed Forces State Armament Programme in 2011–2020*, Warsaw 2021, pp. 6–7, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/assessment-of-the-russian-armed-forces-state-armament-programme-in-2011-2020> [14.04.2025].

²⁸ Global Security, *9K79 Tochka (SS-21 Scarab) Tactical Ballistic Missile System*, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/ss-21.htm> [5.10.2025].

can employ manoeuvring conventional or nuclear warheads²⁹. The launcher is based on the MZKT7930 heavy truck chassis, providing substantial mobility and rapid redeployment capability. In the domain of air defence, the S400 “Triumf” system, introduced into service in 2007, plays a prominent role. The S400 can engage aerial targets, including aircraft, unmanned aerial systems, and ballistic missiles, at ranges up to 400 km. It employs multiple missile types and an integrated radar suite capable of simultaneously tracking scores of targets and directing multiple interceptors. Breakthroughs have also occurred in hypersonic weapons research and deployment. The “Avangard” system is a hypersonic glide vehicle formally declared operational in 2019. Its high velocities and manoeuvring capability are intended to complicate interception by missile defence systems. The air-launched manoeuvring missile “Kinzhal” entered operational service in 2018 and is reported to carry either conventional or nuclear warheads to ranges on the order of 2,000 km while achieving hypersonic speeds³⁰.

During the Russian-Ukrainian war, the first confirmed use of the 9M730 “Burevestnik” (also referred to as “Oreshnik”) was recorded after development of this ballistic missile began in 2011. The “Burevestnik” reportedly derives from the earlier “Rubezh” project and has a declared range of approximately 5,800 km. It was designed for employment by the Strategic Rocket Forces as a component of the so-called nuclear triad³¹. A bespoke mobile launcher, the “Kedr”, built on a heavy truck chassis, was developed specifically for this system. The Russian Federation is also continuing to develop AntiAccess/AreaDenial (A2/AD) concepts aimed at restricting an adversary’s operational freedom within selected strategic areas.

The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation have begun to introduce new technologies, including digitalisation and cyberspace operations, as they have an increasing impact on conducting operations on the modern battlefield, as shown by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. These operations

²⁹ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*, pp. 263, 273, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2023> [5.10.2025].

³⁰ *An introduction to Russia’s military modernisation*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2020/09/rmm-introduction/> 2020 [14.04.2025].

³¹ M. Menkiszak, *Kremlin escalates threats against the West*, Analyses OSW, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2024-11-22/kremlin-escalates-threats-against-west> [14.04.2025].

are undertaken in both offensive and defensive aspects, aimed at attacking the enemy's critical infrastructure. An example of this type of operation was the NotPetya operation in 2017, in which Ukrainian ministries, banks, and enterprises suffered. Additionally, the Russian Federation uses cyberwarfare and disinformation in its operations on the battlefield. For this purpose, specialised units are used within the Ministry of Defence, which are responsible for disinformation operations and influencing public opinion, especially in Western European countries and the USA. These activities are aimed at influencing the choices and decisions made by the government through a disinformation campaign or fake news, and are an element of conducting hybrid operations aimed at destabilising the internal situation. A new element of using new technologies on the battlefield is robotisation and automation in the armed forces. An example of these activities is the development and use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) on the battlefield, such as drones – Altius-U and S-70 Okhotnik. They increase the manoeuvrability of the action, are used for reconnaissance and combat operations, and reduce the risk of death of soldiers. Since 2015, the Russian Federation has also been producing an unmanned combat vehicle type UCGV “Uran-9”, which can be used to support the operations of land units³².

After the fullscale invasion of Ukraine, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, together with the Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, announced on 21 December 2022, the introduction of a plan for reform in the Armed Forces, which was undoubtedly caused by the problems with the military operations in Ukraine³³. Initially, it concerns the increase in the size of the army from 1 million to 1.5 million soldiers, including the

³² S. Bendett, *Russian UGV developments influenced by Ukraine War*, European Security & Defence, <https://euro-sd.com/2024/06/articles/38818/russian-ugv-developments-influenced-by-ukraine-war/> [20.04.2025].

³³ The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has served as a critical test of the Russian Armed Forces' actual combat capabilities. The conflict has exposed significant deficiencies in the training of officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted personnel alike. It has also brought to light the extent of systemic corruption that had been concealed for years. Additional shortcomings became evident during the partial mobilisation announced in September 2022, particularly regarding the lack of modern equipment for soldiers and inadequate training standards. According to independent analysts, between 24 February 2022 and 22 February 2024, Russian forces are estimated to have lost approximately 1,762 tanks, 788 armoured personnel carriers, 2,096 infantry fighting vehicles, 297 wheeled armoured vehicles, 72 fixed-wing aircraft, 78 helicopters, and 12 naval vessels. A. Dynner, *The Next Reform...*

announcement of the creation of several new divisions as well as changes to the command system. The structures of the military districts have also been changed (two separate Moscow and Leningrad Military Districts have been restored from the Western Military District). This is also related to the admission of Finland and Sweden into NATO and the defence of the two largest and key cities – St. Petersburg and Moscow³⁴.

In light of these ongoing reforms and continued military engagement, the Russian Federation has significantly increased its budget allocations for defence and internal security. In 2023, the defence budget was estimated at approximately \$86 billion, representing 5.9% of GDP, a significant increase compared to the previous year. In 2024, defence spending increased to 109 billion USD, and the draft federal budget for 2025 envisages a record 13.5 trillion RUB (approximately 133–145 billion USD) allocated solely to defence, representing over 6.3% of GDP and approximately 32% of all federal spending. At the same time, the Russian government plans to allocate an additional 3.46 trillion RUB (approximately 34 billion USD) for internal security and law enforcement agencies such as the National Guard, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Combined military and security spending will account for more than 40% of total federal spending, reflecting a significant shift toward an economy fully adapted to the realities of war³⁵.

Despite this unprecedented increase in funding, the Russian armed forces and defence industry continue to face significant structural challenges. These include limitations in weapons production capacity, reliance on outdated Soviet-era stockpiles, and limited access to advanced Western technologies due to sanctions. While official narratives emphasise the reorientation of the Russian economy toward “defensive warfare” and the recognition of the defence-industrial complex as a strategic priority, persistent bottlenecks and inefficiencies suggest that resource mobilisation may not translate directly into military effectiveness.

³⁴ *Zasedanie Kollegii Ministerstva Oborony*, 21 December 2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70159> [20.04.2025].

³⁵ I. Wiśniewska, *Russia's budget for 2025: war above all*, OSW Commentary, 22 November 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-11-22/russias-budget-2025-war-above-all> [4.10.2025].

3. Implications for NATO and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe

Simultaneously with the ongoing reforms within the Armed Forces, the strategic documents of the Russian Federation have been systematically updated to address emerging challenges and security threats. This adaptation is clearly reflected in key strategic texts, notably the 2021 National Security Strategy³⁶, the 2014 Military Doctrine³⁷, and the 2020 Nuclear Doctrine³⁸ of the Russian Federation. In these documents, both the conventional and nuclear capabilities of the Armed Forces are articulated as central instruments of Russia's security policy, underpinning its assertion of great power status.

The 2022 iteration of the Military Doctrine further underscores the role of nuclear weapons primarily as instruments of defensive deterrence, while simultaneously affirming Russia's willingness to employ them in response to existential threats against the state. The 2020 Nuclear Doctrine complements this stance by detailing the conditions under which nuclear weapons may be used, emphasising their role in preventing large-scale aggression against the Russian Federation or its allies. The doctrine outlines a threshold for nuclear use, including situations involving the use of weapons of mass destruction against Russia or its partners, or significant threats to the state's sovereignty.

The doctrine explicitly identifies several threats to the Russian Federation, including NATO's eastward expansion and the proximity of its military infrastructure to Russian borders. Moreover, the Armed Forces are directed to maintain preparedness for a spectrum of military engagements, encompassing both conventional operations and irregular forms of warfare such as hybrid and information warfare, which have become integral to contemporary low-intensity conflicts. The conduct of hybrid operations alongside

³⁶ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.07.2021 g. № 400 "O Strategii natsional'noy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii", <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/47046> [5.10.2025].

³⁷ Voennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii (utverzhdena Prezidentom Rossiyskoy Federatsii 25 dekabrya 2014 g. № Pr-2976), <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/document129/> [5.10.2025].

³⁸ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii ot 02.06.2020 g. № 355 "Ob Osnovakh gosudarstvennoy politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii v oblasti yadernogo sderzhivaniya", <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/45562> [5.10.2025].

the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a significant strategic challenge for NATO, particularly affecting its so-called “eastern flank”³⁹.

The current geopolitical environment necessitates the implementation of a new strategy and adaptation to threats posed by the Russian Federation. In addition to expanding its conventional military capabilities, Russia actively conducts disinformation campaigns and hybrid operations as part of its broader approach to new-generation warfare. In Western analytical discourse, such actions have frequently been associated with the so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine”⁴⁰. However, the term itself is highly contested and widely regarded as a misinterpretation. Contrary to its name, the “Gerasimov Doctrine” is not an official Russian military doctrine, but rather a Western construct based on a 2013 article by General Valery Gerasimov titled *The Value of Science in Foresight*⁴¹. In this article, Valery Gerasimov reflects on Western strategies of hybrid warfare, particularly the use of political destabilisation and information operations, rather than proposing a new Russian doctrine⁴².

Despite the terminological controversy, the strategic patterns observed in Russia’s military and non-military operations suggest a deliberate use of non-kinetic measures, including cyber operations, psychological warfare, and disinformation, aimed at undermining adversaries without formally declaring war. These activities are often carried out by paramilitary forces, proxy actors, and through the manipulation of civilian infrastructure, making attribution and response more difficult⁴³.

A prominent example of this strategy in action was the annexation of Crimea in 2014, during which Russia deployed so-called “little green men”, unmarked soldiers, to conduct low-intensity operations without official

³⁹ *Voennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” 2014, no. 298(6570), <https://rg.ru/documents/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html> [2.10.2025]. See also M. Pietkiewicz, *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, “Polish Political Science Yearbook” 2018, vol. 47(3), pp. 505–520.

⁴⁰ J. Meissner, *Rosyjska koncepcja wojny nowej generacji w świetle pierwszych doświadczeń z wojny w Ukrainie*, “Roczniki Nauk Społecznych” 2022, vol. 14(50), no. 4, pp. 134–136.

⁴¹ *Novye vyzovy trebuyut pereosmyslit’ formy i sposoby vedeniya boevykh deystviy*, 2013, https://vpk.name/news/85159_cennost_nauki_v_predvidenii.html [20.04.2025].

⁴² T. Thomas, *The Evolution of Russian Military Thought: Integrating Hybrid, New-Generation, and New-Type Thinking*, “The Journal of Slavic Military Studies” 2016, no. 29(4), pp. 564–570.

⁴³ M. Kofman, M. Rojansky, *A Closer Look at Russia’s “Hybrid War”*, “Kennan Cable” 2015, no. 7, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/7-KENNAN%20CABLE-ROJANSKY%20KOFMAN.pdf> [2.10.2025].

acknowledgement. This hybrid campaign demonstrated Russia's capability to integrate military and non-military means into a coherent operational model. Additionally, Russia continues to employ cyberattacks and influence operations, particularly against Western democracies, aiming to sow social division and influence public opinion. These actions often follow the logic of the "escalate to de-escalate" strategy, wherein provocation and controlled escalation are used to coerce political concessions from opposing states⁴⁴.

The reform and modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces were also intended to respond to the change in the geopolitical environment of the Russian Federation. For the Russian authorities, the expansion of NATO to the east and the military presence of the Alliance's troops, including the USA, in Central and Eastern Europe, is defined as the greatest challenge and threat to its security. The Russian Federation's military intervention in Ukraine in 2022, according to Russian propaganda, was aimed at stopping NATO expansion and influence in Russia's "exclusive zone of influence" and securing its interests in the post-Soviet area. The escalation of these actions was the Russian Federation's demands towards the USA⁴⁵. The actions taken by the Russian authorities in connection with the implementation of reforms in the Armed Forces, especially in the so-called Shoigu reform, show that the Russian Federation is preparing for the long-term implementation of its own goals and interests, not only in relation to Ukraine but also in relation to confrontation with the West, based on military force. This is also evidenced by Russia's policy of the militarisation of society, strengthening the ideological factor in domestic policy, as well as increasing military spending⁴⁶. Such a policy of the Russian Federation may imply a threat to the security of the region and an increase in international tensions, thereby leading to the so-called "new arms race".

⁴⁴ M. McKew, *The Gerasimov Doctrine. It's Russia's new chaos theory of political warfare. And it's probably being used on you*, "Politico" 2017, September–October, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/> [2.10.2025].

⁴⁵ M. Menkiszak, *Russia's blackmail of the West*, Analyses OSW, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2021-12-20/rosyjski-szantaz-wobec-zachodu> [20.04.2025].

⁴⁶ M. Banasik, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

Conclusion

After the collapse of the USSR and Boris Yeltsin's assumption of power, the Russian authorities did not develop a unified strategy for reforming the Armed Forces, which was associated with organisational collapse and chaos caused by structural neglect, widespread corruption, and a decline in morale among soldiers. After Vladimir Putin took power, a number of initiatives and structural changes were undertaken, and a modernisation process was implemented. This primarily concerned weapon systems, especially advanced artillery, hypersonic weapons, and unmanned aerial systems. These actions were aimed at reforming the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation so that they could implement the strategic goal of using their own army to implement political actions in accordance with the so-called Gerasimov doctrine. It consists of combining hybrid warfare, internal destabilisation, and kinetic operations with disinformation activities, which is a significant challenge for NATO countries, especially Central and Eastern Europe.

The increase in investment and modernisation of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation has significant consequences for regional security, especially in the context of the stability of Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, concerns about the security of the so-called "eastern flank" countries, such as the Baltic states and Poland. The response of NATO countries to the conflict in Ukraine should primarily be to increase NATO's operational interoperability and the ability to quickly respond to potential threats and defence needs. Thus, we should not expect a change in Russia's foreign and security policy in its current form; the most important paradigm of Russian policy remains unchanged and will be based on military force. This means the continuation of Russia's aggressive policy towards countries it considers to be in its zone of influence, but also towards NATO countries.

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