

Military Presence in Duma Growing and Not Just from Election of Veterans

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Former Russian military personnel and their closest allies and supporters now form one-third of the membership of the new Duma, an unprecedented figure and one far larger than the 10 percent who are veterans of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine. Instead, most in this war party are former senior commanders or representatives of the military-industrial complex, which cements Putin's ties to a group closely linked to his aggressive foreign policy and balances his own origins and ties to the security agencies. For now, this military presence in the Russian legislature re-enforces Putin's power. In the future, should the Duma evolve as the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Supreme Soviet did in 1990 and 1991, it could give the Russian armed forces an outsized role in selecting his successor.

Most commentators on the September 18–20 Duma elections in Russia have focused on the 49 veterans of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine who have now been elected to the State Duma. Putin had suggested that those who have fought in Ukraine must form the core of Russia's "new elite" (see EDM, March 13, 2024, June 26, October 9, 2025). Some of them have behaved notoriously and been accused of war crimes (The Barents Observer, September 18; Important Stories, September 24). Their presence stood out at the opening session of the new Duma, when they wore their uniforms and medals (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, September 30). They make up 10 percent of the total elected officials in the Duma. That figure, however, dramatically understates the size of what Meduza calls the much more significant "war party" there. This group consists of 148 deputies—one third of the total—who, while including the new arrivals, are either former military personnel or have close ties to Russia's military-industrial complex and have been especially active supporters of Putin's war. Many in this larger group have been in the Duma for years, chair key committees, and ensured the Duma does what Putin wants regarding his war (Meduza, September 25).

The election and re-election of so many people with ties to the military does more than just ensure that the Duma will continue to rubber-stamp Putin's requests. It means that this composition of what often appears to be an impotent body will continue to play an important role in cementing his relationship with the military—a sector of Russian life that has often been at odds with the security agencies from which Putin emerged and to which he is ever more closely dependent. Managing tensions between the military and the security agencies has been the stuff of Moscow politics from Soviet times to now. By ensuring that so many former military personnel or those closely tied to such people are members of the Duma and by bringing in the new blood of veterans of the war against Ukraine, the Kremlin leader is seeking to ensure that tensions between armed forces and the intelligence agencies will not threaten his policies or his person. As long as Putin stays in power and can play the role of arbiter among such groups, this arrangement of such a large military presence in the Russian legislature works to his advantage. This advantage to the Putin system may now turn into a problem for Russia when the looming succession struggle begins, according to independent Russian analysts such as political scientist Aleksey Uvarov (Riddle, September 18; Tema.Glavnoe, September 21).

By his repression, manipulation, and falsification, Uvarov says, Putin has not reduced the Duma to "a purely useless institution" as many believe. Rather, he has allowed it to continue to "perform administrative, legislative, representative, and personnel functions and can be a venue for advancing

regional or sectional interests,” thereby promoting the advancement of its members, including those of the military bloc. That is likely to continue unchanged as long as Putin is in power. Once he has left the scene or his power has been seriously degraded, the political scientist continues, bodies like the Duma, which appear merely ceremonial or vestigial now, could quickly acquire independent political significance. That is what happened with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Supreme Soviet at the end of the Soviet period, and he argues that its experience more than 35 years ago is instructive now. For most of its existence, he acknowledges, that body “almost automatically endorsed party leadership decisions; but after competitive elections to the Congress of People’s Deputies in 1990, the situation changed within months.” Something similar could happen with the Duma in a future succession crisis. At the very least, he suggests, the size of the war party means that, in that event, it could veto or at least slow any move away from Putin’s current aggressive stance. That possibility makes it critically important to track emerging political blocs in the Russian legislature, such as the military one, rather than relying on party divisions or veterans of the war against Ukraine alone.

Far too often, attention to the 49 veterans of that conflict who have now entered the Duma has obscured, rather than highlighted, the role of the much larger “war party” there. Stories about what some of them did while serving in Ukraine have simply drowned out coverage of the larger issue now and in the future. Even the fact that almost 30 other veterans who ran did not win has been largely ignored. (For examples of such coverage, see The Barents Observer, September 18; YouTube/@vertex_live; EXO FM, September 22; Important Stories, September 24; Radio Svoboda, September 26.) It is beyond question that some of the veterans of the war against Ukraine should be in prison rather than in the Duma. The evidence of their complicity in war crimes is simply too damning to allow for any other conclusion. These new deputies, small in number and even smaller in political experience, are unlikely to set the tone for either the pro-war faction in the Russian parliament or the Kremlin’s policies now or even during a future succession struggle.

The war party deputies who do matter now and could matter even more in the future are the other members of “the war party.” These people include senior Duma members who are former generals and who have headed key committees in the past and are likely to do so in the new Duma, such as Andrey Kartopolov, a former Russian army colonel general who has been in charge of the Duma defense committee (see EDM, July 31, 2025; The New Voice of Ukraine, July 27). They may be well pleased by the arrival of new allies in the Russian parliament. These former generals have played and likely will play a larger role in the future—one that may keep Russia from changing as much as many now hope or even expect. Alternatively, their resistance to any change may push Russia into a revolutionary situation, one in which compromise will become impossible and in which the outcome will be determined not in committee rooms in Moscow but in the streets of the capital and of other cities in the Russian Federation. In that event, Russia may provide yet another example of what happens when a regime tries to defend itself by ensuring nothing changes, only to discover that such a stance opens the way to far more radical shifts when the situation changes.

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