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edited by DAVIDE BORSANI



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Jean-François Rosset (1703/1706-1786), Buste de Montesquieu, Collection Adolphe Thiers. Musée du Louvre, Aile Richelieu. Photo Siren-Com, 2009, CC BY SA 3.0 Unported. Wikimedia Commons.

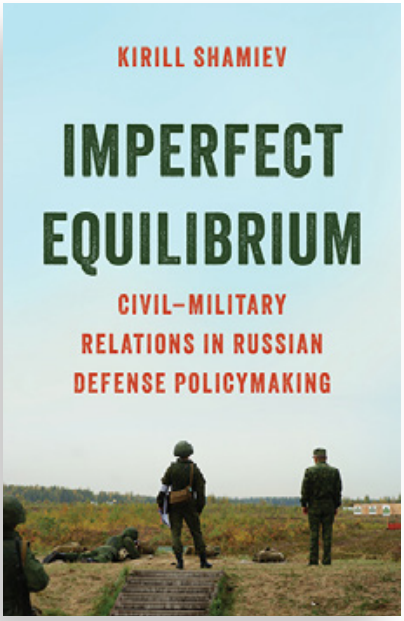
Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) represents the first instance of "philosophical history" applied to international relations—a work in which history is no longer merely a reconstruction of military and diplomatic episodes, but an interpretation of social factors and long-term historical processes. This book, which has recently been brought to the attention of scholars in the field of strategic studies by Jakub Grygiel (Orbis, 63:4, Fall 2019: 582–607) and John Stone (*Journal of Strategic Studies,* 46:6–7, 2023: 1460–1481), can also be considered the first modern example of "strategic history."

Kirill Shamiev,

Imperfect Equilibrium:

Civil-Military Relations in Russian Defense Policymaking

C. Hurst & Co. 2026. 268 pp. $34.99



In *Imperfect Equilibrium*, Kirill Shamiev examines how Russian civil–military relations have influenced the effectiveness of the armed forces from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the war in Ukraine. The book starts from an apparent paradox: despite major increases in defence spending and repeated reform efforts since the First Chechen War, the Russian military has continued to display serious operational weaknesses. These include poor strategic assessment, inadequate intelligence, weak command-and-control structures, and deficiencies in logistics and equipment maintenance. According to Shamiev, these shortcom-

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ings became particularly visible during the war in Ukraine.

The central question driving the book is why Russian governments have repeatedly failed to significantly improve military effectiveness. Shamiev argues that the main obstacle lies in the configuration of Russian civil–military relations. Reform attempts have often remained partial or ineffective because they emerged within a system characterized by a highly centralized presidency and a military establishment capable of resisting or diluting unwanted changes. Rather than acting as a fully compliant institution, the armed forces frequently behaved as a veto player.

The volume is divided into five chapters. The opening chapters reconstruct the evolution of Russian civil–military relations after the Soviet collapse and discuss the organizational culture of the armed forces. Shamiev highlights the persistence of Soviet institutional legacies and emphasizes the military's traditional reluctance to intervene directly in domestic politics, even during periods of instability. At the same time, officers are portrayed as conscious of their informational advantages and often skeptical of civilian expertise in defence matters.

The empirical core of the book is organized around three phases. The first (2000–2007) corresponds to Putin's early years and is marked by limited reform ambitions. The second (2007–2012) follows the war in Georgia and the reform agenda promoted by Defence Minister Anatolii Serdyukov, which generated substantial resistance within the military establishment. The final phase (2012–2022) examines the growing use of military power under Putin alongside the persistence of institutional rigidities that ultimately undermined effectiveness. Across these phases, Shamiev identifies the absence of robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms as a recurring weakness.

Shamiev's sources are personal experiences of military people (from interviews, memoirs and blogs), independent surveys, and official data (statements, documents, law and rules), all interpreted and intertwined to build a theoretical framework centred on the concept of equilibrium. Effective defence policymaking requires alignment among the main actors involved in the reform process. When such equilibrium is absent, reforms tend to remain incomplete, inconsistent, or ineffective.

To conceptualize these dynamics, Shamiev relies on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988). Defence policymaking is presented as the outcome

of competition among coalitions composed of political, military, bureaucratic, and societal actors. In the Russian case, the author identifies three principal coalitions: the presidential coalition, centred on the executive and state institutions; the civilian coalition, including parliamentarians and civil society actors; and the military coalition, built around the General Staff and parts of the military-industrial complex. Each coalition controls distinct resources, such as expertise, political influence, public legitimacy, or administrative access. Shamiev particularly stresses the military's informational advantage and the cultural divide separating military and civilian actors. This reflects a broadly Huntingtonian understanding of civil–military tensions, where differences in professional norms and expertise complicate cooperation between political leaders and the armed forces.

According to the book, successful reform depends on a condition of "perfect equilibrium," in which the major coalitions converge around shared reform objectives. Russian civil–military relations, however, have consistently been characterized by misalignment. Disagreements over strategic priorities, the future character of war, and the role of the armed forces repeatedly obstructed reform efforts. Since governments lacked the capacity to impose reforms unilaterally, military resistance significantly constrained policy outcomes.

Shamiev also emphasizes how the progressive concentration of authority within the presidency weakened civilian oversight. Parliamentary scrutiny, societal input, and external accountability mechanisms gradually lost influence, leaving defence policymaking increasingly isolated within the executive. This marginalization of civilian actors reinforced disequilibrium and reduced the likelihood of effective reform.

One of the book's major contributions concerns the literature on Russian civil–military relations. Much of the existing scholarship, particularly during and after the Cold War, has portrayed the Russian military as highly obedient under conditions of strong subjective civilian control (Perlmutter & Bennett 1980; Belkin 2003). Shamiev challenges this interpretation by showing that the armed forces often maintained preferences diverging from those of the political leadership and were capable of obstructing reforms even under Putin's centralized regime. In this respect, the military emerges not simply as an instrument of repression, but as an influential political actor within the policymaking process.

The book also contributes to broader debates on civilian control and military

effectiveness. Recent scholarship has increasingly examined how different forms of civilian oversight affect defence outcomes rather than focusing exclusively on obedience (Bruneau & Matei 2008; Pion-Berlin & Martínez 2017). Shamiev advances this discussion by demonstrating that centralized executive control may secure political loyalty while simultaneously weakening military effectiveness.

Particularly important is the book's discussion of accountability and civilian expertise. Shamiev argues that genuine civilian supremacy depends not only on hierarchical control, but also on openness, oversight, and the presence of competent civilian actors capable of counterbalancing the military's informational advantages. Although not explicitly framed in these terms, the analysis aligns with recent work emphasizing the importance of epistemic communities and civilian expertise in defence policymaking (Martínez 2024).

Finally, the book intervenes in the debate on regime type and military effectiveness. Shamiev suggests that excessive concentration of power within the executive ultimately undermined the Russian military's capacity to reform and adapt. In doing so, the book indirectly supports the argument that pluralistic and accountable forms of civilian control are more conducive to military effectiveness than narrowly centralized systems.

Overall, Imperfect Equilibrium provides a theoretically informed and empirically rich analysis of Russian defence policymaking. Its main strengths lie in the clarity of its analytical framework, the detailed reconstruction of reform dynamics, and its ability to connect the literature on civilian control with debates on military effectiveness. By challenging the widespread image of the Russian military as merely obedient, Shamiev offers an important contribution to the study of civil–military relations.

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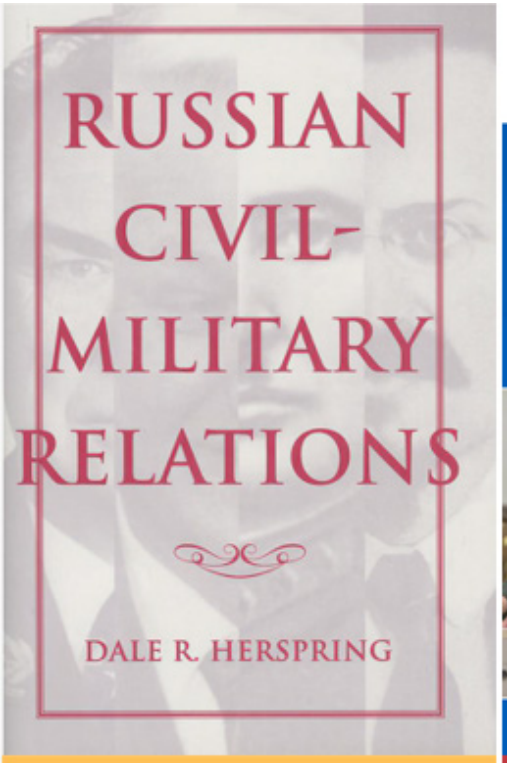
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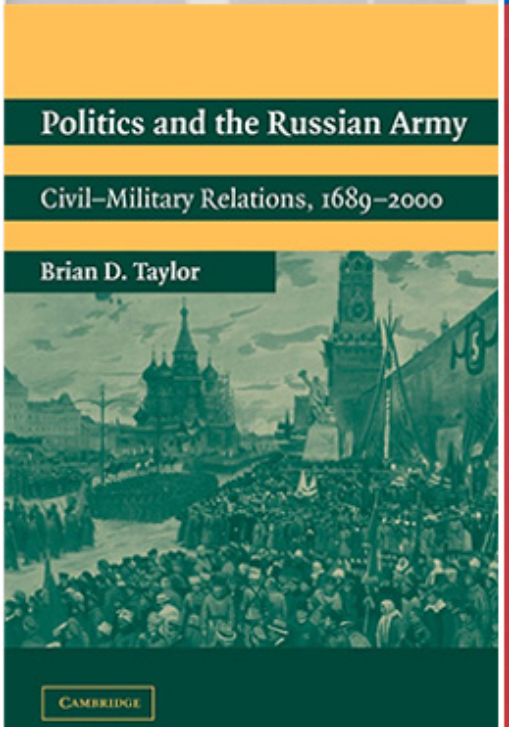
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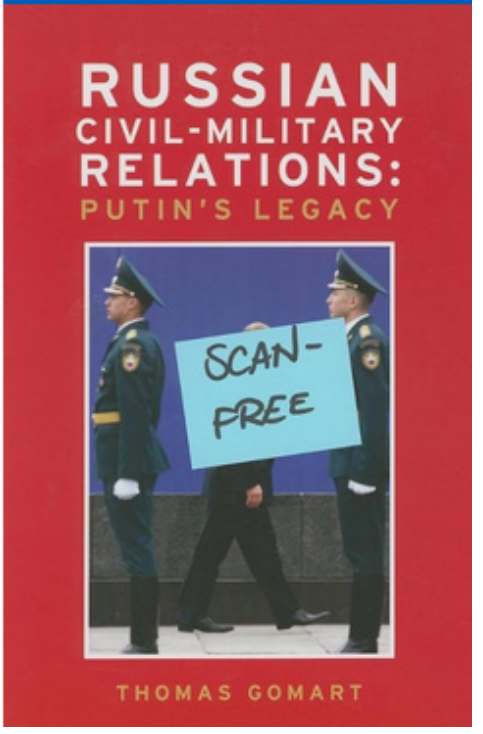
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