

Russia's Conscription Problem

By Rod Thornton, Hewler

Abstract

The attempts by Russian politicians to end conscription in the country have proved problematic. After the Cold War ended, a plan was put in place to ensure that the armed forces would be completely manned by professional, contract personnel. But not enough young men have volunteered to join the military to make this possible and conscripts are still being used. The issue now, though, is that there is also a shortage of conscripts. A supposed million-strong military actually has a strength of only 800,000. The army is especially short of troops. Some difficult political decisions lie ahead for the Russian government in terms of trying to alleviate this problem.

Ever since the end of the Cold War, Russia's political leadership has been trying to end the institution of conscription. Not only is it deeply unpopular within the country and a system that keeps many young men from working productively in the economy, it is also, in military terms, an outmoded concept. Modern military organizations cannot operate effectively if they employ ill-trained and ill-motivated conscripts. But efforts to end conscription in Russia have proved problematic. Such efforts have resulted in a situation today where: a) a large proportion of Russian males are still being asked to serve against their will; b) Russia has a military that is grossly undermanned, and c) its army is currently incapable of operational deployment in any numbers.

President Boris Yeltsin originally initiated a scheme whereby 'professionization' of the military was supposed to lead to the ending of conscription. That is, Russia would have a smaller military manned purely by men on long-service contracts and paid a proper salary. Conscripts would no longer be necessary. These *kontraktniki*—long-service, well-trained professionals—were also needed from the point of view of military efficiency. Mass armies of short-service conscripts belonged to a different era: modern militaries demand the use of high-tech weapons and the employment of sophisticated command-and-control systems which act as force multipliers. Such force multipliers mean that a mass army no longer has any real purpose on a modern battlefield.

Yeltsin's plans, though, were less than successful. Firstly, there was the fact that few young Russian men were willing to serve voluntarily in a military that was infamous for its bully/hazing practices. Secondly, the incentives to serve were few. Salaries were low and accommodation rudimentary. Yeltsin's government never put enough money into the project—in terms of both pay and of building new accommodation—to make it work. Conscription still had to be maintained in order to ensure that manning levels in the military were kept up.

Subsequently, upon coming to power, Vladimir Putin had also tried to end conscription. His plan,

involving significantly more investment, was to gradually increase the number of *kontraktniki* serving while at the same time reducing the term of conscript service. This term (for the army) had stood at two years since 1966. In 2007 it was reduced down to 18 months and, a few months later, to just one year. This was naturally a popular move within the country. It was not, though, to the liking of the military itself.

The senior ranks of Russia's armed forces have, in the main, been less than enthusiastic. At heart, it is a simple formula for them: mass—more men to command—means more command appointments and thus more officers and, in particular, more generals are needed. Any move towards a smaller military—professional or not—would mean generals losing their jobs. Moreover, the loss of jobs would also mean the loss, in many cases, of the ability to make a great deal of money by engaging in the corrupt practices that abound within the military. It is estimated that about 20% of all Russian defence spending (the third largest in the world) ends up in the pockets of individuals.

Many of the officers who would lose their jobs in a professionalized military were part of the mobilization system. If conscription was to end then so would the mass-mobilization military. Such a military is one that relies on the ability to recall—at a time of crisis—those conscripts who have completed their service. In the Soviet Union, the mobilization concept could theoretically produce a military of some 20 million men. These would be recalled to cadre units. These are 'skeleton' units at bases all around the country manned, in peacetime, by only a few officers and conscripts. But on any mobilization order they would be there ready to accept back their quota of recalled conscripts who would fill out the unit. The downside of such a system is that it relies on a huge number of officers who have nothing much to do other than to man bases and maintain equipment. Unless world war is likely to break out then this cadre system is grossly inefficient and very costly. Putin and Dimitri Medvedev (in their roles, variously,

as president and prime minister) wanted to be rid of it. A professional military would produce only a small number of reservists capable of being recalled, meaning that there would be no need to have these hundreds of cadre units. The hundreds of thousands of officers who manned these units could be made redundant, the bases closed and money saved. But these officers represented a powerful constituency; not least because a good few thousand of them were generals with considerable institutional clout.

Senior ranks in the armed forces thus tended to throw spanners in the works of moves towards the establishment of a smaller, more professional military with few cadre units. Thus both Putin and Medvedev have had to choose their defence minister and the officer in overall command of the military—the chief of the general staff—carefully. Anatoly Serdyukov was brought in as defence minister in 2007. He had come from the Tax Ministry and, as such, was perceived to have the skills necessary to bring the foot-dragging generals into line. He was an administrator of high quality but also one skilled at rooting out corrupt practices. It was the uncovering of such practices that could lead to recalcitrant generals either being sacked or leveraged into coming into line with political wishes.

In terms of the head of the military, an officer was chosen who was not part of the conservative, Moscow-based general staff clique. General Nikolay Makarov was brought in from command of the Siberian Military District. As an ‘outsider’ and without a power base in Moscow, he was seen to be amenable to the bidding of his political masters and not to those of the generals around him.

Serdyukov and Makarov in tandem have proved to be reasonably successful in terms of military reform. The number of officers, for instance, has been substantially reduced. Some 200,000 were made redundant as the cadre system was wound down. Almost immediately, though, 70,000 of these were then taken back when it

was realised that the military could not actually operate without them!

Overall, though, the plans of Putin and Medvedev were still being thwarted by the same problem that Yeltsin faced: not enough professionals being recruited. The lack of them in the military meant that conscripts were still needed in order to maintain what both politicians and generals did agree on—the need for a million-strong military (the US military, by comparison, has 1.5 million active service personnel). However, because the term of conscript service had been halved by Putin in 2007 this meant that, in order to maintain a military of such a size, *twice* the number of conscripts had to be called up. The numbers being conscripted every

year had to rise from about 250,000 up to 500,000 or so. In 2009, some 625,000 men were actually called up! (A figure made possible by bringing in that pool of men who had, for years, been avoiding service. But once this pool had been drained, however, there was no more ‘slack’ in the system). It has since proven impossible to conscript the numbers necessary. Moreover, while conscription is now less onerous in terms of its length of

service, it is coming to affect more young men given the need to increase numbers. Many exemptions have been removed (such as doctors, men with young families, etc) and activities verging on press-ganging have been employed. Such moves however have only served to increase the unpopularity of conscription in the country.

Putin and Medvedev have also been stymied in their attempts to create a *better* military. If the professionals are not being recruited then reliance still has to fall on the conscripts. But these are now more ill-trained than ever before. While at least some use could be made of the two-year conscript (they could, for instance, take part in at least one large annual exercise), the new one-year term means that conscripts simply do not serve long enough to gain any useful military skills. They are simply dead weight. It also means that units manned purely by professionals cannot be formed in the army because

Conscription in Russia: Facts and Figures

Military service age and obligation:

18–27 years of age for compulsory or voluntary military service; males are registered for the draft at 17 years of age; service obligation: 1 year (conscripts can only be sent to combat zones after 6 months training); reserve obligation to age 50

Note: over 60% of draft-age Russian males receive some type of deferment—generally health related—each draft cycle (2009)

Manpower available for military service:

Males age 16–49: 34,132,156

Females age 16–49: 34,985,115 (2010 est.)

Manpower fit for military service:

Males age 16–49: 20,431,035

Females age 16–49: 26,381,518 (2010 est.)

Manpower reaching militarily significant age annually:

Male: 693,843

Female: 660,359 (2010 est.)

Source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

the professionals have to be spread out across all units to, basically, act as nursemaids to the conscripts.

As the situation now stands, the navy is almost completely manned by professionals and the air force has a high percentage. Both services require personnel with technical abilities that conscripts do not possess. The 210,000 troops in the FSB's Border Guards are now also all professionals. The main manning problem, though, is with the army. At the moment, the whole Russian military—which should have one million serving personnel—only has just below 800,000. Of these, 354,000 are conscripts, 180,000 are professional and 220,000 are officers (with another 40,000 officers not assigned to any unit). The shortfall is most keenly felt in the army and specifically in a lack of enlisted ranks in the Ground Forces. Around one-third of these are 'missing'. This means that many army units must be undermanned and therefore operationally useless. This fatally undermines one of the military's most successful recent reforms—turning the Ground Forces' 203 divisions into 83 smaller, but more combat-capable, brigades. These are supposedly 'permanent readiness' formations. But the fact that they are not fully manned means they cannot really be 'ready'. They would thus be largely ineffective in any near-term conflict scenario.

What are the solutions to this undermanning issue? One may be found in recruiting more professionals. This is the favoured plan. Putin has stated that he expects to see 425,000 *kontraktniki* serving by 2017. However, this seems wildly optimistic. Such statements have been made before and have proved to be well wide of the mark. The problem will always be—no matter how much money is eventually thrown at the problem—that young Russian men simply do not want to voluntarily serve in the military. The concept is an alien one.

Another solution might be to pull in more conscripts by widening the conscription net by yet further reducing deferments. But there are very few deferments left. As General Makarov recently said, 'there is no-one left to draft'. Moreover, going further down this particular line risks making conscription even more unpopular. A further answer to the manning situation may lie in clamping down on the corrupt practices that see many young men avoid conscription by bribing any number of individuals involved in the selection process. But such a move would not only cause friction with vested interests in the military who see such activities as perfectly normal, but also with many of the middle-class Russians who see it as their right to use their wealth to protect family members from the brutality of military service.

Thus, difficult political decisions remain in dealing with conscription in Russia, whilst it is proving to be an obdurate institution. The efforts made to eliminate it have left the military itself in a problematic position—it is now neither a professional nor a conscript military and the conscripts it has do not serve for long enough. It could be the case that Putin has to increase the term of conscription back to two years. This would go some way to solving the problem of poor training levels; it would also improve the mood of many conservative generals, and it would definitely help boost manning levels. But such a move would be politically dangerous at a time when Putin is already facing protests from what at the moment are limited to middle-class elements in Russia. If conscription, though, was to be made more onerous than the working-class (Putin's natural constituency) would be adding their voices of discontent. Putin may not be prepared to take the risk. In the meantime, Russia stumbles on with a military that cannot be modernized.

About the Author

Rod Thornton is a lecturer at the University of Hwler, Iraq. Prior to academia he served for nine years in the British Army. Among his publications are *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2007); *Organizational Change in the Russian Airborne Forces: The Lessons of the Georgian Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Department of Defense, 2011), and *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Department of Defense, 2011).

Further Reading

- Rod Thornton, *Military Modernization and the Russian Ground Forces* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Department of Defense, 2011).
- Roger McDermott, *The Reform Of Russia's Conventional Armed Forces: Problems, Challenges & Policy Implications* (Washington: Jamestown Foundation, 2011).