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A Semi-professional Military **Problems Facing the Russian Armed Forces in the Effort to Transition to a Contract Army**

Andrey Kalikh

Throughout the post-Soviet period, there have been continuous discussions in Russia about the need to abolish compulsory military service and create a professional army in its place. Although three Russian presidents declared their determination to reorganize the armed forces, however, all attempts to create an entirely contractual military have failed. Today there are some signs that the military is modernizing, supported by reports that professional Russian troops are participating in operations in Ukraine. In order to create a fully combat-effective professional military, however, a number of major reforms are needed. The soldier's legal status needs to be raised, service conditions for contract soldiers should be improved, and authentic civilian oversight should be established over the military.

Statements in the 1990s: Confrontation between the Military Lobby and Civil Society

The year 2012 marked the twentieth anniversary of plans to transition the Russian armed forces to voluntary personnel procurement while decreasing their strength. This military policy objective was included for the first time in 1992 in a statement of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation. Society demanded changes, including military reform, and claimed it was prepared to support its implementation. Soldiers were encouraged to sign voluntary contracts. However, the crackdown on the Congress of People's Deputies (the "Second Putsch" of October 1993), along with the launch of military operations in Chechnya in December 1994, shelved the implementation of these plans for some time.

As Russians began to hear of military crimes in Chechnya and unjustified large-scale losses among conscript soldiers and civilians, the anti-war movement expanded rapidly, leading to a sharp decline in Boris Yeltsin's

popularity. As a response, the Russian president adopted a number of populist measures in the run-up to the 1996 elections. These included a decree on the introduction of "enlistment personnel procurement and the abolition of conscription" in the armed forces as of spring 2000. Two years later, during the preparation of the second Chechen campaign, the decree was amended – inconspicuously, as far as the public debate was concerned – with the phrase "if and when necessary conditions are created." This postponed the abolition of conscription indefinitely. At the meeting of the Russian Federation's Security Council in November 2000, in spite of the ongoing second war in Chechnya, the new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, nonetheless signed the decision on transition to "the entirely contractual" armed forces. These plans, too, have been frozen in time.

These reform attempts, along with ambitious statements of the 1990s, reflected the intense discussions that were underway within Russian society about the model for the military. At the time the overwhelming majority of citizens favored abolishing conscript armed forces. This was during the short period when the government listened to public opinion, despite considerable resistance from agencies in power. To the reactionary *siloviki* (members of the Russian ruling elite who have ties to state security and intelligence organs), the war in Chechnya offered a solution to many problems; it allowed them gradually to bury democratic reforms, boost their influence, and increase the military budget. Reforms were frozen before they could take hold, signifying the victory of the military lobby over civil society.

Mixed Military as a Compromise: Draft and Enlistment

Interestingly, since none of the above-mentioned goals have officially been cancelled, they still remain valid. Nevertheless the state has been gradually moving away from the idea of entirely contractual armed forces. In 2002 the government adopted a more pragmatic concept that reinforced the mixed personnel procurement – both conscription and contract-based.¹

The Federal Target Program (FTP) was developed for 2004–07 to aid transition to enlistment of some of the forces in constant combat readiness. Its stated goal was to enlist at least 135,000 professional soldiers by 2008 (which would have constituted 40 to 45 percent of private corps and junior command personnel).² This was not a simple attempt at reform, in spite of the announced goal: to “transition to a professional military.”³ Rather the program was intended merely to raise the necessary number of enlisted troops.

A system of incentives was introduced to increase the attractiveness of the contractual military service. Wages were increased; a mortgage system was created to provide housing to military personnel; access to higher education was facilitated; and other perks were offered. These enticements did not attract sufficient recruits, however. At the end of the FTP’s period of validity, the target was lowered to 125,000. According to experts, moreover, after 2007 the real number of enlistees never exceeded 100,000. At the same time, the program’s cost actually went up to 99 billion rubles (3,960 million US dollars) from the initially budgeted 79 billion rubles (3,160 million dollars at the 2007 exchange rate).⁴

Despite this overspending, the program was not fulfilled. After it ended, the Ministry of Defense announced

that it would be impossible to create professional military forces in the Russian environment. The reverse process began: reducing the number of enlisted forces and increasing conscription. During the implementation of FTP, the number of conscripts had not exceeded 130,000 to 140,000, but by 2008–09 it had more than doubled, up to 305,000, due to the cancellation of military service deferments and exemptions. Although the number of conscripts has decreased over the last few years, it still exceeds the scale of conscriptions during the FTP implementation.

Difficulties meeting social promises formed the main impediment to the FTP’s successful implementation. Enlisted personnel did not receive fair wages; free housing either turned out to be a lie or was provided only when bribes changed hands; the lengthy term of the first contract – three years – also frightened soldiers away.

Instances of serious criminal coercion also piled up. According to military service law, a contract could only be concluded after the first six months of compulsory military service had been served. When this first half year was about to end, commanders would not merely try to persuade soldiers to sign contracts but often used violence to coerce them. Typically commanders had a vested interest, as they were awarded a bonus for meeting enlistment targets. Recruitment therefore became a source of corruption. Newly enlisted soldiers now became victims of extortion, deprived of rights as before, but with a different salary scheme. The fundamental principle of professional military service – its voluntary basis – was thereby infringed.⁵

Attempts to Modernize the Armed Forces

There were no rousing statements about the transition to the professional armed forces after 2007 for it was already obvious that the FTP was failing. Mistakes committed in the Russian-Georgian military conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008 nonetheless made clear the need for urgent reforms. In the absence of professional forces, the majority of the Russian “peacekeepers” entering Georgia were inexperienced conscript soldiers. This military operation brought to light numerous problems, such as lack of mobility, lack of professionalism, poor command and control, and obsolete munitions that led to unwarranted casualties. Sheer necessity brought about changes that, this time, were not called “reforms” but “modernization” and “refashioning” of the armed forces.

A brief period of liberalization under President Dmitry Medvedev contributed to a renewed modernization effort. Anatoly Serdyukov, a civilian appointed to head the minister of defense in February 2007, carried out significant structural reforms of the military before being dismissed

from his post in 2012. Serdyukov reduced the strength of the commissioned staff, carried out large-scale structural changes – namely considerably reducing ground forces, navy, and air force units – and improved overall management structure and strategic command.⁶

In addition to this, beginning in 2008 the length of conscript service was shortened first from 24 to 18 months, and then from 18 to 12 months. Its purpose changed as well: creating and maintaining a mobilization reserve was declared the sole goal of conscription. Henceforth, the focus for conscripted soldiers would only be improving their qualifications. The country's external security was to be entrusted to professionals. Despite setting yet another ambitious goal for itself, the military remained as dependent as ever on conscripts into the next decade.

In addition to reducing the length of service – a development seen in altogether positive terms by conscripts and the public alike – various less popular measures were also introduced. These included cancellation of a number social deferments and exemptions from military service. Fathers of children under the age of three, husbands of pregnant wives, rural teachers and doctors, children of invalids and pensioners, workers in defense plants, police school cadets, priests, and those who had been exempted from the military service by president's order (such as outstanding scientists or actors) were stripped of their deferment rights. Drafting these categories of people hardly increased the military's proficiency, but it dealt blows to the social protection of potential soldiers and to the country's intellectual wealth, and it further increased conscription-related corruption.

The Gains and Drawbacks of Modernization

Thanks to the Serdyukov–Medvedev reforms of 2007–11, important steps were taken within the military service away from the model of armed forces based on large-scale mobilization. At that time contractual military service became more appealing and, as a result, the numbers of contract soldiers increased. President Medvedev was quick to label this “the beginning of the transition toward the professional military.”⁷ In 2008–09, however, the numbers of enlisted soldiers barely reached 85,000–90,000. From the end of 2009, their numbers were on the rise again. According to the General Staff, in 2011 there were 174,000 contract soldiers.⁸ In 2012 the old-new President Vladimir Putin signed a decree stating that no less than 50,000 contract soldiers had to be enlisted in the armed forces annually; by the end of 2016, the number of contract soldiers should reach 425,000.⁹

As the Ministry of Defense does not disclose data, it is difficult to estimate whether President Putin's plan is being fulfilled, but it is known that there were 225,000 contract soldiers in early 2014, which, according to experts, is behind schedule.¹⁰ This indicates that the problem of the low appeal of military service persists.

Russia does in fact have a successful example of contractual service, however. The Russian Federation's border service (a subdivision of the Federal Security Service, or FSB) has been entirely professional since 2008.

The military modernizations of 2007–11 did not involve genuine reform but rather dealt purely with externalities that did nothing to alter the essentially Soviet character of the Russian armed forces. Conscription survived. Soldiers remained defenseless against the violation of their civil rights. Military justice and judiciary reform did not take place. The Russian military remained a state institution impenetrable to civilian oversight. As far as the amount of bribes is concerned, the conscription process is second only to the education and health sectors, which are equally corrupt. This in no small measure is a consequence of conscription.¹¹

The crime rate in the military continues to be high. *Dedovshchina* (the hazing, brutalization, and bullying of younger servicemen at the hands of older servicemen and commanders) is tacitly regarded as a way of maintaining discipline in military units. These days hazing in the military is nothing less than extortion or illegal canvassing under threat of torture. In addition to hazing, there is a wide-scale illegal use of soldier labor, often with the features of modern slavery. Journalists and activists have monitored and recorded cases in which soldiers are rented out to civilians as laborers.¹²

Corruption has also affected the top echelons of the military leadership. In 2012 Anatoly Serdyukov, the minister of defense who began implementing reforms in 2007, was dismissed from his post after a corruption scandal surrounding the joint-stock company Oboron-service (Defense Service) started to unfold. Later he also testified about the illegal use of soldier labor for personal purposes.¹³ Despite allegations of corruption amounting to billions of rubles, he was granted amnesty in 2013.¹⁴

The Results of Halfway Reforms: Mass Character and Excessive Cost

Despite cuts made under Serdyukov, the strength of the armed forces contracted only slightly, from 1.2 million to 1 million personnel. Nevertheless, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the numbers of Russian military personnel in 2012 remained among

the highest in the world – that is, 3 to 4 million, and on the basis of operational forces – or 20.6 people per 1000 citizens.¹⁵ Apart from the Ministry of Defense, 11 other agencies involve military service; these include the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Emergencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Federal Protection Service.

According to data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia has the third highest military spending in the world: 87.8 billion dollars.¹⁶ Defense spending on such budget items as “national defense” and “national security” is estimated to amount to 3.5 to 4 percent of GDP. Taking account of expenditures concealed within other budget items, however, would raise the estimate for defense spending to 5 to 6 percent of GDP, making Russian military spending among the highest in the world.¹⁷

Thus, having undergone rather significant changes over the last ten years, the Russian Federation’s armed forces have nonetheless inherited and preserved the main features of the Soviet armed forces: mass character, low mobility, and excessive cost.

Social Aspects of Modernization

Significant efforts by the state are indeed helping the Russian armed forces gain in might, but the overall social environment of this modernization has hardly been affected. The military is more popular than ever. According to opinion polls, 86 percent of the population currently supports the armed forces, while only 7 percent favors universal military service. Most Russians support the idea of mixed armed forces, partially based on the draft and partially based on enlistment.¹⁸

Analysis of the increase in service pay for members of the military during the implementation of the Federal Target Program (in 2004–07) amply illustrates the social ineffectiveness of the reforms. This increase had very little effect on the private corps or junior command personnel (sergeants, sergeant-majors), whereas salaries for officers of the central office of the Ministry of Defense enjoyed the most growth. Most importantly, according to data from May 2014, the service pay for a soldier offered a contract to sign voluntarily (17,400 rubles, or 497 dollars) is substantially below average national wages (33,280 rubles, or 950 dollars).¹⁹

Though the armed forces have been restructured, their social composition remains unchanged. The military is still the realm of young men from families of low social status, especially in the provinces, where access to other means social advancement is limited. Those who live in

areas with high unemployment – namely in small towns, rural settlements, or villages – are more likely to sign a contract than their urban counterparts.

The Russian Armed Forces and Ukraine

The events of 2014 in Ukraine and the ongoing situation there show that modernization of Russia’s armed forces has had some success despite the extensive costs. It has been noted that members of the Russian military participating in the annexation of Crimea – and later aiding separatist fighters in eastern Ukraine – showed high levels of professionalism. The practically bloodless operation in Crimea indicated that the military had modified its tactics. Effectiveness increased, while the number of participating military personnel decreased.

It is worth recalling the fact that, as late as 2008, Russia was not able to deploy its forces to South Ossetia within two weeks. By 2014, everything looked very different on the border with Ukraine. Substantial forces made up of professional soldiers were deployed within days to Russia’s southern Rostov region, which borders Ukraine.

Russia of course denies that its military personnel has been participating in the conflict in eastern Ukraine in spite of numerous statements by human rights activists and independent media. Activists investigating the involvement of Russian soldiers in the conflict in Ukraine are being persecuted. Lev Shlosberg, a journalist and politician from Pskov, was beaten after publishing information about the secret funerals of paratroopers from Pskov who were killed in combat.²⁰ Ludmila Bogatenkova, chairwoman of the advocacy organization “Mothers of Prikumye” (Stavropol Region), spent several days in a pre-trial detention center after she made public a list of Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine. Two criminal cases have been initiated against Bogatenkova accusing her of petty crime and taking bribes.²¹

In response to these investigations, the Russian leadership and the Ministry of Defense still maintain that the soldiers died during military training exercises in the Rostov region across the border.²²

The analyst Alexandre Golts, along with other human rights activists, has no doubt that Russia is conducting a covert operation in eastern Ukraine. Russian authorities imply that Russian servicemen are there undercover, but if any are killed or captured, Russia would never admit they belonged to their own armed forces.²³ By February 2015, there were widespread reports of Russian professional servicemen “volunteering” in eastern Ukraine during their “vacation time.”²⁴

For its part, the Russian state propaganda machine has succeeded in persuading citizens that Russia is acting appropriately toward Ukraine. The Russian majority approves the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, supports separatists in eastern Ukraine, and condemns the change in Ukrainian leadership that took place in the country in early 2014.

Conclusion

The Russian Federation's inconsistent actions to reform the armed forces are symptomatic of stark differences between the country's military and political leadership dating as far back as the 1990s. The subsequent history of attempts to reform shows how political leadership went over to the side of the military lobby, which indefinitely postponed topical reforms.

One can conclude from an analysis of the legal status of soldiers that the importance of the draft-based armed forces has always been underestimated – both during Soviet and post-Soviet times. Throughout, it has mostly been considered as a way to mobilize society. This attitude is a very important factor when evaluating the armed forces' operational capability.

Yet this attitude began to change in 2008, after the war with Georgia, when serious modernization and rearmament of the ground forces and the navy started to take place. This suggests the leadership's growing ambition to employ the armed forces in local conflicts. Right now the focus is on the professional portion of the armed forces as a shock vanguard that can be used effectively in local conflicts. EU countries such as Germany should by all means take this change in strategy into account.

Despite the improvements recently undergone by the Russian armed forces, they are not in the same league as their Western counterparts in terms of logistical support, technical and combat equipment, experience gained through participation in training and exercises, or – most importantly – the level of social protection for military personnel. An army made up of powerless soldiers can never become truly effective or combat-effective. The principal threats to Russia's security are therefore corruption, criminality, and the lack of transparency within its armed forces and agencies drawing on military forces. Modernization should not only mean rearmament but improving the quality of the service environment.

To change the situation and improve the defense capacity of the Russian armed forces as a whole, it is necessary to improve the legal status of both drafted and contract soldiers. This in turn requires the implementation of authentic public and parliamentary oversight – supervisory bodies to oversee defense and security spending, re-equipment of the armed forces, and soldiers' legal status. Organizing a broad public discussion of military reform goals and implementation methods is a good place to start. Without such a discussion, no transition to effective and professional armed forces will be possible.

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Notes

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