

## **Conscription in the new Russian Army**

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## Summary

Russia is implementing the most comprehensive reforms of its Armed Forces since the 1920s – “the Serdiukov reforms”. The aim of the modernisation is to make Russia better able to deal with current threats. Conscription will be maintained, at the same time as important parts of the Armed Forces will be manned by enlisted personnel. The service period has been reduced to twelve months, but the exemption regime has become stricter. The new conscription model is a compromise between the generals, who have wanted to retain conscription, and the politicians and the Russian public, who have been in favour of a fully professional force.

The conscription system is under pressure. The number of draftable 18-year-olds will decrease till 2017. The conscripts’ health has been deteriorating in post-Soviet times, and there is little to indicate improvement. The system is further undermined by widespread corruption. Those who are drafted are in many ways more deprived than the national average of young men.

Contingents of conscripts in the years ahead will be considerably smaller than in 2009, when 575,000 were drafted, the largest number in fifteen years. The reserve of older conscripts will soon be spent. Unless there is a return to a longer service period, which would be contrary to official assurances, it seems improbable that Russia will be able to maintain an army of one million, which is the ambition of the Serdiukov reforms. There is little to suggest that the decrease in the numbers of conscripts can be compensated by enlisted personnel. Conscription is likely to be upheld at any rate, primarily because abolishment would drastically reduce the possibilities of recruiting professionals. But the number of conscripts in the Russian Army is likely to be notably smaller than today, tentatively 200,000–300,000 in the longer term.

The attitudes of Russians towards the Armed Forces and military service seem to have improved the last couple of years. However, the attitudes are distinctly more negative among those who are affected by conscription through close relatives and among the conscripts themselves. The most important measure to reduce resentment towards military service and improve motivation among conscripts would be a comprehensive and targeted policy to reduce hazing. The soldiers’ motivation is crucial to the value of the conscript part of the Armed Forces.

## Sammendrag

Russland gjennomfører for tiden de største omleggingene av forsvaret siden 1920-årene – ”Serdjukov-reformene”. Forsvaret skal moderniseres og settes i stand til å håndtere aktuelle trusler. Verneplikten skal beholdes, samtidig som viktige deler av forsvaret bemannes med vervede. Tjenestetiden er blitt redusert til tolv måneder, men fritaksregimet er skjerpet. Dagens ordning er et resultat av flere års dragkamp mellom generalene, som har villet beholde verneplikten, og politikere og befolkning, som har ønsket et helprofesjonelt forsvar.

Flere forhold setter vernepliktsordningen under press. Årskullene vil bli mindre helt fram til 2017. De vernepliktiges helsetilstand har blitt verre i postsovjetisk tid, og det er få tegn til bedring. Utbredt korrupsjon undergraver systemet. De som kalles inn, er gjennomgående mer ressursvake enn gjennomsnittet av unge menn.

Kontingentene av vernepliktige vil i årene framover bli betraktelig mindre enn årets, som med 575 000 er den største på femten år. Reservene av eldre årskull vil snart være brukt opp. Med mindre man i strid med offisielle forsikringer går tilbake til lengre tjenestetid, vil det neppe være mulig å holde mannskaper på en million, slik målet for reformene er. Det er lite som tyder på at bortfallet av vernepliktige vil kunne kompenseres med profesjonelle. Verneplikten vil sannsynligvis uansett bli opprettholdt, først og fremst fordi man uten verneplikt vil ha svært begrensede muligheter til å rekruttere profesjonelle. Antall vernepliktige vil imidlertid bli betraktelig mindre enn dagens. På lengre sikt kan det komme til å ligge på 200 000–300 000.

Den russiske befolkningen har de siste årene gitt uttrykk for mer positive holdninger til forsvaret og verneplikten. Holdningene er imidlertid markant mer negative blant dem som gjennom nære slektninger berøres av verneplikten og blant de vernepliktige selv. Det viktigste tiltaket for å redusere motviljen mot militærtjeneste og bedre motivasjonen blant de vernepliktige vil være en omfattende og målrettet politikk for å få bukt med veteranvirksomheten. Soldatenes motivasjon er avgjørende for hvilken verdi vernepliktsdelen av forsvaret vil ha.

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## Preface

This report is an output of the FFI project “Russia’s Armed Forces towards 2020. Implications for the High North”. Military and security policy developments in Russia are one of the determinants of Norwegian defence planning. The project aims to provide insight into such topics as strategic thinking, military doctrine, technological modernisation and recruitment, with a special view to Russian policy and priorities in the High North.

The subject of the present study – the possibility of providing personnel for the Russian Armed Forces by conscription – concerns both the composition of the army and civil-military relations in Russia in the years to come. The report is intended for military and political decision-makers in Norway as well as a wider audience of readers with an interest in developments in Russia.

This study is based on articles and reports from newspapers, magazines, journals and Internet sites, most of them Russian, and on interviews conducted by the author in Moscow, April 20–23, 2009:

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## 1 Introduction

Russia has started implementing the most comprehensive reforms of its Armed Forces since the 1920s. The reforms that have been officially labelled “The New Appearance (Look) of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation” (*Novyi oblik Vooruzhënykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii*) were endorsed by President Medvedev in the middle of September 2008 and made known to the public a month later.<sup>1</sup> In this study they will be referred to as “the Serdiukov reforms” from the name of the present Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov.

In many ways, the reforms constitute a final goodbye to The Red Army. The Armed Forces of Russia are to become more like the armies of the leading Western military powers. The emphasis is on mobility, permanent readiness and high-tech weaponry. The structure will be radically changed. The cadre units of the old structure will be abolished, and all units will become permanent readiness units.<sup>2</sup> However, the reforms do not represent a complete break with the past. Maybe chief among those elements of the old military that will remain is *conscription*. The number of personnel – 1,000,000 – appears to be one of the few fixed points of the present reforms. If such a large army, the fifth largest in the world, is to be maintained, conscription is a necessity.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the ability to maintain conscription will be decisive for the success of the new Armed Forces that are being created.<sup>4</sup>

However, conscription will no longer be the main method of recruitment. Both the period of service and the role of conscript soldiers have been significantly reduced by the recent reforms. Conscripts will no longer be at the sharp end of the Armed Forces. Still, they make up a sizable component – 500,000 conscripts will be drafted in 2009, or close to 45% of total manpower at present (see Chapter 2.1). Compulsory military service will continue to be something young men will have to plan for and deal with one way or another.

This report discusses the likelihood that Russia will be able to maintain conscription in the way outlined by current reform plans. The first part of the study gives an account of the events leading up to the Serdiukov reforms. With the 2009 spring draft – the most extensive draft for years – as the backdrop, the second part discusses some key variables for the future of conscription, such as demography, public health and the population’s perceptions of the Army and military service.

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<sup>1</sup> Solov’ëv, “The military reform of 2009–2012”.

<sup>2</sup> The state of “permanent readiness” has been taken to mean that units and formations should be at least 80% manned and equipped and ready to deploy to a combat zone on short notice and without further mobilisation (Bruusgaard & Andresen, “Permanent readiness units in the Russian Armed Forces”).

<sup>3</sup> The Russian word for “army” – *armiiia* (*армия*) – generally refers to the whole of the Armed Forces, not just to the Land Forces as a branch of service. The use of “Army” in this text is similar.

<sup>4</sup> American and British usage differ on the subject of conscription. In this study, the system and principle of universal military service is denoted by “conscription”, whereas “draft” is used about the bi-annual call-up campaigns and the contingent of soldiers taken into service, both meanings rendered by *prizyv* in Russian. The nouns “conscript” (Br) and “draftee” (Am) about the person having to serve are used interchangeably, as are the verbs “conscript” and “draft” about enrolling someone into service.

The concluding part sums up the discussion and assesses the chances that the new model will survive.

The question as to whether Russia should have a professional or a conscript army has been vehemently discussed by politicians, officers, military observers and the Russian public for almost two decades. For Russia, the introduction of a wholly professional force would carry significance beyond merely practical and economic aspects, and also beyond considerations of military effectiveness. Proponents of professionalisation have argued that conscription represents a continuation of the Russian state's tradition of suppressing its citizens and ignoring their rights. Champions of compulsory military service emphasise every man's duty to defend the motherland as Russians have done before. And Russia has traditionally won its wars primarily by huge masses of personnel, not by technological superiority.<sup>5</sup> Readiness to serve and sacrifice is also portrayed as something very Russian, whereas a professional army is alien to Russia. Voluntary soldiers are only motivated by what they are paid, and the country should not be defended by mercenaries. In other words, maintenance or abolishment of conscription is a very emotional issue, frequently linked to the eternal question of what Russia is or should be.

## 2 Historical background

The Armed Forces of the Soviet Union were manned, structured, trained and equipped for an all-out conflict with the West. The Soviet military was unthinkable without conscription. But mandatory military service did not come with the Soviet Union. Universal conscription was introduced into Imperial Russia by Minister of War Dmitrii Miliutin in the 1870s. Military service was declared compulsory for all males aged 20. Miliutin's reforms dispensed with the recruitment system and the professional army that had been established by Peter the Great, and they laid the foundations for the country's army as it has existed through Soviet times up until the present. In Stalin's militarised state, conscription was a matter of course, and the system was cemented by the experiences of the Second World War and the continuing confrontation of the Cold War. The legal basis for conscription in the late Soviet Union was the Soviet Universal Military Obligation Law of 1968. All able-bodied men were subject to draft at the age of 18. The service period was two years, three years for those who served in the Navy. Conscription was not confined to the Armed Forces. Conscripts were also assigned to other armed structures, notably the Interior Ministry (MVD) and the KGB.

### 2.1 The 1990s: Personnel cuts and vows to end conscription

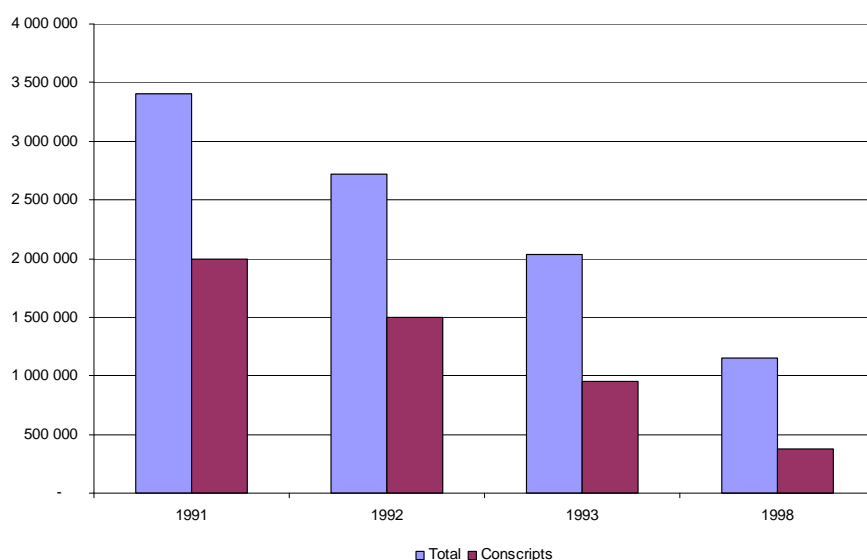
In 1991, the last year of the Soviet Union, *the Military Balance* reported that the total number of active troops in the Soviet Armed Forces was 3,400,000, and that conscripts made up more than 2,000,000, i.e. ca 59% (Figure 2.1). The Russian Armed Forces were established in May 1992.

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<sup>5</sup> An example of this line of thought is presented by General Makhmut Gareev in *Future war* (pp. 113–114): "But this is a historic fact: After the introduction of recruitment [under Peter I], in the eighteenth and a significant part of the nineteenth century the Russian Army had an enormous advantage. ... For two centuries all battles showed the advantage of this system. Now it is said this is not the right system, but that means that Russia has gained its victories in the wrong way. That can't be right."



An army of close to 3,000,000 soldiers was created. *The Military Balance* set the total number of active troops in Russia in the first post-Soviet year at 2,720,000. Conscripts were estimated at 1,500,000, or about 55% of the manpower. These figures are necessarily approximate and can hardly be verified, but it is beyond doubt that the number of personnel started to decrease rapidly. In 1993, the year of Yeltsin's triumph over the conservative Supreme Soviet, the Armed Forces had been reduced by a quarter: The overall number stood at 2,030,000. The number of conscripts had been reduced to 950,000, or 47%. Towards the end of Yeltsin's second term the size of the troops had dropped by approximately 60% compared to 1992, and conscripts made up roughly one third of all personnel. After Yeltsin, cuts in personnel have been insignificant. Today, the official number of total manpower in the Russian Armed Forces is 1,130,000.<sup>6</sup> The target of the Serdiukov reforms is 1,000,000 by 2012.<sup>7</sup> 150,000 will be officers. The numbers of conscript versus enlisted personnel have not yet been fixed.



*Figure 2.1: Total manpower and conscripts in Russia's Armed Forces in the 1990s. From 1991 to 1998, manpower was reduced almost down to today's level, and the share of conscripts was reduced from two thirds to one. Source: The Military Balance.*

The massive personnel cuts during Yeltsin's presidencies were a result of dwindling allocations, not of a deliberate reform policy. The Yeltsin regime was largely indifferent to the state of the Army as long as it did not support the opposition. The Armed Forces were left to decay. The reformers on Yeltsin's team generally regarded defence spending as one of the main reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Directly or indirectly, the Armed Forces had consumed most of the country's resources and strangled the economy. Leading members of the Russian government were determined not to let the military burden the budgets in a Soviet fashion. There was a marked decrease in the defence share of GDP during the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> But the crucial factor was the

<sup>6</sup> Solov'ëv, "The military reform of 2009–2012".

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. The ultimate deadline set by the President is 1 January, 2016 – Presidential decree no. 1878ss, December 29, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Estimates from the Stockholm Peace Research Institute show a decrease in the defence share of GDP from 5.3% in 1993 to 3.3% in 1998 ("SIPRI Military Expenditure Database" – [www.sipri.org/databases/milex](http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex)).

overall economic decline.<sup>9</sup> To maintain the structures and equipment inherited from the Soviet Union was completely unrealistic. The Army was also facing the challenges following the dismantling of Soviet military presence beyond Russian borders.

The shortage of resources was overwhelming. And if the government and political establishment were unsympathetic to the Army, the public was even more so. The system that was needed to uphold conscription was falling apart, and there was no support for it among Russian citizens. It was seen as a meaningless waste. To serve as a conscript in underfunded and demoralised troops was something most young men would try to avoid.<sup>10</sup> In this situation, there would seem to be good reasons for abolishing the draft. In November 1992, the Russian government passed the resolution "On measures for the phased transition to manning the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation by volunteers on contract".<sup>11</sup> The time frame for this transition was not specified. Four years later, in an obvious effort to improve his chances in the upcoming elections, President Yeltsin issued a decree that ordered the transfer of both the Armed Forces and other armed structures to a system of voluntary recruitment by 2000. The schedule for transition incautiously fixed this time, it was nevertheless obvious that the chances of fulfilling such a plan were minimal. This realisation led to a new decree in 1998, substituting the neutral and timeless "when the necessary conditions are created" for the unrealisable promise of ending the draft in 2000. Abolishment of conscription never really got beyond the stage of empty populism. There were no thoroughly drafted plans or cost assessments. Nonetheless, although conscription was not abolished, it was made easier to have service deferred or be dismissed. The Soviet Universal Military Obligation Law of 1968 had provided nine justifications for deferral or dismissal from military service. The first Duma doubled the list.<sup>12</sup> The new Law on Military Service exempted more than 80% of draft-age men from service.

## **2.2 The Putin era: Professionalisation relaunched, conscription maintained**

Almost immediately after becoming Prime Minister in 1999, Vladimir Putin started to promote his leadership by showing an active interest in military affairs. The second campaign to crush separatism in Chechnya would testify to the resolve of the coming Commander-in-Chief. As President from 2000, Putin made reform and revitalisation of the Armed Forces a priority. He soon relaunched the goal of creating a professional army, and the task was assigned to one of the President's most trusted men, Sergei Ivanov, as the new Defence Minister. Apparently, the conditions for success were no worse than they had been some years earlier. In addition to being unpopular with the people, conscription appeared increasingly outdated as a means of building military strength. The wars in Chechnya had demonstrated that conscripts, at least conscripts with the level of training and quality of equipment that existed in the Russian Army, were no match for the determined and skilled separatist adversaries. The experience of other countries and the wars

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<sup>9</sup> According to the International Monetary Fund, Russia's GDP shrank by 4.7% annually from 1993 to 1998 ("Data and statistics" – [www.imf.org/external/data.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/data.htm)).

<sup>10</sup> For a description of the plight of conscripts in the Russian Army in the 1990s, see Spivak & Pridemore, "Conscription and Reform in the Russian Army".

<sup>11</sup> Kalikh & Krivenko, "On one contract track".

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandrov, "Contract service. The cost of a volunteer soldier".

fought by the world's leading military powers (the Gulf War of 1990–91, NATO's war against Yugoslavia in 1999) also seemed to give solid evidence that professional forces were superior to conscript armies.

It was obvious from the start that the introduction of a professional force would face a number of practical and economic difficulties. The most fundamental problem, however, was opposition within the Army. The military represented not an ally, but a formidable obstacle for those who wanted to do away with the draft. This was no surprise – opposition from generals had been evident since professionalisation first appeared on the political agenda – but the resistance turned out to make a complete transformation to a professional force impossible. There are numerous reasons for Russia's officers to oppose professionalisation. Obviously, arguments put forward in public debate have been based on security considerations and military aspects. The idea that military power is expressed in numbers of personnel has held considerable ground. An army of professionals would simply be too small for Russia, since professionalisation without a reduction in manpower would be beyond the country's economic means. But the officers' motives for going against professionalisation have also been of a more self-interested nature. A smaller number of soldiers would result in a correspondingly smaller number of officers, which the officers themselves would naturally be against. Illegitimate use of soldiers, for example as hired-out labour for the personal economic gain of officers, is easier with conscripts than with enlisted men. Generally, professionals can be expected to be more aware of their rights and to leave if their employer does not observe his obligations. On the whole, the idea that an ordinary soldier is an employee and the Armed Forces an employer, with all the responsibilities that follow, is both alien and scary to Russian officers.

At some point Sergei Ivanov either gave in to the opposition from the military, or he accepted some of their arguments against professionalisation. At any rate, he opted for a compromise, and in 2003 he declared that complete professionalisation had never been the aim, and that Russia's Armed Forces were to consist of a mix of conscripts and enlisted personnel.<sup>13</sup> An experiment had been launched in September 2002 with the airborne division at Pskov to assess the cost and process of professionalising a military unit. The experiment had largely failed, but professionalisation went ahead.<sup>14</sup> The first programme for comprehensive professionalisation was launched 25 August 2003 – “The Federal targeted programme for the transfer of soldiers to contract service in a number of units and armed formations 2004–2007”. In its final version, after revisions and budget cuts, the programme encompassed 80 units manned by 147,600 servicemen.

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<sup>13</sup> Kalikh & Krivenko, “On one contract track”.

<sup>14</sup> In *Russian Military Reform: A failed exercise in defence decision making*, Carolina Vendil Pallin writes that “the General Staff made every effort to convince Putin and the Minister of Defence that the costs of abandoning conscription would be astronomical. The Pskov experiment proved a perfect opportunity for the military to drive this point home” (p. 158). Contractees were given what were exceptionally high salaries for Russia and would be provided with high standard housing. Still, the professionals were inclined to leave after having enjoyed the pay and benefits of service in Pskov, and few were willing to sign a second contract. There was also a general problem with the quality of the contractees.

Of these, 72 units with 133,400 men were in the Armed Forces; the rest were in the other security structures.<sup>15</sup>

Opinions differ on the results of the Federal programme, but there is no doubt that the initial targets for recruitment were not met. Shortly before the end of the programme period it was asserted that 100,000 professional soldiers and sergeants would be serving in units of permanent readiness by the beginning of 2008, and that another 25,000 professionals would be in place in a few months.<sup>16</sup> The Federal programme was not intended to be the last step towards professionalisation, but the pace was to be reduced after the programme's completion. In 2008 there would be a break. A new programme was designed to run from 2009 through 2013, stipulating the transfer of another 80,000 people to contract service. Together with other measures, the new programme was to increase the number of professionals to 300,000.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 The new conscription model

#### 3.1 Shorter service, fewer exemptions

As the Federal programme was being completed, a new conscription model was established. The service period was reduced from two to one year. As before, men aged 18–27 would be eligible for conscription, and there would still be two drafts a year. As a transitional arrangement, those who were drafted in the autumn of 2007 would serve for eighteen months. The 133,000 recruits who started their service in the spring of 2008 were the first to serve for only twelve months.<sup>18</sup>

However, the reduced term of service did not imply a lesser role for conscription in the Armed Forces. On the contrary, conscription might be said to have become more important, as professionalisation did not go as planned. To uphold manpower with a shorter service period and a deteriorating demographic situation, the possibilities for exemption or deferment had to be reduced. The first post-Soviet legislation had made the rules more lenient, and this trend had continued under Putin. When a draft bill instituting a stricter regime was submitted to the Duma in 2006, the number of grounds for deferment had reached twenty-five.<sup>19</sup> With the introduction of the one-year service from 2008, the number was brought down to twenty.<sup>20</sup> This was supposed to

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<sup>15</sup> *Krasnaia zvezda*, November 25, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Gavrilov, "Commander under contract". On the confusion surrounding the professionalisation programme and the number of professional soldiers in Russia's Armed Forces, see Bruusgaard & Andresen, "Permanent readiness units in the Russian Armed Forces".

<sup>17</sup> *Defense & Security*, April 4, 2008.

<sup>18</sup> At the age of seventeen, Russian males are enrolled in the military register and subjected to preliminary medical examinations (Women can also be enrolled if they have received basic military training in school and are found to be physically fit for service). When they turn eighteen, they can be drafted. They receive a summons to appear before a draft board for conscription proceedings, which include new medical examinations, and the draft board considers applications for deferment or exemption, after which the conscript is either discharged or transferred to a military unit.

<sup>19</sup> Kalugina, "Doctors, teachers and young fathers are made to serve the motherland".

<sup>20</sup> Evseev, "Short of conscripts again".

allow for drafting an additional 90,000 men. To be exempted from service on the grounds of social obligations such as family responsibilities was no longer straightforward. For example, as opposed to earlier, a father of a child less than three years old would now be drafted, unless he was a single parent.<sup>21</sup> Husbands with pregnant wives would no longer get deferral.<sup>22</sup> Young men with close relatives in their daily care would also as a rule have to serve. Under the previous regime, teachers and doctors in rural districts and remote areas could expect to be exempted because they were considered to be too important and difficult to replace in their jobs. The new rules did not make any such exceptions. Some categories of employees of state agencies had their exemptions annulled. Moreover, students of vocational and technical schools would only be deferred until they turned twenty.<sup>23</sup> To be enrolled in higher education was still a ground for deferment, but there were signs that students at universities and colleges would be treated with less indulgence than before. Apparently, the authorities would be stricter and more inclined to decide to the disadvantage of the student in cases of irregularities or doubt.<sup>24</sup>

The new conscription model comes across as a compromise between considerations along multiple lines. The mixed contract/conscript model was considered an interim arrangement at the beginning of the decade. The draft would be temporarily maintained as a gradual transfer to a contract army was implemented. This is now officially changed, and the Serdiukov reforms presuppose the continuation of the draft.<sup>25</sup> Draftees are to spend six months receiving training and then go on to actual service.<sup>26</sup> It does not seem clear which positions will be filled by draftees, apart from their functions being other than combat.<sup>27</sup> Draftees will not be sent into battle, except in the case of full mobilisation.<sup>28</sup> In any case, there may be reason to question the military value of this manpower. The service period seems rather short for the conscripts to learn very much or be of use. Critics joke that the old two-year service consisted of six months of adaptation, six months of training, six months of service and six months of preparations to be discharged, and that the reduction of the service to one year means that part two and three have been removed. Nevertheless, the fact that Russia will still have a mobilisation reserve has symbolic significance.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, though, conscripts make up the main source of volunteers for contract service. At present, professionalisation is dependent on conscription – approximately 80–

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<sup>21</sup> Evseev, “Short of conscripts again”.

<sup>22</sup> *Defense & Security*, March 7, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Kalugina, “Doctors, teachers and young fathers are made to serve the motherland”.

<sup>24</sup> Kovalevich, “Tens of thousands of students can end up in the Army”. During the spring draft of 2009, students were drafted if their college or university hadn’t had their accreditation renewed in time. Protests that this was not the students’ responsibility were ignored.

<sup>25</sup> Gavrilov, “Attacking at the staff level”. “It is absolutely certain that the mixed system will remain. We do not aim for complete professionalisation, nor will we.” – Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov

<sup>26</sup> Kalikh & Krivenko, “On one contract track”.

<sup>27</sup> Kretsul, “A military secret”.

<sup>28</sup> Since 2003, before the implementation of the Federal programme on professionalisation, Russian authorities from the President and down have made assurances that conscripts will not be serving in hot spots. Still, conscripts were used in South Ossetia in the war against Georgia, and four of them were killed (Viktor Litovkin, “The General Staff admitted that conscripts had died”). According to Russian law, conscripts can only be used in battle on Russian territory (Emiliia Kazumova, “A scandal is brewing around the General Staff”).

<sup>29</sup> Viktor Litovkin – author’s interview, April 23, 2009.

90% of those who sign contracts are serving draftees. Abolishment of conscription would have dramatic consequences for the enlisted part of the forces.

Uncertainty about the functions of draftees and how much knowledge and skills they will be able to acquire in half a year makes the new conscription model seem inconsistent with Russia's ambitions to become a more efficient military power. Russia compares itself to the USA and the West, i.e. to the leading countries in terms of technological development. Much of the equipment used by their armed forces is so sophisticated that it requires training of personnel far beyond what is possible in a one-year conscription system. Considerably more time would be needed, which again would be politically and economically unacceptable. This is one of the reasons why conscription is no longer an option as an instrument of recruitment in such countries as the USA and the United Kingdom. Technologically, Russia is far behind them, but it is one of the main ambitions of Russian defence development to reduce this gap. Plans and programmes aim to repair the most serious imbalances by 2020. Be that realistic or not, much of the equipment needed for Russia's military ascent will be too high-tech and complex to be operated by conscripts. However, if Russia fails to modernise its equipment and remains a technologically second-rate military power, such a large conscript component as the present makes more sense.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 Conscription modernised and humanised?

The new conscription model has been promoted by Russian authorities as a liberal reform to make the service more acceptable in a modern society. The reduction of the service term is presented as a measure to make conscription less of a menace in the lives of young people. Proponents of professionalisation, on the other hand, argue that a stricter exemption regime testifies to the reactionary nature of the reforms. The crucial question is whether the new model will result in more positive attitudes among the population towards the Armed Forces. The salient point in this respect will be a reduction in the occurrence of bullying and hazing of young recruits at the hands of senior soldiers and officers – the notorious *dedovshchina*. The authorities have emphasised the aim of overcoming *dedovshchina* as a rationale behind the conscription reform.<sup>31</sup>

Hazing is a well-known phenomenon in the armies of most countries. In Russia, it has reached an unprecedented level. *Dedovshchina* – literally “the rule of the grandfathers” – makes service a life-threatening experience for thousands of recruits every year. It is the most serious image problem of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>32</sup> It also existed in the Red Army, but a particularly brutal form of *dedovshchina* emerged in the demoralised Russian Army of the 1990s. It has remained a serious problem up until the present. In many instances it has led to severe and lasting injuries as well as deaths. A much talked-about case in recent years is that of the conscript Andrei Sychev,

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<sup>30</sup> In the near future, recruits will be trained under conditions that are far from optimal. The new professional sergeants that will be in charge of the training in the reformed forces started their education quite recently and won't graduate till the autumn of 2012 (Gavrilov, “ABC for the lowest rank”).

<sup>31</sup> Another measure that is expected to reduce the occurrence of *dedovshchina* is the establishment of a military police force (*Newsru.com*, 10 November, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Hazing is formally denoted by the euphemism “non-manual relations” (*neustavnye otnosheniia*).

who nearly died after having been severely beaten on New Year's Eve in 2005. The incident caught the headlines after military authorities initially had tried to prevent publicity.<sup>33</sup>

By the military's own accounts, the occurrence of hazing has been significantly reduced over the last years: Officially, 7,000 soldiers became victims of *dedovshchina* in 2005.<sup>34</sup> In 2008, the figure decreased to 3,600. The downward trend has continued. 1,500 cases were registered during the first six months of 2009. This may reflect a real tendency, but the latest figures are still grotesquely high. The dark figures are probably also substantial. Among the 1,500 registered cases in the first half of 2009, four were murders. However, there is reason to believe that many cases listed as accidents were related to *dedovshchina*, which commanders are naturally prone to disguise. Hazing is also one of the main reasons behind an ugly suicide rate. In September 2009, it was reported that 120 servicemen had committed suicide since the start of the year. Conscripts, enlisted personnel and officers each make up approximately one third of the total.<sup>35</sup>

It is a commonly held view that the immensity of hazing in the Russian Army comes from a lack of will on the part of the authorities to do something about it. Disciplinary problems should have been dealt with on the level of local or military district commanders, but these have largely ignored them. There is reason to believe that a focused and consistent policy on all levels could be efficient in reducing the extent of hazing. So far, such a policy has been absent.<sup>36</sup>

## 4 The 2009 spring draft

The spring draft of 2009 was in many ways a landmark in the modern developments of Russia's military. It was the first draft after the start of the Serdiukov reforms. From April 1 to July 15, 305,000 young men were drafted. This was the largest contingent since 1994, up from 133,200 in the spring of 2008.<sup>37</sup> It was the first real test for the stricter exemption regime. The preceding decade and a half of increasingly lenient regulations had made Russians used to the idea that military service could be avoided relatively easily. But the most severe challenges were the ones emanating from the basic conditions of demography and people's state of health. Critics warned that Russia simply did not have a sufficient number of healthy young men to fill the new quotas, and that implementation of the plans would lead to widespread violations of laws and human rights.

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<sup>33</sup> Myers, "Hazing trial bares dark side of Russian military".

<sup>34</sup> Gavrilov, "A hidden fracture".

<sup>35</sup> Orlov, "A lost battalion".

<sup>36</sup> But there have been examples of efforts to fight *dedovshchina*. In Moscow military district, an attempt was made to curb the problem by registering all cases and calling on all units with a bad record (Fatigarov & Iushkov, "To train professionals, to bring up leaders"). According to the district commander, these measures lead to a halving of incidents from 2005 to 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Litovkin, "A birthday decree".

## 4.1 Demography

Russia's dismal demography has received much attention. The population of Russia has been declining since 1993, when it stood at about 148.5 million. At the beginning of 2009, it was estimated to have gone below 142 million (Figure 4.1). The diminishing population is one of the most severe challenges to Russia's development. Efforts have been launched to address the crisis. Child care benefits have been improved to encourage women to have more children.<sup>38</sup> For the last couple of years, birth rates have improved.<sup>39</sup> The number of children born in 2007 was the highest since 1991 (Figure 4.2). The government aims to stabilise the population at 142–143 million by 2015 and to achieve an increase to 145 million by 2025.<sup>40</sup> Most demographers, however, consider this unrealistic. The fertility rate has increased but is still only 1.4 children per woman, compared to the needed 2.15 to maintain the current population.<sup>41</sup> The last years' increase in the number of births is mostly related to the relatively high numbers of births in the late 1980s, before the post-Soviet decline set in. Hence, the positive trend from 2006 is not likely to last long. It is predicted to be over by 2012.<sup>42</sup> However, there has been some other positive news recently: For the first time in fifteen years, the number of births exceeds the number of deaths. In August 2009, there were one thousand more births than deaths.<sup>43</sup> Still, it will take some time before the Armed Forces can benefit from any such positive developments. The number of conscript-age men is decreasing, and this has been the situation for some years. The birth rate started to go down towards the end of the Soviet era (Figure 4.2). It reached bottom in 1999 with 1,214,689 births, 626,149 of them boys. This means that there will be a decrease in the number of 18-year-olds till 2017, and the present recruitment problems will become correspondingly greater.

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<sup>38</sup> *RFE/RL*, May 10, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> *BarentsObserver*, February 25, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Kuvshinova, "Russia is dying out".

<sup>41</sup> Abdullaev, "Boosting population a vague science".

<sup>42</sup> Kuvshinova, "Russia is dying out".

<sup>43</sup> *BarentsObserver*, October 6, 2009. The main cause of the decreasing population has been an exceptionally high number of deaths, not a low number of births. In terms of average life span, Russia is far behind economically comparable countries. And while people live longer year by year in the world as a whole, average life span in post-Soviet Russia has been decreasing.



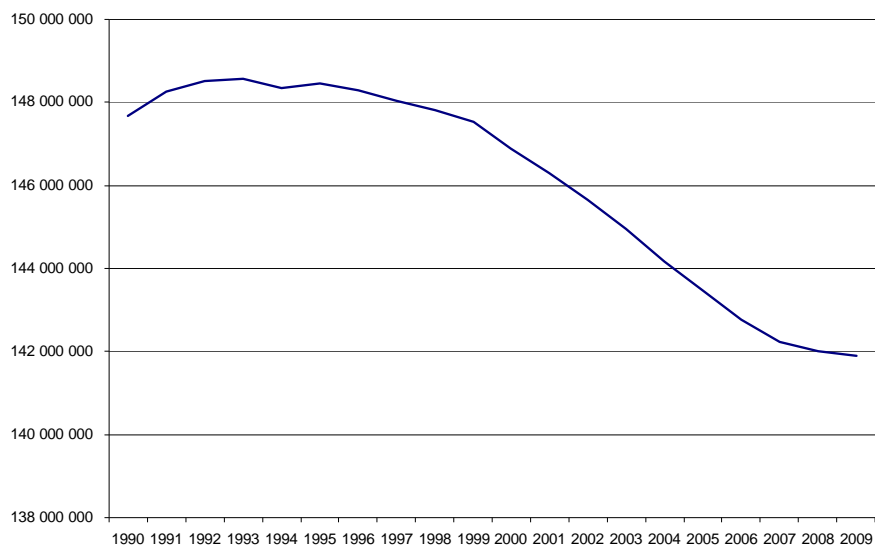


Figure 4.1: Russia's population 1990–2009. Source: Rosstat.

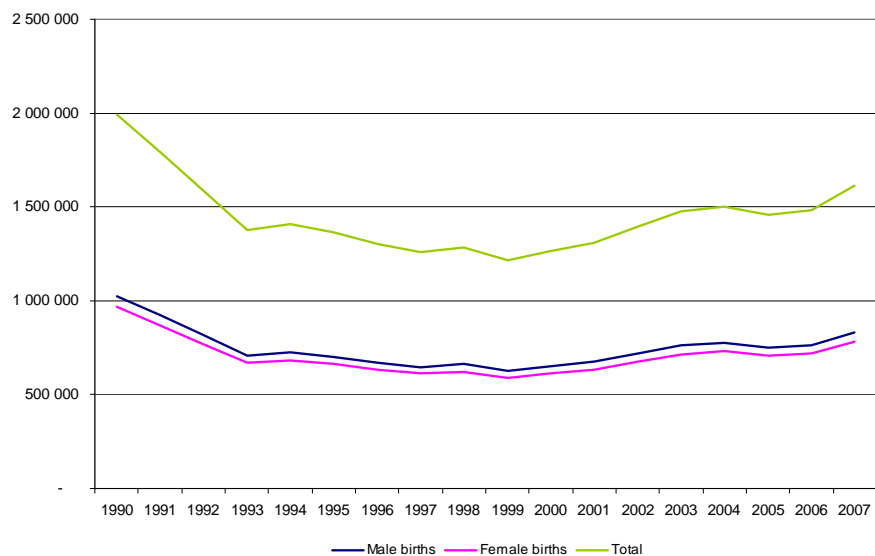


Figure 4.2: Number of births per year in Russia 1990–2007. Source: Rosstat.

## 4.2 Health

Like demography, public health has developed in a way that limits the supply of suitable recruits. After the collapse of the old political system, Russia experienced a marked deterioration of the population's health, as did other post-communist states. Statistics and sources may not always appear consistent or entirely reliable, but there is little doubt that there has been a decline in the health of Russians for several years. This concerns the whole of the population, not just conscripts, and there is little to indicate improvement in the near future.<sup>44</sup> During the autumn draft of 2008, 65.2% of those examined were found fit for military service.<sup>45</sup> A slight majority of

<sup>44</sup> Evseev, "Short of conscripts again".

<sup>45</sup> Litovkin, "A birthday decree".

them, and fewer than in 2007, were classified as “category A”, i.e. completely fit. For the rest – “category B” – restrictions would apply as to where and in what capacities they could serve.<sup>46</sup> 26.9% were classified as “limitedly fit”, 6.7% as “temporarily unfit” and 1.3% as “unfit” (Figure 4.3). A comparison of the results from the autumn of 2008 with those from the autumn of 2007 showed that the number that were fit for service had decreased by 2.5 percentage points, and that the numbers in the categories “limitedly fit” and “temporarily unfit” had increased correspondingly.<sup>47</sup> The General Staff’s statistics for the 2009 spring draft showed that the distribution between those fit for service and the rest was close to that of the 2008 autumn draft, i.e. approximately one third were medically unable to serve.<sup>48</sup>

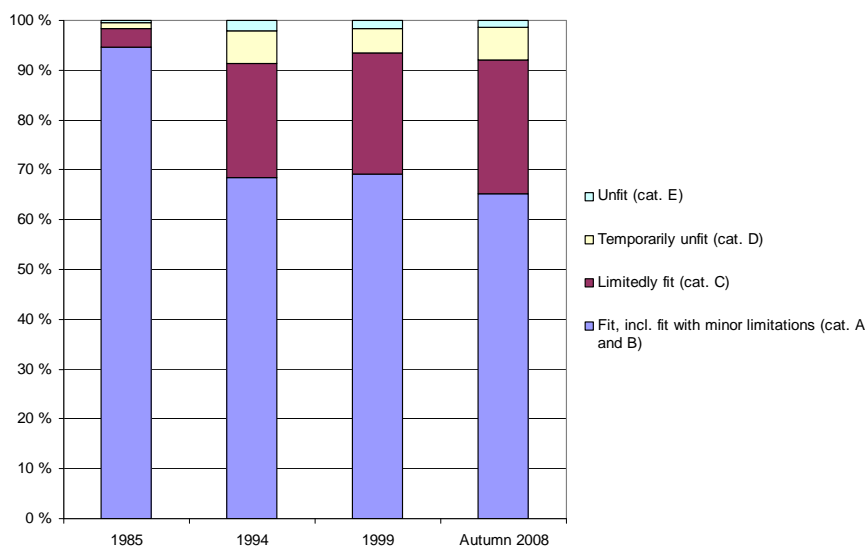


Figure 4.3: Fitness for military service in percentage of those who appear before the draft boards. Personnel classified as “limitedly fit” (cat. C) will only have to serve in war time. Source: Russia’s Ministry of Defence.<sup>49</sup>

Deteriorating health is a familiar phenomenon in many countries and there is good reason to believe that the statistics above reflect an actual trend. But it is still difficult to assess the correctness of the figures. Routines and principles of medical examination as well as criteria for classification may have changed. Many observers suspect that the real number of young men who are medically unfit for service is notably higher than what the above statistics indicate. Moreover, with today’s record-high targets for the draft, military authorities may be tempted to lower health requirements.

<sup>46</sup> *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, January 29, 2009. Conscripts classified as “category B” cannot serve in the Navy, the Airborne Troops (VDV), the Air Force, the Interior Forces, units of the Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS) and some other special units (Iuzbashev, “The draft has been completed. Prepare for a new one”).

<sup>47</sup> Babin, “Preliminary conclusions have been drawn”.

<sup>48</sup> *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, June 26, 2009. Information on draft procedures, including medical examinations, can be found at the website “The draftee’s compass” (*Kompas prizyvnik*) – <http://army.hro.org/index.htm> [accessed November 10, 2009].

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Litovkin, “A birthday decree”.

### 4.3 Corruption

Draftees may also have been placed in the exempted categories C–E for dubious reasons. Flourishing corruption has made it easier to obtain the sought-after status as unfit for service. Buying one's way out of the army, e.g. by bribing doctors, is an option that has been utilised by a steadily growing share of draftees in post-Soviet Russia. In a comprehensive study from 2005, analysts of the Indem Foundation in Moscow concluded that Russians were spending ten times as much on bribes as they had done four years earlier.<sup>50</sup> The Army was rapidly becoming one of the most corrupt spheres. The record of what was called "day-to-day corruption" (*bytovaia korrupsiia*) was set by conscription to military service. Corruption related to conscription was estimated to have grown from USD 12–13 million annually in 2001 to 350 million in 2005, i.e. by almost 2,700%. Public health and higher education were also found to be among the most corrupt spheres, and it would seem obvious that this is partly related to the draft. Investigations into crime in the Army show that the problem of corruption is still growing.<sup>51</sup> It is expected by many that the abolishment of several grounds for deferment will lead to a further increase in corruption.<sup>52</sup>

### 4.4 Draft dodging

The number of those who try to avoid military service simply by dodging the draft seems to have decreased considerably since the beginning of the decade. According to reports from the Ministry of Defence, 7,100 tried to dodge the draft in the spring of 2009. The spring before the figure was 7,751, whereas 12,521 cases were registered two years ago (*Newsru.com*, June 23, 2009). The marked decrease from 2007 to 2008 coincided with the introduction of the one-year service and has been interpreted as a sign that the shortening of the service period has reduced young men's reluctance to serve.

There is some disagreement about the number of draft dodgers, and the disagreement is partly due to different interpretations of the term "draft dodger" – *uklonist*. The judicial definition is clear. Those who have received a summons to appear at their local draft board and confirmed by signature the reception of the summons, and then failed to appear, are considered draft dodgers and can be prosecuted under the criminal code.<sup>53</sup> But the term "draft dodger" is often used indiscriminately about all those who for some reason do not appear for conscription proceedings. There is reason to believe that the cited numbers from the Ministry of Defence for the 2009 spring draft include cases that do not represent draft dodging as described in the law, whereas the numbers shown in Figure 4.4 below are based on a narrower definition. In any case, if the numbers can be trusted, draft dodging is decreasing. The present need for conscripts has made the authorities intensify efforts to prevent dodging, and the problem is likely to remain limited for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>50</sup> Indem, "How much has corruption increased in four years?"

<sup>51</sup> Iamshanov, "Crime among officers".

<sup>52</sup> Kalikh & Krivenko, "On one contract track".

<sup>53</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Conscription through detention in Russia's Armed Forces*. Not surprisingly, a considerable number of conscripts disappear from their homes during the draft to avoid being presented with the summons and required to sign. However, the General Staff's figure of 100,000 disappearing conscripts seems exaggerated (*Newsru.com*, October 1, 2009).

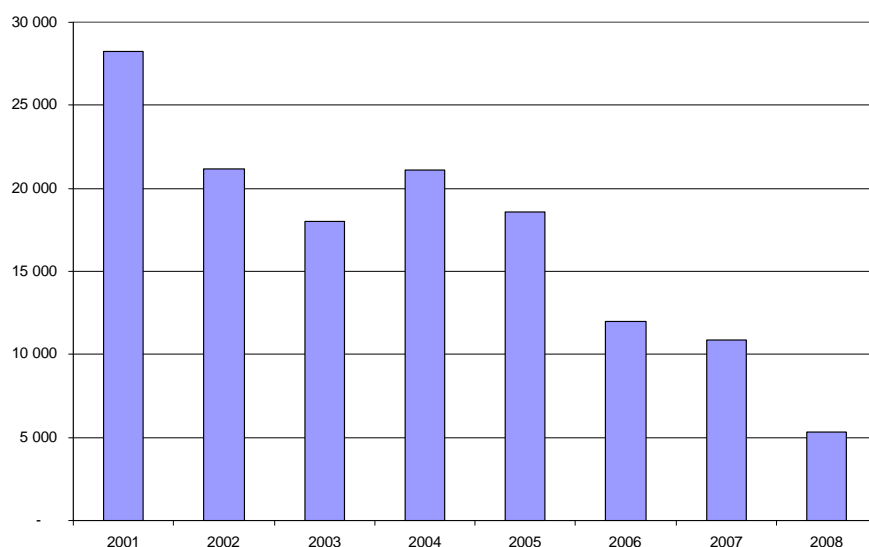


Figure 4.4: Number of draft dodgers 2001–2008. Source: *Izvestiia* (Beluza & Litovkin 2009).

#### 4.5 Alternative service

In several countries with conscription, many draftees do alternative civilian service. Since 2004, it has been possible for pacifists and conscientious objectors in Russia to serve the country in a non-military capacity. However, this has remained a marginal option. In the spring of 2009, 191 were accepted for such service.<sup>54</sup> There are about one thousand alternative servicemen working in various organisations at present. Slightly more than three thousand conscripts have carried out alternative service since the implementation of the law “On state civilian service”.<sup>55</sup> The service lasts for 21 months, i.e. longer than military service, as is common in other countries as well. Alternative servicemen have to find accommodation themselves. This has constituted a significant obstacle since most of the 800 institutions that may hire alternative servicemen have no housing to offer, and the servicemen have not been permitted to serve close to their homes. This last provision has recently been removed, and the terms of service have become less unfavourable.<sup>56</sup> Polls indicate that as many as 25–30% of conscripts may choose alternative service if conditions are improved.<sup>57</sup> Given today’s conscription targets it is unlikely that the authorities will allow the number of alternative servicemen to increase significantly. It should also be noted that non-military service seems alien to Russian traditions and culture. A large part of those who apply for civilian service today are Jehovah’s witnesses<sup>58</sup> and base their conviction on a faith that has a relatively short history and small following in Russia.

<sup>54</sup> *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, June 26, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> *Defense & Security*, October 31, 2008.

<sup>56</sup> *Newsru.com*, July 15, 2009.

<sup>57</sup> *Defense & Security*, October 31, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Valentina Mel’nikova – author’s interview, April 22, 2009.

## 4.6 The quality of conscripts

The way conscription has worked in post-Soviet Russia, the system has failed to supply the Armed Forces with the personnel they would like to see in their ranks. Those wanted by the Armed Forces are also those better able to avoid service. It is well documented that the young men drafted are more deprived in various ways than the national average. They are poorly educated and in bad health, they abuse alcohol and drugs, they find it hard to adapt to society, and they have records with the police. At the time of Sergei Ivanov's appointment as Defence Minister, observers concluded that the absolute majority of conscripts came from poor and socially disadvantaged families that did not have the means to enroll their sons in paid education or buy them a false certificate for deferral.<sup>59</sup> Ivanov himself reportedly told the State Duma that the conscripts of the 2001 autumn draft were a pathetic lot, afflicted with drug addiction, psychological problems and malnutrition.<sup>60</sup>

Much has changed for the better in Russia since the start of the decade. Most Russians have experienced noticeable improvement in their standard of living. But despite these facts, there is little to suggest that the qualities of the average conscript are very different now from what they were at the start of the economic upturn. After the 2008 spring draft, the first after the reduction of the service term to one year, it was reported from the Main Directorate of Organisation and Mobilisation that 21.5% of the draftees had higher education, a distinct increase compared to the previous contingent.<sup>61</sup> This must be seen in relation to a stricter regime of deferral. Other reports spoke of no noteworthy changes in the quality of conscripts. They came "with the same problems and standard characteristics".<sup>62</sup> Recruitment is socially just as biased as before, or maybe even more so. Surveys done by the Armed Forces Sociological Centre in 2008 showed that more than 80% come from blue-collar families employed in industry and agriculture.<sup>63</sup> Ironic commentators have noted that Russia is in fact creating the Soviet ideal – an army of workers and peasants. Almost 40% are children of single parents or were raised in orphanages.<sup>64</sup>

With the record of 305,000 drafted personnel in the spring of 2009, the number of draftees with higher education rose to 37,900.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, the ambitious targets set for the draft may also have resulted in setbacks with respect to other indicators, mainly regarding the conscripts' health and their observance of law and order. There were numerous reports that young men with illnesses and disabilities were drafted, which seemed contrary not only to the well-being of the draftees, but also to the interests of the Armed Forces.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, recruits with criminal records

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<sup>59</sup> "Mentally limited contingent", *Grani.ru*, July 3, 2002, cited in *Conscription through detention in Russia's Armed Forces*, Human Rights Watch.

<sup>60</sup> Efimova, "Lawmaker: Defense Ministry plans to slash draft deferrals".

<sup>61</sup> Mukhin, "The unexpected draft".

<sup>62</sup> Logvinenko, "Springboard to the future".

<sup>63</sup> Statistics from Rosstat show that close to 40% of the economically active population are employed in the primary and secondary industries (*Russia in figures 2008 – Statistical handbook*).

<sup>64</sup> Mukhin, "Calling up the workers and peasants".

<sup>65</sup> Iuzbashev, "The draft has been completed. Prepare for a new one".

<sup>66</sup> *Newsru.com*, July 15, 2009. *Newsru.com* has been covering the 2009 spring draft at [www.newsru.com/dossier/2901.html](http://www.newsru.com/dossier/2901.html) [accessed November 11, 2009].

made up a sizable share of the contingent. At one point it was reported that more than 100,000 of those drafted had suspended sentences or previous convictions, and that an additional 50,000–70,000 had been in trouble with the police.<sup>67</sup> These figures were contested by the authorities. According to the Military Prosecutor’s Office, the draft included 21,000 persons whose convictions were overturned or had been removed from their records.<sup>68</sup> In the years 2000–2008, young men with records were not drafted, although this was allowed by the law. Having been pressured by i.a. the Public Chamber (*Obshchestvennaia palata*), the advisory body that oversees relations between citizens and the state, military authorities decided to return to the pre-2009 practice, thereby reducing the contingent by 10,000–12,000 men.<sup>69</sup>

## 5 Russians’ perceptions of the Army and military service

A conscript army is obviously dependent on the population’s size and its physical and mental qualities as well as on the ability of state institutions to make the system work in a proper and efficient way. Moreover, the system also rests on the people’s support. The attitude of a state’s citizens towards its military and military service will be of fundamental importance to the effectiveness of conscription.

Since 1998, the Levada Analytical Centre in Moscow has conducted surveys at regular intervals to monitor the views of the people on matters of defence. The polls show that almost throughout Putin’s presidencies a majority of the respondents supported the transition to a professional army. In 2008 they no longer constituted a majority, but they still outnumbered the opponents of professionalisation. However, the opponents had made up a significant minority all the way, and in the 2009 survey the balance tipped in their favour, with 47% supporting the draft against 43% for professionalisation (Figure 5.1).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Newsru.com*, July 3, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Iuzbashev, “The draft has been completed. Prepare for a new one”.

<sup>69</sup> *Newsru.com*, October 2, 2009.

<sup>70</sup> As opposed to surveys where respondents are selected objectively, polls where people are invited to respond may, not surprisingly, give completely different results. In a programme on the radio channel *Ekho Moskvy* in April 2009, listeners were asked to call and vote for or against the maintenance of conscription. 86.2% of the 593 callers wanted to do away with the draft (*Ekho Moskvy*, “What kind of army do we need: professional or conscript?”).

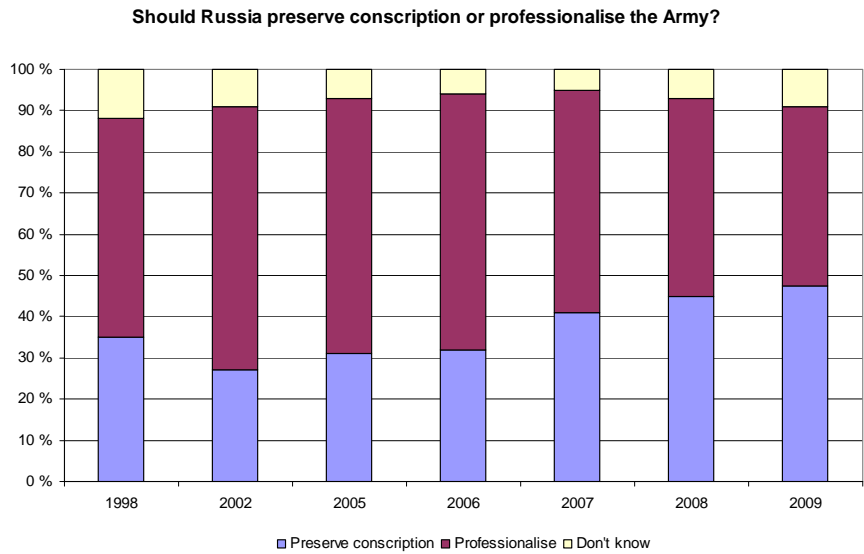


Figure 5.1: Russians' views on conscription vs. professionalisation. Source: Levada Analytical Centre.

Respondents have also regularly been asked a question that makes the issue of conscription versus professionalisation a more personal matter: Would you want your son, brother, husband or other close relative to serve in the Army at present? Not surprisingly, the percentage who would want a close relative to serve is considerably lower than the share who support the draft (Figure 5.2).

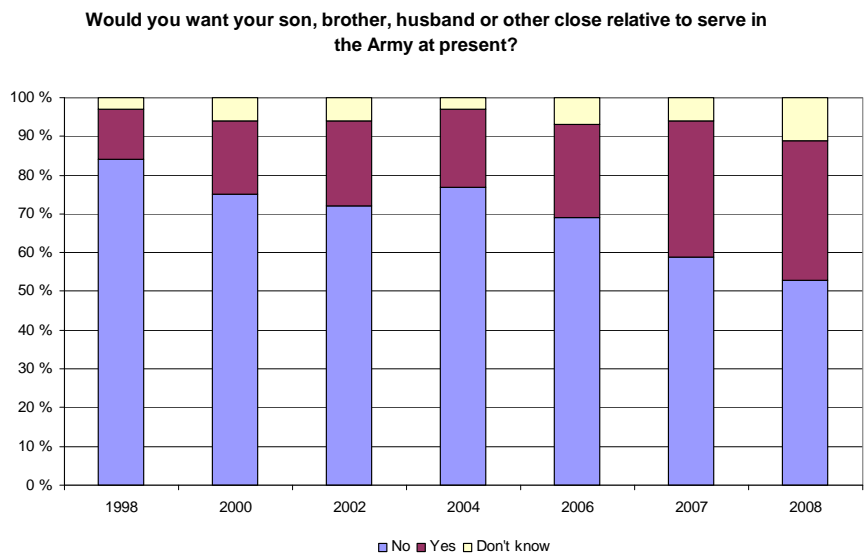


Figure 5.2: Russians' views on military service for close relatives. Source: Levada Analytical Centre.

However, the views on service for close relatives have changed considerably since the end of the last decade, when only 13% answered positively. That the share of respondents who did not want their relatives to serve was substantially higher a decade ago is obviously related to some key developments and events of post-Soviet Russia. In the late 1990s, the probability that conscripts

might be sent to the high-risk zone of Chechnya had seemed greater. Continuing economic decline and dwindling defence allocations had had its effect both on the the material conditions of service as well as on the morale and discipline of an army that had been deeply humiliated by the Chechen separatists.<sup>71</sup> From 1999 onwards, Russia experienced substantial economic growth. Gradually this lead to a general rise in optimism among the population and enhanced self-esteem and pride in the country. It also influenced Russians' perceptions of the Armed Forces. Growing budgets made it possible to resume military exercises and to start modernising equipment. The Army became more visible, and not just in connection with problems and failures. Military service came to be regarded in a less negative light.

Surveys conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM) show that the Army's standing with the Russian public has improved over the last years (Figure 5.3). In January 2006, 32% of the respondents approved of the way the Army carried out its tasks. The approval rate had risen to 51% in June 2008. It then made a predictable jump in the wake of the successful war with Georgia and reached 59% in September. It has remained high since.

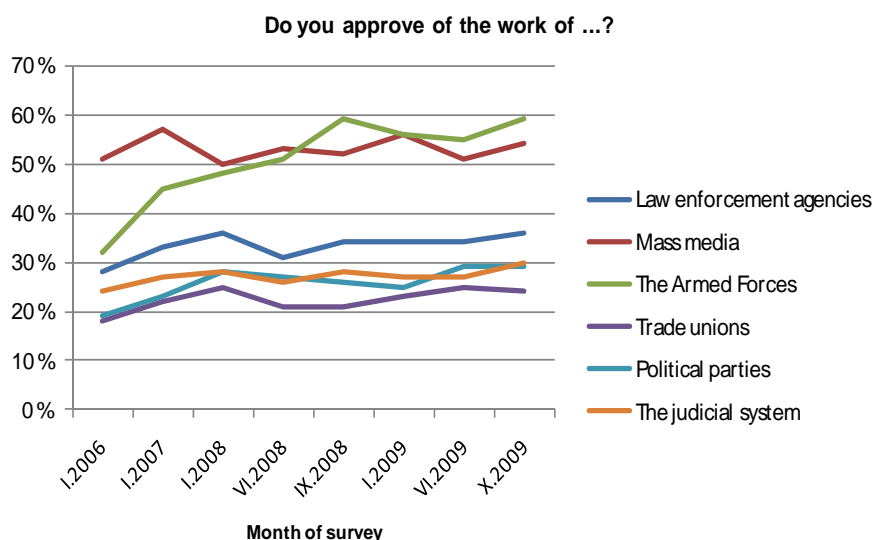


Figure 5.3: Ratings of social institutions. Source: Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (VTsIOM).

The results of recent polls have been interpreted by some as a militaristic trend in Russian society. People are fully aware of the existence of *dedovshchina* and other brutal and illegal practices, but still a growing number are sympathetic towards military service and tend to regard it as a tempering experience that young men should go through.<sup>72</sup> The new conscription model may have served to improve the Army's standing. In a poll published by VTsIOM in October 2008, 54% expressed approval of the changes, while 29% disapproved.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> The two reasons most often referred to by those respondents who did not want their relatives to serve were *dedovshchina* and the risk of being wounded or killed in conflict.

<sup>72</sup> Shmagun & Mertsalova, "Soldiers counted in spring".

<sup>73</sup> *Vzgliad*, October 9, 2008.



Polls will always be subject to uncertainties. The accuracy of the questions has consequences for the value and interpretation of the results, and more technical circumstances such as error margins will have to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, opinion polls must also be assessed with regard to the basis people have for forming informed opinions. In Russia, authorities exercise substantial control over mass media, mainly those media that dominate news distribution to the larger part of the population, i.e. first of all television. Critical coverage of problems and failing policies is limited. In media and publications that reach smaller audiences, in particular regionally and locally, critical journalism exists, but only a minority of Russians receive information from those sources. Through control of the media, the authorities can manipulate public opinion. In the case of Russia, another important aspect to consider is to what extent respondents answer sincerely. There is reason to believe that many people tend to give the answers they think the authorities will prefer. Moreover, there is a divide between how people answer in an impersonal context with no commitments or obligations, and how they act when they are personally involved or affected. The attitude of Russians towards their Armed Forces is fundamentally ambivalent: Most would agree that Russia should be powerful. Military force is then essential, and all Russians have a responsibility to contribute. Nevertheless, by their choices and acts they show that they see military service as the responsibility of someone else, not of themselves or someone in their family. Almost 70% of young people claim to be patriots and more than 50% say they would like to attend basic military training classes.<sup>74</sup> Still, there is little doubt that the conscripts themselves are overwhelmingly negative towards military service.<sup>75</sup> And in contrast to the above cited polls from the Levada Centre one may find references to other polls indicating that 90% of parents would do anything possible to help their sons avoid the draft.<sup>76</sup>

## 6 Concluding remarks

The introduction of the new conscription model is in many ways a move against national as well as international currents. Conscription as practised in Russia today fits poorly with developments in various spheres. The limits set by demography are absolute, and for the Armed Forces the situation will deteriorate till 2017. Other circumstances, such as public health and corruption, are less absolute, but still hard to change in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, a higher standard of living and more options for most of Russia's young people have made them less willing to accept military service as a fact of life.

The contingents of conscripts will have to be smaller in the years to come than they were in the spring of 2009. To reach the spring target it had been necessary to increase the share of older conscripts. However, the reserve of older conscripts will soon be spent. If the number of conscripts is to be maintained on the present level, the service period will have to be extended.<sup>77</sup> According to the authorities, that is not going to happen.<sup>78</sup> In any case, extension will hardly

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<sup>74</sup> Gorevoi, "Basic army training back on school curricula".

<sup>75</sup> Shmagun & Mertsalova, "Soldiers counted in spring".

<sup>76</sup> Iakov, "A hunt for people".

<sup>77</sup> *Newsru.com*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Gavrilov, "Attacking at the staff level".

become policy this side of the presidential elections in 2012 – it is very unlikely that President Medvedev or anybody else will want to face voters with such an unpopular measure on their agenda.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe Defence Minister Serdiukov when he asserts that the service period will remain unchanged. The pros of extending the duration of the service would hardly make up for the cons. It is hard to see how the military value could outweigh the reactions it would cause. How important is it to maintain high numbers of conscripts? If the targets for 2009 are met, 575,000 men will be drafted, about 500,000 of them to the Army.<sup>79</sup> But conscripts will be harder to come by. Observers typically predict that in the longer term Russia's Armed Forces will have 200,000–300,000 conscripts.<sup>80</sup> As professionalisation has been slow and looks to remain behind schedules, the ambition of 1,000,000 men seems precarious. Moreover, the target of one million seems to be more a fixation on a round number of symbolic value than a result of strategic calculations. To measure military power first and foremost in manpower is becoming increasingly meaningless in other parts of the world.

There have been speculations that the Serdiukov reforms are really a concealed attempt to abolish conscription. The idea would be that the odds for today's model are so bad and the result will be so meagre that compulsory military service becomes discredited and can be done away with in a few years without much resistance. However, a more likely outcome is that conscription will be maintained for the foreseeable future, first of all because of its importance to the recruitment of enlisted personnel. The symbolic significance of having a reserve also carries some weight. Political and military leaders routinely stress the role that universal service can play in strengthening the sense of community and patriotism in the multiethnic Russian state. At present this view is an expression of hope rather than a description of reality. Conflicts between soldiers from different ethnic groups are a familiar phenomenon in Russia's Armed Forces.

Conscription faces enormous challenges in terms of economic costs and logistics. Still, the image problem of the Armed Forces may be the more fundamental. There is little doubt that reluctance to serve is massive. Over the last years, people's perceptions of the Armed Forces have become more positive. But the question is whether positive attitudes in a more general sense will ever turn into something more, whether such sentiments can make the draftees want to sign the summons and show up before the draft boards with more than just a wish to escape. The experiences of other countries show that it is entirely possible to create positive attitudes towards conscript service among the population, including those who will have to serve. It is, however, obvious that positive attitudes and motivation depend on a basically good relationship and a high degree of trust between those who govern and those who are governed. Russia clearly has some way to go in this respect. The bi-annual draft campaigns are far from resembling cooperation between the people and the military. To improve this relationship will take more time than what has been allotted to the implementation of the ongoing reforms. The single most important issue is the treatment of recruits. The meaningless brutality that they are exposed to has an overwhelming

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<sup>79</sup> *RIA Novosti*, October 1, 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Il'ia Kramnik, Aleksei Nikol'skii, Aleksandr Khranchikhin – author's interviews, April 2009.

impact on people's perceptions of the Army and undermines motivation among draftees more than anything else. The will and ability of the authorities to quell *dedovshchina* would be the best contribution to make conscription work. More positive and motivated soldiers will be decisive for the value of the conscript part of the Army.

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