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Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?

Russia's Military Plans
versus
Demographic Reality

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Key Points

- * Russia intends to halve the term of conscription into the armed forces from two years to one in 2008, while retaining the overall size of the forces.
- * This implies doubling the number of conscripts drafted each year, but demographic change in Russia means there will not be enough healthy 18-year-olds to do this.
- * A number of grounds for deferral of conscription are to be abolished, but this will still not provide anything like enough conscripts.
- * Recruitment and retention on contract service appear insufficient to fill the gap.
- * The timing of the change-over to one-year conscription threatens major disruption and upheaval in the armed forces, at or around the time of the 2008 presidential election.



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Not Enough Russians

Russia's plans for maintaining the size of its armed forces largely by means of conscription, while at the same time halving the conscription term from two years to one, are at odds with the realities of demography.

According to one estimate, if armed forces manning is to be maintained at planned levels, by 2010 the number of conscripts required will be in excess of the number of available healthy 18-year-olds; while even by 2008 the proportion of those drafted would have to increase to two-thirds of those eligible.¹

The demographic challenge has been neatly summed up by military analyst Pavel Felgengauer, who could not make figures provided by the Defence Ministry add up:

“[Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov] has repeatedly stated that at present the army calls up around 350,000 recruits a year. The contingent will increase to 700,000 a year when the duration of military service is cut to one year. Where will the Defence Ministry find this many conscripts?... The ministry will cancel nine types of recruitment deferral. This will let the military call up around 90,000 [more] young people a year. This is enough for 2008. What then? The demographic situation will be disastrous. There will be only one million youths in Russia in 2008, 800,000 in 2010 and 600,000 later. Even if the military call up everyone they will not be able to support the existing structure of the army.”²

Reduction of the size of the army is not an option under consideration. “We are too big a country, and we have too many unpredictable neighbours,” says Sergey Ivanov. “We are fated to have a strong army, and as compared to countries which are small in territory, an army that is large in numbers.”³ The armed forces have now reached their optimum complement, Ivanov says, and should be maintained at 1.1 million until at least 2011.⁴ This figure does not take account of internal readjustments between the various arms of service: at the beginning of 2006, air force C-in-C Army Gen Vladimir Mikhaylov was looking forward to being able to increase the number of men under his command “in a couple of years”.⁵

Felgengauer's figure of an additional 90,000 conscripts being made available in 2008 through abolition of nine grounds for deferral was backed by Deputy CGS Col-Gen Vasilii Smirnov,⁶ and by Deputy Defence Minister Nikolay Pankov when introducing the abolition law in the State Duma.⁷ Felgengauer's figures for available 18-year-olds tally with the results of the 2002 census and with independent projections on the basis of Russia's very high mortality rates. The census showed a fall of 43 per cent in the number of children of both sexes under 10 between 1989

and 2002, and a rapidly widening gap in the numbers of males and females, again due to high male mortality.⁸ Male births in Russia have indeed plummeted, and the further ahead the conscription year, the smaller the *maximum possible* number of available 18-year-olds:⁹

Birth year	Male births	Draft year
1987	1,283,425	2005
1988	1,204,907	2006
1989	1,110,602	2007
1990	1,021,248	2008
1991	923,319	2009
1992	816,757	2010
1993	708,689	2011
1994	724,818	2012
1995	700,191	2013
1996	671,430	2014
1997	648,195	2015
1998	660,842	2016
1999	626,149	2017

Over the last few years the trend of live births has shown a slight improvement: but this will not feed through into effective manpower until the 2020s. Meanwhile, to arrive at the number of available conscripts, the figures above need to be adjusted downwards not only for the numbers of male children who do not survive to 18, but also for the relatively small number of them found fit for military service. With about 70 per cent of potential conscripts rejected at the medical board stage,¹⁰ the proportion of those available who are actually drafted officially stands at 9.7 per cent at present,¹¹ a slight increase from 9.1 per cent in 2005.¹²



According to official statements, the proportion of those on the military register who can actually be conscripted has fallen from 54.6 per cent in 1988 to 9.7 per cent in 2006¹³

The figure is subject to wide regional variations: during the spring 2006 draft, of 47,556 potential conscripts in Kursk Region, 46,140, or just over 97 per cent, were

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disqualified from conscription through one cause or another.¹⁴ In Tula Region in 2005, the corresponding figure was cited as 85.8 per cent.¹⁵

Yet examination of the actual number of conscripts entering the army in 2004-2006, and comparison with the crude measure of the total number of males born during 1986-1988, shows the official figure of 9.7 per cent needs a great deal of further explanation. It is not in fact directly related to the number of 18-year-olds available for conscription, and consequently is less useful as a guide to future numbers of conscripts than might be presumed:

Draft	Conscripts	Totals	18-year-olds (max)	Proportion (per cent)
2004 Spring	166,050			
2004 Autumn	176,000			
<i>2004 Total</i>		342,050	1,273,213	26.9
2005 Spring	157,000			
2005 Autumn	145,000			
<i>2005 Total</i>		302,000	1,283,425	23.5
2006 Spring	124,550			
2006 Autumn	*123,310			
<i>2006 Total</i>		247,860	1,204,907	20.6

**Planned figure as announced on 1st October 2006.*

The most important figure here for future projections is the number of 18-year-olds arriving on the military register to replenish the pool from which conscripts are drawn.¹⁶ If we take, based on the proportions above, a generous 25 per cent of this figure as a benchmark for the number of conscripts available, we can determine whether the planned extra 90,000 conscripts a year available through abolishing deferrals (also generously projected forward unchanged) will be sufficient to cover the double draft which will be required to halve the conscription term while maintaining numbers.

Given that the double draft is quoted at 600,000 per year,¹⁷ or 500,000 if we double the 2006 figure, it is immediately obvious that even these very generous estimates are not sufficient, and the shortfall worsens as time goes on and the number of men available for conscription continues to fall:

Draft year	18-year-olds (maximum)	Can be conscripted (25 per cent)	Available through abolished deferrals	TOTAL
2007	1,110,602	277,651	0	277,651
2008	1,021,248	255,312	90,000	345,312
2009	923,319	230,830	90,000	320,830
2010	816,757	204,189	90,000	294,189
2011	708,689	177,172	90,000	267,172
2012	724,818	181,205	90,000	271,205
2013	700,191	175,048	90,000	265,048
2014	671,430	167,858	90,000	257,858
2015	648,195	162,049	90,000	252,049

Conscription Reform

Deferrals Cut

Even the relatively modest adjustments to conscription law that result in the estimated 90,000 extra conscripts have been difficult to bring about. Despite Sergey Ivanov pushing for a rapid passage of the relevant legislation,¹⁸ it was not until late April 2006 that the State Duma began its hearing of the package of the bills intended both to cut the term of conscription and to address the manning crisis which it will bring about, including tougher penalties for contract servicemen who breach their terms of contract, and the reduction in the number of deferments available to potential draftees.¹⁹

The delay in presentation of the legislation may have been connected with a last-minute change of plan from a sudden cut in the conscription term to a phased reduction with an eighteen-month interim stage: some sources suggested that this resulted from a belated realisation by the Defence Ministry that without a transition period, “in 2008 about three-quarters of conscript soldiers and NCOs would have to be discharged”.²⁰ Speaking in April 2006, Deputy Defence Minister Nikolay Pankov said this change was introduced in order to avoid mixing two-year with one-year soldiers in the army:²¹ without the 18-month service period, conscripts called up in April 2007 would have been discharged before those called up in October 2006, which would have been unlikely to be conducive to good order and discipline. But even the revised schedule is fraught with difficulties, as discussed below.

As originally proposed, the deferrals to be abolished from 2008 can be summarised as follows:

1. Carers for elderly or disabled relatives (unless certified by local authorities);
2. Parents of children under three years old (financial compensation available);
3. Those awaiting state assignment to a place of work following higher education;
4. Those training to be firemen, policemen, or officers in certain other state bodies;
5. Those with spouses at least 26 weeks pregnant;
6. Students in vocational education;
7. Rural teachers;
8. Rural doctors;
9. Those specifically exempted by presidential decree (the “talented youth”).

Those opposing the changes pointed out that in some instances they ran counter to the National Projects for education and healthcare, particularly in rural areas, and to stated priorities in demography.²²

The abolition of these nine grounds for deferral did not have a completely unopposed passage through the Duma either:²³ deputies asked whether there was any point in drafting someone whose wife was expecting their second child if he would have to be released in a few months anyway under a surviving exemption, and pointed out the practical difficulties involved in determining whether a potential conscript’s wife was precisely 26 weeks pregnant or not.²⁴ This stipulation, one female deputy said, “could only have been drafted by a man”.²⁵

The bill finally passed its third reading by the Duma on 14 June 2006,²⁶ with the changes to deferrals now presented as four abolitions and five amendments²⁷ – which made little substantial change to the impact on potential conscripts.

Conscript Quality

Pankov said that the legislation for reducing the number of deferrals was intended not only to increase the number of available conscripts, but also to increase their quality.

“It’s the scruffy rural youngsters who are going to the army, young people from small towns and villages. We believe that our draft law has a very important positive social orientation as well. It ensures greater social justice because, speaking bluntly, the rich must serve too, young people from Moscow and St Petersburg must serve too... We believe that reducing conscription service to a year and expanding the social basis of the draft will not only make it possible quickly and sharply to improve the social composition of the army, but also to resolve a whole range of other problems.”²⁸

Sergey Ivanov also confirmed that this was a main aim of cutting deferrals.

“The conscription contingent, more specifically the potential conscription contingent, will expand. And the main point in our opinion is that the quality will improve. As for this, I very much hope that we will, for example, be able to stop conscripting into military service former convicts who have served their sentences.”²⁹

As the State Duma vote on abolishing the deferrals grew closer, both Pankov and Ivanov’s assessments grew pithier: addressing the Duma, Pankov said that the “main point of the bills is that decent people should join the army and not the scum that we sometimes get”.³⁰ Ivanov agreed that the composition of the army needed to be adjusted: “The current corps of conscripts is not even an Army of Workers and Peasants. It’s just peasants.”³¹

Meanwhile, the problem remains of the small proportion of conscripts who are passed fully fit for service in all respects. Statistics continue to be presented suggesting that even of those conscripts who pass their medicals and are drafted, far too many are mad, bad or underweight. Sergey Ivanov gave the example in February 2006 of the 2005 autumn draft into the air force of 8,768 conscripts, of whom only 20% are considered suitable to be allowed to handle weapons, and added that:

“Speaking of the education of the soldiers, we need to consider and know that... some are seeing a lavatory, toothbrush and three meals a day for the first time in their lives.”³²

Air force C-in-C Vladimir Mikhaylov later confirmed that the trend had continued with the spring 2006 draft into his command: again, only 20 per cent were found fit to be issued weapons, with one in three displaying “a low level of mental stability”. A total of 23.5 per cent of those who passed the draft medical were either underweight or “have weak health and cannot discharge their duties to the full extent”:³³ this was, at any rate, an improvement on the previous draft where the figure was 31 per cent, with another 3 per cent considered “at high risk of suicide” even before they joined up.³⁴

A consistent proportion of conscripts arrive at their units significantly underweight³⁵ – in addition to those rejected by the medical boards as suffering from malnutrition. Maj-Gen Valeriy Kulikov, head of the Ministry of Defence Central Military Medical Commission, said in June 2006 that of the spring draft, “in excess of 40,000 draftees received draft deferrals for chronic malnutrition, and 15 per cent of recruits suffer from weight deficit”.³⁶ The 15 per cent figure was backed by figures from the Leningrad Military District for the autumn 2005 draft, while it was noted that this was an improvement over previous years when the figure had been 20 per cent.³⁷ Considerable time and resources are supposed to be devoted to bringing these underweight 15 per cent up to scratch in their units, which will reduce still further their productive time in service once the conscription term falls to one year.

Another consequence of the current recruitment profile is low educational standards. According to Russia’s chief military prosecutor, Aleksandr Savenkov, “ten years ago a category of newly-conscripted people who had weak literacy skills appeared. At present, some 4-5 per cent [of conscripts] are people who never had any education. They cannot read or write.”³⁸ With the abolition of some grounds for deferral, one newspaper wrote, “first of all they will try to dilute the traditional pool of conscripts with some normal lads who have had an education”.³⁹

This sounds as though there is a long way to go before achieving Sergey Ivanov’s stated aim: “we want to have soldiers with a higher education, not to mention a secondary one”.⁴⁰ One reason, he says, is that “equipment is becoming more complicated, so it is dangerous to give ignorant people access to it”.⁴¹ This tendency is already reflected in the Ground Forces, where “45 per cent of conscripts are incapable of mastering some trades, and 25 per cent are incapable of learning to be a driver-mechanic”.⁴² This has obvious implications for the armed forces’ ambition of introducing a new generation of high-technology weapons and equipment, and shifting the emphasis from large quantities of basic conscript-proof kit to smaller amounts of quality systems with highly-trained users. It will not matter how much is spent on re-equipping with high-tech weaponry if a significant proportion of the potential users are considered illiterate.

Recruitment Centres

The gloomy forecast by Pavel Felgengauer quoted at the beginning of this note also predicted that increased pressure to maintain conscript numbers would inevitably lead to increased corruption, with higher prices being charged by recruitment offices for “reaching an agreement”.

The response has been to attempt to tackle the culture of corruption in military recruitment centres by rotating staff through them on “short” attachments of no more than three years.⁴³ The move has not been universally popular: “it isn’t hard to imagine what a stir this has created among recruitment centre staff, who assumed their jobs were secure for life”.⁴⁴ Rotations began concurrently with a programme of contracting the recruitment centre system: between January and July 2006, 407 of the original 2,600 centres had been closed and consolidated.⁴⁵

Plans to combat corruption as stated by Nikolay Pankov also included removing the front-desk local officials from the decision process. “We propose to do away with the artificial nature of grounds for exemption... We are removing the military enlistment offices from the process of determination of fitness for service... These offices only come into play after a draft commission has decided that this or that young man should serve in the army.”⁴⁶ As will be seen below, this also has implications for the numbers of conscripts who enter alternative civilian service instead of the forces.

Manpower Planning

Official Recognition

There has been recognition of the scale of the problem within the military. Col-Gen Vasiliy Smirnov, head of the General Staff's Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate, pointed out in October 2004 that:

“If the standard draft contingent of 800,000 is divided into four periods, 200,000 people have to be called up in each period. If it is divided into two periods (when the term of compulsory service is reduced to a year), 400,000 people will have to be recruited each time. The rate of male births in our country is now just over half the rate in 1985, however. In other words, demography has reduced conscription resources dramatically.”

It followed, Smirnov said, that “manning of the armed forces... will entail great difficulties”.⁴⁷ Smirnov was commenting on the results of the Autumn 2004 conscription season, where instead of his 200,000 servicemen, a total of 176,393 were called up.⁴⁸ But this was hardly news – Smirnov's predecessor Col-Gen Vladislav Putilin had started calling for action to avert a manpower crisis three years earlier.⁴⁹ Putilin predicted that the crisis would peak in 2006-7: contraction of the armed forces since 2001 has postponed the date, not removed the problem.

By Spring 2006, the planned conscription total was 124,550,⁵⁰ with Sergey Ivanov explaining that part of the reduction was compensated for by increased contract recruitment. A reduction of 30,000 from the previous spring draft resulted from the recruitment of 30,000 contract servicemen over the previous year, he said:⁵¹ but as will be seen below, precise figures on contract service are difficult to establish with certainty.

In April 2006, Smirnov warned again of the difficulties lying ahead for manning the armed forces, citing a figure of 870,000 available 18-year-olds in 2008.⁵²

Some of these conscripts at present appear not to be wanted: there are instances of small numbers of “surplus” conscripts being sent home,⁵³ or spending extended periods in military limbo at the recruitment offices while final manning quotas are decided.⁵⁴ But the numbers are small, and the conscripts concerned are those of a sufficiently low medical grade⁵⁵ that they are considered unsuitable for nearly all units.

Similarly, the quantitative impact of citizens of other CIS states serving in the army has been insignificant, despite the incentive of Russian citizenship at the end of a three-year contract.⁵⁶ Claims of a “Russian Foreign Legion” notwithstanding, the numbers of non-Russians actually engaged appears to remain in double digits only.⁵⁷

Official Statistics

There has been no shortage of statements by senior officials on planned numbers in the armed forces. But just as in Soviet times, attempts to reconcile officially stated statistics on manpower present considerable difficulties.

It might be hoped that clarity would come in statements by the two most authoritative sources available, Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov and Deputy Chief of the General Staff and Chief of the Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate Col-Gen Vasiliy Smirnov. But comparison over time of their recent statements serve to illustrate that they should not be taken as a reliable guide to what is actually planned for the armed forces.

In July 2006 Smirnov said that by the end of 2007, one Russian serviceman in eight should be serving on contract: this gave, he said, a total of 145,900 soldiers.⁵⁸ This ties in with the original aims of the Federal Targeted Programme on contract service for 2004-2007, which hoped to achieve a remarkably precise 147,578 on contract⁵⁹ – but it contrasts with the figure he gave in May 2006 of 178,000 contract servicemen who he said were currently engaged,⁶⁰ or his figure from June 2006 of 175,000 contract servicemen with plans for an increase to 207,000 by the end of 2006, and to 250,000, or 45 per cent of all soldiers and NCOs, by the end of 2007.⁶¹ At the time of writing, Smirnov’s most recent statement said that by 2008 there would be 125,000 contract servicemen in the armed forces and a total of 138,000 when other forces are included.⁶²

Figures given in statements by Sergey Ivanov are also difficult to reconcile. “At the present time more than 60,000 contract servicemen are serving in the Russian army in the ranks of soldier and sergeant,”⁶³ he said in April 2006. More specifically, with 60,623 *kontraktniki*, the overall plan for contract recruitment was 57 per cent fulfilled – this would give a total target for contract servicemen in the army of 106,356. Ivanov continued by saying that a grand total of 145,000 servicemen would be on contract – not far off one of Smirnov’s targets for the end of 2007, or Ivanov’s own earlier estimate of the position by that stage,⁶⁴ but a long way from either Ivanov’s arithmetic in April 2006 or the “70 per cent of armed forces personnel” which he has repeatedly stated as his own aim for 2007,⁶⁵ even if we charitably assume that he is including all officers in this figure. In any case, all of these figures still need to be reconciled with Smirnov’s often-repeated statement that in 2008 and beyond, 55 per cent of soldiers and NCOs should be conscripts, and 45 per cent on contract.⁶⁶

The figures are dense and baffling, but can be summarised by extracting conclusions on the total number of contract servicemen, either current or projected: figures in italics in the table below are extrapolated from two or more other numbers provided in the same statement, while all other figures are directly quoted.

Source	Statement Date	Projection Date	Total contractors
Ivanov	Apr 06	Apr 06	<i>106,356</i>
Smirnov	May 06	May 06	178,000
Smirnov	Jun 06	Jun 06	175,000
Smirnov	Jun 06	end 06	207,000
Federal Programme	2004	end 07	147,578
Ivanov	Mar 06	end 07	<i>770,000</i>
Smirnov	Jun 06	end 07	250,000
Smirnov	Jul 06	end 07	145,900
Smirnov	Oct 06	end 07	125,000

An additional complication, as if any were needed, is that the strict legal status of the “two-year lieutenants” is that of contract servicemen⁶⁷ – so it is anybody’s guess

whether the figures above include a number of “short service limited commission” officers or not. The range of figures provided requires no further comment.

As well as contract service, Smirnov has also been the apparent source of a range of baffling statistics on conscription: saying, for example, at the end of May 2006 that 95 per cent of new conscripts for spring 2006 had already been drafted and of these, 23 per cent had already been sent to their units. This meant, he said, a total of 29,800 people:⁶⁸ but if all his figures were correct this would give a total number of conscripts of over 136,000, instead of the 124,550 who were actually called up.

In this context the official figure for the proportion of potential conscripts who can actually be drafted also needs to be examined: as shown above, it does not have a direct relationship to the numbers of 18-year-olds becoming available for conscription. In order to make this proportion make sense, we need to attempt to determine precisely who is considered to be “on the military register” (*sostoyashchiye na voynskom uchete*).

Previous writers on the subject have reconciled these figures by explaining that the official figure relates not to the number of 18-year-olds, but to the total number of male Russians of liable age (18-27)⁶⁹ who have not already undergone military service.⁷⁰ We can attempt to test this theory by applying it to the 2005 conscription year, for which complete draft figures are available.

As seen above, in 2005, 302,000 conscripts were drafted, which officially represented 9.1 per cent of the total available. This implies a total figure available (100%) of 3,318,681, compared to approximately 1.2 million 18-year-olds.

The most recent publicly available figures for the total number of surviving male Russians born between 1978 and 1987 appear to be from 2004: rounded down to the nearest 10,000, they give 11.97 million.⁷¹

From this figure we now need to deduct the number that underwent military service between 1996 and 2004. For the majority of this period conscription was running at a fairly constant figure of just under 200,000 per draft, or (generously counted) 400,000 per year. Over eight years, this gives 3,200,000 who have undergone conscript service.

To this number we need to add several other groups: regular officers, “two-year-men” lieutenants, professional warrant officers, contract servicemen signed up before the introduction of the Federal Targeted Programme, and alternative civilian service (AGS) recruits. The latter three groups are unlikely to make any significant difference to the calculations: warrant officers and contract servicemen because they will in any case have had to undergo their original conscription term and are therefore included in the 3.2 million arrived at above, and AGS men because their numbers are tiny.

Calculating the numbers of officers of all kinds who have passed through the Russian armed forces over the eight-year period is more problematic. We know that officers make up just over 50 per cent of authorised posts in the armed forces as a whole: but we also know that for much of the period in question the forces were complaining at empty posts caused by the chronic shortage of junior officers. We know that the figure we need will be made up of a fairly constant core of regulars (*kadry*) which will see little turnover during the period under examination, and successive waves of two-year-men (*pidzhaki*) which will account for a larger number but cannot be quantified using publicly available figures.

What we can say for certain is that whatever the number of men who have passed through the armed forces as officers in 1996-2004, because of the solid core of long-serving regular officers, it will be nowhere near the number of conscripts. But if we take the totals above of 11.97 million available men, less 3.2 million accounted for as conscripts, less the 3.3 million supposedly still available in 2005, we arrive at a number to be accounted for through officer service of 5.47 million. This is far in excess of the maximum possible number of officers during the period, and so we are forced to conclude that whatever the official figure of 9.1 per cent is based on, it is not the total 18-27 manpower pool.

Who is “Listed on the Military Register”?

The real picture of who exactly is listed *na voynskom uchete* is much more complex, and requires digging deep in the relevant legislation.⁷² It needs to be looked at in detail to understand the exact nature of the conscription process and what could or might be done to make it generate more men for the armed forces.

You are listed on the military register if you:

- Are considered fit for military service;
- Have reached the age of 17, or will do so in the current year;
- Have not reached the maximum age for retirement from the reserve (between 50 and 65 depending on rank);
- Are male; or female but trained in specific skills of military relevance;
- Are not specifically exempted from military service;
- Are not currently undergoing military service or AGS;
- Are not currently in prison;
- Are not permanently resident outside the Russian Federation;
- Are not currently serving in the Interior Ministry, Tax Police or criminal correction system.

It can be seen from these criteria that the proportion of young Russians who can actually be conscripted will be very different from the headline percentage repeatedly quoted by Smirnov and others, namely the proportion of those *on the register* who are drafted – the register includes many who are not eligible to be drafted in the first place, for example women, 16- and 17-year-olds, those aged between 27 and 65, and all those who have already undergone military service.

If you are on the register, you are subject to conscription if you:

- Are aged between 18 and 27;
- Are listed in the reserve with officer rank following completion of higher education with a military faculty;
- Are not listed in the reserve in any other capacity (i.e. have not undergone military service);
- Are not specifically exempted from military service by Federal Law (specific circumstances such as academic rank or close relatives killed in service);
- Do not have the right to a deferral of military service (e.g. as a student);
- Are not considered medically unsuitable for military service, or suitable only with restrictions (medical categories V and D);
- Are not under investigation or on trial.

The division of the military register into the “general” and “special” sections, with “special” citizens being reserved for particular duties in the event of mobilisation, appears not to have an impact at the pre-conscription stage.

It follows that one likely result of the conscription assessment process is removal from the military register; for example as a 17-year-old considered healthy before being downgraded by a draft medical board and therefore removed as unfit. This is just one of a number of ways in which Russians can move on or off the register: coming out of prison, for example, would result in a return to the register but not in eligibility for conscription until the conviction was spent. So insistence on continuing to refer to the total number on the military register as a benchmark against which to measure conscription appears at best disingenuous, given that it now bears such a very tenuous relationship to the actual number available to be called up.

The net result is that publicly released statistics and plans cannot be relied upon to give an accurate picture of actual manpower dynamics. The question that remains is whether, even taking the most optimistic of all projections, enough men can be found to fill armed forces of the size Sergey Ivanov is insisting on.

Impact of Contract Service

Sergey Ivanov stated in March 2006 that recruitment plans were for 25,000 contract soldiers that year and 60,000 in 2007, but in order for this to happen, additional funding was badly needed in order to provide the infrastructure specified by the contract service programme.⁷³ As will be seen below, the lack of this infrastructure seriously compromises retention of contract servicemen, and without increased recruitment and high retention, contract servicemen will not be able to fill anywhere near the number of posts where they are expected.

Even taking the most optimistic forecasts, it is clear that much more contract recruitment will be required even after the conclusion of the Federal Targeted Programme for contractisation in 2007. The total authorised complement of NCOs in the armed forces is 109,000: in April 2006, 23,000 of these were on contract service, and the Federal Targeted Programme was expected to give another 26,000. Since it is already broadly recognised that the cut in conscription term will make it highly undesirable to appoint conscript *serzhanty*,⁷⁴ this leaves a shortfall of 60,000 experienced servicemen to fill NCO posts.⁷⁵

Retention rates at the moment are not looking promising. Ministry of Defence estimates suggest that only 15-19 per cent of contract servicemen are likely to extend their contracts on expiry: this is in addition to the high wastage rate observed throughout the service period (in 2005, 12.9 per cent broke their contracts, in addition to those who were dismissed).⁷⁶

This average figure also covers wide regional variations. Predictably, contract turnover is high in the North Caucasus Military District: but other areas which have not been able to provide the stipulated amenities and infrastructure for contract servicemen and their families have also lost large numbers of troops, for example in the 2nd Army (Volga-Urals Military District) where 20 per cent of contract servicemen leave prematurely, most because of the absence of the promised facilities.⁷⁷ With contract servicemen making up 45 per cent of the 2nd Army's total complement as at April 2006,⁷⁸ this represents a significant drain of experienced personnel.

This outflow is likely to reach a peak with the scheduled expiry of the first major wave of contract service periods: many of those who signed up for three-year contracts in 2005 will be leaving in 2008. As will be shown below, this is the worst possible timing for manning of the forces overall.

Impact of Alternative Civilian Service

Despite lengthy and heated debate at the time of its introduction, Alternative Civilian Service (AGS) has had a negligible impact on recruitment. Largely as a result of it having been made a deeply unattractive option, the numbers of potential conscripts electing for AGS have dwindled away almost to nothing.

During the spring 2006 draft, there were 150 applications for AGS, of which 100 were approved by recruitment offices⁷⁹ – which is not a high approval rate for a programme to which all potential conscripts have a statutory right, but still an improvement on the autumn 2004 figures of 1,500 applications and 317 approvals.⁸⁰ Throughout the whole of 2005, 257 people successfully applied for AGS,⁸¹ and in Moscow, a grand total of two individuals were allocated to alternative service in the first half of 2006.⁸²

But there are a number of concurrent factors which may revive interest in AGS from 2008 onwards.

1. The term of AGS service is to be reduced in line with the conscription term, and will be halved from the original daunting three and a half years; further reductions, down to 18 months, are available for those posted to defence organisations;⁸³
2. If draft decisions are to be removed from the recruitment offices, a significant obstacle to electing for AGS is removed with them;
3. Alternative servicemen now have the option of working in defence enterprises and, crucially, being paid a normal salary, which will remove the disincentive of conscript-like poverty but without the access to a conscript's free food and accommodation.⁸⁴

Taken together these constitute a major change in the nature and attractiveness of AGS, and the potential for reducing still further the number of 18-year-olds available for the draft should no longer be discounted.

Impact of Cuts in Military Higher Education

Little has been said about the effect on recruitment of the drastic reduction in “military faculties” at higher education establishments. This may be because although there will be an increase in the number of conscripts available, the net effect in terms of overall army manning will be zero: simply those graduates who would have been liable for call-up as the “two-year lieutenants”, widely regarded as next to useless, will be available for conscription as ordinary soldiers instead. The result, therefore, can be summarised as a small shift in the proportion of officers to other ranks, and a reduction in the number of those in the forces who are technically considered contract servicemen.⁸⁵

Further Reform

Conscription Age

The demographic information quoted at the beginning of this note relates primarily to 18-year-olds: although the ages between which Russian males remain liable to conscription are to remain unchanged at 18-27,⁸⁶ those conscripted at any older than 18 at present constitute a tiny minority.

Russia's human rights ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, has consistently argued that the conscription age should be raised to 20 or 21. "At the age of 18, young people, even after finishing school, often remain socially and psychologically immature and susceptible to outside negative influences, and for this reason are not quite fit for army service, in particular for fulfilling their duties and defending their rights with due responsibility and dignity," he says.⁸⁷ Raising the conscription age would result in "the army becoming more intellectual, mature and responsible",⁸⁸ which chimes with the aims stated by Ivanov and Pankov.

Lukin's proposal was seconded at a Public Chamber meeting which stated that it would "result in more mature and complete individuals joining the army and not needing further upbringing", as well as vastly reducing the problem of bullying: it also received strong support from defence medical commission chief Maj-Gen Valeriy Kulikov.⁸⁹ But the suggestion was immediately publicly rejected by Nikolay Pankov,⁹⁰ Vasiliy Smirnov⁹¹ and others.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented hints of a move towards targeting older potential conscripts. There are some suggestions that the total number of those listed as evading service (*uklonyayushchikhsya ot prizyva*) includes not just the current conscription year but the whole of the 18-27 age range, and a steady trickle of these are identified and called up:⁹² and in Tatarstan, the spring 2006 draft targeted men born in 1979-1985, of whom about 15,000 had never been drafted.⁹³ A campaign of this sort across Russia would allow the armed forces to net significant numbers of older males who thought they had successfully avoided army service.



Numbers evading military service⁹⁴

Some analyses suggest that there is a deliberate policy of not employing all potential conscripts in current drafts, in order that there is an untapped pool of manpower available at an older age in 2008 on.⁹⁵ But the suggestion that there is a large surplus of 18-year-olds who are both available and suitable for service appears not to tally with the figures currently emerging from recruitment offices.

Draft Rejects

A number of measures were put in place in 2005-6 to tighten up entry requirements in order to exclude recruits who will be a potential liability. Drugs testing has been introduced at conscription offices, and in early 2006, morale and welfare chief Col-Gen Nikolay Reznik said that polygraph tests would be introduced into recruitment medicals in order to weed out “people with mental disorders”.⁹⁶

A criminal record is also increasingly being seen as a bar to service: Nikolay Pankov said in late 2005 that the number of conscripts with criminal records had fallen “from the appalling figure of 7 per cent to 1.5 per cent in the last few years”.⁹⁷ But even this low number will still have an impact if Sergey Ivanov achieves his aim of barring those with previous convictions from service.

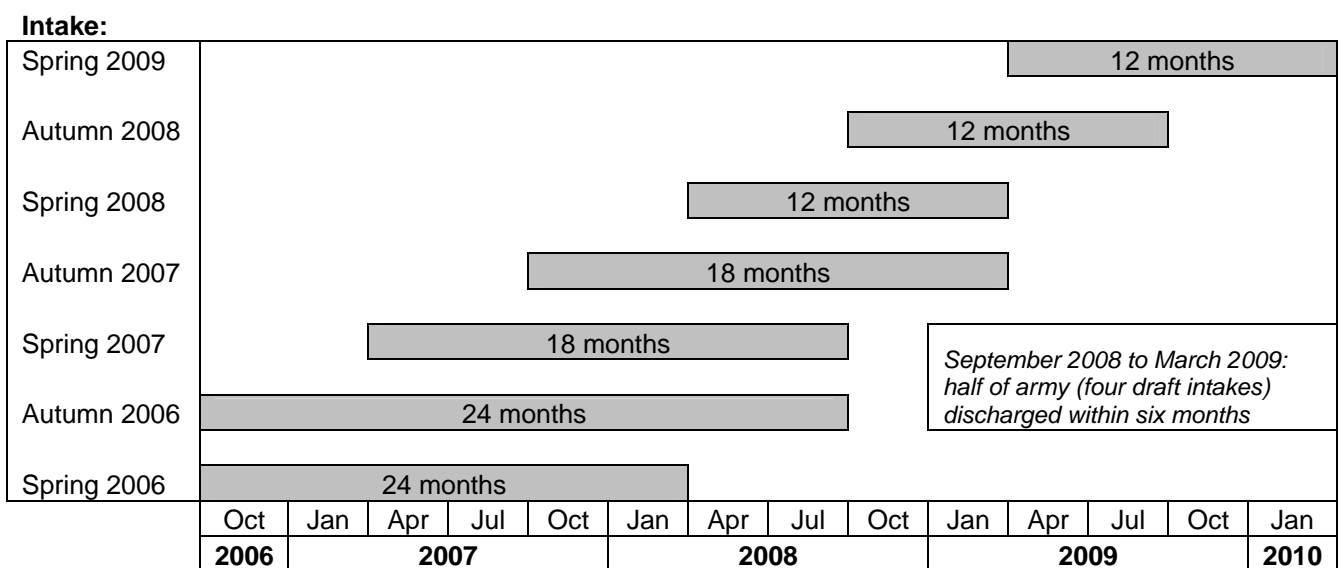
New levels of medical testing are reducing the number of conscripts still further, including no fewer than 3,000 per year rejected because they are found to be suffering from tuberculosis.⁹⁸ The number rejected for being HIV positive will also only increase.

Taken together, these measures will mean that the proportion of conscripts found suitable for service will certainly not increase from the current official 9.7 per cent (or actual 20-25 per cent), and if anything will decrease.⁹⁹

Consequences

Managing Transition

Some of the serious issues involved in the change to a shorter conscription period can be deduced from the start and end dates of the conscription terms in 2007-9:



The spring of 2008 will see soldiers serving together who have been called up for two years, for 18 months and for one year, which is fraught with challenges to discipline. One suggested solution has been to separate the conscripts into different units, but there has been little evident discussion of the effect this would have on training and the effectiveness of the units concerned.

The total numbers of conscripts in the armed forces during the transitional period of 18-month service does not appear to have received any public discussion: what is clear beyond doubt, however, is that manpower problems will become immediately apparent when each of these 18-month periods comes to an end.

These crunch points will come in September 2008 and March 2009, at each of which dates not one but two draft contingents will be discharged. If the supply of replacement conscripts has indeed been miscalculated, this is when manning shortages will suddenly become severe. It should be recalled that in late 1995, a similar manpower planning glitch forced the reversal of the earlier reduction of conscript service to 18 months, with conscripts called up in autumn 1995 forced to serve an unexpected additional six months.¹⁰⁰

An additional factor is the sudden increased exodus of contract servicemen noted above. While the real impact is difficult to estimate in the absence of plausible statistics on contract service, if we take Sergey Ivanov's figure of 50,000 contract servicemen recruited in 2005 and the Ministry of Defence expectations for renewal of contracts, there is likely to be an increase in the shortfall as contracts expire by at least 40,500 men - not to mention the additional disruption caused by the rapid loss of experienced personnel at the same time as the massive outflow of conscript manpower.

Implications for Training

The implications of the reduced term of conscript service for training have also been recognised, with various approaches to the problem proposed. Sergey Ivanov has stated that the intensity of training in the single year must increase,¹⁰¹ while Vasiliy Smirnov hopes to use the ROSTO (formerly DOSAAF) structure to resurrect widespread pre-service training for specialists.¹⁰²

In addition, "pre-conscription training points" have been mooted, specifically for those teenagers who have somehow managed to avoid all forms of basic introduction to military matters while in school.¹⁰³

Russia's "National Priority Project" on education envisages training in civilian trades for conscripts leading to professional qualifications,¹⁰⁴ and an experiment is under way looking into practical implementation of courses. While providing an additional sweetener for conscription, if the plans are implemented, the training time available for turning conscripts into soldiers will be even further reduced: courses provided during the experiment last five months.¹⁰⁵

Another measure with an as yet unknown impact on conscript training comes from the initiative to send them to dedicated training units for their first six months of service, a move proposed by the Siberian Military District intended to reduce the incidence of bullying.¹⁰⁶ It has been suggested that at the end of their first six months all conscripts would be offered the choice: either serve out their remaining six months of ordinary conscription, or sign up for a three-year contract.¹⁰⁷

Perversely, at the same time as bringing in new educational opportunities for conscripts and improving their preparation for military service, according to one plan, efforts to train the conscripts as useful soldiers may cease. “Conscripts who do not wish to sign [on for three years as contract soldiers] will spend the six months before discharge carrying out meaningless housekeeping tasks such as servicing military premises, guard duty, repairs, clearing up areas, heaving about heavy loads and so on... You can't train a soldier to the extent that you can trust him with something serious in six months. If you take a tank, and change its crew every six months, pretty soon there will be nothing left of it.”¹⁰⁸

Similarly, Col-Gen Aleksandr Skorodumov, head of armed forces training in 2001-5, believes that while a year may be enough to train a soldier, it is not long enough to get any use out of him. “All the plans for army combat training are currently set up in such a way that a soldier trains hard for a year, then in the following year uses that knowledge in service... It is important that in a single year of service, the money the state has spent on training the soldier will not be ‘worked off’... at precisely that time, the soldier has to say sorry, that’s it, I’m off home, and another raw recruit arrives to take his place.”¹⁰⁹

A combination of these attitudes and the proposed amendments to training will polarise still further the already existing distinction between contract and conscript formations. As summed up by an officer of a contract-manned permanent-readiness battalion quoted in *Krasnaya Zvezda*,

“Today we actually have two armies. You can boldly call one of them, represented by this contract battalion, the army of tomorrow. But there is also a second army, which it is simply pathetic to look at. And nobody knows what to do with it.”¹¹⁰

Perhaps the only measure which increases a conscript’s training time instead of eating into it is the clause in the packet of laws bringing in one-year service which abolishes leave for conscripts (20 days for privates, 30 days for NCOs) with the exception of sick or compassionate leave – which, perhaps understandably, has received very little publicity.¹¹¹

Conclusion

According to the Russian armed forces’ own statistics, the change to one-year instead of two-year conscription will bring about a sudden manpower crisis of unprecedented scale – this three years after the “process of military reform” was officially declared complete. The appearance of a massive gap between Sergey Ivanov’s minimum permissible size of the armed forces on the one hand, and what appears possible in the light of demographic reality on the other, is fraught with security, social, economic and political consequences.

The peak of this crisis is less than two years away: so given the lead time involved in planning manpower allocations, the time when any corrective action needs to be taken in order to avert serious upheaval and disruption is now. Yet although the problem has been recognised for a number of years in statements by successive heads of the Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate of the General Staff, no coherent plan for addressing it appears to have been stated.

Looking at the disparity between the Russian armed forces’ manning plans and the realities of demography leads us to three related questions: how can they be

appearing to get the planning so very wrong; how is it possible that contract service is being relied on to fill the gap when even according to the most optimistic forecasts it clearly will not; and what, if anything, are they planning to do about it? Several possible explanations are provided below, listed in approximate order of optimism.

1. Finding more men

As it must already be clear that Russia's armed forces cannot square the circle by increasing contract recruitment to fill the gap, another as yet undeclared source of conscript manpower may be under consideration: but the one immutable fact in the maze of mutually contradictory official statistics is the number of Russians turning 18 in 2008, which no statistical sleight of hand can ever increase.

As discussed above, the notion of a "reserve" of 18-year-olds not being called up at present in order that they are available in 2008 and beyond, aged 20 and older, does not appear to add up. If, on the other hand, the cancellation of deferments were applied not just to those turning 18 in 2008 and beyond, but also (in a way retrospectively) to everybody aged up to the maximum conscription age of 27, this would give a much greater pool of potential conscripts. If this is indeed planned, then it is perhaps understandable that Smirnov and others have been reticent on the subject, given how popular measures of this kind are likely to be.

Another possibility is addressing the large number of potential conscripts who are exempted on medical grounds. As seen above, moves at present are towards tightening medical requirements, not loosening them, and even so large numbers of underweight or psychologically disturbed young men are still drafted. So moving the medical goalposts implies one of three processes: accepting into the armed forces even more unfit and unhealthy conscripts, with obvious results for the usefulness of the units accepting them; accepting category "V" conscripts (restricted service only) for specific non-combat roles; or, preferably, serious measures to address corruption at the medical board stage, in order to eliminate the option of purchasing your "*belyy listok*" medical exemption certificate and thereby dropping off the register.

2. "Gapped posts" and cadre units

Another possibility is that when Sergey Ivanov repeats the figure of 1.1 million below which he says armed forces manning cannot fall, he is referring, knowingly or otherwise, to posts not people. Looking closely at the wording of each of his statements certainly suggests that he has in mind 1.1 million physically existing men and women in uniform. But is it possible that the figures he is being provided include posts in cadre units, which are not intended to be filled except by calling up reserves in an emergency?

This need not be with criminal intent, but the impact of fraud should also be taken into account. Instances of the "dead souls" (*mertvyye dushi*) approach, where commanders overstate the number of men in their units and pocket the difference in pay and materiel, have been less frequently reported in recent years: but even after Sergey Ivanov's initiatives aimed at lowering the endemic level of fraud and corruption in the forces, it seems unlikely that the practice has been eliminated entirely.

In addition, it would certainly be in the best traditions of Russian statistical reporting for *tufta*, or inflated reports, to be passed up the chain and amplified at

each stage, so that by the time it reaches Ivanov, his 1.1 million is riddled with empty posts, shell units, and positions and people filling them who appear to exist on paper only. The effect of this syndrome would be to mask temporarily the impact of the shortage of conscripts, but to make its real effect even more acute.

3. Engineering a crisis

As shown above, the period of maximum disruption in the armed forces, and possible consequent instability, begins after mid-2008, with conscripts serving three different draft terms in the army concurrently, followed immediately by a massive exodus of conscripts. Consideration of whether potentially dangerous instability in 2008 would be in anybody's interest leads us directly to the Putin succession issue, and particularly one popular suggestion that Putin could use a real or engineered emergency as a pretext for cancelling elections and remaining in power.¹¹²

Another, less dramatic scenario, but one which also has a bearing on the presidential elections, relates to the future career of Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov, at one point seen as a major contender for Putin's chair. If it were necessary to discredit Ivanov thoroughly by the time the presidential election arrives, then a crisis resulting from an implosion of army manpower brought about by policies implemented during his current tenure would do the job nicely.

4. Sowing confusion

In some respects the challenges of reconciling publicly released statistics on the Russian armed forces have remained unchanged since Soviet times. Information released has always been partial, with no complete overview available: making it difficult to fit figures which may or may not have been consistent among themselves into a known overall picture. It could well be that one of the root causes for the lack of statistical coherence is a persistent assumption that the real numbers constitute a military secret and are definitely not for public consumption without being distorted in some way.

In this context the possibility should not be altogether dismissed that the whole range of inconsistent figures, and the lack of clarity over where the additional manpower is to come from, does in fact form part of a coordinated deception plan for purposes which remain unclear.

5. Lack of coordination

Alternatively, some of the contradictions between manpower projections for conscript and contract servicemen could be explained by a failure to link together plans for the two sources of soldiers. Although the official projections for contract service are wildly inconsistent, conscription projections do at least refer consistently to filling manpower gaps not only by cancelling deferrals but also by increased contract recruitment. Is it possible that the two programmes are simply not being coordinated in a manner which will ensure posts are filled after 2008? If we look for the point at which the joined-up thinking ought in theory to be taking place, we arrive once again at Vasiliy Smirnov.

6. Lack of incentive

Some Russian commentators think the root cause of Vasiliy Smirnov's broad range of mutually contradictory statistics lie in his own career. "I have no doubt that the Minister of Defence and his generals are familiar with arithmetic," wrote prominent

military analyst Aleksandr Golts. “It is just that the main condition for their survival rests in the Russian army never becoming professional, not partly, not fully. And so there is no reason at all to bother with any kind of serious head count.”¹¹³ Related to this is the “somebody else’s problem” phenomenon: by the time the manning crisis bites, those who allowed it to come about (including, it has been suggested, Smirnov) will be safely retired.¹¹⁴

7. Lack of a clue

The more Vasiliy Smirnov’s official statements are compared over time, the more difficult it is to dispel the nagging thought that if all the previous possible explanations are invalid, one remaining possibility is that he does not have full knowledge or control of what is going on. What may have been an unguarded *cri de coeur* by Smirnov in April 2006 might perhaps serve as the epitaph for Russia’s current plans for its armed forces. Asked in a newspaper interview how many conscripts there were in the army at present, the head of the Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate gave what could quite possibly be the most honest answer to date: “Don’t give me a hard time. I don’t exactly know.”¹¹⁵

Endnotes

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² Pavel Felgengauer, *Novaya Gazeta*, 27 March 2006, “Dana komanda – sluzhit”

³ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 11 May 2006, “Ministr Oborony Sergey Ivanov: Rossiya obrechena imet’ sil’nyuyu armiyu”

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¹⁸ Vladimir Mukhin, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 March 2006, “*Ministr oborony ne vypolnyayet svoikh obeshchaniy*”; BBC Monitoring: *Agentstvo voyennykh novostey*, 03 March 2006, “Bill to reduce call-up deferments ready for submission to government”

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- ³⁵ It should be noted that for Russian medical board purposes a “normal” body mass index (BMI) is considered to be within a relatively narrow range: between 19.5 and 22.9, compared to British (NHS) recommendations for adult males of 18.5 to 24.9. Put another way, a conscript who is 172 cm tall (5’8”), will be considered underweight if he weighs less than 57.5 kg (nine stone). See the Appendix to the Regulation on Military Medical Testing confirmed by Decision No 123 of the Government of the Russian Federation of 25 February 2003.
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- ⁵² Viktor Khudoleyev, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 01 April 2006, “*Stat’ v stroy!*”
- ⁵³ BBC Monitoring: Russian Centre TV, 05 July 2006, “Surplus conscripts sent home in Urals”
- ⁵⁴ BBC Monitoring: Russian Channel One TV, 20 December 2005, “‘Third-class’ conscripts wait years for units that want them”
- ⁵⁵ Medical board subjects are graded A, B, V, G, or D, in accordance with the first letters of the Russian alphabet: A is fully fit for service, B is fit with “insignificant restrictions”, V is suitable for restricted service, G is temporarily unfit, to be reviewed after one year, and D is unsuitable for service. Numbers appended after these letters relate to sub-categories of fitness for specific arms of service.
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- ⁵⁷ Nikolay Poroskov, *Vremya novostey*, 31 March 2006, “*GOMU na Rusi zhit’ khorosho*”; Yuliya Taratuta, *Kommersant*, 31 March 2006, “*Minoborony ostavilo prizyvnikov pro zapas*”
- ⁵⁸ BBC Monitoring: Russian Channel One TV, 10 July 2006, “Professional army the answer to poor quality conscripts – commander”
- ⁵⁹ Decision No 523 of the Government of the Russian Federation of 25 August 2003 “On the Federal Targeted Programme ‘Transfer to Manning of a Number of Formations and Military Units with Servicemen Undergoing Military Service on Contract’”, as amended by Decree No 364 of the Government of the Russian Federation of 21 July 2004; Vladimir Samsonov, *Ural’skiye voyennyye vesti*, 20 July 2004, “*Sluzhba po kontraktu: turisty ne nuzhny*”
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