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**Pay and Allowances
in the Russian Armed Forces:
A Guidance Note**

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Key Points

- * Western views of the Russian Armed Forces traditionally hold that Russian military pay is disastrously inadequate.
- * But headline figures for Russian military pay scales bear little relation to what servicemen actually earn.
- * This is because pay for all servicemen is made up of two parallel basic components, plus a large number of allowances, extras, and increments.
- * It is therefore almost always misleading to generalise about Russian military pay.

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Overview

Aim

Almost every assessment of the condition of the Russian Armed Forces makes reference, usually unfavourably, to the earnings of Russian servicemen. This issue has become particularly prominent in discussions of failure to recruit and retain contract servicemen in 2005-2007, where salaries are presumed to play a key role.

Unfortunately the vast majority of references to military wages are excessively generalised, and therefore misleading; they do not take account of the complex nature of Russian service pay which means that first, every serviceman takes home far more than the published basic wage figure; and second, servicemen of similar rank doing similar jobs can be earning wildly different amounts. Unlike in the British Armed Forces, where the earnings of a serviceman not in possession of some exotic speciality can often be approximately deduced with reference to his or her rank, in the Russian Armed Forces no such generalisation is possible.

This note therefore leads with a broad summary of the overall structure of Russian servicemen's pay, which should be sufficient to demonstrate the point above, followed by a more detailed explanation of some of its component elements for readers with a more specific interest. Although illustrative examples are given, this is in no way a comprehensive report on all Russian benefits and entitlements, and its main aim is to warn against issuing, or believing, sweeping generalisations about Russian soldier earnings.

Summary of Pay Structure

“The monetary remuneration of servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation consists of a monthly wage in accordance with the military post occupied (hereinafter referred to as the wage per post) and a monthly wage in accordance with the award of military rank (hereinafter referred to as the wage per rank), which comprise the wage of monthly monetary remuneration of servicemen (hereinafter referred to as the monetary remuneration wage), and monthly and other additional payments (hereinafter referred to as additional payments).”¹

So says Article 2 of the “Procedure for providing the monetary remuneration of servicemen of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation” – hereinafter referred to as the Procedure. Even in this hugely oversimplified summary of how wages are calculated, we can immediately see a key reason why it is difficult for an outsider to grasp the precise nature of Russian military earnings.

The published scale of earnings for each military rank is *only one component* of basic pay: another is an additional payment, usually much larger, which relates to the post occupied or duties undertaken. For simplicity, these will be referred to below as “rank pay” and “duty pay”.

So if we take the purely hypothetical example of a platoon commander appointed immediately after being commissioned, and the pay scales effective from 1st January 2007, he earns R829 per month for being a junior lieutenant, but R2,247 per month for being a platoon commander. It follows that anybody who follows a British instinct and looks to the pay scales by rank to work out what this officer may be earning will be hopelessly wide of the mark.

Even then, it can be readily seen that the R3,076 we have arrived at so far is nowhere near the kind of figures reported as typical officer salaries. This is where the “monthly and other additional payments” come in. Instead of being small bonuses or allowances, these additional payments form a substantial part of take-home pay, in many if not most cases the bulk of it. This is because even servicemen with no particular speciality or special circumstances are entitled to a range of allowances and premiums, and instead of being small set additions these are expressed as multipliers or percentages of their base pay.

Two simple examples will serve to illustrate the effect this has on salary. As an officer our Junior Lieutenant Ivanov is in any case entitled to a monthly financial incentive equivalent to an additional one month’s duty pay. And if he is serving in Moscow or St Petersburg or their surrounding regions, he is entitled as a junior officer to “Moscow weighting” equivalent to 160 per cent of his duty pay. Taken together, these two adjusters raise his duty pay to R8089.20, and so his total monthly earnings to R8918.20, or very nearly three times the original figure.

But our hypothetical fresh-baked lieutenant would be very unusual if he only received two multipliers on his salary: these examples are just two of the very wide range of adjustments to the base pay that need to be borne in mind when considering standard monthly earnings for any serviceman, before we even begin to look at annual additions, good conduct premiums, bonuses, financial retention incentives, length of service increments, and the whole sub-topic of specialist pay.

“Contract Officers”

One further source of confusion which has to be mentioned at the outset is the precise nature of a “contract serviceman” (*voyennosluzhashchiy, prokhodyashchiy voyennuyu sluzhbu po kontraktu*), and the related issue of why pay scales are published for conscripts, and for contract servicemen, but appear at first sight curiously to omit regular officers.

The answer seems to be that all officers are by default classed as contract servicemen:² anecdotal reports of salary friction between “contract” and “non-contract” officers may instead derive from the very generous bonuses payable for being posted to a “contract unit” - one which is supposed to be professionally manned - due to the “special conditions of training” there.

False Comparisons

Another aspect of writing about Russian military pay which is apt to mislead is comparisons with earnings elsewhere. This note will deliberately avoid a number of comparisons and references which are regularly made:

- Conversion of wages from roubles into pounds sterling or US dollars – it is near impossible to do so without interference from our knowledge of costs and wages in the UK or USA;
- Comparison with civilian earnings in Russia – even granted the monetisation of some military entitlements such as free public transport and the “family ration”,³ it is still the case that the services and amenities provided to servicemen at no cost make direct comparisons unlikely to be helpful;
- Benchmarking against Russian average earnings – even if we overlook the wide differences in average earnings in different parts of Russia (try comparing salary expectations of office workers in Moscow to those in the proverbial Nizhniye Nuzhniki, for instance), there is no reason why comparing soldier pay to the national average in Russia will be any more instructive of real conditions than the same exercise will be in the UK.

What follows therefore is a review of different elements of Russian military pay in more detail than above. It should be emphasised that this review is based on Russian legislation and material presented in Russian open sources, as opposed to first-hand experience: it is a long time since the author was on a Russian payroll, but experience and anecdote suggest that practical implementation may well differ tangibly from the theory, and not to the benefit of the recipient.

Rank Pay

There are 20 different levels of rank pay for contract servicemen,⁴ from private or rating to Marshal of the Russian Federation (of which at the time of writing Russia has none on the active list). There are no gradations or levels of pay within ranks, so this element should be identical for, for example, all majors (or Captains Third Rank) across Russia.

As far as can be deduced from the published legislation, there is no such thing as conscript rank pay, so the only payments made to conscripts are based on duty pay as described below.

Duty Pay

There are 50 levels of pay tied to the post or duty occupied by a contract serviceman:⁵ 1 is “Initial military duties of soldiers or ratings: rifleman, motorcyclist, assistant grenade launcher operator” and 50 is “First Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation... [or] C-in-C of an Armed Forces Arm of Service”.

Levels 1 through 9 are intended to be occupied by other ranks, and our Jun Lt Ivanov, as a platoon commander, would be on level 10, alongside junior engineering officers. As a company commander he would be on level 14, level 18 for battalion

command, and if he were to rise to command a division he would be on level 32 – levels higher than this are dominated by senior positions in the Ministry of Defence.

Conscript servicemen have their own table of duty pay, restricted to six levels which curiously go into more detail on the trades attached to them than does the contract table: you are entitled to level 2, for instance, if you are a sniper or a senior disinfecter, among other things. The level of pay is significantly lower for conscripts - their level 6 (senior sergeant of battalion, company or battery) pay is less than half that of a contract serviceman on level 1. There are also complex adjustments to both scales for cadets and trainees of various sorts, depending on their precise status and to a large extent on their test results.

One theoretical result of pay being structured in this way is that it is not sufficient to be promoted to a rank to be earning commensurate pay: you also have to be on a unit's books as being gainfully employed in some specific post. According to the regulations, anyone not employed in this way, or not yet appointed to a post, or under arrest, or listed as "at the commander's disposal" (*v rasporyazhenii komandira*) defaults to level 1 of duty pay. For officers, the default is level 10 – which for an officer of some seniority would equate to a drastic cut in salary.

Multipliers

Regular additional monthly payments are usually calculated as a percentage of duty pay, although some are set at flat rates. The table below lists some of these additions, in no deliberate order, and the maximum percentages or rouble amounts that appeared current at the time of writing.

Please note: this is not an exhaustive list, and serves only to illustrate the wide range of bonuses available; many of these bonuses are cumulative, so taken together can multiply the basic duty pay several times over; the figures shown are the maximum, and a range of lower percentages or flat rates may apply instead dependent on rank or circumstance.

Entitlement to additional monthly payment	Max % or R increase
Moscow weighting	200%
Vetting and access to state secrets	75%
Guarding state secrets	15%
Service remote from base	10%
Contract (or officer) service incentive	160%
Command bonus	R500
Use of a legal education	50%
Academic qualifications	25%
Academic qualifications (and lecturing)	R1,500
Academic rank	60%
Service at sea	50%
Service at sea (nuclear)	100%
Medical personnel	30%
Medical personnel working with AIDS	60%
Medical personnel working with infectious diseases	80%
AFV crew or engineer: aircraft ground crew	10%
Special forces pay	20%
Aircrew	100%

Reloading of nuclear reactors	35%
Locating and destroying explosive devices	50%
“Class payments” for skill levels	10%
Command post duty	25%
Strategic Missile Forces bonus	20%

In addition length of service increments can account for more than double the basic duty pay, and service in the Far North or other remote locations attracts pay increases as per standard government rates.

Another significant boost to pay comes if you are serving in a contract-manned permanent readiness unit: junior servicemen in the 42nd Guards Motor-Rifle Division in the North Caucasus receive an additional R4,500 per month, and in all other units which are officially contract-manned, they receive an average of R3,000 per month. This compares with their base duty pay (January 2007) of R1,405 per month. The equivalent contract bonus for officers is slightly more generous at R5,000 and R3,300 per month respectively.

But all of this pales when compared with the rich rewards of postings to the Ministry of Defence central staff, when in addition to all other bonuses the duty pay rate is multiplied by a minimum of 2.6 and a maximum of 10.5. A lieutenant serving in the central Moscow “Arbat Military District”, it has been pointed out, earns as much as a colonel in the General Staff Academy on the outskirts of town.⁶

Until recent reforms, secondment to another government department must also have been highly lucrative: you would continue drawing your military pay, with a 30 per cent bonus for “carrying out important work”, plus an additional one-off bonus at the end of the secondment, and a percentage increase for time in service based on the civilian salary which you were drawing at the same time.

It will be noted that many of the increments in the table above have direct equivalents in British military practice. But an additional peculiarity is that in addition to the monthly rate of extra pay to a specialist, there are one-off payments for every time he actually uses his special skills.

Regular Bonuses

Specialist Pay

For example, parachute-trained personnel receive a bonus for each jump, calculated as a percentage of a platoon commander’s duty pay and starting at a minimum of 5 per cent (at the time of writing, equivalent to R70.05). There is a detailed list of “complicating factors” which can be applied to parachute jumps, each of which triggers bigger bonuses for each jump, culminating in being parachuted inside a vehicle, which earns 20 per cent, or R280.20. There is a cap on earnings of three jumps per day.

Similarly, diving and other work under water is paid per session, with tables of additional bonuses according to depth and complication (under ice, in low visibility, in radioactive water) which at first sight seem as complex as decompression tables. The additional factors triggering bonus payments are specified to an impressive level of detail: the most generous bonus on offer (three month’s duty pay for a single dive) appears to be for dives involving recovering bodies or body parts.

The system for allocating payments for handling or making safe explosives will give an indication of the amount of bureaucracy likely to be generated. Payments are made on the basis of an individual report from the local commander on every explosive device or part thereof handled or moved, its classification on a three-part scale (1 for grenades without detonators or incendiary rounds, for instance, 2 for misfires, 3 for IEDs), and each individual involved in handling or transporting it. The scale of the payments involved can also be deduced from their upper limit: no matter how many explosive devices you pick up in a month, you cannot be paid a bonus for that month of more than 12 times the monthly duty pay of a platoon commander.

A peculiarity of the bonus system is that bonuses are calculated as percentages of duty pay relevant to ground forces duties – which is understandable, given the preponderance of ground forces in the Russian Armed Forces, but which gives rise to the faintly perverse situation where the one-off bonus for any aircrew taking part in a flight where night vision equipment is used is expressed as 10 per cent of the duty pay of a tank or motor-rifle platoon commander.

“Field Pay”

Another lucrative source of additional income is *polevyye*, or “field money”, payable under a wide range of circumstances not many of which have anything to do with being “in the field”; for instance while detached to a training unit. *Polevyye* are set at a flat daily rate equivalent to the daily allowance for travel or detached duty (*sutochnyye*), currently R200 per day.

If this figure is compared with the monthly earnings discussed above, it can be seen that they will make a significant difference to earnings if paid even for a short period each month - let alone longer periods of continuous entitlement, such as if you are “detached to ... construction military units ... for a period of up to one year”.⁷

Annual Premiums

The “premium for exemplary military service” (*premiya za obraztsovoye vpolneniye voinskogo dolga*) is not to be sniffed at, being an annual bonus of up to three times your monthly duty pay for contract servicemen. For this you have to score “excellent” (five on the Russian five-point scale) on all indicators throughout the year; but even a row of threes (“satisfactory”) will earn you an extra month’s pay.

But this is in addition to the “single financial reward for conscientious carrying out of duty” (*yedynovremennoye denezhnoye voznagrazhdeniye za dobrosovestnoye ispolneniye dolzhnostnykh obyazannostey*) also for contract servicemen, which amounts to another three months’ duty pay awarded at the end of each year of service, and whose dependence on performance is not specified.

Other annual premiums are trade-specific: warrant officers in charge of mobile missile launchers in the Strategic Missile Forces who report an accident-free year earn a bonus of a month’s duty pay, and officers whose “service is connected with the carrying out of jumps with parachutes” receive length of service bonuses of up to three months’ salary every five years – unusually, a multiple of their duty pay and rank pay combined.

Finally, contract servicemen and officers are entitled to additional “material assistance” of up to two months’ pay per year.

Golden Hellos and Handshakes

Non-commissioned contract servicemen are entitled to a golden hello of one month’s combined pay when first signing a contract, and to repeat payments if they sign new contracts on the first one’s expiry. There is also an “essential property” grant of up to 12 months’ combined pay for newly-graduated officers and those renewing their contract, or getting married.

Gratuities on leaving contract service for officers and other ranks on contract range from five months’ combined pay up to 20 times monthly pay for long service – all subject to a bonus of two months’ pay if they have been decorated during their time in service.

Pay Disputes

A popular, although not particularly funny, Russian joke of the mid-1990s about the pioneer contract servicemen then appearing in the forces hinged on their amazement, several months into their service, to learn that as well as being given a free uniform and rifle they were actually supposed to be paid as well. Mercifully, epic arrears of basic pay for officers and contract servicemen seem now to be a thing of the past; but court cases over non-payment of bonuses and allowances which servicemen think they are entitled to are still a matter of routine.

The complexity and variety of allowances on offer, and the precise definitions of when they are available, provide plenty of grounds for confusion and dispute. The relevant legislation appears to comprise at least three Federal Laws and one “Procedure” (*Poryadok*), each of them monoliths of close-packed Russian legalese of at times barely tolerable density; plus innumerable decrees, orders and resolutions adopting, adapting, amending and confirming them and the pay scales they govern.

A serviceman’s entitlement or otherwise to many additional payments and allowances is dependent on reports and applications submitted by his or her immediate commander. This provides fertile ground for abuse, especially when the direct allocation of bonuses is also within the commander’s remit, for example with the “single financial reward for conscientious carrying out of duty”, where an additional 50 per cent bonus for individual servicemen can be allocated by commanders from a slush fund of underpaid rewards. So in addition to being at the mercy of the competence and diligence of clerks, which may well be a universal military experience, in order to receive their full entitlement Russian servicemen have in some instances to put forward a more powerful incentive to their commander than the temptations offered by that commander’s direct control over the budget for bonuses.

Or, in some cases, pay disputes can arise simply because the “official” function of a unit differs from what it is actually doing – as with the case of units in the North Caucasus where soldiers have put in claims for combat pay after an engagement only to be told that according to the plan their unit was not actually supposed to be involved in any fighting, and therefore combat pay is not due; alternatively, they

could have been “officially” involved in qualifying combat, but their commander has for whatever reason failed to issue the vital piece of paper confirming the relevant dates.⁸

Reports are regular of claims for non-payment of Chechen combat pay in particular being dragged out over a number of years, which is particularly unfortunate since the Procedure specifies that you cannot lodge a claim for more than three years’ back underpaid salary or allowances.

Prospects for Change

It can be seen how the complexity of the pay system causes both dissatisfaction when it goes wrong, and a substantial bureaucratic overhead whether it is working correctly or not. A particular source of friction is the huge range in earnings of servicemen in similar ranks and performing similar duties, as well as relatively junior ranks earning more than their nominal superiors.⁹ This arises between officers in contract and non-contract units, or between contract servicemen in central Russia and those enjoying substantial incentives for service in remote areas or “field money” for extended postings; but the most striking example is the enormous increments provided to those posted to the Ministry of Defence. It has been suggested that a similar practice in the case of Ukraine, of paying more for service on the General Staff, provided an active barrier to reform of military personnel policy, stifling any incentive for rotation to new positions or locations.¹⁰

Nonetheless this has not led to visible suggestions that the military pay and allowances system in Russia should be overhauled or reformed as a whole. Any such suggestion, whether rational or not, would probably meet intense institutional resistance. For an example of the military mobilising to resist change in this area, we can take the response to Federal Law No 122 on the monetisation of benefits, which among other things removed servicemen’s rights to free public transport and replaced them with a monthly allowance.¹¹ Bills to introduce this reform, considered essential for the continuing existence of a viable public transport system, had been put forward since 2000 if not earlier;¹² yet even in 2005 resistance to the measure at all levels was intense and coloured with high drama: “if this were the Tsarist army, we would all have shot ourselves by now”.¹³ So it would be a brave military or government official who proposed any fundamental reform of the pay system for several years to come; and of course the central staff of the Ministry of Defence would be unlikely to push through with any notable enthusiasm changes that threatened their own high incomes.

Conclusion

It is not simply the existence of a large and complex system of increments and bonuses which baffles and misleads Western observers (after all, what would our Russian opposite numbers looking into British pay and allowances make of “Gurkha Porterage Allowance” or “Nugatory Holiday Expenditure Arrears”?) – it is more the way in which these unpredictable extras make up the bulk of earnings, together with there being two basic components of pay rather than one, that have tended to lead to wrong or simplistic conclusions.

So if we move from our hypothetical Jun Lt Ivanov to apparently real servicemen, we can pick at random the example of Pte Mikhail Karakulev, a 24-year-old AFV gunner serving on contract in Aleysk, in Altay Territory in southern Siberia.

According to the pay scales current from 1st January 2007, Karakulev's basic rank pay should be R506 and his duty pay (level 3) R1,615, making a total of R2,121. But when interviewed in the Siberian Military District newspaper *Na Boyevom Postu* he quotes his earnings as over R9,000 a month, in company with others of similar age earning R10,000 or R11,000.¹⁴

We can in fact benchmark Pte Karakulev's alleged earnings against official pay scales quoted for contract servicemen posted to the Separate Motor-Rifle Brigade in Aleysk, posted on a Siberian Military District website seeking to attract contract recruits.¹⁵ These give the following levels of pay and allowances for his rank, trade and length of service:

Element	Entitlement
Rank Pay (Private)	R399.60
Duty Pay (level 2)	R1,221.00
Length of Service (two to five years)	R405.15
Difficult conditions of service (compensation for loss of benefits)	R1,282.05
Special training conditions (contract unit)	R3,300.00
Monthly financial incentive	R1,221.00
Regional coefficient (service in remote area)	R1,505.76
Subtotal	R9,034.56
Less tax	-R1,174.00
Monthly take-home pay	R7,860.56

So we can see that the “over R9,000” quoted above is indeed on track for pre-tax income – in fact his earnings would be more than those shown in the table, since at the time of writing the website was still showing the (lower) pay scales current at August 2005. In addition, we need to remember the quarterly and annual premiums, bonuses and “material assistance”, each of which can potentially add several multiples of monthly pay to the total end-of-year figure. So we arrive at total earnings which are so clearly out of all proportion to “basic pay” that it should demonstrate beyond doubt the unreliability of formally published pay scales for guessing actual earnings.

This note does not seek to argue that Russian servicemen are necessarily much better off financially than is usually imagined: merely that there is such a wide variation in pay for servicemen that it is not appropriate to generalise at all about incomes, including to continue to write off the entire Armed Forces as scandalously underpaid.

Endnotes

¹ *Poryadok obespecheniya denezhnym dovol'stviyem voyennosluzhashchikh Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii* – at the time of writing, most recently updated by Order No 33 of the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation of 29th January 2007 “*O povyshenii razmerov nekotorykh vidov dovol'stviya voyennosluzhashchikh Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii i vyplat litsam grazhdanskogo personala Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii*”. Unless otherwise specified, conclusions drawn from here on in this note are based on this Procedure.

² Article 2.1 of the Federal Law “On the Status of Servicemen” (“*O statuse voyennosluzhashchikh*”), which lists different categories of servicemen, groups officers together with contract servicemen, unless they are officers “conscripted in accordance with a Decree of the President of the Russian Federation”.

³The current allowance in compensation for the *prodovol'stvennyy payek*, or food ration, is to be replaced with a monthly payment of R608.33 with effect from 1st December 2007, which is to be added to rank pay: this is good news for pensioners, since unlike standard allowances, an increase in rank pay will affect the pension rate. See *Na boyevom postu*, 24 March 2007, “*U zavetnogo okoshka*”

⁴ See Appendix 1 to the Procedure, “*Razmery mesyachnykh okladov v sootvetstvii s prisvoyennymi voinskimi zvaniami...*”

⁵ See Appendix 2 to the Procedure, “*Razmery mesyachnykh okladov v sootvetstvii s zanimayemyimi voinskimi dolzhnostyami voyennosluzhashchikh, prokhodyashchikh voyennuyu sluzhbu po kontraktu*”

⁶ For more on this, see Oleg Yelenskiy, *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye*, 31 March 2006, “*Kak ministr ofitserov ozolotil*”

⁷ See Articles 340 onwards of the Procedure.

⁸ pravnet.ru, 26 May 2003, “*OBZOR sudebnoy praktiki rassmotreniya del, svyazannykh s predostavleniyem dopolnitel'nykh l'got i kompensatsiy voyennosluzhashchim i priravnennym k nim litsam, vypolnyayushchim zadachi v usloviyakh chrezvychaynogo polozheniya, pri vooruzhennykh konfliktakh, uchastnikam boyevykh deystviy i kontrterroristicheskikh operatsiy*”, at <http://www.pravnet.ru/content/view/753/76/> accessed on 18 June 2007

⁹ Vitaliy Tsimbal, *Kommersant-Vlast*, 02 April 2007: “*Armeyskaya bukhgalteriya*”

¹⁰ Prof. Marybeth Peterson Ulrich, “Ukraine's Military Between East and West”, June 2007, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College

¹¹ For a distinctly one-sided assessment of the impact of the law, see BBC Monitoring: *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 12 January 2005, “Russian army newspaper laments effects of new benefits law on service personnel”

¹² See for instance BBC Monitoring: AVN Military News Agency, 05 November 2001, “Russia to abolish free public transport for servicemen”; it took another three years for the bill to be passed.

¹³ BBC Monitoring: *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 21 January 2005, “*L'goty: razreshite zastrelit'sya*”

¹⁴ See the *Kontraktnik* supplement to *Na Boyevom Postu*, 03 March 2007, featuring a number of servicemen stationed at Aleysk.

¹⁵ Accessed at <http://sibcity.ru/?firms=178&page=5&t=4&p=2> on 18 June 2007

Disclaimer

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