

• Author: [Kirill Shamiev](#)

[Why Russia Still Has Conscription](#)



This year's autumn round of conscription to the Russian army is now underway. As of October 1st, Russia's military is hoping [to find and recruit 110-120 thousand fresh troops](#).

For many young people, military conscription is no longer a scary prospect: they have been admitted to universities and can live without thinking about spending their 'young years in boots,' at least for now. However, October brings more threats for their older or less fortunate compatriots: they can expect another letter requesting them to appear at the military commission for a medical examination.

Just over twenty years ago, in 1996, President Boris Yeltsin [planned to cancel mandatory conscription](#) by the spring of 2000. However, in 1998, three months after an economic collapse, the decree was [reworded](#), with the following phrase added: 'as the necessary conditions are created'. Yeltsin left soon afterwards and no such conditions emerged under President Putin, regardless of the country's high economic growth.

January 2018 will mark 18 years of Putin's actual power in the country, and the President will need to be reelected for a new term in March. Even [according to Western experts](#), the Russian armed forces have improved their combat capabilities, carrying out operations in the Crimea, Syria and eastern Ukraine. All these operations involved the professional Russian army - i.e. officers and soldiers who have signed a contract with the Ministry of Defence for several years, thereby choosing a military career. Well, why would one need compulsory military service in the Russian army if the conscripts have not participated in real combat operations for a long time? The French military leader Louis-Jules Trochu answered this question back in the 19th century: in peacetime, the conscript army exists as a political institution. Thus, if conscription is needed at all, it is only because the current Russian authorities need it. The system of compulsory military service in Russia is archaic and cannot be viewed as an effective way of organising the country's military security system.

Today, the number of voluntary and conscripted armies in the world is approximately the same. However, contract-based armies are mostly present in democratic countries. This is due to the [greater accountability of the army to the civil society](#) and the opportunities for citizens to influence the government in democratic countries. However, countries such as Austria, Finland, Norway and Denmark formally retain conscription but only call a small number of citizens, and the latter always have the opportunity to perform civilian service instead. When Lithuania reintroduced conscription in 2016, justifying this decision by geopolitical tensions, its Ministry of Defence instantly [faced citizens' evasion of compulsory military service](#).

Large scale armies were decisive during the First and Second World Wars. Even Britain and the United States had to introduce mandatory recruitment into the army. However, in the second half of the 20th century, the public reaction to the war in Vietnam and the shortcomings of the draft army, which had not been obvious before, forced the U.S. government to seek an alternative solution versus the draft service as they faced tough confrontation with the USSR and needed to support their global influence.

One of the most famous reports of the commission for reforming the U.S. Army of that era was by Milton Friedman, a fiscally conservative economist, about the shortcomings of the draft army and the advantages of a fully voluntary service. The Russian army today struggles with the same problems that the armed forces of the

eternal 'likely enemy' of the USSR faced in the past.

Compulsory military service essentially reduces the motivation of soldiers. Much like in today's Russia, in the past the only people who ended up in the U.S. army were only those who were not fortunate enough to 'slip off'. Therefore, the behaviour of conscripts in the military is extremely logical: they try to minimise the difficulties of service and maximise the benefits. In contrast, professional soldiers have a completely different motivation. [According to research](#), the desire to 'improve oneself', earn money (for living or to go to university) and 'serve my country' are the main motivational factors among those serving in the U.S. Army. The strongest motivations include the desire to 'improve myself' and 'acquire new skills'. These data show that military service which is accepted by citizens should, first of all, offer opportunities for personal growth and improved financial material well-being. In contrast, conscription-based service does not provide such opportunities.

When talking about the economic aspects of mandatory military service, the Institute for Labour Economics (IZA) in Bonn [has shown](#) that compulsory military service negatively affects GDP growth and the level of prosperity of men who have left the army. Between 1960 and 2000, OECD countries lost between 12% and 19% of GDP per capita of the working population because of compulsory conscription. Mandatory conscription is also a burden on the economy: young people are forced to make different plans for family life, education and work because of the constant threat of conscription. This reduces the average efficiency of the resources spent by these people, and this necessarily affects the economic performance of the country as a whole. For example, [according to a study by the Higher School of Economics](#) in Moscow, one in five Russian doctoral applicants mention 'postponement of the army service' as the motivation for continuing education. This kind of motivation is poorly correlated with the rules of academic work based on free thinking and creativity.

Thirdly, conscription reduces the motivation of the army leadership to ensure welfare and to organise training of the troops. Officials from the Ministry of Defence as well as army officers are much less interested in creating favourable conditions for the troops and raising its appeal in the labour market since they always have a free resource, i.e. young recruits from each conscription wave. The situation in the modern Russian army is aggravated by the lack of opportunities for citizens to inspect the ratio of conscription to contract soldiers, which means that the strength of troops can always be increased at the expense of citizens, that is by making the military commissions work more actively. For example, this October the [State Duma will review draft law](#) No. 1658257 on compulsory military registration of all nonresident students at the place of their actual residence, regardless of their previous registration. In practice, many students do not register at their actual place of residence, thereby avoiding conscription. Now, it will become even more difficult for young men to evade military service.

As officers and officials from the Ministry of Defence are unmotivated to improve the conditions of service and the appeal of military training, the need to provide the Russian army with professional servicemen is shifted onto society. Russians are compelled not only to send men to the army but also to finance the inflow of contract soldiers. For example, if we compare the average salary of civilian and military specialists by title and education, even without considering various additional allowances, 'thirteenth salaries', combat payments and regional add-ons, and if we disregard the statistical susceptibility of average values to outliers, contract servicemen nevertheless earn more than civilian specialists. For instance, soldiers earn an average of 30 thousand roubles, sergeants and sergeant-majors earn about 40 thousand whereas a civilian specialist with a secondary education receives 28 thousand roubles, with 38 thousand roubles earned by those with university degrees. Young lieutenants graduating from military schools earn even more: 55 thousand roubles on average.

To conduct a more accurate analysis, preferential military mortgages, full board, health care services and welfare support, holiday travel compensation and many other additional payments and benefits for servicemen and members of their families should be added to the picture. These allowances would increase the gap between servicemen and civilian experts even further.



[Data on wages and salaries](#)

Servicemen of any country must receive the right conditions, corresponding with labour market requirements

and the difficulties of the service. However, because of the negative influence of the mandatory service on Russia's entire military security system, the country is trying to use material resources in order to compensate for the lack of appeal of the army service in terms of personal growth and job opportunities after its completion.

Lastly, the conscription-based system essentially divides the army into two parts, one of which is much more secured and prepared. This damages the cohesion of the military and, again, undermines the appeal of mandatory service. For example, contract servicemen are given the financial and institutional opportunity to buy higher quality boots and some elements of uniforms; they are allowed to use mobile phones throughout the day and rent a room or a flat near the army unit. Officers have more confidence in the contract servicemen, and they allow them to perform tasks beyond their rank and function. Such practices reinforce the social inequalities among soldiers and fossilize the low status of the conscription service inside the armed forces.

Neither cancelled nor reformed

As [noted by the Levada Centre](#), a total of 58% Russian citizens support keeping mandatory military service while 37% oppose it. A large share of those who back mandatory service are retirees, people with lower-than-secondary education and from a rural background. Most probably, those citizens are conservative members of the military and political elites who believe that the weaknesses of military conscription, if any, can be eliminated. However, this is not the case since the entire logic of the Russian conscription system is contrary to modern conscription norms.

It seems that yet another conscription to the Russian army is not really needed for either the army or for the citizens aged 18 to 27. Russia's real defence capability is provided by contract servicemen, who are able to perform combat missions in other countries. Army officers are not interested in training conscripts while military leaders are not motivated to improve the conditions of mandatory service to attract more volunteers.

Nevertheless, the conscription system is useful for Russia's civil authorities. The service helps to raise the incoming recruits in the right spirit, even without any direct propaganda coming from their officers. Living in a closed conservative community with strict codes of conduct, the need to obey their commanders' orders and the limited availability of alternative information creates a conducive environment to undermine the ability for critical thinking. In addition, mandatory service is an opportunity to create an effective image of the country's military power without spending any additional effort or resources to ensure real improvements in Russia's military service.

Tags

[army](#)

[draft](#)

[military](#)

Category

[Security](#)

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu