

CHAPTER 8

Upgrading the Image of the Russian Armed Forces

A Task Set for Military-Political Training

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Abstract

The demographic trends and general scepticism among the youth towards the armed forces have created a strong impetus for the authorities to make military service more attractive to young Russian men, improve the effectiveness of military training, and in general improve the image of the army among young people. The survey results show growing trust towards the armed forces in Russia. This chapter will discuss the meaning of these results and provide an overview of the newly organized military-political training among the conscripts and military personnel. It is argued that, with the reorganization of military-political training, the authorities aim to further enhance a positive image of the armed forces, and, seemingly most important, consolidate the troops' moral and political views as well as willingness to fight.

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Introduction

Over the past decade the Russian armed forces have undergone a transformation that aimed at improving its fighting power. In retrospect, most analysts praise the latest military reform as a success, albeit an incomplete one (Arbatov and Dvorkin, 2011; Forsström, 2019; Mikkola, 2014; Westerlund and Oxenstierna, 2019). Given the general trends of war fighting and Russia's demographic situation, the improvement of the manning system has been one of the priorities. For years, the Russian armed forces have referred in their plans to the official and symbolic target figure of one million troops under arms. It has been estimated that, in order to reach that level, the military needs to draft around 300,000 men annually (Stratfor, 2012). Taking a quick look at the demographic trends shows that there are challenges ahead in this area.

On the basis of the size of the cohort of 18- to 27-year-olds and assuming that, by the age of 27, around 35% of the male population will eventually have completed their conscription service (Svynarenko, 2016) it is possible to make an estimation of the future size of the conscript army (Figure 8).

In 2018, some 15% of all conscripts were 18 years-old, 27% were 19 years old and 58% aged between 20 and 27 years old (Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii, 2019b). The most typical conscript in Russia is a 20-year-old man from a small town or rural area, who studies at a vocational school or has recently completed it. Although the demographic trend for the general population is in decline, the size of the most important recruitment resource of 20- to 24-year-olds is likely to grow between 2020 and 2035 (owing to a moderate fertility increase starting from 2000). By 2035, the size of this cohort will recover to almost the same numbers as in 2014. According to a UN prognosis based on medium fertility, there will be 4,382,000 young men aged 20–24 in 2035, compared to 4,475,000 young men in 2014. The main decline will be in the category of military reserves. During the same time period, the number of 30- to 34-year-olds will decline by almost 50% – the

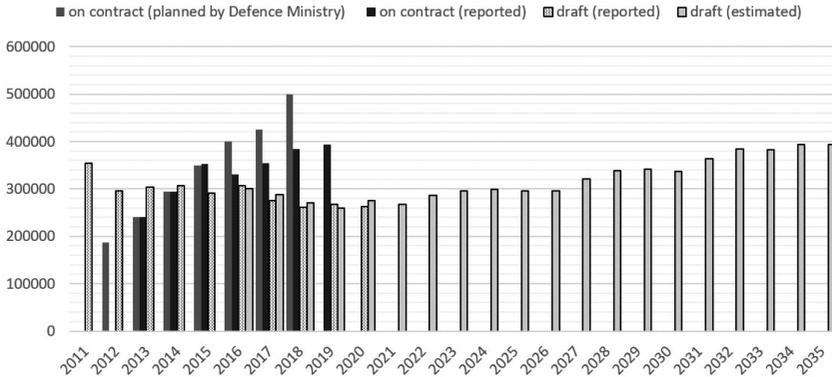


Figure 8: Reported number of young people drafted during the years 2011–2014 compared to the number of servicemen on contract and the forecast until 2035 of the number of young men who most likely will be drafted.

Planned number of servicemen on contract until 2017. Estimated number of conscripts until 2035 – estimate is based on estimated number of young men of conscription age.

Sources: Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii (2019a) and United Nations (2019). Figure by the author.

cohort of children born in the late Soviet years who were 25–30 in 2015 will remain the biggest cohort through the years composing the core of army reserves in 2035 (Svynarenko, 2016, pp. 28–33).

Between 2015 and 2019, the number of young people who joined the compulsory military service dropped from almost 300,000 to around 259,000. If, by 2024, there are no significant changes in legislation and the political situation in Russia, the number of young people drafted will recover to 298,000 (the level of 2014–2015) and will continue to grow. However, in 2014, the Defence Ministry reported that only 73% of conscripts were fit for military service, while some 20% received deferrals. Any significant fluctuations in the numbers of future conscripts are very unlikely. In the past two decades there was no explosive fertility growth or specific events that could radically reduce the number of children or young people (such as wars or economic crises; even the COVID-19 pandemic is characterized by a low mortality among children and youth). The changes in legal regulation and militarist

propaganda have only limited potential to increase the size of the conscript army. During the past three decades the highest number of 20- to 24-year-olds was in 2005–2010 (in 2010, as many as 549,400 young men were drafted for compulsory service) and the Russian armed forces were unprepared for this rapid increase in young men enrolled for military service. This partially contributed to the increased level of violence and accidents in the army. These themes dominated the public discourse about conscription and contributed to the growing unwillingness to serve in the army (Svynarenko, 2016, p. 78).

Furthermore, as shown in previous chapters, young people remain sceptical of the official patriotic discourse (see Lassila, Chapter 5, and Mitikka and Zavadskaya, Chapter 6, this volume). A survey conducted on soldiers' and officers' attitudes in 2010–2011 demonstrated that in 83 out of 100 cases servicemen are not satisfied with their army service (Surkova, 2012). Also, the annual report of the Soldier's Mothers organization identifies a list of problems affecting Russian army servicemen, including: high mortality in military conflicts, torture and cruelty, persecution of servicemen seeking to protect their rights (threats, psychological and physical pressure, and violence), failure to provide timely and adequate qualified medical assistance, and, finally, high levels of corruption (Soldatskie materi Sankt-Peterburga, 2014).

The current demographic trends and general scepticism among the youth towards the armed forces have created a strong impetus for the authorities to make military service more attractive to young Russian men, improve the effectiveness of military training, and in general improve the image of the army among young people. The prioritized tasks include an increase in payment for the military personnel and improvement of conditions for conscripts and professional soldiers alike. Although salary rise may serve as an important factor for a person to choose a military career or to engage in military conflicts (e.g. as a part of private military company), the Russian authorities also strive to change the overall political outlook and motivational sentiments among the youth (see Lassila, Chapter 5, this volume). The reorganization of the military-political training in the armed forces further

aims to improve the prestige of military service in society and to ensure political loyalty of the military personnel. How these two objectives can be met in the current political constellation is another matter.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. The next section takes a closer look at the survey data describing trust towards the armed forces. The purpose is to pinpoint major changes (e.g. growing support for the military service) and possible factors influencing these trends. An analysis of these trends and the previous research (e.g. Mitikka and Zavadskaya, Chapter 6, this volume) highlights that a higher level of trust towards the armed forces has not translated into willingness to make personal sacrifices in the case of conflict. In fact, militaristic patriotism is challenged by other versions of patriotism, especially among the groups that the Russian armed forces are most interested in. Therefore, it seems logical to suggest that the recent invigoration of military-political training in the armed forces seeks especially to enhance troops' willingness to fight. The second section of this chapter provides an overview of the recent changes introduced in pre-draft training and military-political training. The concluding section will discuss some possible directions of further research on this topic.

Trust in the Russian Armed Forces Is Growing

Currently, the armed forces is the most trusted institution in Russia, even before the president (Levada-Center 2020b). Public opinion polls show a longer-term positive trend in the way in which the army is perceived by society (Figure 9). Referring to the situation in the early 2000s, the director of the Levada-Center, Lev Gudkov, argued that the positive perception of the army indicates that 'the army is not regarded as an effective and efficient institution, but an embodiment of the most important national symbols, the key values for mass consciousness, and the reference point of mass identity' (cited in Golts, 2012, p. 217). Interestingly, it is not so much young people but more the older generations who are most receptive to this propaganda (Isakova, 2006).

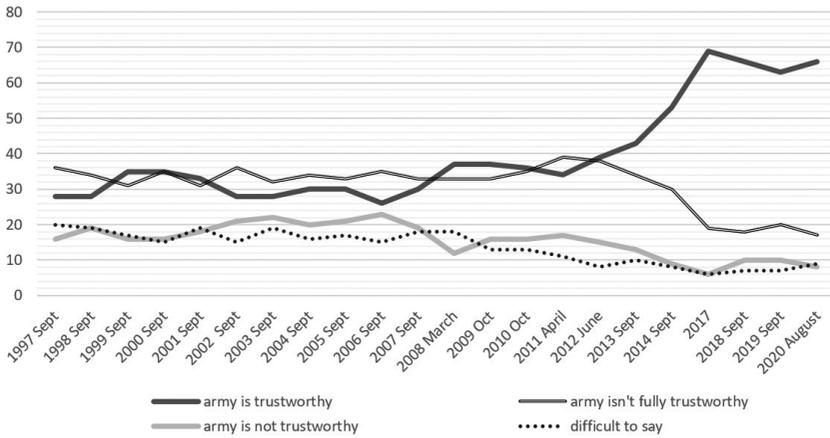


Figure 9: Distribution of answers to the question ‘To what degree army is trustworthy?’ between 1997 and 2020.

Source: Levada-Center (2015, 2018, 2019a, 2020a). Figure by the author.

Public trust towards the army fluctuates greatly depending on public perceptions of the processes in the army and on external factors, such as the perceived role of the Russian military in domestic or international conflicts (Figure 9). The poll taken in September 2006 after the Andrej Syčev hazing case showed worsened attitudes towards the army (26% of respondents supported the statement that the army was trustworthy, while another 35% said that army was not fully trustworthy). The 2008 poll was carried out in March, before the August military intervention in Georgia (Levada-Center, 2015). Shortly before and during the Russian military campaigns against Georgia and Ukraine, public attitudes towards the army improved considerably positive coverage of the Russian military campaign in Syria also contributed to the growth of trust in the armed forces, which skyrocketed, reaching a historical maximum of 69% in 2017.

Since late 2013, the proportion of the population that does *not* trust the army has started to decline. It is also noticeable that the proportion of those who are ‘undecided’ about the issue has likewise declined since 2008. These changes can be traced back both to the actualization of an alleged ‘external threat’ during the 2008 war in Georgia and the recent conflict with Ukraine, and to the longer-term impact of several soft power tools, such as

the positive representation of the armed forces in a series of new Russian films, and the patriotic education of young people, broad media coverage of the military drills, and the 'New Look' reform in the armed forces (which also includes a salary increase for military personnel), which gradually neutralize the negative perceptions by young people towards the armed forces in general, and military service in particular.

The widely shared perception of the systemic corruption in the armed forces can be regarded as a factor that has a negative overall effect on young people's trust towards the army. However, this aspect has not been thoroughly studied in opinion polls conducted in Russia. Sociological studies pay little attention to the theme of corruption during conscription, focusing instead on violence in the army and the issue of trust.

Attitudes towards military service changed considerably after 2014. According to polls conducted in July 2000, only 24% of respondents regarded army service as a duty to be paid to the state. In 2019, the number of respondents supporting statement that 'every real man should undergo military service' reached 60% – this is a 20% increase in five years (Figure 10). Simultaneously,

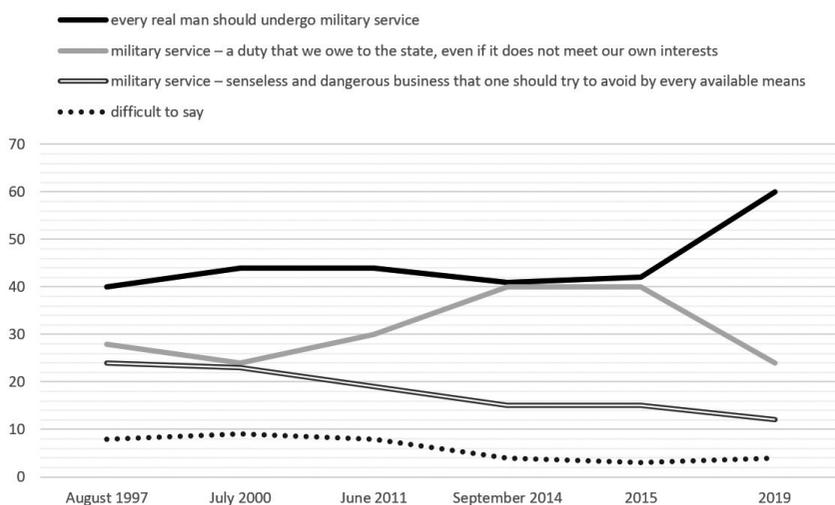


Figure 10: Distribution of answers to the question 'What is your attitude towards military service?' between 1997 and 2019.

Source: Levada-Center (2014, 2019b). Figure by the author.

the proportion of those supporting avoidance of military service by every available means has consistently declined.

A similar tendency is evident when the opinion poll results are organized according to age groups. In 2014, only one in four young respondents aged 18–24 agreed that every real man should serve in the army and in 2019 every other young respondent shared this opinion, while in 2014 42% of this age group said that it is one's duty to serve even if it does not meet one's own interests. Perhaps some young people redefined their understanding of 'own interest' but only 23% of them shared the same opinion in 2019. Interestingly, the change in the attitudes towards the army is less dramatic among 25- to 39-year-olds, who were less certain regarding this point, most likely because most of them were over the age of conscription and have families and jobs. Only one third agreed that they could give up their own interests for military service (33.7% in 2014 and 27.4% in 2019). The oldest generation consisted predominantly of those who were born after the Second World War, and they were the most supportive of the army (Table 6).

The location of respondents reveals interesting differences between regions (Table 7). The Moscow residents attached less importance to military service as an element of masculine identity in 2014 (26% said that 'Every real man should undergo military service'). Instead, for them, military service was perceived as an obligation (46% agreed with the statement 'military service – a duty that we owe to the state, even if it does not meet our own interests'). On the other hand, in the same year, residents of small towns viewed the army as an element of socialization into the masculine culture (47% of respondents in towns with less than 100,000 residents agreed that 'Every real man should undergo military service') and a duty served on behalf of the nation.

Attitudes towards military service also vary across social classes. Representatives of the lower social classes were more likely to perceive military service as an important element for building masculinity (48% of respondents in the 'poor' category agreed that 'Every real man should undergo military service'). In fact, income level and perceived wealth were in direct correlation with negative attitudes towards military service. Thirty-three per cent of rich

Table 6: Distribution of answers to the question ‘What is your attitude towards military service?’ Answers by age group.

	18- to 24-year-olds		25- to 39-year-olds		40- to 54-year-olds		55 and older	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
Every real man should undergo military service	27.7	49.7	43.1	52.4	40.4	61.7	44.6	67.9
Military service – a duty that we owe to the state, even if it does not meet our own interests	41.9	23	33.7	27.4	39.6	23.3	47	21.9
Military service – senseless and dangerous business that one should try to avoid by every available means	26.6	19.4	18.9	16	16	10.9	5	6.6
Difficult to say	3.9	7.9	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.1	3.5	3.6

Source: Levada-Center (2015, 2019c). Table by the author.

Table 7: Attitudes towards military service. Distribution of answers for Moscow, other towns and village residents.

	Moscow		500,000+ residents		100,000–500,000		Less than 100,000		Villages	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
Every real man should undergo military service	26.1	49.7	40.1	54.6	40.4	56.9	47.2	66.6	40.1	65.7
Military service – a duty that we owe to the state, even if it does not meet our own interests	46.3	19.5	35.8	26.9	42.9	24.2	41.5	23.6	40.3	23
Military service – senseless and dangerous business that one should try to avoid by every available means	22.1	27.6	18.9	13	12.2	12.5	8.9	5.7	16.3	9.4
Difficult to say	5.4	3.1	5.2	5.5	4.5	6.5	2.3	4.2	3.4	1.9

Source: Levada-Center (2015, 2019c). Table by the author.

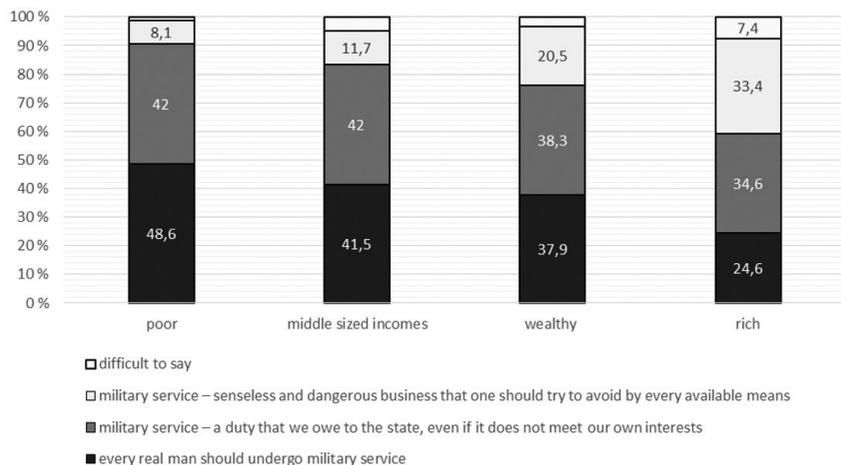


Figure 11: Attitudes towards military service. Distribution of answers for respondents in four income categories: poor, respondents with middle-sized incomes, wealthy, rich.

Source: Levada-Center (2015). Figure by the author.

respondents considered military service to be senseless, and hence something to be avoided. For the rest of the population, including those who were most likely to belong to the (*wealthy*) middle and upper-middle classes, military service was both a duty and a part of the masculine identity (Figure 11). A similar tendency was present in the 2019 respondents from low- and middle-income categories, who were more likely to bind the military service with the masculine identity; 63% shared the opinion that ‘every real man should undergo military service’ (Levada-Center, 2019c).

The general consensus among Russian respondents corresponds with the changes implemented during the military reform. Most young people support the idea that both paid professional soldiers and conscripts should serve in the army. However, older generations (55 years or older) are clearly in favour of the mixed system, whereas among the younger generation’s support for an army consisting of only contract soldiers is significantly higher (Table 8). Between 2014 and 2019, some significant changes are evident: the support for a conscript army has increased across all generations, while support for the mixed military service (current system with both conscript and professional army) has declined.

Table 8: Distribution of answers to the question ‘In your opinion who should serve in the army?’ Comparisons across age groups.

	18–24		25–39		40–54		55 and older	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
Only conscripts according to conscription law	6.9	12.1	5.9	17.5	5.4	16.2	10.8	17.4
Only contracted soldiers who serve for money	41.8	47.3	34.3	33.4	22.6	30.4	19.4	24.3
Both conscripts and contracted soldiers	46.2	38.2	55.2	46.2	65.7	52.1	66.4	52.1
Difficult to say	5.1	2.4	4.6	2.7	6.2	1.3	3.5	5.8

Source: Levada-Center (2015, 2019c). Table by the author.

Age, place of residence, income level and level of attained education are all factors that influence respondents’ trust towards the armed forces. A cross-examination of opinion polls also reveals that the more positive people are in their evaluations of President Putin, the more positive they are about the army in general and military service in particular (see also FOM, 2014). It can be argued that the perception of military service is formed largely through the mass media and is associated with the outcomes of reforms and other actions in relation to the army conducted under President Putin’s leadership. Similar finding is made by Mitikka and Zavadskaya (see Chapter 6, this volume), who show that preferences for a strong political leader positively correlate with patriotism. Interestingly, those respondents who have direct contact with the army (e.g. they have relatives serving in the armed

forces) generally maintain a neutral opinion about the army, but those who have no contacts are confident that the army's image is a positive one (FOM, 2011).

What is more, many young people in the provincial towns see military service as a possibility to advance in society and they are more in favour of a longer duration of conscription service.² However, when they have actually been enlisted as conscripts, and possibly later as contract soldiers, positive expectations often go unrealized. All in all, a majority of Russians are in favour of conscription, and the number of general draft supporters increased from 31% in 2005 to 58% in 2017. Furthermore, a number of Russians who would choose to avoid the draft of a family member decreased from 39% in 2005 to 23% in 2017 (Levada-Center, 2017).

The relatively high trust towards the armed forces as an institution and increasingly positive, albeit not uncontroversial, image of the conscription among the general public are factors that the authorities can use as a resource in recruitment. However, as Mitikka and Zavadskaya show in Chapter 6, while trust in the army has increased, this has not automatically translated into a willingness to fight. In other words, while the trust towards the armed forces has grown quite steadily, the desire to fight is prone to fluctuate depending on the political trends. Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov (2019) has also drawn attention to the inherently ambiguous attitudes towards the armed forces and military service in Russia. As separate individuals, Russians are prone to avoid military service, he says, while as 'the people of Russia', a faceless collective, they tend to approve the Kremlin involvement in the Syrian conflict or in Donbass. This does not entail, Gudkov adds, that people would personally want to get involved in those conflicts or to pay the costs of Kremlin's military interventions. Comparing the current situation to that of the Soviet era, Gudkov observes that, in fact, discussion about the costs of war for society have become a taboo, and instead the war 'is turned into a sacred symbol of the greatness of the Russian state, not subject to doubt and analysis' (*ibid.*; see also Kolesnikov, 2016).

In light of these observations, we may formulate a hypothesis for further research. Accordingly, it seems logical that the Russian armed forces are currently facilitating military-political training among the conscripts and military personnel. In this way, the military may capitalize on the growing trust towards the army by further consolidating a positive image of the armed forces, and, seemingly most important, by creating social and discursive practices that will enhance and consolidate moral and political views as well as willingness to fight. To ascertain whether the reorganization of the military-political work is primarily oriented towards the latter task would require different types of research material (e.g. interviews) that is not available at the moment. The next section provides an overview of the officially stated goals for military-political training and can be used as a background of the further, more detailed, research on this topic. The section starts with a short description of the pre-draft training that forms an important part of the recruitment of the young people into the armed forces.

Reorganization of Military-Political Training in the Russian Armed Forces

The development of pre-draft training

Taking into account current demographic trends in Russia, that is, expected small cohorts of young men of draft age, the Russian authorities seek to influence a number of other factors including: effectiveness of draft, the reward system, population's health, and motivation to serve in the military. This section will discuss changes in the latter sphere, namely to the reform of military-political training system.

In recent years, the Russian authorities have introduced new legal measures to increase the number of recruits to the armed forces. The administrative measures aimed to limit grounds for avoiding conscription include: loosening of medical regulations on fitness, introducing fewer grounds for postponing military service, and

allowing foreigners to sign up (Prezident Rossii, 2013, 2015). For example, hospitals are required to send medical data on potential conscripts to the military district commissariats throughout the year. As a consequence, ‘the disqualification of a draftee on medical grounds will become much more difficult to fake’ (Isakova, 2006, p. 28). In March 2015, the Russian State Duma approved the law, in accordance with which a young employee of the government and municipal organization, if found to be illegally avoiding conscription (*uklonist*), must be released from the job and will be banned for 10 years from working in these organizations (Gosudarstvennâ Duma, 2015). Furthermore, in the early 2000s, military patrols tried to track down such young men in public places. Since 2010, almost all search activities have been in the form of raids on the homes of the young men. Both military personnel and police visit the addresses where the young men are registered and investigate other possible addresses where they might be found (Alekseeva, 2014; Peredruk, 2014). The efficiency of these and other measures in resolving the demography problem is difficult to estimate, in part because there are systemic flaws in reporting the number of conscripts drafted into the armed forces annually.

Preparing young people for military service falls within the remit of youth policy in Russia and is formulated in accordance with the State Programs for Patriotic Education (SPPE). The organizations involved in this process include governmental organizations (Rospatriottsentr, Russian Fleet Support Fund), mixed public–state organizations (DOSAAF, Ûnarmiâ, Russian Military-Historical Society) and non-governmental organizations (including Cossacks organizations) (Krasnâ zvezda, 2018). While the Defence Ministry oversees the patriotic education, its implementation relies heavily on the Ministry of Education, the Federal Youth Agency, local education youth work authorities, educational institutions, and primarily schools. Jonna Alava’s Chapter 9 in this volume provides an overview of the military-patriotic education provided by the recently established Ûnarmiâ and therefore the focus here will be on the pre-draft training provided for the future conscripts in Russia.

The main purpose of the pre-draft training is to improve the physical and mental condition of the conscripts *before* they engage in military service. This policy has long roots in the Soviet period but due to financial and organizational dysfunction it almost ceased to exist during the 1990s and later. In February 2010, a new concept for the federal-level systemic preparation of the recruitment-age population was accepted and a special inter-departmental committee³ was established to facilitate and monitor the implementation of the planned activities. The concept outlines that the facilitation of the training will be implemented in four phases between 2009 and 2020.

The organization responsible for the actual pre-training as well as the patriotic education of young people is called the Voluntary Association for Assistance to the Army, Air Force, and Navy (Obšerossijskaâ obšestvenno-gosudarstvennaâ organizaciâ “Dobrovol’noe obšestvo sodejstviâ armii, aviicii i flotu Rossii, DOSAAF⁴). In the Soviet period, retired officers used to prepare high school children for conscript service (Thornton, 2011). Currently, the organization is supervised by the Russian government, the Russian president and the key power ministries. The main tasks of the DOSAAF include the development of military-sport education, the training of pilots in selected polytechnic institutions, the military education of reserves, the education of specialists in various technical professions, participation in catastrophe prevention and emergency situations, and the maintenance of the organization during mobilization and wartime (Tarvainen, 2012, p. 27).

In 2018, 460,000 young people took part in the DOSAAF training at over 1,000 training centres around Russia (DOSAAF Rossii, 2019a). The Defence Ministry reported that 27,000, or 17.8%, from 135,000 conscripts recruited in spring 2019 had participated in DOSAAF and vocational school training programmes (Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii, 2019c; Rossijskaâ gazeta, 2019). Not all of DOSAAF trainees eventually enter military service. If we divide those who annually complete DOSAAF training by two (for the spring and autumn drafts), that means that hypothetically around 230,000 trainees are available for the

spring draft, while only 12% (27,000) of conscripts had DOSAAF training in 2018. That makes around 12% of DOSAAF trainees entering military service.

The expected decline in the size of future generations, and problems encountered in recruiting well-educated and motivated conscripts, has forced the military planners to abandon the system based wholly on conscripts and reservists. The current Russian armed forces are a combination of conscript-based forces and 'professional' troops. The latter are volunteers who may, after their 12-month military service, become contract-employed soldiers (*kontraktniks*) with a salary and better conditions. However, according to Roger N. McDermott (2011) and others (see e.g. Thornton, 2011), this system has largely failed to attract volunteers into the armed forces or to increase the predictability required for planning. According to more recent estimates, the Russian Ministry of Defence has managed to increase the number of contract-employed soldiers significantly, although it falls short of the original plan (of 425,000 contract soldiers in 2017). However, the recruitment is likely to become increasingly difficult in the future because of the growing competition of the smaller cohorts of young people among the Russian armed forces, other troop formations (e.g. the National Guard) and the civilian sector for young recruits (Westerlund and Oxenstierna, 2019, pp. 23–24). Against this background, the efforts to further improve the image of the Russian armed forces seem logical.

New obligations for the military-political directorate

Changes introduced in July 2018 to the organization of military-political training in the Russian armed forces seem to have reinvigorated previous Soviet practices. The Main Military Political Directorate was the central military institution in charge of propaganda, ideology and political control in the army in the Soviet Union. It was established amid controversy in spring 1918, primarily to ensure the loyalty of the former tsarist military officers in the Red Army (Kolkowicz, 1967, pp. 81–82). The main task of commissars was to represent the political authority, execute

control over military personnel, and prevent and respond to possible unrest in the army. The Main Political Directorate existed until 1991 as the main controlling organization of the Communist Party in the military. In post-Soviet Russia the military commissars remained only in the conscription centres – called military commissariats – and were in charge of conscription and the organization of mobilization. Furthermore, commissars were tasked with ‘forming [the] ideologically firm personality of a serviceman’ and ‘cohesive military collectives’ and their control extended to soldiers and officers (Izvestiâ, 2018a; Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii, 2019c).

The July 2018 presidential decree assigned several new tasks to the Ministry of Defence. Accordingly, the ministry was tasked with organizing ‘military-political work’ and developing information services, enhancing the prestige of military service in society, preserving and enhancing military-patriotic traditions and organizing historical, cultural and training activities to support these objectives. With the same decree, General-Colonel Andrei Kartapolov was nominated as the head of the Military Political Directorate, responsible for the military-political work in the Russian armed forces (Prezident Rossii, 2018).

The newly created organization was expected to vitalize the military-political work within the military and in so doing contribute to the ‘implementing of the state defense policy, maintaining the moral-political and psychological conditions, law, order, and military discipline in the armed forces, forming ideologically firm personality of a serviceman, cohesive military collectives capable of completing their missions in any situation’ (Kommersant, 2018; Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii, 2019c). In effect, the directorate has absorbed the structures of the General Staff Directorate, in particular the Department of Culture. The directorate is also in charge of *Ūnarmiâ* – a youth military organization (see more details in Alava, Chapter 9, this volume) – the patriotic education programmes for civilian population, the ministry’s press service and all media production (including over 20 periodicals, the TV, and radio stations).

Furthermore, the new law 'On the Status of Military Personnel' that was passed in spring 2019 assigns the military commanders with a new duty: they would be responsible for moral-political conditions in their units (Prezident Rossii, 2019). The explanatory note of the law defines 'the moral-political conditions' as follows:

Moral, political and psychological conditions are understood as a combination of personal ideological and political attitudes, moral values, behavioral motives and moods that have developed under the influence of a system of socio-political and psychological factors that affect the moral readiness and psychological ability of personnel to carry out tasks. The moral-political and psychological conditions are the result of the activation and actualization by the personnel of previously perceived, consciously and internally accepted goals of state policy aimed at ensuring the country's defense and security. (Poâsnitel'naâ zapiska, 2019)

The concept of 'moral-political training' is familiar from the Soviet military lexicon, where it stands for the protection of the socialist Fatherland, spirit of victory, and upbringing of patriotism and proletarian internationalism (Ministerstvo oborony SSSR, 1986, p. 457). In the 2002 Russian military dictionary this term was replaced with the concept of 'moral-psychological training'. It referred to the psychological-moral qualities of the soldier required for maintaining courage and discipline required for success in the battlefield. The collective and individual training included protection of the military personnel from the information-psychological influence of the adversary (Ministerstvo oborony Rossijskoj Federacii, 2002, pp. 938–939). In fact, in the earlier version of the law 'On the Status of Military Personnel' commanders were responsible for the troops' 'moral-psychological conditions', that is, for their moral spirit, psychological conditions, discipline and order as counteraction to enemy's informational-psychological influence (Garant, 2019).

The difference between these two conceptualizations is that the Soviet version and the formulation included in the 2019 law refer explicitly to the formation of a collective political consciousness

among military personnel. The insertion of the task of cultivating and controlling of ‘personal ideological and political attitudes’ may indicate that the Main Military Political Directorate attempts to respond to what they perceive as weaknesses: a diversity of ideological views and political attitudes in the military. If this is the case, the policy line undermines the key principles of civil–military relations in the democratic political system and, thus, signals further consolidation of the authoritarian, semi-totalitarian political system in Russia (Rogov, 2016).

The State Duma Deference Committee, in its conclusion on the above-mentioned draft law, pointed out that the new model of military-political training ‘is different both from the Soviet model and that of the post-Soviet military-patriotic education’. The aim of the reform is the ‘formation of a reliable and devoted defender of the Fatherland, a bearer of the traditional spiritual and moral values of the Russian society, a patriot and a state-defender’ (in Russian: *gosudartvennik*) (Komitet Gosudarstvennoj Dumy po oborone, 2019). The concept of *gosudarstvennik* refers in this connection to the ideal of all-encompassing state where individuals are expected to serve the state, not the other way around.

During the first press conference as the new head of the directorate, General-Colonel Kartapolov emphasized that one of the main aspects of military-political training is the development of soldiers’ moral spirit. According to Kartapolov, ‘it is this spirit that manifests itself in battle – it is heroism, a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of completing a combat mission or for the sake of one’s comrades’ (RBK, 2018). Unlike in Soviet times, when heroism was envisioned in the context of Communist ideology, the reference point for sacrifice in Kartapolov’s description is Orthodox religion. The *Kursk* tragedy, discussed in the next chapter (see Kahla, Chapter 10, this volume), demonstrates this shift vividly.

The return of politruks to the ranks

The cultivation of military-political qualities is delegated to commanders of units, who will receive special training. During the

Soviet era, these officers were also called ‘commissars’ and later ‘politruks’ (from the Russian word *političeskij rukovoditel’*, a political leader). In the current Russian army organization, officers tasked with military-political education serve as deputy unit commanders (when the unit has more than 50 servicemen) or instructors (when the unit has fewer than 50 servicemen) in the rank of sergeant serving on contract (Èho Moskvyy, 2019). In 2018, the Main Military Political Directorate published the training curricula for the new politruks (Armejskij sbornik, 2018). As early as 2018, a staffing table for motorized rifle companies included the political officers and it was expected that in forthcoming years political officers and instructors would be introduced throughout the military structure (Izvestiâ, 2018b). Furthermore, the Defence Ministry was expected to publish teaching material on current political affairs in Russia and abroad (Èho Moskvyy, 2019).

Colonel Ryzhov describes the plan for military-political education in an article published in late 2018 (Armejskij sbornik, 2018). Accordingly, army personnel should attend at least one hour of military-political training every week, or 15–20 minutes of instructions preceding regular daily military training exercises. The content of political training should reflect the specificities of the operational environment, especially during the preparation of a unit for counter-terror, combat or peacekeeping operations. Training curricula outlined 60 hours of annual political training for officers, 80 hours for contract soldiers and 160 hours for conscripts. According to Colonel Ryzhov, the main mission of the newly established Military Political Directorate is to counter ‘the Western anti-Russian propaganda conducted by the USA and its satellites during an open information war’ (Armejskij sbornik, 2018). As outlined later by Kartapolov (see Krasnaâ zvezda, 2019), this objective can be attained by way of ‘forming among the personnel of the armed forces (and the Russian society as a whole) of political consciousness, high moral and strong-willed qualities, immunity to ideological and cultural values that are alien to our society’. This interpretation of tasks ahead of the new directorate are commensurable with the emphasis in both the Military Doctrine

(Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii, 2014) and the National Security Strategy (Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossijskoj Federacii, 2015) of the need to protect and consolidate Russian traditional values and cultural integrity.

Conclusions

During the past two decades the Russian government has developed and implemented significant reform of the armed forces. These changes reflect the manning problems caused by objective (demography and health) and subjective (attitudes of population towards army and government) factors, on the perceived external and internal threats (increasing readiness to use various means of warfare against broadly defined threats), on the situation in the army (motivation for contract service and corruption). Almost two decades of patriotic upbringing programmes implemented across the country in the form of commemoration of the Second World War and military training for pupils, the dominance of the state in the traditional electronic media has brought some positive results in increasing the population's trust towards the army.

The government and army leadership have directed significant resources at pre-military training (Ūnarmiâ, DOSAAF) and developed forms of cooperation between the state and the public sector (Cossack organizations), which allowed recruitment to start at a significantly early stage when future conscripts are attending secondary school. While the possibilities to choose civil service remain very limited, the government continues to develop the new incentives for young people to join the armed forces: stable employment, preferences for further careers in state companies etc.

The reintroduction of political officers in the armed forces is expected to facilitate changes in several directions. It is hoped to strengthen the army's control over the political moods of soldiers and officers (a role similar to the Soviet commissars and politruks). The political training is intended to present the image of the enemy and rightfulness of the government's mission and goals, and consequently to strengthen the ideological unity of

the army and tackle the possible discrepancies at an early stage. All in all, the political leadership in Russia seeks to strengthen the loyalty of military personnel towards the political leadership and increase control among the ranks. These are the objectives set for military-political training. Further research is required to ascertain to what extent and in what respect the reintroduction of military-political training has been successful, to understand the changes in civil–military relations and the potential repercussions of the militarization of Russian society.

Notes

- ¹ This article is based on research published originally at: Ssynarenko, A. (2016). The Russian Demography Problem and the Armed Forces Trends and Challenges Until 2035. Finnish Defence Research Agency, URL: <https://puolustusvoimat.fi/documents/1948673/2015525/The+Russian+demography+problem+and+the+armed+forces+Trends+and+challenges+until+2035/a2ef95eb-b9ab-4563-ba31-cc1010b3c20c>.
- ² At the age of 38, most officers reach the 20-year service mark and become eligible for a good pension and various social benefits (Surkova, 2012).
- ³ There is little information available on committee meetings or reports the committee is obliged to provide for the government. The Ministry of Defence publishes a summary of the main targets on its website: <http://recrut.mil.ru/career/conscription/preparation/voluntary.htm>.
- ⁴ The organization was established in the 1920s and it had important functions in the Soviet military system until the very end of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s the organization was renamed the Russian Defence Sports-Technical Organization (ROSTO), which undertook responsibility for training the pre-draft-age young men in sports and technical military training. In 2009 the organization regained its original DOSAAF name. In December 2011 it had around 1,000 regional departments and over 300,000 members (Tarvainen, 2012, p. 27; see also DOSAAF Rossii, 2019b).

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