

Conscript Army of Flutists

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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General Nikolai Makarov, chief of the General Staff, caused a stir last week after he said to journalists: “We aim to create a professional army. We can’t make it happen in a short time period, but year by year there will be an increase in the number of contract military personnel.”

Interestingly enough, only one month ago Makarov said the exact opposite. “We will not switch to a contract-based army. Instead, we will be drafting more soldiers ...” to fill the gap.

Moreover, Makarov and Ground Forces chief Alexander Postnikov said earlier this year that the much-acclaimed program run between 2003 and 2008 to create separate units made up of contract soldiers had definitively failed. At that point, the top brass decided to rely exclusively on conscripts to fill the ranks, arguing that this was the only way to achieve a million-man army.

But the main problem is that political and military leaders ignored a basic demographic reality that makes it impossible to draft 750,000 new conscripts a year even under the best

recruitment efforts. There simply aren't that many able 18-year-olds in the country.

Nonetheless, Vasily Smirnov, head of the General Staff's organization and mobilization department, reassured the top brass that there is a pool of roughly 1 million young men in their 20s who dodged the draft over the past eight years. If the army recruitment office rounds up a good percentage of these guys, Smirnov argues, the armed forces can meet their conscription quotas.

With only two weeks remaining before the new year, the moment of truth on conscription has come. Even now, as police in the major cities are busy trying to prevent clashes between ethnic Russians and people from the North Caucasus, many police officers are being diverted from their primary duties to rounding up conscripts. Recruiters are feeling a lot of pressure because the law requires that the 2010 conscription be completed by Dec. 31, and they are way off on their numbers.

This may explain an early morning raid on a dormitory at the Moscow Conservatory of Music to round up about 40 flutists and clarinetists. A few days earlier, police officers descended upon several hundred graduate students in Voronezh. The government is using the police to force young men into the army who have a legal right to defer their military service. But army recruiters are fully aware that even if the hapless students are able to prove their right to a deferment, they will be unable to escape serving in Russia's armed forces. The conscription quota needs to be fulfilled.

When the army is desperate enough to hunt down graduate students and musicians, it is clear that the top brass has run out of ideas. For example, only 70 percent of the conscription quota was fulfilled in the Voronezh region, and only 65 percent in the Khabarovsk region. In some cases, police have refused to participate in raids to snatch up conscripts, arguing that this is not their job.

In short, the entire conscription system is disintegrating. Judging from his recent statements, the head of the General Staff realizes that a professional army is the only option available to make the armed forces combat-ready.

To be sure, it is possible that Makarov, who in the past has been known to toss out this kind of off-the-cuff remarks, may at some point go back on his word. In any case, it is revealing that Russia's most senior general considers the ideal army to be one based on contract service, and not a mixture of professional and conscripted soldiers.

In early 2008, the term for conscript service was decreased from two years to one. As a result, the entire Russian army is composed of short-term conscripts, half of whom at any given moment will have served fewer than six months.

On paper, Russia has a nominally full-staffed army, but it is woefully unprepared to fight in even a small-scale military conflict. Judging by Makarov's call for a professional army, it appears that he has finally acknowledged publicly how bad things really are.

Reportedly, 120 of the roughly 2,000 young, battle-ready people who were detained on Saturday in Moscow in connection with protests and clashes between ethnic Russians and people from the North Caucasus were turned over to the army to serve as conscripts. The

recruiters are probably thinking that this could be a good source of manpower, but the army will never make its number even if all 2,000 are conscripted.

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