

Shoigu's Crafty Numbers Game

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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During its annual conference on Wednesday, the Defense Ministry will report not only on the results of the past year but also on important lines of development in the armed forces — particularly the system for manning the armed forces and prospects for its modernization.

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Recall that back in September, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu promised the Defense Ministry Public Council that in November he would announce the number of contract soldiers needed for the armed forces. He promised to cut "tens of thousands" of conscripts. Shoigu explained that the reduction would eliminate the need to seek out and catch large numbers of 18-year-olds in the country's largest cities who are evading mandatory service. And now, after speaking with Putin, Shoigu has announced that the army will require 499,000 contract soldiers by 2020. Optimistic observers considered this as the long-awaited reduction to military conscription. The math is simple: By adding the existing 220,000 officers, the 60,000 or so cadets in military academies and the 499,000 contract soldiers, we get a total of about 780,000 professional soldiers. Staffing a million-man army requires drafting another 220,000 recruits, about 100,000 fewer than the current number of conscripts.

Thus, it seems Shoigu has fulfilled his promise to reduce the number of conscripts. Of course, it will take seven years to accomplish, but better late than never. And it would seem to corroborate Shoigu's statement that "we continue to create a professional army." But the devil is in the details. The Defense Ministry has happily reported that it brought in 70,000 professional soldiers this year, fully 12 percent more than planned, according to Shoigu. The problem is that 30,000 contract soldiers left the service over the same period, leaving a net gain of only 40,000 soldiers, at least 10,000 fewer than needed.

A separate question is which figure to take as a starting point. If you take the Defense Ministry's statistics seriously, it turns out that, despite the Herculean efforts of the last 10 years, the number of contract soldiers hovers around 200,000 enlisted men and sergeants. For example, last year they numbered 186,000 and this year, 205,000. However, the Defense Ministry's development plan calls for 240,000 contract soldiers by year's end. The truth is, as long as the Defense Ministry continues to manipulate the figures, it is impossible to reach any reliable conclusions about prospects for staffing the army.

The funny thing is that the Defense Minister made no mention of what miracle he plans to work in order to fulfill the president's order to have a million-man army by 2015. According to the figures given in the development plan, even if all the necessary contract soldiers sign up, at least 450,000 conscripts are needed — and this despite the fact that, in recent years, even by hook or by crook the army has never managed to corral more than 350,000 recruits per year.

Without a political decision to abandon the call for a million-man army, no serious changes to the system for manning the armed forces are possible. But that would require that someone gather the courage to inform Putin that it is physically impossible to carry out his order.

Even more important, Shoigu introduced a major caveat when he said that "the schedule for bringing in contract soldiers will be synchronized with the arrival of new technology. That is, our goal is not to have as many contract soldiers as possible, but to recruit them only as the need arises." In other words, there will be no new equipment and no additional contract soldiers. This calls to mind six unusual meetings that Putin held and that were reportedly devoted to the fulfillment of state orders for specific weapons systems. The first reason they were strange is that five were held without the participation of the defense minister or Dmitry Rogozin, the deputy prime minister responsible for defense issues. Some analysts even speculate that from now on, the presidential administration will oversee weapons production

directly.

Another odd thing about these meetings is that, according to the transcripts, Putin assembled senior defense contractors for no other reason than to hear them report on how wonderfully their work is progressing. Their dialogue sounds like something from the theater of the absurd. Here's an excerpt:

Putin, addressing the director of a production facility: The equipment you are receiving, is it modern, technologically advanced?

Director: Yes, it is modern, technologically advanced.

Putin: Good.

Surprisingly, Putin summed up his round of little chats by saying that the meetings had been substantive and even hard-hitting, and he ominously threatened to follow up in six months to learn if the officials are "carrying out their agreements." I would venture to suggest that, despite the enormous sums spent on arms production — 1.5 trillion rubles (\$45.8 billion) this year alone — production has not increased at all. That is why Putin is using administrative measures in an attempt to push the defense industry into action.

So, there is no guarantee that the defense industry will fulfill the plans for modernizing weapons and military equipment. And that, in turn, gives the Defense Ministry the perfect excuse for failing to recruit the planned number of contract soldiers. In the end, the promise to have 500,000 professional soldiers will remain a dream, just like the promise to significantly reduce the number of conscripts.

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