The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What You Need to Know About Joining the Russian Army

By Matthew Bodner

January 12, 2015



By allowing foreign citizens to join its ranks, the Russian military has moved beyond most other modern militaries.

Tried to join the French Foreign Legion and didn't make the cut? Don't fret — the Russian military has created its own force of foreign citizens to fight Moscow's wars.

The Russian Defense Ministry last month announced that foreigners could enlist in the Russian military, a move ostensibly aimed at legalizing the status of citizens of former Soviet republics already serving, but its ranks are open to all foreigners — provided they speak good Russian and have clean criminal records.

President Vladimir Putin signed the new policy into force on Jan. 2, five years after the proposal had originally been made.

Now "foreign servicemen can participate in operations during martial law, as well as in armed

conflicts, in accordance with [the] generally accepted principles of international law, international agreements and Russian legislation," said the order, published on the Kremlin website.

Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, a Moscow-based defense think tank, explained to The Moscow Times that the change was finally implemented to provide legal status to locals already serving on Russian bases in Armenia and Tajikistan.

Furthermore, as salaries for Russian civilians continue to outpace those offered by military service contracts, the new law is seen as a way to fill the military with migrant workers, Pukhov said. The reported salary for a contract soldier in the Russian army is 30,000 rubles ($500) a month.

But while the law may be aimed primarily at citizens of Russia's near abroad who are already working for Russian rubles, there are no restrictions written in the document prohibiting citizens of countries beyond Moscow's traditional sphere of influence from enlisting.

Defense Ministry spokesperson Igor Konashenkov, when asked by The Moscow Times by phone on Monday if, for example, a U.S. citizen could join the Russian army, said simply that the guidelines for foreign contractors are listed on the department's website.

Indeed, the ministry's website for prospective contractors provides all the useful information you need to join — including where to find a recruitment officer and sample professional exams to gauge your own competency.

Service Guarantees Citizenship

By allowing foreign citizens to join its ranks, the Russian military has moved beyond most other modern militaries. Typically, foreigners are allowed to join another nation's military only after establishing residency, or by special agreements between their governments.

In the U.S., for example, foreigners can only join the military if they are permanent residents with a green card. While service in the U.S. military does not in itself entitle a foreigner to U.S. citizenship, foreign contractors will be eligible for Russian citizenship after their five-year contract is concluded.

In this way, the Russian military is taking a page from the French Foreign Legion, which since the 1800s has existed as a largely foreign-staffed military force. Legionnaires, who historically have served on the front lines of France's wars, can apply for citizenship after three years of service with the French Foreign Legion, or immediately if wounded in action.

But while Russia may make joining its army easy, serving in an active combat role can jeopardize a foreign soldier's citizenship status in their country of origin.

Although not patently illegal, a U.S. citizen cannot be recruited by a foreign military force on U.S. soil, although a Supreme Court ruling allows citizens to go abroad for the purpose of joining a foreign army.

However, all of this is contingent on who you are fighting for and against — serving in a

foreign military actively fighting against the U.S. or its allies will be interpreted by the U.S. government as a desire to relinquish one's U.S. citizenship.

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Original url:
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