The Moscow Times
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Russian Army Attracts Tajikistan's Unemployed

By The Moscow Times

March 17, 2015



Russian army is ready to give a paying job to a few members of Tajikistan's legion of unemployed men.

This article was originally published by EurasiaNet.org

As of this year, there's an army that's ready to give a paying job to a few members of Tajikistan's legion of unemployed men—Russia's.

The 201st Russian Military Base in Tajikistan has long employed local soldiers. But they were prohibited from fighting under the Russian flag abroad. Now, a law signed by President Vladimir Putin on January 2 allows foreign citizens to fight for Mother Russia anywhere in the world.

The timing appears connected to Moscow's standoff with the West, and the Ukrainian crisis, in which Kremlin-backed separatists are fighting against the Ukrainian army and pro-Kiev militia units. There have been unconfirmed reports recently that several thousand of the

7,000-strong contingent stationed at Russia's 201st base in Tajikistan have been transferred to the Ukrainian border. Russian military spokespeople deny that — and deny that Russian troops are engaged in hostilities anywhere. But in any case, the new legislation would allow Russia to fill positions at its Tajik base with local troops.

The idea has been on the table since 2003, but only received Putin's support recently, according to Yaroslav Roshchupkin, a Yekaterinburg-based spokesman for Russia's Central Military District. The Central Military District is responsible for administering the 201st base in Tajikistan, Russia's largest military outpost abroad.

Roshchupkin paints the initiative largely as an economic gift for the impoverished Central Asian nation, noting that Tajik soldiers are eligible for the same benefits as any Russian citizen, plus are able to obtain fast-tracked Russian citizenship.

"First, it is not the Russian army that needs recruits from Tajikistan. But we provide them this opportunity because many wish to get Russian citizenship. Contract soldiers get Russian citizenship through a simplified procedure and they can get a [low-interest] mortgage through the military," Roshchupkin told EurasiaNet.org. He added that the number of Tajiks who have joined the Russian military is a secret.

Roshchupkin said monthly salaries for soldiers at the base range from 17,000 rubles ($273) to 70,000 rubles ($1,125). Tajikistan has the lowest average monthly salary in the former Soviet Union, about $180, according to the CIS Interstate Statistics Committee.

There are no reliable statistics on unemployment in Tajikistan, but more than a million people — about half the working-age male population — are believed to spend at least part of the year working as laborers in Russia. They often perform the lowest-paying and most dangerous jobs, such as sweeping streets and working on construction sites. Their remittances account for the equivalent of almost half of Tajikistan's GDP.

This year, new Russian legislation has made labor migrants' lives a lot more difficult by demanding expensive tests and work permits. Russian citizenship would provide a way to circumvent those hassles.

Roshchupkin said the 201st base is not equipped to accept applications and added that Tajiks, for now, must travel to Russia — as many already do to search for work — to enlist at a recruitment office there. Priority is given to those who speak Russian and have military training.

Until this month, enlisting could have violated Tajik law, which under a bill passed last year, mandates 12-20 years in prison for citizens who take part in hostilities abroad on behalf of a foreign army or armed group. But this month Dushanbe made an exception for men fighting in the Russian military. Nasrullo Makhmudov, who was a member of the Tajik parliament's Committee on Legislation and Human Rights until this month, said anyone fighting for the Russian army would not be prosecuted in Tajikistan. He added that the law only applies to so-called "illegal formations" — such as militant groups in places like Syria.

"I think that Tajik citizens must serve in the official Tajik army. However, there are times when a person has left the country and cannot serve. [...] It is up to them. If they want, they

can serve in the Russian army," Makhmudov told EurasiaNet.org.

A Tajik contract soldier serving Russia at the 201st base, who joined the Russian army in 2014, said he chose to serve in Dushanbe. He cannot be identified because Russian legislation prohibits soldiers from giving interviews to the press.

"Here I am quite close to my family and parents. I have received Russian citizenship already. In a short time, when I sign the extension of my contract, I will be able to get a [low-interest] military mortgage," he told EurasiaNet.org.

He says that when he signed his contract, he clearly understood that he is obligated to fight for Russia, should Russia demand it. He counts himself lucky for being based near home, and understands he could be sent anywhere at any time.

The cousin of another Dushanbe man was transferred from the 201st base to Crimea early this year. "We call each other. He says he does not like Crimea and that everything is very expensive there, but he has to stay there. By the end of this year he is promised an apartment and he will be able to take his family there," the Dushanbe man said, speaking on condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize his cousin's career.

Could the Russian recruitment hurt the notoriously understaffed Tajik military? Tajik Ministry of Defense Spokesperson Faridun Makhmadaliyev says no, because Tajiks are patriots. "They will never refuse their poor mother in favor of a rich one," he said.

"People stand in line to serve in the army," Makhmadaliyev told EurasiaNet.org. "We can even choose the best candidates for the Tajik army."

That assertion contradicts widespread reports of poor conditions and hazing in the ranks, as well as well-documented press-ganging during the annual draft.

Dushanbe-based security expert Sulton Khamad said that the option of Tajik citizens serving in the Russian army might benefit the country. He reasoned that it could make the Tajik army an attractive training ground for soldiers seeking to join the Russian army. And, more prosaically, Tajikistan needs the jobs. "This could help us address the unemployment problem in our country," Khamad said.

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