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Russians Learn to Love the Army

A new poll shows Russian support for the military and conscription is on the rise.

By Matthew Bodner

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Sergei Savostyanov / TASS

Draft dodging was once Russia's national sport. But society's attitude toward compulsory military service is changing. For the third straight year in a row, the majority of Russians support conscription, a recent poll by the independent Levada Center shows.

The poll also found that 84 percent of respondents would enlist today if Russia were attacked by a foreign power — a 20-year record.

As with most issues of Russian public opinion, support for the draft is dependent on world events. Or, more exactly, on how Russian state media covers world events. During the late 1990s and 2000s, when the military was in decay, most Russians opposed the draft.

Russians with means and education usually found their way out of the draft by expensive and less-than-legal means. With stories of hazing and elevated suicide rates, most considered it a price worth paying.

From 1997 to 2006, no more than 35 percent of respondents supported the draft in an annual Levada Center poll. But in 2007, President Vladimir Putin began to chart a more assertive foreign policy.

The turning point came in 2008. Russia and Georgia went to war. NATO was portrayed as a boogeyman in the Russian media. The number of respondents who supported the draft surged above 40 percent.

“According to our data, if military campaigns are short, victorious and not costly, support is higher,” says Denis Volkov a sociologist at Levada Center. “But during longer wars, such as in Chechnya, the level of support is lower.”

The Levada Center poll gave respondents two choices — support the draft, or support a voluntary army. Increasing support for conscription corresponded to less support for a volunteer military, and vice versa.

Historically, the Russian public has been in favor of ending the draft. At its peak in 2002, 64 percent of respondents supported contract service reforms. The rejection of the draft was always most pronounced in Russia’s advanced cities, says Volkov: “In rural areas, it was one of few mechanisms of upward mobility.”

It was not until former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov took office in 2007 that the military began to take the idea of a professional army seriously. Since 2009, professional recruitment has become a major focus of the ministry.

Serdyukov's reforms were not limited to recruitment practices. In 2010, the military embarked on a monumental modernization drive. The goal was to rebuild the combat potential of the decrepit Soviet-built force. The term of compulsory service was reduced from two years to one.

These modernization efforts have become a staple of the state media's patriotic messaging effort. Media coverage obsesses over the latest Russian military vehicles and weapons. Russians again see their military as a force to be reckoned with.

This is reflected in Russian attitudes toward service. While the military has come around to the idea of volunteer forces, the public now thinks otherwise, and are now in favor of a national draft. Perhaps more telling, they are also more open to family members serving under the draft.

2017 saw a record number of respondents — 61 percent — say they would support a family member following through with their draft orders. Only 23 percent supported draft dodging, down from a peak of 53 percent in 2006.

At the same time, in 2017 fewer Russians said they believe the country faces an imminent military threat from abroad. These sentiments peaked at 68 percent in 2015, during the height of the Ukraine crisis. This year that number is down to 58 percent. The percentage of

respondents who did not believe there was a threat also jumped from 22 to 34 percent over the same period.

A question closely related to the issue of conscription and contract soldiers is the Russian attitude toward mercenaries. Mercenaries are currently illegal, but recent proposals suggest Moscow is considering a change.

The Levada Center, for the first time in the history of the poll, asked Russians what they thought of mercenaries. Russians may respond well to increased levels of militarization, but so far that support is limited to service of the state. Only 28 percent supported legalizing soldiers of fortune.

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