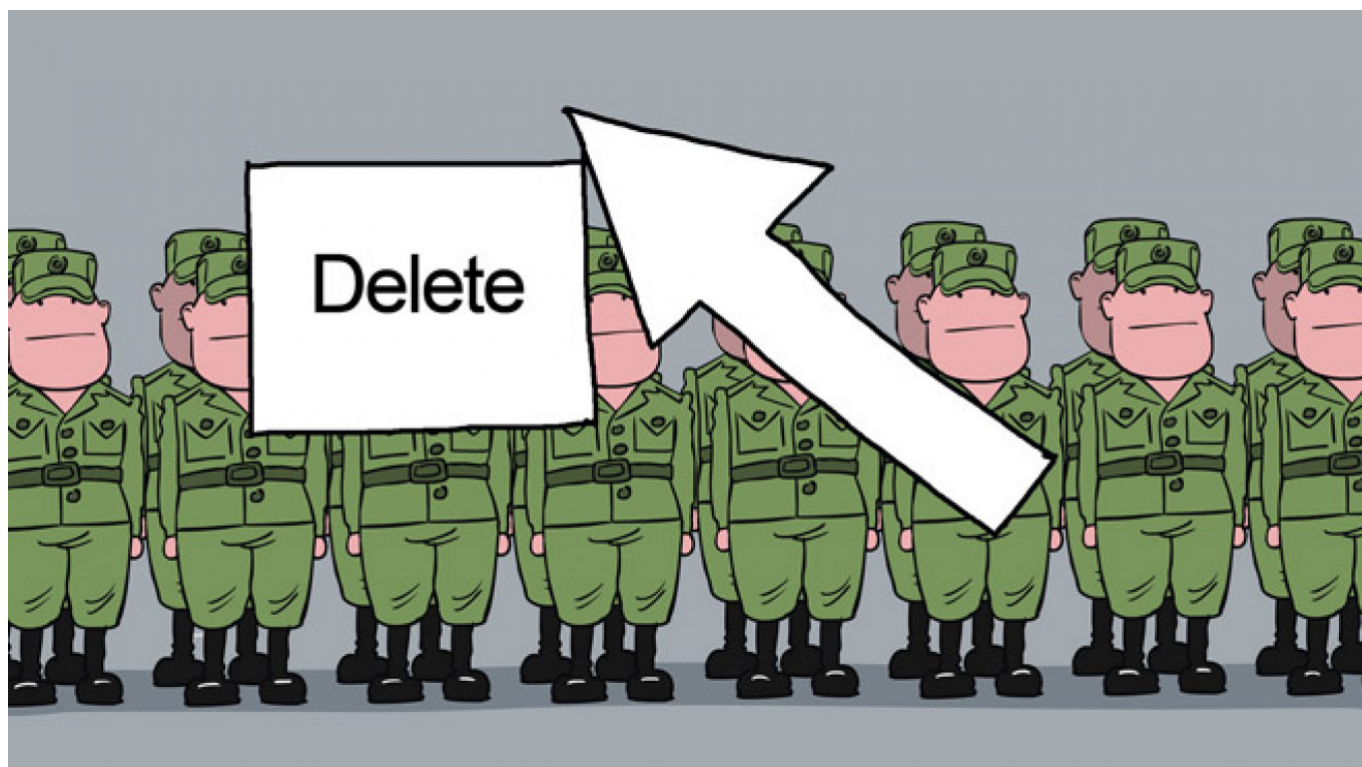


Russian Army Facing Big Problems in Ukraine

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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To be honest, I do not believe that a military conflict like the one that has continued for almost a year in Ukraine can be halted through exhortations, persuasion or international agreements.

Russian President Vladimir Putin would only agree to a settlement in order to end the rapid depletion of Russia's financial resources as it fights a so-called "hybrid war."

But the problem goes beyond money: Several years ago Moscow reorganized its armed forces such that it is now extremely difficult to fight a protracted military conflict of the ordinary type.

Ekho Moskvy radio recently cited Tajik media in reporting that about 3,000 Russian soldiers at the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan would be deployed to the Ukrainian border, with additional troops to come from the Tajik population.

According to the sources cited, that question was discussed at the latest meeting between Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov and Central Military District commander Vladimir Zarudnitsky. An indirect corroboration of this information is that the Russian military has just now launched a massive effort to train Tajik soldiers.

Keep in mind that the Central Military District is responsible for the Central Asian republics. After the Western Coalition withdraws from Afghanistan, it will be only a matter of months before radical Islam begins creeping into the former Soviet republics.

To its credit, Russia's top brass prepared the army in advance for that eventuality. It hurriedly created rapid reaction forces to thwart an attack by the Taliban and international terrorists. As a result, Russian commanders have at their disposal up to 20 battle-ready units manned primarily by contract soldiers. And yet they were deployed not to Central Asia, but to Russia's border with Ukraine.

Those forces were trained to handle short-term conflicts such as eliminating advancing Taliban fighters and quickly returning to base. However, the conflict in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine has become a protracted battle, and Russia's well-trained rapid-reaction forces alone are not enough to maintain the momentum.

It seems that commanders have decided to deploy every soldier with even a modicum of training to the Ukrainian border. The 201st military base must provide the rapid deployment of Russian forces in case of a crisis.

However, if half of the soldiers are poorly trained locals, that task will prove difficult, if not impossible. And by concentrating on the war in Ukraine, Russia risks losing control over Central Asia.

And now reports are surfacing that officers have been forcing conscript soldiers serving in the Leningrad, Nizhny Novgorod, Kursk and Murmansk regions to sign contracts to extend their terms of duty. They are ostensibly to undergo training in the Rostov region, but could afterward find themselves in Ukraine.

And this reveals another obvious sign of the crisis with Russia's armed forces. Last year, Russia's professional army reached a total of 295,000 personnel and actually exceeded the number of conscript soldiers. Thanks to reforms instituted by the previously maligned former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov — and current Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, who understood their usefulness and continued them — the Russian army rejected the concept of mass mobilization.

Up until a few years ago, every army unit had to fill its ranks with reservists before it could deploy for battle. The top brass switched to a focus on creating divisions and units in a constant state of battle readiness, made up of professional soldiers and ready to deploy soon after receiving the order.

As a result, when Putin issued the order for a so-called "snap inspection" last March and April, the army deployed upward of 40,000 to 50,000 troops to the Ukrainian border in just 24 hours.

But now we see the other side of that coin. In March 2014 the Kremlin refused to repeat the "Crimean scenario" in eastern and southern Ukraine.

It would have proven simple enough to seize the Donetsk and Luhansk regions at that time, but a far more daunting task to create a new border — or "line of demarcation" as it is now called — and to set up military checkpoints at the hundreds or even thousands of roads intersecting it, and defend them over a long period of time. That is a task calling for many more than the 40,000 to 50,000 soldiers currently available.

And even now when the battle-ready units send out only their tactical battalions, they experience a personnel shortage that is becoming increasingly difficult to fill.

There is no escaping the fact that, for the last several years, the Russian armed forces have been organized according to the model first proposed by former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell who said that troops should be used for as short a time as possible, should deploy on a massive scale and should immediately withdraw after attaining their objective. However, the war in Ukraine imposes a different set of requirements.

That is why the military chiefs are now faced with the need to increase the number of troops. But Russia lacks the required number of professional soldiers. That means they must send conscript soldiers to the border.

But because conscripts serve for only one year, they cannot be deployed before their first six months of training, and then six months later, the next group must rotate in. That is why Russia's military leaders might have concluded that they need to force or trick conscripts into signing on for longer stints.

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