

Strong Public Support for Military Reform in Russia

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The Russian public strongly supports reform of the Russian military. In focus groups in summer 2002 and in a large-scale survey in January 2003, we found deep and widespread interest and anxiety associated with conditions in the military. Specifically, our January 2003 survey results show that barely half the Russian population of age 16 and over has confidence in the army. Three-fifths advocate a professional military instead of the current conscript-based force. Concern about brutal hazing of young recruits is nearly universal and sympathy for draft dodgers is surprisingly high. Over two-thirds advocate increased spending on the military, while 38 percent want a smaller military. In addition, two-thirds of likely voters view military reform as an important issue in choosing which party to vote for. Support for change in the military is especially strong among women from 30- to 49-years old and better-educated Russians. Support for the status quo is stronger among the oldest cohorts and those with the least education.

Why Public Opinion on Military Reform Matters

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, observers and policymakers in Russia and the United States have advocated fundamental reform of the Russian military. Talk has not produced significant action, however, and the Russian military remains a conscript-based force that is bloated, under-trained, poorly equipped, and severely strapped for cash. Meanwhile, several widely publicized tragedies have befallen the military, including the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000 and the downing of a large transport helicopter nearly two years later in Chechnya. Casualties in each accident reached 118. Of course, Russian armed forces have paid a high toll in Chechnya overall. According to government figures, on average, more than three military personnel have been killed each day since the resumption of the war in 1999. Perhaps most stunning, the government reported in January 2003 that 2000 members of the armed forces had died in “crimes and incidents” in 2002. Even away from conflict zones, the daily lives of conscripts are fraught with dangers, as they are routinely exposed to physical abuse, crime, exploitation, and corruption.

Clearly, major military reforms are needed to address these spiraling difficulties. Although the repeated failure of Russia's leadership to enact significant reforms thus far certainly provides grounds for skepticism, recent proposals by the Ministry of Defense for the conversion of Russia's army to an all-volunteer force suggest that reform has support in some policymaking circles. Observers are skeptical, however; they have heard much of this before.

Given the lack of action, the apparent divisions on military reform within the Russian political elite, and the terrible conditions inside the military that have been well documented by watchdog groups, Russian public opinion on military issues might spur some bold policymakers to be more decisive. If the public supports significant reforms—including those that will cost Russians money—then advocates of reform within the government can use these numbers to bolster their position. It is especially important, therefore, to determine what the Russian public thinks about military reform as Russia heads into its upcoming national elections.

What Does the Russian Public Think About Military Reform?

To determine public opinion on military reform, we asked participants in nine focus groups conducted in three different regions of Russia during the summer of 2002 whether they have confidence in the Russian army (as well as seven other public institutions). The topic of the military immediately touched raw nerves, raising the level of emotion in discussions. The ordinary Russians who participated in our groups quickly recited the litany of problems in Russia's armed forces and bemoaned their sad state, often offering specific personal experiences to illustrate the perilous conditions. Many openly expressed doubts about whether the current Russian military could protect Russia from threats. Although opinions differed about the best solution for the military's problems, virtually no one supported the status quo, and many came out strongly in favor of conversion to an all-volunteer force.

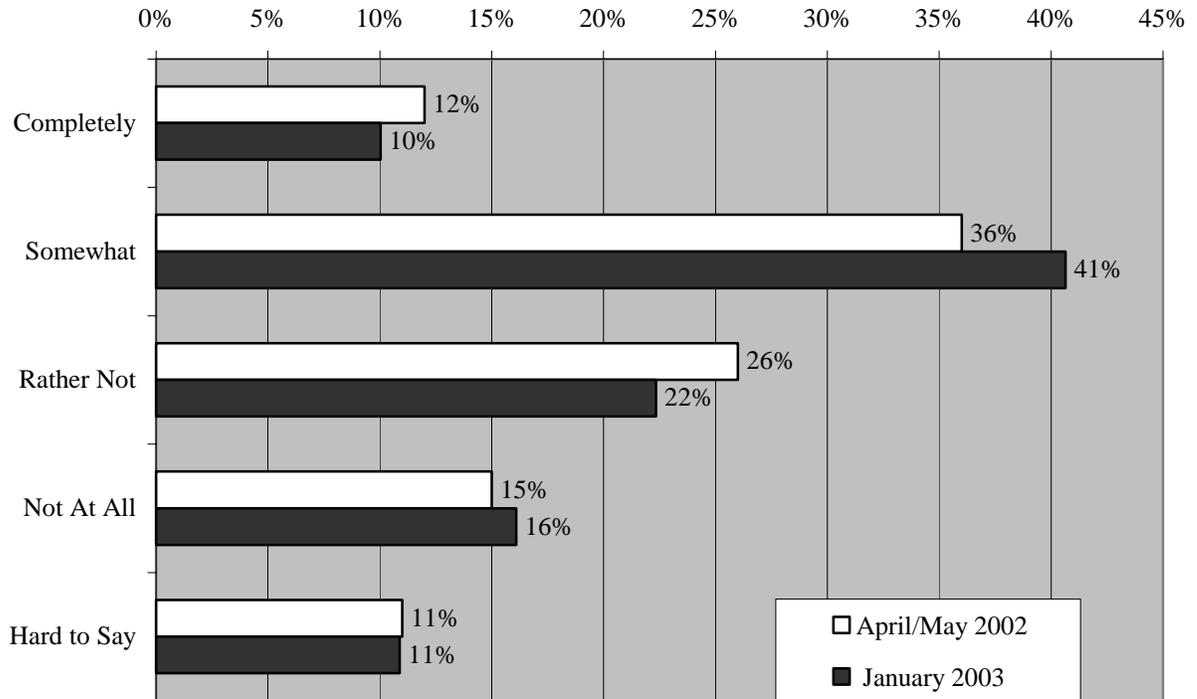
Given the strength of opinions about the military and the prevalence of support for reform in our focus groups, we decided to investigate the extent of pro-reform sentiment among the Russian public using a large, representative survey. We added a series of questions about the military to a survey administered to a national sample of 2,408 Russians ages 16 and over by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM) in January 2003. Previously, we had included two of these questions on national and regional surveys also conducted by VTsIOM in April and May 2002 (combined N=5409).

Declining Confidence in the Military

During Soviet times and in the early years of the post-Soviet era, the military was one of the most trusted institutions in Russia. Our data show that this support has waned. Our January 2003 survey asked respondents how much they believe the army and five other political or social institutions deserve confidence (Figure 1). We asked the same question in surveys conducted in April and May 2002. The results indicate that only about half the population has complete or partial confidence in the army. Roughly 40 percent have little or no confidence, and roughly 10 percent find it hard to say. Clearly, a decade's worth of

troubles in the military, coupled with a failure to enact fundamental reforms, has eroded public confidence.

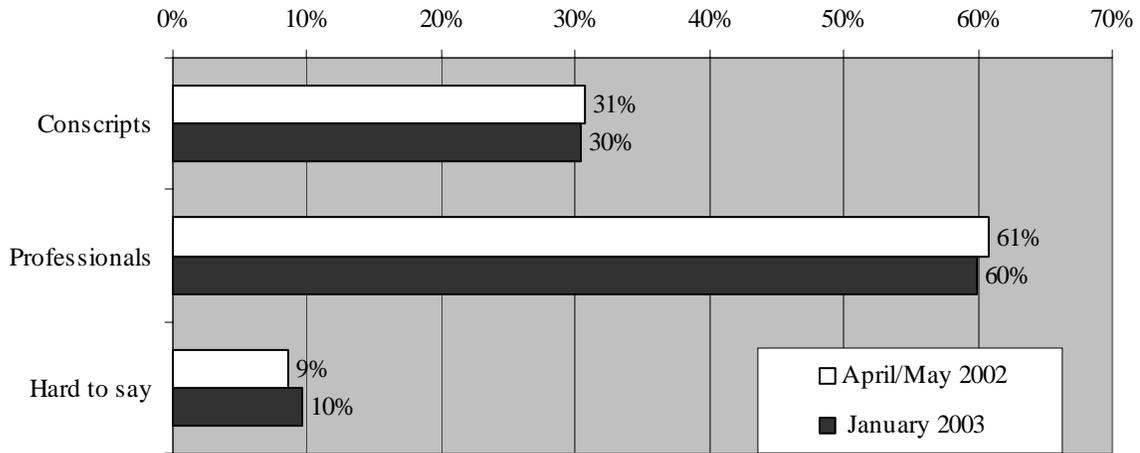
FIGURE 1: To What Extent Does the Army Deserve Confidence?



Support for an All-Volunteer Force

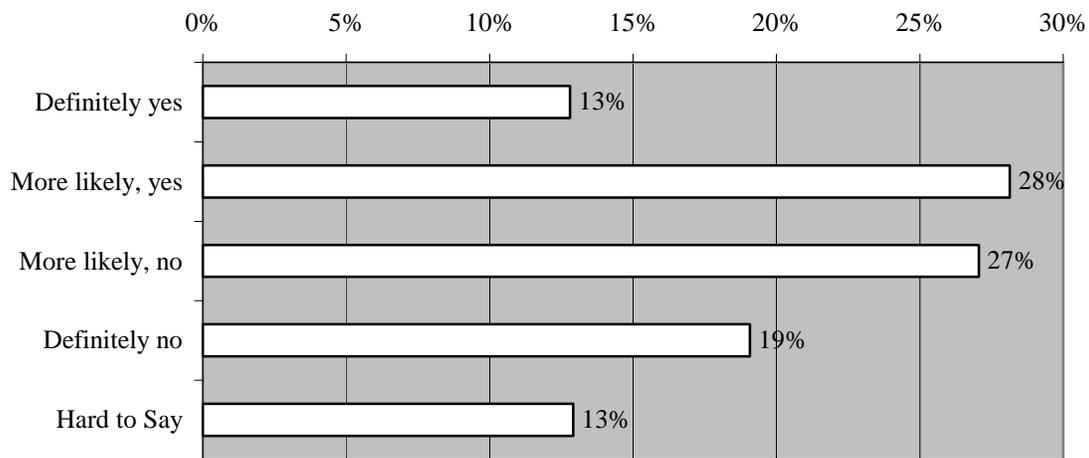
Many observers have argued that professionalization—that is, abandoning conscription and converting to an all-volunteer force—is the most urgent and crucial reform for the Russian military. We asked our survey respondents in both April/May 2002 and January 2003 whether they support the current, conscription-based system or would prefer a military consisting solely of volunteers hired on a contractual basis. The results reveal stable and strong support for an end to the conscript system (Figure 2). Supporters of this reform outnumber supporters of the status quo by a 2-to-1 margin, with about 10 percent declining to state their preference.

FIGURE 2: Should Russia Maintain Conscription or Convert the Military to a Contract-Based Military?



Our January 2003 survey included three additional questions that tap into views about the conscription system. We asked whether respondents sympathize with young men who avoid the draft “without a good reason for doing so” (Figure 3). Those who expressed an opinion were almost equally divided among sympathizers (41 percent) and non-sympathizers (46 percent).

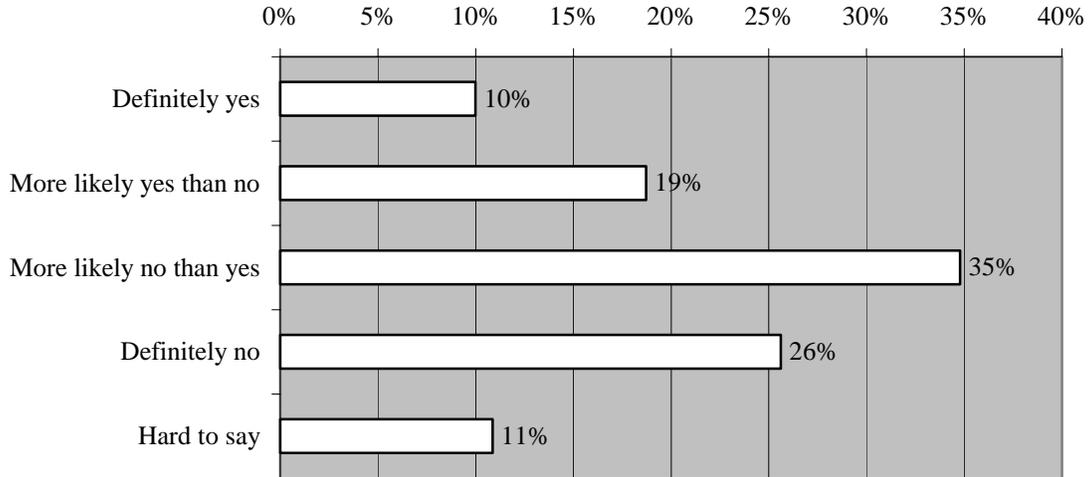
FIGURE 3: Do You Sympathize with Those Who Avoid the Draft without Good Reason?



We also asked if respondents approve of the common practice of arresting young men suspected of draft avoidance and sending them to draft boards without due process (Figure 4). A substantial majority (61 percent) does not approve. Of course, this could reflect either sympathy for draft evaders or concerns about the lack of due process in

legal procedures. In any case, it shows that draft compliance is at best a weak norm in Russian society.

FIGURE 4: Do You Approve of the Practice of Arresting Men for Draft Dodging?

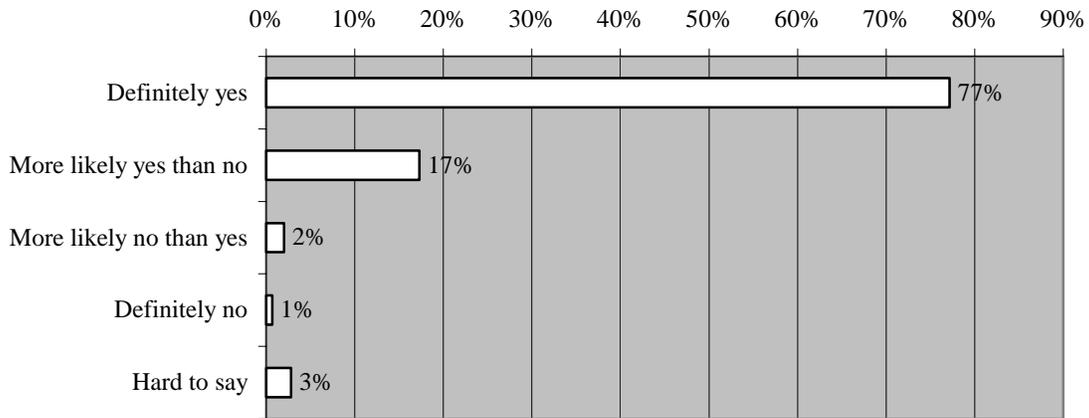


In addition, we asked respondents if they are familiar with the activities of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM) and, if so, what they think about those activities. An overwhelming number of Russians—81 percent of our sample—is familiar with the activities of CSM, which include first and foremost consultations with parents on how to keep conscription age sons (18–27 years old) out of the military. (In contrast, 22 percent and 8 percent are familiar with the activities of Memorial and the Moscow Helsinki Group, respectively. These NGOs are widely viewed in the West as two of Russia's most important human rights organizations.) Moreover, among those who have heard of CSM, 33 percent take a “very positive” view of them, 35 percent take a “somewhat positive” view, 28 percent take a neutral view, and only 5 percent a somewhat or very negative view. The strong recognition and approval of the actions of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers testifies to the great unpopularity of the draft within the Russian public. Altogether, our data reveal a public practically clamoring for serious reform of the Russian military.

Stop *Dedovshchina*

One reason behind the widespread sympathy for young conscripts is that they routinely suffer severe physical abuse in the form of what Russians call *dedovshchina*, systematic and violent hazing by older soldiers of younger ones. Although *dedovshchina* occurred in Soviet times as well, most observers agree that it has become more rampant during the last decade, as authority has broken down within the ranks. The depth of the public's concern about *dedovshchina* is illustrated by the responses to our question on whether officers should be prosecuted if they allow *dedovshchina* in their ranks (Figure 5). Over three-quarters (77 percent) of the population believe they definitely should be, and most of the remainder believes they probably should be.

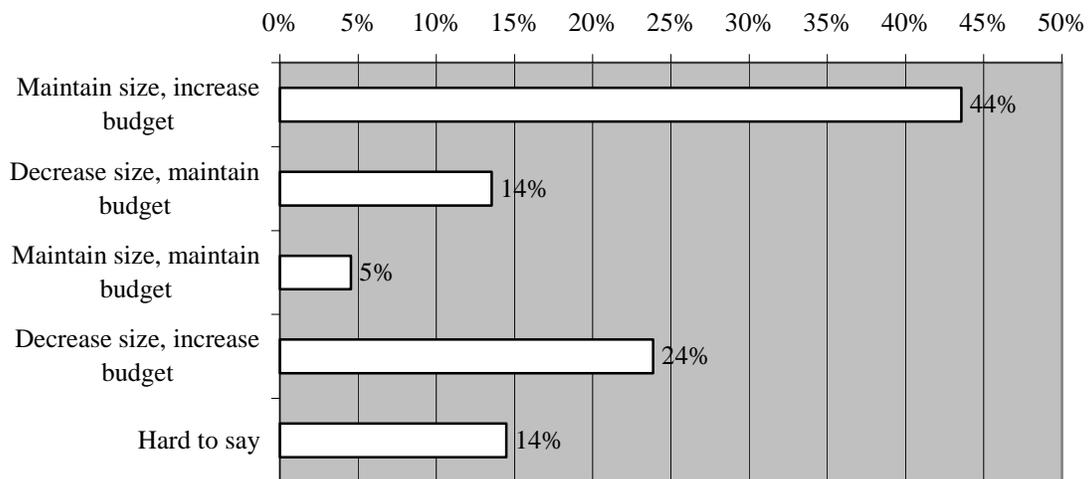
FIGURE 5: Should Officers who Tolerate *Dedovshchina* in Their Ranks Be Prosecuted?



Increase Defense Spending

The main argument posed by opponents of professionalization and other military reforms is that such measures are expensive. Yet the Russian public appears to support devoting more financial resources to the military. We told our respondents that some advocate improving the situation in the military by increasing spending; others advocate decreasing the size of the military; and still others advocate neither measure, and asked them which, if any, measures they support (Figure 6). Despite the numerous legitimate demands for government spending in other areas, two-thirds (68 percent) of our respondents support increasing the military budget. Evidently, the public is willing to spend more money to improve the military.

FIGURE 6: Which Measures Should Be Taken to Improve the Situation of the Military?

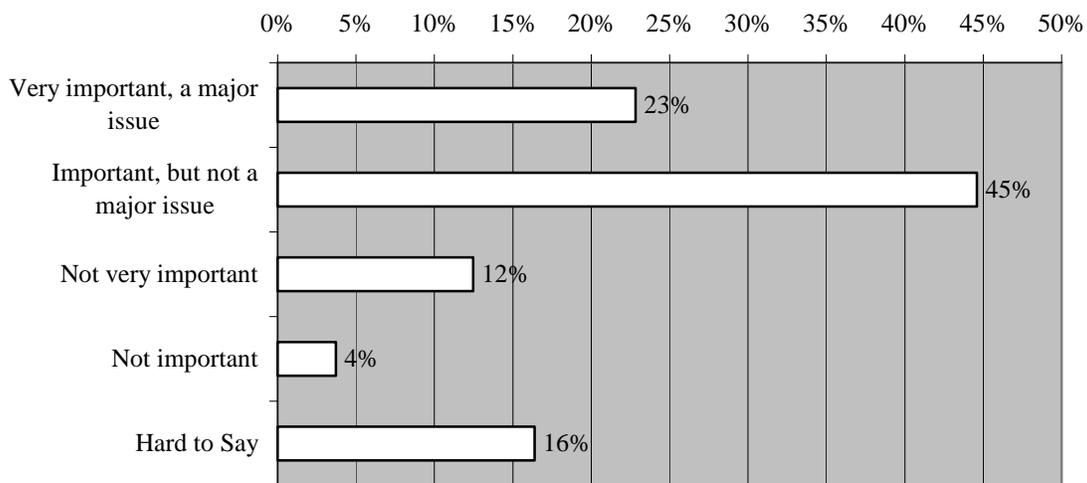


Also, 38 percent of respondents support decreasing the size of the military, which might be necessary for professionalization. Strikingly, only 5 percent favor the current size and budget of the armed forces.

The Political Salience of Military Reform

The Russian public obviously worries about the condition of the armed forces and favors military reform when asked survey questions, but does that mean Russians will actively support political leaders who take up these causes? To find out, we asked respondents to indicate how important a party's position on military reform is when they decide whether to vote for that party (Figure 7). About one-quarter of likely voters view military reform as a major issue, and another 45 percent view it as important. These numbers imply that, especially in a context where parties' platforms on economic issues are hard to distinguish, a strong position on military reform might help garner votes.

FIGURE 7: How Important is a Party's Position on Military Reform?



Demographic Variations in Views on the Military

We found three striking variations in views on the military by demographic characteristics (Table 1). First, women of the ages 30-49 are consistently the strongest supporters of military reform. We think this probably reflects the grave concerns of mothers, as well as their sympathetic friends, who fear the conditions their Russian sons will face upon conscription. Reformers can count on solid support from this group, and campaigners could target them effectively. Second, Russians with more education are *more* supportive of military reform, while those with the least education are the least supportive. Since those with a college education tend to be more politically active than those without, this is an important distinction for reformers to bear in mind. Finally, the older generation is the least supportive of military reform. Most likely, this reflects both the inherent conservatism of the elderly and their generally lower levels of education. It may also reflect an older frame of reference: they are in essence thinking about a military that no longer exists but that won the war against fascism. In any case, as these cohorts

are replaced through the inevitable processes of demographic change, we expect overall support for military reform will only grow.

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics and Support for Military Reform (%)

	Support All- volunteer force	Support Conscription	Sympathize with Draft Dodgers
National Average	60	30	40
Women ages 30-49	79	16	49
College Degree	72	20	49
Less than Secondary	49	38	34
60 and over	33	49	34

Policy Implications

There are numerous policy implications that flow from these numbers. The first is related to military reform as an election issue. There is a growing conventional wisdom among observers of Russia discussed in both Washington and Moscow that no reform on any front will occur prior to elections. Russian politicians should prove analysts wrong. They would do well to respond to these numbers as elections approach in December 2003 and March 2004 by putting forth specific recommendations that address grievances, such as hazing, or ways of toughening laws that already exist but are routinely violated. Pitched in the right way, a coherent program that essentially breaks down or unpacks the many issues involved in military reform could draw enormous support from voters. For example, politicians need not address all issues related to ending conscription but could focus on ending hazing. Whatever the focus, from a campaign perspective, there are few downsides to addressing these issues in the coming months in a sustained way because they appeal across the political spectrum.

Human rights activists and retired military officers concerned with soldiers' rights should take great heart in the public support for reform. These numbers should encourage them to pursue public awareness campaigns on these issues using strategic communication and focused messages that deliver concrete proposals to the government. The goal of such campaigns would be to let the government know that the public will not tolerate further delays on this issue.

There are implications for supporters of reform outside Russia as well. Western policymakers who have long worried about the conditions of the Russian military should speak loudly and forcefully on these topics, aware that they are articulating a popular cause inside Russia. Donors are often accused of imposing Western or alien issues or ideas on activists. That argument disappears in the face of overwhelming support for military reform within Russia.

Ultimately, as policymakers and activists pursue various aspects of reform, and whether this effort involves a campaign to end hazing, improve nutrition and medical treatment, or the larger task of abolishing the conscript system, understanding how people who serve in the military think about these issues will be critical to implementing change. After all, Russia has decent laws, many of which do in fact address the rights of soldiers. The problem, in many cases, has been getting officers to comply with these laws in the first place, and when they are violated, getting adequate redress. The numbers here should make clear to Russians and western observers that the situation as it exists today is not likely to be tolerated indefinitely, and support for the rule of law rather than the rule of men is as critical in the armed forces as in the civilian realm.

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