

Experts Question Whether Robots and Mercenaries Can Fill Russian Military's Manpower Needs

By Ray Finch
OE Watch Commentary

The Russian military continues to use a blended system of contract soldiers and conscripts to meet its basic manpower needs. Given the technical demands of advanced weapon systems, some observers have questioned the efficacy of conscripting soldiers for a one-year term of service. However, as the brief excerpt from the centrist source *Svobodnaya Pressa* points out, “conscripts serve as a cadre source of the contract army,” where commanders can “offer contract service to the most distinguished.”

The article also touches upon the prospects of using both robots and private military companies (PMCs) to help offset personnel shortfalls. After describing various robotic systems (air, ground and sea), the author asserts that the Russian military may soon not “need pilots, tank crews, submariners, etc.” A military expert, quoted in the article, challenges this assertion, reminding the author that “robots don’t move by themselves...they are operated by people.” This expert goes on to stress that “in order to operate a complex machine, qualified personnel will be required,” and therefore, “there will be a reduction in low-skilled personnel.”

Even though the appropriate legislation has yet to be enacted to allow for the operation of PMCs, the article also touches upon the Russia’s increasing use of them. The article quotes an expert who bemoans the lack of legislation authorizing PMCs, pointing out that because of this

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ambiguity “it is not easy to hire an IT specialist or a soldier who will go for vague conditions to carry out combat missions.” Russian PMCs have been employed in Syria, Ukraine, Africa, and as the article claims, “according to some reports, more flexible PMCs have now been entrusted to cover the Tajik-Afghan border.”



Combat robot Uran-9
Source: mil.ru CC BY 4.0

Source: Sergey Aksenov, “Военные роботы отправят солдат на дембель раньше срока (Military robots will send soldiers for demobilization ahead of schedule),” *Svobodnaya Pressa* (Centrist source), 4 September 2021. <https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/308853/#mc-container>

...Recently the Russian military robot “Marker” was tested in the Chelyabinsk region and independently moved 100 kilometers, patrolling the borders of the settlement. At the same time, another device produced a swarm of drones, which the RF Ministry of Defense is actively integrating into the troops. Creating new models, they are tested in real combat in Syria, like the Uran-9 fire support robot....

...The unmanned triad, in addition to a complex of purely military capabilities, demonstrates by its appearance the appearance of the army of the future. It will not need pilots, tank crews, submariners, etc. This means that it does not need to massively train these military specialties, including conscripts. Apparently, it was not for nothing that Sergei Shoigu recently spoke about the senselessness of increasing the number of conscripts.

The transfer of some real combat missions to PMCs can also become a factor that reduces the importance of a conscript in the usual sense.... So, according to some reports, more flexible PMCs have now been entrusted to cover the Tajik-Afghan border.

According to military expert Viktor Litovkin, the quality of military personnel training will replace their number: “The robotization of the army and navy will undoubtedly affect the personnel of the Russian Armed Forces. These should be highly educated, highly qualified and professionally trained people. Others simply will not be able to control drones in the sky, under water and on earth. Drones don’t move by themselves. In any environment, they are led by people - operators...”.

According to the coordinator of the public initiative “Citizen and the Army” Sergei Krivenko, the reduction in conscription is a direct consequence of organizational decisions made at the beginning of the 2000s: “And the conscript service remained only in order to pull up young people, give them a military registration specialty, conduct combat coordination, and then offer contract service to the most distinguished ones. Conscripts are a cadre source of the contract army. Accordingly, the number of conscripts is no longer as high as it used to be. And, apparently, it will decline.”

“...Technical re-equipment, robotization of combat units are simply obliged to touch on private military companies,” thinks an expert on PMC Yevgeny Bersenev. “And this is already happening abroad - there IT specialists are increasingly appearing as part of PMCs, appropriate training courses are arranged for the PMC employees themselves, the composition of the companies themselves is gradually changing. This can be clearly seen in the ads that are published in specialized publications.”

...If the army units of the same IT specialists are recruited under a state contract and the very presence of this fighter in the unit, relatively speaking, is written out by the documents of the General Staff, then the nature of the activities of ‘semi-state’ PMCs is still ‘near-partisan’ in nature with payment of ‘black cash,’ etc. And in these conditions, it is not easy to hire an IT specialist or a soldier who will go for vague conditions to carry out combat missions. These are people of increased demand.”