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As Russia drafts young men, some fear ending up on Ukraine's front line

The Russian military is looking to conscript more than 130,000 soldiers during its spring recruitment drive

By Mary Ilyushina

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RIGA, Latvia — The Russian military began its spring draft Friday, aiming to sign up 134,500 conscripts and stoking fears among young men that they may end up on the front lines of the invasion of Ukraine.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has vowed that none of them will be used to reinforce Russian troops now fighting in Ukraine. “Please note that conscripts will not be deployed to any hot spots,” he said in televised remarks Tuesday, adding that those who were drafted last spring will be discharged and sent home at the end of their one-year service.

But amid the significant losses suffered by Russian forces in their Ukrainian campaign, which appears to have lasted longer than the Kremlin anticipated, Shoigu’s assurances have not put all prospective conscripts and their families at ease.

All Russian men between 18 and 27 must serve one year in the military, and recruitment campaigns are usually held each spring and fall. Dodging the draft is punishable by heavy fines and sentences of up to two years in prison.

Human rights groups and lawyers say that since Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, they have been receiving a barrage of calls from eligible men, as well as their wives, girlfriends and mothers, seeking legal help in avoiding the draft.

“The amount of applications is enormous, much more if compared [to previous drafts],” said a lawyer who works with a legal group called Conscious Refusal From Military Service in Russia, which assists Russians in navigating the laws on conscription and contract service in the armed forces. The lawyer spoke on the condition of anonymity because Russia has recently introduced new laws mandating punishment for “discrediting” the Russian army.

Since the group set up a Telegram account three weeks ago to process cases faster, the lawyers have received more than 8,000 requests for help, they said. Other Russian organizations, like the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and the Agora human rights group, have also reported a spike in inquiries about the draft and potential mobilization.

"People have not been assured [by what Shoigu said] because it is not backed by anything but 'the minister said so,'" the lawyer said. "Because in fact the law, the military service regulation, allows sending conscripts who served for at least four months into combat."

Even some military officials have acknowledged that the draft will take place under difficult circumstances.

"An informational and psychological war is being waged against Russia with increasing intensity through a huge stream of fakes," St. Petersburg military commissar Sergey Kachkovsky said in late March, according to the Interfax news agency. "Also, young people have little information about the life of the Russian armed forces and the country as a whole. This results in growing fear of discipline, the army, and growth of anti-state sentiments."

The Russian military includes both conscripts and professional troops who sign a contract to serve.

President Vladimir Putin said March 8 that the hostilities in Ukraine did not involve conscripts.

But videos released by the Ukrainian military purported to show that Russian conscripts had been taken prisoner in the war's early days. In one such clip, 23-year-old Damur Mustafaev said that his unit was told it would take part in military exercises in western parts of Russia. But it ended up in the Chernihiv region of central Ukraine, where Mustafaev was captured after his tank broke down.

The next day, March 9, the Russian Defense Ministry acknowledged that some conscripts had been sent to Ukraine — calling it a "mistake" — and were indeed taken prisoner.

Skepticism toward military officials runs deep in Russia. Many people remember the trauma inflicted during the separatist wars in the southern Russian republic of Chechnya in the 1990s and early 2000s. Thousands of young men, woefully unprepared for battle, were killed, and groups like the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers gained prominence, working to release prisoners of war and return bodies to grieving families. These groups also sought to reform military service and address issues such as beatings, abuse and humiliation of soldiers, as well as a lack of food and other necessities.

For years, various groups have campaigned to end conscription in Russia and replace it with an all-volunteer, contract force, similar to that of the United States, which discontinued its draft in 1973.

"The decision to join the military must be conscious," Olga Golovina, head of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in Novosibirsk region, told local media. "To do this, the person must be formed both mentally and morally. Then people will not be driven there under pressure. The army is a difficult experience, but a valuable one — if the conditions are right."

As recently as 2019, Putin pledged to abolish military conscription, but the end date remains unclear. He has repeatedly made similar promises during his tenure, but none have materialized.

Under Russian law, men can refuse to join the military and seek alternative service — such as shifts at post offices, nursing homes and hospitals — for religious, ethical or political reasons.

"Many people are scared that in actual wartime conditions, the law will not work, that the military will spit on the constitution and, instead of granting them alternative service, will just immediately grab them at enlistment offices and send them right into the war zone," the lawyer said. So far, he said, enlistment offices have continued to accept requests for alternative service.

Many Russians also try to avoid the draft for health reasons and through deferments granted to university students. But enlistment offices do not always accept these reasons.

Russians have good reason to doubt whether conscription will be carried out fairly, given the reluctance of some officials to adhere to rules about exemptions and deferments and the practice common among wealthier Russians of buying their way out of military service.

An IT specialist who recently graduated from a Moscow university said in an interview that his local commission tried to pressure him into conscripted service last year. The young man, in his early 20s, had an official letter from his university confirming that he had defended his undergraduate thesis and had been given a sabbatical for two months before enrolling in graduate school. Russia routinely grants deferrals from military service until all studies are completed.

“But what happens is that they tell you, ‘Wipe your ass with this letter; tomorrow you are going to a military base,’” the student recalled. “The commissars try to put as much pressure on you as possible, refuse to take any deferment letters, and their only goal is to make you sign the draft notice.”

The student eventually sued the enlistment office and won, much to his surprise.

The draft is also riddled with corruption. Enlistment offices have networks of doctors, clerks and military officials who are willing to sell military service record cards, which allow men to avoid conscription, at a cost of up to several thousand dollars each. The ever-increasing cost of such cards has prompted many parents to have two savings funds: one to pay for college and another to bribe the enlistment office.

Evading the draft is especially common in big cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg but is more challenging for residents of less-prosperous regions.

At the same time, volunteering to serve as a contract soldier is one of the few options for young Russian men in need of a job with stable pay. Human rights groups have also reported that some conscripts were forced into contract service ahead of the invasion of Ukraine.

“Overall, the problem with conscripts being forced to sign contracts is a systemic one and was there before the war started,” the lawyer said. “This is all done so military bosses can draw good numbers in their recruitment reports.”

Many requests for help received by the lawyer’s group are from professional soldiers and other contractors who are trying to avoid being sent to Ukraine.