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North Caucasian Draftees Undermining Russian Military

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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North Caucasians form an increasing fraction of the Russian military, the result of growing draft quotas, ethnic Russian demographic decline and draft resistance and the desire of many non-Russians from that region to serve as soldiers, with some men from the region even bribing their way into uniform.

But that trend, Nasha Versiya reporter Alexander Stepanov says, is leading not only to an increase in the number of ethnic clashes within the Russian military but also to a rise in the number of incidents of insubordination, with some North Caucasians refusing to obey orders that they feel are demeaning.

And he reports that none of the policies Moscow has adopted so far &mdash including limiting the number of North Caucasians drafted from a particular republic or assigned to a given unit or sending them to distant garrisons where any conflicts that do occur are less likely to be

noticed by the media — has worked, leaving officers at a loss as to what they can and should try next.

Unlike many ethnic Russians who do not want to serve in the military, North Caucasians, given their national traditions and the economic problems of their homelands, view it as an attractive option, and some are bribing military commissaries 10,000 to 30,000 rubles (300 to 900 US dollars) to overlook criminal pasts or health problems that would lead to deferments.

That, in combination with the demographic differences between ethnic Russians and North Caucasians, mean that the latter are not only increasing absolutely but also relatively to the former, something that Stepanov says has led to an increase in problems, including ethnic clashes, insubordination and crime in units where they serve.

According to military prosecutors, the Nasha Versiya reporter says, more than 20 percent of all military crimes now take place in units with significant numbers of soldiers and sailors from the Caucasus. Uncertain how to respond, "commanders of all ranks are throwing up their hands because they don't know how to combat manifestations of interethnic hostility."

One place where Russian officials have reduced the draft quota is Dagestan. In the past, approximately 12,000 men from that republic were drafted each year, but Moscow cut the number to 1800 in the spring of 2008 but was forced to increase it to 3500 for this year's spring draft. But, Stepanov notes, "the number [there] wanting to serve was all the same greater."

As a result, North Caucasians who want to serve are adopting various strategies: bribing local officials, according to Vladimir Milovanov, a prosecutor in the North Caucasus Military District, or listing as their home addresses those of relatives elsewhere in the Russian Federation, making it more likely that they will be drafted.

Moscow has taken more draconian measures with respect to Chechens hoping to serve. From 1991 to 2005, the Russian military did not try to draft anyone from that republic, both because parents there feared that their children would be mistreated by officers with experience in the fighting in that republic and because commanders feared what the Chechens might do if they were drafted.

In 2005, however, Moscow drafted 200 Chechens, something Vladimir Putin and others proclaimed was an indication of Russian military success there. "But," Stepanov reports, "from the first days of their service they undermined the authority of their commanders by seeking special privileges which were not allowed by the rules."

The Chechen draftees "refused to eat in mess halls, to wear uniforms and to remain around the clock on the territory of their units." As a result, "and without much noise," they were "immediately sent home," and after that, the Russian military more or less completely "stopped" drafting Chechens.

Today, Stepanov continues, "soldiers called up from the North Caucasus are sent to serve further from their homelands and measures are taken in order to spread them about in units in various regions." Moscow's calculation is obvious: If something happens "with an ethnic

shading, there are fewer chances that the broader society will find out about it."

But the Russian government's hopes in that respect have not always proved out, as reporting about the revolt of North Caucasians on the island of Kunashir in the Pacific Ocean in December 2006 clearly showed and as efforts by groups like the Soldiers' Mothers' Committees have expanded.

One commander told Stepanov that "the main thing is not to allow a dangerous concentration of Caucasian soldiers in any one unit." In that commander's opinion, such soldiers are "the most problematic" not because of interethnic relations but because of "their culture and upbringing," which leads them to refuse to obey orders to work as cooks, for example.

A solution some have proposed is the formation of units consisting of draftees from a single republic or even from a single nationality. Tatarstan has backed this, and Chechnya realized it in the form of the East and West GRU battalions. But if such arrangements proceed, Stepanov says, it could lead to the disintegration of the Russian military.

Although the share of North Caucasians in the Russian military is far higher than it was in Soviet times, Soviet officers also had to deal with some of the same challenges, and it appears that some Russian commanders are studying this experience, including Soviet-era "unwritten quota[s]" on the number of Caucasians in units — "not more than three per company."

And Russian commanders are also thinking about the need for better ideological work in units with North Caucasians, with religious groups possibly playing the role that the Komsomol did before 1991. But there is a catch: If Christian and Muslim soldiers have separate religious services, this could further divide the Russian army rather than unite it.

Moreover, Stepanov suggests that if the number of Muslim soldiers is kept below the 10 percent that officials say would qualify them to having their own mullah, ethnic tension would almost certainly be further exacerbate, with Muslim troops in such cases undoubtedly seeing this as yet another example of Russian discrimination against them.

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