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Nearly 80% of Draft-Age Russians Unhealthy, Sources Say

By Paul Goble

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Apalachicola, Florida &mdash An ever-larger share of Russia's ever smaller draft pool consists of people whose physical and mental illnesses make them less than optimal candidates to be soldiers, a trend that the Russian government hopes to reverse over the next decade by making the health of the draft-age cohort another measure on which governors will be rated.

But because it appears unlikely that Moscow will provide the regions with sufficient resources to do the job, this latest Russian unfunded liability appears likely, in the words of one expert, to be yet another means to increase central control over the governments of the regions and cities of the country.

In its "Conception of a Federal System of Preparing Citizens of the Russian Federation for Military Service up to 2020" published on Friday, Russian officials acknowledged that 78.6 percent of all draft-age young people were ill to one extent or another and that 21 percent

have chronic illnesses that may incapacitate them.

According to the Russian health and social development ministry, of the 13.62 million children in schools, "only 21.4 percent are absolutely healthy." Worse, the percentage of those who are ill has increased over the last five years &mdash by 9.3 percent for those up to the age of 14 and by 11.6 percent of those aged 15 to 17.

As a result, the share of the draft-age cohort whose health permits them to serve without restrictions has fallen from 94.7 percent in 1985 to 51 percent in 2009, a drop that may overstate the problem given the different standards employed but that Moscow now hopes to reverse by 10 percent by 2020.

One means that the Russian government proposes in this program to improve the health of potential draftees is the introduction of "an electronic passport" to record medical information. Another method is to encourage greater athletic activity among young people via ROSSTO, as the successor to the Soviet-era DOSAAF organization is known.

As so often happens, the government is responding to this in crisis fashion, but Svobodnaya Pressa reports that it was given more than adequate warning. As early as 2002, the General Staff general responsible for the draft warned that the situation would become especially dire in 2010-2011.

But at the same time, the news service warns that the situation may be much worse than Russian officials say. While the concept paper suggests that only 13.5 percent of draft-age males are psychologically ill, Tatyana Dmitriyeva, a leading Russian psychiatrist, says that almost 40 percent of that cohort are unfit for military service because of mental problems.

In an interview with Svobodnaya Pressa, Valentina Melnikova, the responsible secretary of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers, says that the concept paper and the statistics on which it is based "do not correspond to real life." Instead, she said, they are intended to serve narrow bureaucratic interests.

Consequently, she suggests, the program is likely to fail in its ostensible purpose because Moscow won't fund it, but she says that it may achieve another, and apparently from the central government's point of view, more important goal: strengthening one part of the military bureaucracy and also Moscow's control over regional and local governments.

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