

Army of Migrant Workers

By [Alexander Golts](#)

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Vasily Smirnov, head of the General Staff's organization and mobilization department, has admitted something he was never willing to admit earlier: There are more than 200,000 draft dodgers in the country. A year ago, he said there were only 20,000 draft dodgers, and in March he said there were only 100,000.

What is important is not that Smirnov has suddenly become more honest about failures in the conscription system. Most significant is what we can now expect in terms of much tougher measures to crack down on draft dodgers.

Already, a group of United Russia deputies have introduced a bill proposing that the spring conscription period be prolonged by six weeks from the current deadline of July 15 to Aug. 31. An explanatory note accompanying the bill states that it would somehow improve the situation by reducing conscripts' time in military training centers from five months to three.

But the new law actually has another goal. It would allow military recruitment officers to induct college students immediately after they graduate, preventing them from enrolling in

post-graduate studies or starting a job. Some pessimists suggest that the extended conscription term will enable the authorities to even induct young men who turn 18 during the summer they graduate from high school, thereby preventing them from enrolling in universities.

In an effort to comply with quotas set by the General Staff, military authorities in Moscow rounded up everybody they could get their hands on — even migrant workers from Central Asia who aren't Russian citizens.

Before this, Smirnov proposed increasing the maximum draft age from 27 to 30 and drafting 70 percent of all college students who would normally have immunity from mandatory service. In addition, the measures would free the Defense Ministry from having to get an actual signature from draftees proving that they have been served notice. Instead, it has been proposed to simply notify the young men by SMS and to subject them to criminal prosecution if they do not show up at their recruitment office.

At the time they were first made, General Staff chief Nikolai Makarov hurried to disavow Smirnov's proposals, but now they have become State Duma bills.

Cracking down on draft dodgers and going to ridiculous extremes to round up warm bodies — including foreigners — to fill the quotas clearly demonstrates that the recruitment system has failed miserably. The cause is well-known: The number of Russia's 18-year-olds is decreasing significantly every year. It is expected that the army will face shortages of from 250,000 to 300,000 recruits per year over the next few years, and this problem will get even worse starting in 2015.

Meanwhile, all those draconian measures are not causing the army's ranks to fill anywhere near as quickly as the pockets of the recruitment officers who agree to look the other way. It is clear that under no circumstances will it be possible to staff a million-man army, much less fill the ranks of the other dozen or so siloviki agencies such as the Interior Ministry, Federal Security Service and the Emergency Situations Ministry. Setting an unattainable goal at the outset only serves to distort the purpose of current military reforms.

The biggest irony in the frenzy to round up more draftees is that the army doesn't need the additional draftees whom it has managed to snag by illegal methods. With the plans to reform the armed forces to make it more effective and professional, the number of army units and formations has been cut more than tenfold. More than 1,000 skeleton units were simply eliminated.

The problem, though, is those were the units that previously absorbed most of the new conscripts. The remaining units do not even have adequate barracks to accommodate the increased number of conscripts. Human rights advocates report that some soldiers have been sleeping in tents this winter because of the lack of barracks.

Two contradictory processes are taking place: an attempt to perpetuate the myth of a million-man army and efforts to build a smaller, more professional army that is able to fight 21st-century military conflicts. For now, the people who are determined to drive the army down a dead end have got the upper hand.

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