The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Despite Promises, Russian Draftees Are Fighting and Dying in the North Caucasus

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May 26, 2011



Staunton, May 24 — Despite repeated promises by senior Moscow officials and the explicit provisions of several laws, Russian draftees are being sent to fight and die in the hotspots of the North Caucasus, a situation a major Moscow paper is calling attention to and one likely to spark both more resistance to the draft and more questions about Russia's policies in that region.

The deaths of several draftees in Ingushetia have prompted Moskovsky Komsomolets to declare in a headline that "The Russian Army Is Outside the Law," because the defense ministry has declared that such personnel "must not be involved in counter-terrorist operations."

Indeed, the widely published ministerial decree specifies that draftees are not even to be

positioned "in the zone" of such counter-terrorist operations. Apparently, the paper continued, "the command of the military unit does not know anything about this order." How else can one explain the fact that this set of deaths of draftees is not the first?

A source in the military procuracy told the paper that "such violations are taking place everywhere," even though commanders know the order and investigators have addressed many of these situations, a process that is complicated because commanders often do all that they can to hide the facts of these and other violations of the military code.

The major reason commanders want to use draftees is that such personnel cost less and are far more numerous than professional soldiers, but another reason, according to experts, is that the latter are far more prepared to speak up for their rights than the draftees are. If the pay of the professionals is late, for example, they raise such a fuss that commanders hurry to address the problem.

Because the command is unwilling to investigate these violations, activists have appealed to the Counter-Terrorist Committee and also to the Federation Council, but they have either been ignored or "given to understand that one can only speak about the Russian Army today as if about the dead — either something good or nothing at all."

However, the numerous cases of the violation of the defense minstry's own orders and of the rights of draftees almost certainly will increase calls for a shift to a professional military, something Russia would find hard to pay for unless it significantly reduced the size of its armed forces, or an increase in the amount of draft resistance.

And in the current environment, these two trends appear to be coming together. In St. Petersburg over the weekend, for example, some 150 people staged a demonstration under the banner "Say No to the Draft," during which speakers called for the creation of a purely professional military.

This meeting is likely to lead to others, all the more so because it was organized by groups with sections elsewhere and by political parties, including Yabloko, which are likely to be interested in using this issue to attract attention and support in the run up to the 2011 and 2012 elections.

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