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Defense Minister Vows Not to Draft Postgraduate Students

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A young conscript being embraced by his girlfriend on Manezh Square. **Igor Tabakov**

Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov promised Wednesday not to draft postgraduate students into the army after a group of students who fell victim of a bureaucratic mix-up appealed to President Dmitry Medvedev.

All full-time male students at state-run schools aged 18 to 27, postgraduates included, are eligible for deferred military service.

But this spring, conscription boards found a loophole allowing them to enlist postgraduate students: new requirements that schools obtain a special license for postgraduate studies, students from several cities wrote in a letter to Medvedev after receiving enlistment notices.

No schools, including the prestigious Moscow State University, have received the license yet because it was introduced only in March without any procedural guidelines.

The spring conscription drive started in April.

The forced enlistment of postgraduate students offered a direct challenge to a pledge by Medvedev to create a favorable climate for young specialists.

In response to the students' petition, Serdyukov said Wednesday that he "recommended that conscription boards" not enlist postgraduate students pending the approval by the State Duma of amendments to clarify the enlistment process, the Defense Ministry said in a statement.

Whether Serdyukov's statement — a recommendation, not an order — will stop the recruitment drive remains unclear. Moreover, conscription boards answer to local authorities, not the Defense Ministry.

On Friday, the Duma's Defense Committee is to hold a discussion on expanding the range of options for conscription deferrals, Interfax reported.

Medvedev has not commented publicly on the students' appeal. Be he weighed in on the conscription issue Tuesday, urging the Defense Ministry and the Education and Science Ministry to provide deferrals to 18-year-old high school graduates who wish to continue their education.

As part of the spring draft, conscription boards are authorized to enlist men aged 18 and over who are graduating from high school in late June though the end of the draft in mid-July.

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