

Deserter Who Claimed Abduction Gets 2 Years

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A Saratov region conscript who said he had been kidnapped and forced to work in a factory has been convicted of desertion and sentenced to two years in a settlement colony.

Private Andrei Popov was reported missing in 2000. But he returned home in August, saying he had been kidnapped 10 months into his service and forced to work in brick factories in Dagestan.

Prosecutors argued that Popov fled his division before hiding and illegally working in Dagestan.

In November, Popov changed his story and pleaded guilty. His lawyer acknowledged that there was no evidence that Popov had been held against his will.

On Tuesday, the two said they were satisfied with the verdict.

"The difference between four years in a prison colony, which is what prosecutors asked for, and two years in a settlement colony is night and day," Popov's lawyer said, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

"I was hoping for this verdict," Popov said.

But human rights defenders cast doubt on Popov's confession and said he wasn't fit to stand trial.

"Whether or not Popov told the truth is irrelevant," said Valentina Melnikova, secretary of the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia.

If a soldier is medically unfit to serve, he is unfit to stand trial in a military court, she said, adding that Popov was not given a medical examination that could have revealed health problems.

"I could tell from the photograph. He's pale and missing teeth. There's something physically wrong with him," she said.

Lidia Sviridova, director of Soldiers' Mothers of Saratov Region, said co-workers recognized Popov at the plant where he claimed to have worked, and plant managers couldn't produce documentation certifying that he was a paid employee.

"It's evidence that Andrei ... was in fact held illegally," she said, Gazeta.ru [reported](#).

Directors of two brick factories implicated by Popov have denied the allegations.

Dmitry Pyslar, of the advocacy group For Human Rights, said Popov's initial claims were entirely plausible and that slavery among soldiers is endemic in the armed forces.

He speculated that Popov's confession had been forced.

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