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Russian Soldiers Face Gay Tattoo Check

By Peter Spinella

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The Defense Ministry is recommending that new recruits' bodies, especially their sexual organs and buttocks, be examined for tattoos indicating homosexual orientation.

The recruits would also be asked to describe their sexual history, whether they have a girlfriend and whether it is important for her to be faithful, according to a list of Defense Ministry recommendations for determining mental health.

The questioning would also broach subjects of theft, suicide and alcohol abuse, the Izvestia newspaper reported Thursday, citing a copy of the document, published late last year.

Tattoos indicating homosexuality are uncommon among Russian gays, Igor Kochetkov, a representative of the LGBT community, told The Moscow Times.

But the Russian prison system has a long history of such tattoos. Most of the markings, however, are applied by force.

"This is a form of 'lowering,' basically degrading an inmate, forcing him to become a passive homosexual who could be raped," said Damon Murray, co-editor of the "Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopaedia Volumes I-III."

"The most common image for this would be a woman entwined with a snake (on the back), or a set of eyes above the buttocks or the penis (making a 'face'). ... Inmates might also be tattooed with dots or 'beauty marks' on the forehead or cheeks or above the upper lip (this signifies a 'vaflyor,' a passive partaker in oral sex)," Murray said by e-mail.

But, Murray added, those tattoos could be altered or covered up once the inmate has left the prison system.

"The reason for getting tattoos could indicate a low cultural or educational level," the Defense Ministry document said. "If an influence by external factors is determined, for example, persuasion or direct coercion, this indicates the malleability of the young man, his disposition to submit to another's will."

Most officers whom Izvestia interviewed about the guidelines said they did not intend to strictly follow them.

An undisclosed battalion chief assistant in the Southern Military District was cited as saying: "I just physically can't so confidentially hold a discussion with each new recruit. The commanders do that anyway. What will they do, examine their genitals for any tattoos? And how will they ask about someone's first sexual experience? 'Hey, when did you have your first woman, rookie? Answer directly, no beating around the bush!'"

A military psychologist who works with personnel noted that the military remains a stronghold of traditional views on sexuality.

The battalion chief assistant echoed that sentiment, saying: "I had one gay contract soldier who joined just to find more partners for himself. For people like that, of course, there's no place in the army."

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