

Cossacks to Hunt Down Draft Dodgers in Moscow

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Moscow draft dodgers beware: Cossack brigades are being mobilized to hunt down young men reluctant to complete mandatory military service, local news site M24.ru reported Wednesday.

"Cossacks are concluding deals with [Moscow's military] enlistment offices to conduct raids to bring military conscripts into the army," said Sergei Shishkin, head of the Southeast District Cossack Organization, in comments carried by M24.ru. "We can join representatives of military enlistment offices and police in going door-to-door to hand the conscripts their draft papers."

Some 1,400 Cossacks — members of a quasi-militant group predominantly found in Russia and Ukraine — are available to hunt the draft dodgers, Shishkin said, adding that the group had already made agreements with two of Moscow's 27 military enlistment offices.

Cossacks have re-emerged as public defenders of law and order in Russia under President

Vladimir Putin, where they are presented as guardians of patriotic values. A few dozen Cossacks began patrolling Moscow's parks in December, in tandem with policemen, to curb drinking in public and smoking in places where it is banned, Russian media reported.

The Cossacks' inclusion in public patrolling was facilitated by the adoption last spring of a law on citizen participation in maintaining public order, which cemented their ability to play such roles in society.

Cossacks, reputed to be ferocious fighters, drew international attention during last year's Sochi Olympics when they patrolled the Black Sea resort city wearing traditional uniform, at one point attacking Pussy Riot with tear gas and whips during a performance by the female protest group.

This spring's conscription will take place between April 1 and July 15, following medical examinations held in February and March.

Russian men between the ages of 18 and 27 are eligible for conscription for a mandatory year of military service. Draft dodgers face fines of up to 200,000 rubles (\$3,222) and face up to two years in prison.

The Defense Ministry recorded that 4,300 men across Russia had evaded last spring's conscription, a 20 percent decrease in the number of draft dodgers compared to the previous year, according to M24.ru.

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