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‘I Don’t Want to Be Cannon Fodder’: Panic and Fear as Russia Begins Mobilization

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Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency

Thousands of conscription-age Russian men appeared to be attempting to flee the country Wednesday as others planned how to avoid being sent to the front after President Vladimir Putin declared a partial military mobilization for the war in Ukraine.

“I don't want to be cannon fodder,” one 30-year-old Muscovite who asked for anonymity to speak freely told The Moscow Times.

The most obvious way for men to avoid conscription is to leave the country and Wednesday’s direct flights from Russia to Armenia, Turkey and Azerbaijan — nearby countries that allow Russians to enter without a visa — quickly sold out.

Prices for one-way flights to popular destinations later rose at least eightfold, with tickets from the Russian capital to Yerevan on Thursday being sold for about 160,000 rubles ($2,621)

and from Moscow to Dubai priced at 170,000 rubles ($2,784).

“My brother is scared. We are urgently trying to buy him a plane ticket somewhere,” said a Russian woman, whose brother recently completed his military service.

“We only hope that he can cross the Russian border without any problems,” the woman, who declined to provide her name, told The Moscow Times.

While Russian law provides for restrictions on movement in the case of a general mobilization, the Kremlin has not yet taken any steps to close Russia’s borders.

The head of Russia’s State Duma Defense Committee Andrei Kartapolov said Wednesday that the borders are likely to remain open, while Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on the issue.

“Of course, I have fears. I really want to avoid conscription and I would definitely leave the country if my finances allowed me and if I had friends abroad,” said Oleg, 29, who has also completed his military service.

“I’m trying to figure out how to do it.”

While Putin said that Russia would only implement a “partial” mobilization, prioritizing the call-up of military reserves with experience in the Armed Forces, a lack of official detail has sparked confusion and fear about who might actually be affected.

In particular, the official Kremlin decree on the subject published Wednesday was much more vague about who might be called up.

“The situation is currently unclear,” said Sergei Krivenko, director of the human rights group Citizen. Army. Law. that provides legal assistance to Russian soldiers.

“Judging by the decree... any citizen from the military reserve can potentially be drafted,” he told The Moscow Times.

The uncertainty appeared to be fueling a sense of panic among some Russians, as well as creative solutions to try to avoid being drafted.

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“People will use any opportunity to avoid conscription — some might go back to university or find a part-time job in the defense sector,” the Muscovite said.

“I even thought about breaking my own arm to get a medical waiver.”

Others said that mobilization was likely to be unevenly applied in different regions, with those in the Russian capital less likely to be targeted than poorer parts of the country.

“Hopefully they will spare Muscovites again. I am sure the authorities do not need pictures of police and military commissars chasing after hipsters on the subway,” said Vyacheslav

Tikhonov, a Moscow-based journalist.

“It is terrible that Muscovites will most likely avoid conscription at the expense of the regions, but I have nothing else for which to hope,” Tikhonov told The Moscow Times.

The mobilization announcement comes as Russia faces a shortage of soldiers in Ukraine after a series of military defeats around the northeastern city of Kharkiv.

In the first official estimate of Russia’s battlefield losses since March, Defense Minister Shoigu said Wednesday that 5,937 Russian soldiers had been killed in Ukraine over the course of seven months of fighting.

But the real total is likely far higher, with public data suggesting at least 6,219 soldiers have been killed and U.S. officials estimating last month that up to 80,000 Russian soldiers had been killed or wounded since February.

“Why send us there? I think that all military campaigns should be carried out by professional soldiers and those who voluntarily sign military contracts,” the Muscovite said.

“What’s happening now is the biggest failure in the history of Russia.”

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