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Russians Evade Conscription in Istanbul as Mobilization Rumors Become Reality

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Istanbul, Turkey. **Oziel Gómez / pexels**

ISTANBUL — Alexander, 23, remembers panic-buying a ticket from St. Petersburg to this Turkish metropolis shortly after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine, fearing he could be among those sent to the frontlines.

"The day the war started, I got a doctor's diagnosis saying that I'm not ill and therefore I'm not exempt from serving a year in the military," the math teacher told The Moscow Times in an interview.

Young men worried about conscription have been over-represented in the tens of thousands of Russians who fled home earlier this year for countries across the South Caucasus and Europe.

And, as President Vladimir Putin announced Wednesday a partial mobilization to offset

Russia's mounting losses in Ukraine, a new wave of emigration looks likely.

Ticket prices for destinations including Istanbul spiked in the aftermath of Putin's address, with some carriers reportedly selling out entirely.

Before the announcement, young Russian men who had recently relocated to Istanbul told The Moscow Times they were worried that conscripts could be illegally sent to fight Ukraine, or even that Russian law could be changed to allow a broader mobilization, or the deployment of conscripts abroad.

To ensure they won't be called up, they have no choice but to stay abroad until their 27th birthdays when they are no longer eligible for conscription. However, under partial mobilization, those older than 27 may also now be at risk of being called up.

Several Russians of conscription age in Istanbul declined to speak to The Moscow Times for fear of attracting the attention of the Russian authorities.

One recent arrival from the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don told The Moscow Times that two of his acquaintances had died in Ukraine.

"Neither were combat soldiers," he said, declining to give his name.

After two months in Istanbul, Alexander, who refused to give his surname for safety reasons, briefly returned to Russia to renew his passport — but because new passports are only issued to men who have not completed their military service if they have an exemption certificate, he ran into problems.

After his appeal for a medical exemption was rejected, Alexander found himself in a court case over avoiding compulsory military service.

"I rejected their summons on the grounds of illnesses which have not yet been proven, but I will need to go back to Russia to do more tests," he said.

"In the event my medical exemption is rejected, I am not likely to return."

Although Russian law mandates conscripts cannot be used in conflicts outside Russia, several men on compulsory military service have been confirmed killed while fighting in Ukraine. In perhaps the most dramatic example, conscripts were among those killed on Russia's Black Sea Fleet flagship, the Moskva, when it was sunk in April.

Russian media reports suggest that units with conscripts are already being sent to defend Russia's border where it abuts Ukraine's Kharkiv region.

In particular, many young men are worried about spot checks by police who would be empowered to report civilians to the enlistment office.

"I know someone who this happened to a few years ago," Alexander said.

While the mobilization decree published Wednesday following Putin's televised address appeared to give the authorities the power to conscript millions of eligible men aged between

18 and 60, Defense Minister Shoigu said that just 300,000 from Russia's military reserves would be called up to fight.

“Only those citizens currently in the reserve will be subject to a call-up for military service, first and foremost those who have served in the ranks of the Armed Forces,” Putin said in the pre-recorded footage aired Wednesday.

But observers pointed out that the partial mobilization decree was written to be as vague as possible.

“In reality, the Russian Defense Ministry will decide which men, where and in what quantities to send to the war,” human rights advocate Pavel Chikov posted on Telegram.

A law passed by Russia's parliament Tuesday introduced the legal concepts of “mobilization, martial law and wartime” and mandated long prison terms for deserters and those who surrendered "voluntarily."

Calls from top politicians for mobilization had grown since Russia’s retreat from the Kharkiv region earlier this month.

Up until now, the Kremlin had resisted those calls, instead resorting to recruiting prisoners, offering large salaries for short-term military contracts and setting up local regiments to increase the number of men available for the Armed Forces.

Russian student and political activist Ivan, 22, told The Moscow Times he was subjected to an invasive psychological interrogation at a military enlistment office earlier this year to assess his views on the war and establish why he had not done military service.

“There was a problem when I was asked by one doctor if I was worried about the sanctions — I replied honestly and said yes,” he said.

“I knew at that point what they wanted to do: they either wanted to put me in a psychiatric hospital... or send me to [serve in] the military.”

Ivan, who protested against the war in Moscow in April, left Russia for Istanbul shortly after and joined the local branch of anti-war group Russians Against War.

As the number of young Russian men in Istanbul looks set to grow amid Russia's partial mobilization, Ivan said he is prepared to live abroad for as long as he remains at risk of having to perform military service.

“I will not go back... as I do not know if a military summons will be waiting for me,” he said.

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