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‘War, Prison or Disability’: Russian Military Desertions Surge

The Idite Lesom project has reported an 89% increase in requests for help to desert from the Russian army this fall compared to the summer. Lawyers link the spike in requests to the fact that soldiers have given up on waiting for demobilization.

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A sign reading "Tactical Training Area" seen at a Russian military shooting range. **Yevgeny Yepanchintsev / TASS**

Russian soldiers’ requests for help deserting their units in Ukraine have almost doubled in recent months, the Idite Lesom (“Get Lost”) group, which helps Russians evade fighting in the war, told The Moscow Times.

The project said it received 577 such requests between September and November, an 89% increase from the 305 it received between June and August.

Since April, Idite Lesom's lawyers and volunteers have counseled more than 1,000 servicemen trying to desert. Of these, more than half sought help in the fall.

The highest number of desertion attempts was recorded in October (218) and the lowest in June (54 cases). Last month, 175 people tried escaping — less than in September and October, but more than in any other month.

"A year has passed since the beginning of mobilization. If some people still had hopes that they could go home after a certain period of service, there are no such illusions now," said Sergei Krivenko, director of the Grazhdanin. Armiya. Pravo ("Citizen. Army. Rights.") human rights group.

"Servicemen see that there is no rotation, that even seriously wounded men are sent back to the front after being hospitalized," he added.

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Grigory Sverdlin, the head of Idite Lesom, said most servicemen choose to desert after being wounded and treated in Russian hospitals.

Pavel, a Muscovite who served in Ukraine, decided to desert his unit after being severely wounded twice. He agreed to speak to The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity due to the risk of prosecution for his actions.

"I was sure that I would [be able to] complain about my leg [injury]," Pavel recalled. "To say that a nerve had been hit and go to a therapist with a complaint of post-traumatic stress disorder."

But in the end, there was no medical commission for his injury, and Pavel was sent back to his post as soon as his treatment ended.

By the time he returned to the front, Pavel's detachment "had gone through changes."

"Convicts were piled in there. They didn't touch me for a week, they let me settle in the trench and get used to it," he said.

"In the second week, I received a combat assignment 'to carry ammunition.' As I was running through a wooded area, a quadrocopter dropped a charge right under my feet. It was a severe wound, with a lot of blood loss," Pavel recalled.

"By another miracle, I managed to get out thanks to a comrade who carried me on his shoulders to the green zone. This time the treatment [was long], and I suffered kidney failure."

Pavel said he understood that he would be sent back to the front after this treatment if he did not take action. He decided to desert before his next period of leave was over. He left Russia with the help of human rights activists and is now seeking asylum in an undisclosed country.

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According to Krivenko, very few people try to escape from the war zone, as the chances of getting caught are high. Military patrols search the area for deserters, who are often detained and held at a field prison, only to later be sent back to the front. Desertion cases are rarely brought to court.

Sverdlin said that Idite Lesom's volunteers have helped several soldiers desert from the front line, but acknowledged that such cases were rare, in part because soldiers deployed to the front are limited in their ability to communicate with the outside world and sometimes do not have any form of identification on them.

Soldiers are required to have their internal Russian passports and military identification papers with them at all times, and commanders have no right to confiscate them. But in practice, officers can confiscate servicemens' documents when they go on leave or are hospitalized.

Pavel, the deserter, described those who decide to flee from the front line as "not quite reasonable guys."

"There are minefields ahead. And behind you... Military police. Some hid with local residents, but usually, they drank alcohol [together] and these same locals turned them into the military police."

Those who voluntarily surrender — for example, by contacting the Ukrainian project Hochu Zhit ("I Want to Live") — can also be considered deserters.

Hochu Zhit does not disclose the exact number of those it has helped, but its representatives said that it has received more than 22,000 applications in Russia in the year since mobilization was declared.

In August, Andriy Yusov, a spokesman for the Ukrainian military's intelligence directorate, said that one in five of the 200 POWs captured by Kyiv that month surrendered voluntarily.

"Every day, 3-5 Russian servicemen surrender under the 'I Want to Live' program," he said.

Russian lawyers and human rights activists say they are unable to estimate the scale of such desertions.

According to calculations by the independent Mediazona news website, 4,121 cases of unauthorized abandonment of duty have been sent to military courts since the start of mobilization, 3,470 of which have resulted in sentencings. The vast majority of those who fled received suspended sentences.

Lawyer Maksym Grebenyuk said that in his experience, deserters tend to receive suspended sentences for attempting to leave their unit, but this does not prevent them from being sent back to the front.

A suspended sentence can also be changed to a real jail term at any time, which allows commanders to keep unlucky deserters under tight control.

“They can be sent to the front line with a suspended sentence,” Grebenyuk said. “[It turns out that their prospects are] war, prison, or disability.”

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Fleeing abroad is one of the few ways to ensure that one is not sent back to the front lines.

But the problem is that most servicemen do not have international passports, different from the internal passports used inside Russia. In June, President Vladimir Putin signed amendments that require men to surrender these passports within five days of receiving a draft summons.

Those who manage to travel to neighboring countries that allow entry with an internal passport, such as Kazakhstan, are unable to move on to safer countries without their international passport.

Sverdlin advises against traveling abroad without help from organizations like Idite Lesom — theoretically, an escapee has two days before being declared wanted, but what happens in practice can never be foreseen.

"If a person is already wanted, then of course he will be detained at the border. Of course, there is a mess there: they may not announce [that a person is wanted] in time, but the mess works both ways — they may announce it earlier," he explained, adding that human rights defenders can only help in such a situation if deserters contact them in advance.

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