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'It's Like Winning at Roulette': War Quotas Squeeze Russian Students Out of Free University Spots

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The Moscow Law University admissions committee. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

"SVO children, f*** you, let me get into university," a Russian teenager says in a TikTok video, using the Kremlin-sanctioned term for the war in Ukraine.

The girl is referring to the children of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine, who receive preferential treatment in university admissions as competition for state-funded places intensifies across Russia.

More than 28,000 students were admitted under quotas for war participants and their children in 2025, nearly double the number a year earlier, the exiled outlet IStories reported.

The quotas, part of a wider system of benefits for soldiers and their families introduced after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, are prompting some students and parents to complain that

admission is increasingly decided by wartime status rather than academic achievement.

"I don't feel like I'm competing with them in terms of knowledge, but they're taking up all the budget spots," a high school graduate from the Moscow region told The Moscow Times, asking not to be named for safety reasons.

"Because of them, some olympiad winners can't get state-funded places," she said, referring to nationwide subject competitions that often provide admissions benefits.

"And what can ordinary people even hope for?"

When university admissions season opens on June 20, high schoolers nationwide will be entitled to compete for free, state-funded university places known as "budget" spots based on their scores on the Unified State Exam (EGE).

For decades, admission to a leading state university has been one of the most reliable routes to upward social mobility in Russia, particularly for students from low-income families.

Securing a "budget" place has allowed talented applicants to obtain prestigious degrees and access career opportunities that might otherwise have been beyond their reach.

But critics say the war in Ukraine has upended that system by prioritizing soldiers and their family members.

Meanwhile, the list of people eligible for admissions preferences has continued to expand.

In April, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree granting the benefit to widows of servicemen killed in the war, provided they have not remarried. The benefit also extends to widows of federal prison service and Interior Ministry employees, as well as military personnel from the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" who have served since 2014.

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Starting this year, military personnel and their relatives will be able to compete for up to one-quarter of state-funded university places.

IStories found that in almost 90% of degree programs, military personnel and their children admitted under quotas scored below the threshold required in the general admissions competition. Many opted for highly sought-after fields like medicine, education, IT, economics and law.

Competition for "budget" places is especially fierce at top institutions like Moscow State University, the Higher School of Economics and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), whose graduates often go on to work in government, business, law and the media.

The high school graduate from the Moscow region said she hopes to study law at Moscow

State Law University, but isn't sure she will be able to get into university at all this year.

"It's gotten harder to get in. The number of state-funded places is shrinking, and tuition costs astronomical amounts," she said.

One first-year student at a university in St. Petersburg said the system increasingly feels stacked against applicants competing through ordinary admissions channels.

"I think higher education has long since become a privilege in this country," he said. "You either accept that you'll be paying for your studies, or you compete in olympiads. Getting in through the EGE is like winning at roulette."

The student said his family pays about 400,000 rubles ($5,520) a year in tuition.

"At first, this situation really got to me. One girl had a lower score than me, but she got a state-funded spot, while I have to pay," the student said. "But now I've come to terms with it and just see it as the new normal."

While tuition-paying places are available to students who fail to secure a "budget" place, the cost can put elite higher education out of reach for many families, particularly as university fees have soared.

The average cost of first-year tuition at Russian universities rose 10.7% in 2026, the Kommersant newspaper reported.

The increase followed a government decision to begin regulating the number of fee-paying university places for the first time, eliminating some 47,000 fee-paying places nationwide.

At Moscow's Higher School of Economics (HSE), one of Russia's most prestigious universities, annual tuition for the popular media communications program stands at nearly 1 million rubles ($13,800).

By comparison, annual tuition at France's Panthéon-Sorbonne University is around 3,000 euros ($3,460).

In April, shortly before the EGE exams, HSE slashed a scholarship program that had helped students from Russia's regions afford tuition, cutting the maximum tuition discount from 75% to 25% as part of "optimization" efforts.

"For me and my family, that discount system was absolutely crucial," said Kirill, an HSE graduate whose name has been changed for safety reasons. "Even back in 2020, when I enrolled, the cost of tuition and living in Moscow was unaffordable for an ordinary family from the Krasnodar region."

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With space for public dissent increasingly constrained in Russia, social media platforms blocked by the authorities have become one of the few venues where applicants and parents

openly discuss admissions policies.

"These military kids are mostly getting in through exclusions," one applicant's mother said in a TikTok video. "They didn't always get admitted because of their academic abilities."

Yet some beneficiaries of the policy defend it.

"This is the least of the problems you could run into with admissions," said an HSE media communications student whose father is fighting in Ukraine and who runs a lifestyle blog about studying in Moscow.

The admissions quotas are part of broader changes that have reshaped Russia's higher education system since the start of the war.

Universities have expanded military-patriotic programs and cooperation with the Armed Forces, while recruitment campaigns targeting students have become increasingly visible on campuses since the start of the war.

Rights groups and independent media have also documented cases of students facing disciplinary action, expulsion or pressure from university administrators after taking part in anti-war protests or publicly criticizing the invasion.

A high school graduate from the Moscow region said she understood the rationale for providing benefits to military personnel themselves, but questioned extending them to their children.

"Giving admissions preferences is fair, but not to 'SVO kids',” she said. “They haven't earned it. Yes, their parents are defending the country's honor... But their children, by and large, haven't done anything.”

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