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RUSSIA: Russia moves to tighten conscription law, pressing more men to fight

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By Robyn Dixon

Washington Times (13.04.2023) – When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a mobilization in the fall to

commandeer reinforcements for the war against Ukraine, thousands of men fled the country or went into hiding. But tough new measures approved by Russia's lower house of parliament on Tuesday will make it almost impossible for Russians to dodge conscription in the future.

The law provides for electronic military summonses with bans on draftees leaving the country, making it possible to quietly sweep up thousands more men to fight – even as the Kremlin is denying plans for a controversial new mobilization.

The State Duma, which is the lower chamber, approved the legislation with just one abstention. The upper house, the Federation Council, is expected to adopt it Wednesday, and send it on to Putin for his approval, which is widely expected.

Last year's chaotic mobilization – in which military officers were obliged to physically hand out paper notices – created scenes of young men being grabbed from the streets and at subway stations, or wrestled to the ground in shopping malls. In some cases, passersby filmed men fleeing military officials.

Under the new rules, electronic summonses will be issued to conscripts under Russia's compulsory military service for men ages 18 to 27, but also potentially to members of the Russian military reserve and others. Under Russian law, conscripts must not be deployed to Ukraine, however complaints have surfaced that in some cases they have been sent there and killed in action.

Andrei Kartoplov, head of the State Duma defense committee, spelled out tough penalties for those who do not respond to electronic summonses, including potential bans on driving, registering a company, working as a self-employed individual, obtaining credit or loans, selling apartments, buying property or securing social benefits. These penalties could apply to the thousands of men who are already outside the country.

The electronic summons will be issued via a government services portal, Gosuslugi, used for all manner of state payments and services including taxes, passports, housing services, social benefits, transport documents, medical appointments, employee insurance and countless other matters.

Under the law, personal data of conscripts including identity documents, personal tax numbers, driver's license details, phone numbers and other information will be transferred by Gosuslugi to military enlistment offices. Universities, business employers, hospitals and clinics, government ministries, law enforcement agencies, the electoral commission and the tax authority are also required to transmit data to the military.

With the Kremlin anxious to avoid unpopular mobilization measures, the new rules highlight Russia's need for more military personnel, after a largely ineffective winter offensive that gained little ground despite high casualties, and ahead of an expected new Ukrainian counteroffensive ahead.

As the Kremlin prepares Russians for a long war, the need to

continually reconstitute depleted Russian military units could drag on for years.

Russia's Ministry of Defense has recently recruited hundreds of prisoners on 18-month contracts to fight in the war, according to Russia Behind Bars, a prisoners' rights group, after the Wagner mercenary group was blocked from recruiting in jails.

The military has also been offering Russian passports to foreigners who join the Russian armed forces and has been running a voluntary recruitment campaign.

In December, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced plans to increase the size of Russia's military by 30 percent to 1.5 million servicemen, including 695,000 volunteer contract soldiers.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the new law is "absolutely necessary" but added that it is not connected with the mobilization of more Russian men to fight in the war.

"We need to improve and modernize the military accounting system," Peskov said.

However, Putin's written mobilization decree was never rescinded and legally remains in force.

Last year's mobilization triggered anger and public protests, with many conscripts drawn from Russia's most impoverished regions, while the privileged sons of officials such as Peskov and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said they would not fight in Ukraine, when contacted by members of the team of jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Russian political analyst Andrei Kolesnikov, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote in a recent analysis that the Kremlin's claim it was fighting the West, not Ukraine, had created a "people's war," in which citizens are expected to lay down their lives for victory and critics of the war or the Kremlin are branded traitors.

The goal of defeating the West – much like the goal of building communism in Soviet times – is ever receding into the future, he continued. "The specific parameters of what such a victory would look like or how it may be achieved remain entirely unclear, but the rest of eternity can be spent moving toward that horizon," Kolesnikov wrote.

The new measures follow a flurry of denials from Russian officials that summonses would be issued through the state services portal.

Once an electronic summons is issued, a citizen is bound by it until his military duty is discharged.

The deputy chairman of the Duma's defense committee, Yuri Shvytkin, told Russian media that conscripts who deleted their

accounts on the state services website would be deemed to be draft dodgers and face arrest and punishment.

“It was just one of the goals, to minimize the percentage of dodgers,” he told Russian media outlet Ura.ru.

The bar on departing the country takes effect from the moment the draft notice is electronically sent. Military draft offices can register draftees in the military in their absence, ditching the current practice where conscripts and draftees appear in person to sign forms and undergo medical examinations.

The new measures come with mobilized soldiers from regions across Russia posting dozens of videos on Russian media complaining that they are sent to the slaughter in near-suicidal assaults on Ukrainian positions without adequate training, arms or equipment, a problem that has haunted Russia throughout the war.

State Duma member Andrei Lugovoi, one of the bill’s developers, said on Telegram that problems during last year’s mobilization operation had proved the need for a more efficient way of calling men up for military duty.

“There were so many complaints about the military registration and enlistment offices, people erroneously mobilized, and those who were able to hide under the pretext of a non-received summons,” he said. The bill allows the military to “put things in order” and “eliminate any inconsistency or

erroneous actions in the future.”

The move to bar real estate sales makes it difficult for conscription evaders to flee the country without losing assets. It also means that those who fled Russia last year to avoid fighting in Ukraine will not be able to cash out of their Russian property.

Although conscripts are not supposed to be deployed to combat zones, including Ukraine, those completing their compulsory military service have come under intense pressure from superiors to sign military contracts making them eligible for deployment to the front, according to Russian independent media interviews with the mothers of conscripts.

The war is hitting Russia's economy, depleting the nation's ranks of young workers. Last year's combination of migrants fleeing Russia and the military call-up led to a sharp decline in the number of Russian workers younger than 35, which dropped by 1.3 million workers from 22.83 million, including mostly men, according to a study of Russian state statistics published on Tuesday in RBC newspaper. The drop was most apparent among workers ages 25 to 29, falling by 724,000 to 7.2 million workers.

Natalia Abbakumova contributed to this report.



Photo 1: Russian recruits board a train at a railway station in Prudboi, Russia, in September. (AP)

Photo 2: An army recruiting billboard with the words "Military service under contract" is outside Krasnodar, Russia, on March 23. (AP)

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