



Alternate Medical Service for Russian Draftees

OE Watch Commentary: Like many other countries, Russia continues to struggle with the challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. All sectors of society, to include the military, have been enlisted to help reduce the threat of infection and to provide medical care to the ill (see: “Constructing Multifunctional Medical Centers to Combat Coronavirus,” *OE Watch*, May 2020). Perhaps it was just fortuitous timing, but according to the accompanying excerpt from the pro-Kremlin daily, *Izvestia*, Defense Ministry officials recently announced that young Russian men who opt for Alternative Civilian Service (AGS) in lieu of being trained as a soldier, will soon be able to “be trained in the paramedic profession,” and elect to serve “within the civilian structures or the Defense Ministry system.”

Since the early 1990s, Russia has allowed young men who hold pacifist views, the option of completing their conscription requirement outside of military service. As the excerpt points out, selecting this option has not been very popular, with only a few hundred young men choosing AGS each draft cycle. Not only is the process convoluted, filled with bureaucratic hurdles, and generally frowned upon by defense officials, but prospective candidates are required to serve 21 months instead of the normal 12-month conscription period.

The excerpt suggests that the military’s attitude toward those recruits who select AGS may be changing. The article quotes an expert who asserts that “working in the medical field is an important and honorable deed,” pointing out that “the spread of coronavirus infection has shown that medical professionals are still at the forefront, in the hospitals, fighting for the lives of thousands of people.” The military also plans to reduce the time commitment for those choosing AGS from 21 to 18 months.

Even with serious national concerns over the spread of COVID-19, the Kremlin leadership elected to go forward with the Spring 2020 conscription campaign. In a roundabout way, allowing future draftees the option of AGS and being trained as a paramedic, may help to stem the spread of the coronavirus within the military. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“Working in the medical field is an important and honorable deed...”

Source: Roman Kretcul, Bogdan Stepovoi, Aleksei Ramm, “Санитарный призыв: в РФ меняют правила прохождения альтернативной службы (Sanitary Draft: Russian Federation Changes Alternative Service Rules),” *Izvestia*, 16 April 2020. <https://iz.ru/996298/roman-kretcul-bogdan-stepovoi-aleksei-ramm/sanitarnyi-prizyv-v-rf-menaiut-pravila-prokhozheniia-alternativnoi-sluzhby>

New Alternative Civilian Service (AGS) rules are being introduced in the country. It is planned that, as soon as in 2021, the draftees opting for AGS will be able to serve through the Defense Ministry channel. The young people will be trained in the paramedic profession at the Russian Federation Armed Forces Main Temple Military Spiritual and Educational Center base. Afterwards, the draftees will be dispatched to serve in medical institutions, Izvestiya’s sources in the Defense Ministry reported. Their service term will be reduced from 21 to 18 months, unlike those who serve their AGS in civil structures.

Previously, the young men whose beliefs forbid taking up arms, served only in civil establishments -- as paramedics, social workers, and so on. They now have the opportunity to serve the Motherland within the military department system. As such, they will have no need carry an assault rifle....

The option to choose civilian service instead of the military one became available for the Russian draftees in the early 1990s. There were no mechanisms for implementing this option at the time, and the young men, who had applied for the AGS, sometimes waited for years until a service place was allocated for them. Some treated this option as an opportunity to legally evade military service, by stretching the time up to the end of the draft age.

Today, the list of professions available for those choosing the alternative serve already numbers dozens of positions. These, for instance, include: a woodworker, a driver, a welder, a postman, an elevator operator, a house painter, a tractor operator, a paramedic, a gate-keeper, a gardener, a reindeer herder, a baker, a fireman, etc.

...However, this service is not very popular. There are only several hundred draftees opting for the AGS every six months, while approximately 130,000-135,000 draftees in the same time period choose the military service.

The service term for those choosing the AGS through the Defense Ministry channel will be reduced to 18 months. After training, they will be dispatched for service in medical institutions....

...Colonel Aleksandr Perendzhiyev, the Associate Professor at the Plekhanov REU [Russian University of Economics], is also confident that the young men serving the AGS can be very useful to the country and the society. “Working in the medical field is an important and honorable deed,” the expert told Izvestiya. “The world is changing, and the situation with the spread of coronavirus infection has shown that medical professionals are still at the forefront, in the hospitals, fighting for the lives of thousands of people.”

...It is also important for the draftees to keep in mind that certain restrictions will apply to the citizens who have opted for alternative service, when they are processed for government jobs.