

Yakov Lurie
March 2026

“Don’t Wake the Giant”:

*Who Avoids Conscription in Russia –
How and Why?*



Imprint

Published by

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
<https://www.russia.fes.de>
info.russia@fes.de

Editing Department

International Cooperation Department,
Russia Program of the FES

Responsibility for content and editing

Alexey Yusupov

Photo credits

Cover: Illustrations Freepik.com

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. Commercial use of media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. Publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung may not be used for election campaign purposes.

March 2026

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➤ <https://www.fes.de/publikationen>

Yakov Lurie
March 2026

“Don’t Wake the Giant”:

Who Avoids Conscription in Russia – How and Why?

Contents

Introduction	3
Research Objectives & Methodology	4
1. “Army is a waste of time”: motivations for avoiding military service	4
2. The male vs. the state: strategies of avoiding conscription	5
3. Why alternative civilian service is not an alternative	6
4. Why human rights support remains marginal	6
5. From rights to transactions: why people trust commercial aid more than NGOs	7
6. Refusal as Privilege: Class and the Uneven Landscape of Draft Evasion in Russia	7
Key Outcomes	8
Practical Recommendations for Human Rights Organisations	8

“Don’t Wake the Giant”:

Who Avoids Conscription in Russia – How and Why?

The study explores the motivations and strategies of young men in Russia who seek to avoid mandatory military service, as well as the perception of human rights organisations in this process. Based on qualitative sociological interviews, the research was conducted by the [Public Sociology Laboratory](#) (PS Lab), an independent collective studying politics and society in Russia and the post-Soviet region.

Introduction

Since the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the military has remained in the public spotlight throughout the war. The media reports on the conditions of soldiers at the front and the progress of mobilisation campaigns. High-profile news stories often focus on the recruitment of prisoners,¹ the forced deployment of conscripts to combat zones² and, more recently, the growing number of returning veterans from Ukraine, including former inmates,³ as well as on new “death economies”.⁴

Yet for hundreds of thousands of Russians military service does not begin with mobilisation or war – it begins with the draft. The longstanding system of compulsory conscription remains the first link in the chain feeding Russia’s broader mobilisation potential. In 2024, the legal draft age in Russia was raised from 27 to 30,⁵ and new mechanisms of surveillance and enforcement – such as digital military summons and tighter exit restrictions – have been introduced to strengthen mobilisation control.⁶ Russia’s Defence Ministry has introduced new regulations that further restrict access to medical exemptions from conscription.⁷ Unsurprisingly, since the invasion began, a number of anti-war initiatives have emerged to support young men at risk of being drafted – motivated by the aim of keeping as many people as possible out of the war.

But who are these young men? Who in today’s Russia seeks to avoid conscription – and why? What are they willing to do to achieve this? How do they view human rights organisations and the option of alternative civilian service? How has the war shaped public attitudes toward the military? And finally: why is avoiding the draft in Russia a privilege? These are the questions addressed in this study.

Throughout the full-scale war the Kremlin has been investing heavily in militarizing society – through patriotic education in schools, expanded recruitment efforts, and promoting war in the public sphere.⁸ Meanwhile, front evasion

¹ Olgin K., Sapozhnikov P. Meduza. From trial to the trenches: How the Russian authorities keep finding new ways to trick prisoners into going to war. 25 November 2024. Available at: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/11/25/from-trial-to-the-trenches> (accessed on 9 September 2025). Full story in Russian is available at: <https://meduza.io/feature/2024/11/25/zaklyuchennyh-v-rf-verbuyut-na-front-bolshe-dvuh-let-dazhe-obmanom-i-ugrozami-kak-rabotaet-etot-konveyer-rasskazyvayut-praktikuyuschie-advokaty> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Ilyushina M. The Washington Post. Russia prison population plummets as convicts are sent to war. 26 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/26/russia-prison-population-convicts-war> (accessed on 9 September 2025); MacFarquhar N., Mazaeva M. The New York Times. Where Is Russia Finding New Soldiers? Wherever It Can. 30 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/30/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-soldiers.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

² Sivtsova S., Safonova K. Meduza. ‘I’m panicking — where is my child?’ Conscript soldiers are being sent to fight against Ukraine, their relatives say. Here’s what their families told Meduza. 25 February 2022. Available at: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/02/26/i-m-panicking-where-is-my-child> (accessed on 9 September 2025); RFE/RL’s Siberia.Realities. Russian Conscripts Can’t Be Sent Into Battle. This One Was. And He’s Not Happy About It. 20 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-conscripts-war-combat/33415104.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

³ Hopkins V., Heitmann N. The New York Times. For Many Returning Russian Veterans, a Long Road of Recovery Awaits. 7 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/07/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-veterans.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025); MacFarquhar N., Mazaeva M. The New York Times. Pardoned for Serving in Ukraine, They Return to Russia to Kill Again. 6 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/06/world/europe/russia-convicts-war-murder.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Goble P. Russian Army’s Degradation in Ukraine Makes Returning Veterans Even Greater Threat. Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 22 Issue: 77. May 29 2025. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-armys-degradation-in-ukraine-makes-returning-veterans-even-greater-threat/> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁴ Kantchev G., Luxmoore M. The Wall Street Journal. The ‘Deathonomics’ Powering Russia’s War Machine. November 13 2024. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russia-ukraine-war-military-death-pay-6cfe936e> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Jégo M., Seigneur M. Le Monde. Russia’s economy of death is boosting growth. 30 August 2024. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/06/world/europe/russia-convicts-war-murder.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁵ Kolezev D. Russia Post. How Conscription Has Changed in Russia During the War. 22 April 2025. Available at: <https://russiapost.info/society/conscription> (accessed on 9 September 2025); The Guardian. Russia raises the maximum age of conscription as it seeks to replenish Ukraine forces. 26 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/26/russia-conscription-maximum-age-raised-ukraine-war> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁶ Novaya Gazeta Europe. Three Russian regions begin to test issuing digital military conscription notices. 18 September 2024. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/09/18/three-russian-regions-begin-to-test-issuing-digital-military-conscription-notices-en-news> (accessed on 9 September 2025); The Moscow Times. Russian Army Fully Launches Digital Call-Up System to Crack Down on Draft Dodgers. 9 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/05/09/russian-army-fully-launches-digital-call-up-system-to-crack-down-on-draft-dodgers-a89031> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Russian Army Fully Launches Digital Call-Up System to Crack Down on Draft Dodgers. 9 May 2025. Available at: <https://russiapost.info/society/conscription> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁷ Meduza. Russia’s Defense Ministry is quietly making it even harder to get a medical exemption from military service. 4 February 2025. Available at: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2025/02/04/russia-s-defense-ministry-is-quietly-making-it-even-harder-to-get-a-medical-exemption-from-military-service> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Alexander R. Russia Post. MoD Proposal to Send Men with STIs to Ukraine Could Have Devastating Consequences for Public Health. 13 March 2025. Available at: https://russiapost.info/society/men_with_stis (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁸ Trach T., Flokas V., Novikov D., Stepanenko K. Institute for the Study of War. Russian Force Generation and Technological Adaptations. 14 May 2025. Available at: <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-force-generation-and-technological-adaptations-update-may-14-2025> (accessed on 9 September 2025);

is criminalised, as more and more cases against soldiers accused of refusing to serve are registered across the country.⁹ In this context, understanding how and why some young men seek to avoid military service becomes politically significant, as resistance to conscription – even silent, private, or informal – reveals limits to state power, social consensus, and ideological control.

This study focuses on those trying to avoid conscription into Russia's military, with the goal of understanding their motivations, strategies and attitudes toward various forms of assistance. We explore how people interpret the risks and requirements of conscription during wartime and which forms of support they find most relevant, trustworthy or accessible.

Research Objectives & Methodology

The study was guided by the following key questions:

1. What motivates young men in Russia to avoid compulsory military service?
2. What strategies for evading conscription do they consider available, desirable or unacceptable – and why?
3. What types of support are they seeking, if any, to help them avoid service?
4. What role do human rights organisations play in these strategies – and how are they perceived?
5. How do ongoing developments – such as the war in Ukraine and mass mobilisation, – shape perceptions of military service and its risks?

Surveys show that support for military service remains high among Russians in general,¹⁰ but they do not isolate the views of draft-eligible men. Our study helps fill this gap by focusing on a group that is statistically small but socially significant – especially as a potential site of disengagement from the wartime state agenda.

Ebel F. The Washington Post. In wartime Russia, schools prepare the next generation of fighters. 8 May 2025. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/05/08/russia-patriotism-education-ukraine-war/> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Manley C. Business Insider. Russia is spending millions to create a new generation of militant Putin clones. 20 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-spends-millions-youth-indoctrinate-next-generation-putin-2024-7> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

⁹ Mediazona. Over 20,000 Russians prosecuted for refusing to fight in Ukraine. Russia sees a wave of military refusal, with Ukraine not far behind. 26 June 2025. Available at: <https://en.zona.media/article/2025/06/26/awol> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

¹⁰ Levada-Center. Russian Army. 16 December 2022. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/12/16/russian-army/> (accessed on 9 September 2025); Levada-Center. Army: partial mobilization, electronic army draft, compensations to the participants of the Special Military Operation and conscription service. 2 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/06/02/army-partial-mobilization-electronic-army-draft-compensations-to-the-participants-of-the-special-military-operation-and-conscription-service/> (accessed on 9 September 2025); FOM. Polozheniye del v armii [State of things in the Army]. 2 March 2021. In Russian. Available at: <https://fom.ru/Bezopasnost-i-pravo/14545> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

Based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted in 2023 by Public Sociology Laboratory (PS Lab) researchers – along with 5 interviews with relatives and 3 with human rights professionals – this research draws a portrait of young men who do not want to serve, but who do not identify as strongly political either.

The project originally began as applied research for an initiative aiding draft evaders. Their key concern was how to reach beyond their existing, politicized audience and support those who might still be reachable – young men *not fully inside the opposition “bubble”, but also not entirely cut off* from independent information channels. Accordingly, we focused on residents of large cities and regional centres who:

- Want to avoid conscription;
- Don't follow opposition media closely or express strong political views;
- Still fall within the potential reach of civil support efforts.

Most had higher education or were pursuing it; a quarter had graduate-level studies.

Recruitment was via Telegram channels and snowball sampling. Three had used *Prizyva.net*, a commercial legal aid company, and three had temporarily left Russia due to conscription risk.

Political orientation turned out to be of limited explanatory value. Views on service and evasion were similar across the sample – whether or not participants followed anti-war media. All participants opposed being sent to war; some said they'd rather be imprisoned than serve in combat. But their views on military service itself varied – from outright refusal to seeing it as a tolerable last resort.

1. “Army is a waste of time”: motivations for avoiding military service

All respondents in our study shared a common goal: to avoid military service. While some explained this choice clearly, many described it as self-evident – “never wanted to serve” – without linking it to broader political or ethical positions. Motivations fell into two broad categories: pragmatic and ethical, with pragmatic concerns prevailing across the board.

Three main themes emerged across pragmatic motivations: interruption of life plans, poor quality of service, and fear of being sent to war.

Conscription is widely seen as a disruption during a crucial period for education, work, and skill-building. Many called it a “waste of time” that would block career opportunities. “I'll get nothing from service – just lose a year”, said one respondent. “Why would I need the army? I want to go into business”, shared another.

The Russian army is perceived as unproductive and disorganized. Several described friends who “*did absolutely nothing*” or trained only “*one and a half times a year*”. Military service is not seen as offering useful experience.

After the invasion of Ukraine, fears of forced deployment grew. One respondent changed his mind after hearing that “*they pressure people to go fight*”. This fear is rarely tied to protest, but to self-preservation. Even those with anti-war views typically did not connect them directly to their refusal to serve.

Overall, the dominant attitude is a personal, calculated rejection, not based on ideology but on cost to individual plans, perceived uselessness, and physical risk.

A minority mentioned ethical or ideological reasons, usually as secondary. These are framed in personal terms – “*never wanted to hold a weapon*”, “*was never into military stuff*” – and not as systemic critique. One teacher, for example, linked his pacifism to peaceful childhood preferences like Lego, not current events or beliefs about the war. Criticism of army culture – “*being ordered around*”, “*patriarchal structure*” – also appeared, but as personal discomfort rather than principal rejection of the military institution itself. Even politically engaged respondents treat conscription avoidance as a personal strategy.

Surprisingly, strong anti-war respondents rarely mentioned their anti-war stance when explaining why they avoid service but expressed it separately.

Rather than reflecting a broader political stance, interviewees’ attitudes toward conscription is shaped by a cost – benefit analysis that weighs various life strategies against the burdens and risks of serving. Military service was often perceived not as a categorical wrong, but as one of several undesirable options. As one 22-year-old from Moscow put it: “*I don’t want to join the army. But I’m just tired of the constant running. I’m the kind of person who likes to get it over with quickly and live in peace*”. The idea of “*getting it over with*” underscores how service may be accepted by some as a lesser evil – when avoiding it feels more exhausting.

2. The male vs. the state: strategies of avoiding conscription

Most young Russian men we spoke with claimed they began thinking about ways to avoid conscription even before draft age. The pressure intensifies during periods of seasonal conscription waves as well as at moments of transition – after graduation, during mobilisation, or upon contact from enlistment offices. The strategies they choose differ in accessibility, risk and effort, but they all reflect a broader logic: minimizing exposure to the state while securing protection from military service.

The most common and often most desirable strategy is to obtain a legal exemption, often on medical grounds or

through extended education. These options are seen as relatively predictable and safe. Some respondents pursue graduate degrees primarily for this reason. “*If you earn the Candidate of Sciences degree*”, one said, “*they can’t draft you anymore. So that’s the plan – go to grad school and do science for fun*”. Others choose programs more instrumentally: “*Many guys I know apply to random universities just to avoid the autumn draft and buy time*”. This type of exemption grants potential conscript legal immunity from the state and sends it a message: “*I can’t legally serve*”.

When formal exemptions are unavailable, many opt for a different route: disappearing from the state’s view. This includes not living at one’s registered address, avoiding updates to official records and ignoring draft notices. “*I haven’t gone to the voyenkomat¹¹ since I was 20*”, said a man from St. Petersburg. “*If I go now to get transferred to the reserve, they’ll learn my current data and that could complicate things*”. For some, family helps maintain this distance – by turning off the intercom, intercepting mail and avoiding any official contact.

Conscripts who follow this strategy rely partly on gaps in the state’s own infrastructure – such as outdated databases or lost paperwork – and avoid any communication with state authorities altogether. Emigration functions as the most radical version of this approach, though for many it’s either inaccessible or too disruptive.

A small number of respondents take the opposite tack: confronting the system head-on. They assert their legal right not to serve through complaints, delays and sometimes lawsuits. “*My strategy was to make them so uncomfortable they wouldn’t want to deal with me*”, said one, who sued a military commissioner – and won. This group, though rare, shows a posture of deliberate engagement and legal activism. These individuals study regulations, memorize medical disqualifiers and treat the draft office “*like a game of dominance*”. Often, it is their mothers who take on this role – following information channels, cross-checking orders and assembling legal dossiers. “*I have a bookkeeping approach*”, said one woman. “*I collect everything – laws, instructions, explanations*”.

Across these approaches, what’s at stake is not just avoiding military service, but how to relate to the state. Some assert their status openly (“*I’m legally unfit*”), others withdraw entirely (“*I’m invisible to you*”), and a few confront the system on its own legal terms (“*I know my rights – and I’ll use them*”). Most young men, however, aim to avoid attention while still securing long-term protection. The ideal outcome is legal immunity without visible conflict, with as little disruption to life as possible.

In terms of information search, most rely on friends, relatives or passively gathered knowledge. Active legal literacy is rare

¹¹ *Voyenkomat* (in Russian: *военкомат*) is a military enlistment office responsible for conscription and military records in Russia

and usually problem-driven – “how to dodge the draft”, “which illnesses qualify” – rather than systematic. But this too reflects the prevailing logic: reduce contact, avoid risk, and handle the state from a safe distance, if at all.

3. Why alternative civilian service is not an alternative

Alternative Civilian Service (ACS)¹² is almost entirely absent from the real choices our interviewees consider when avoiding conscription. Though it exists on paper as a legal alternative, respondents see it as exposing oneself – a move from passive avoidance to active confrontation with the state. Unlike medical exemption, which says “I can’t serve”, applying for ACS signals “I won’t serve” – and that difference matters. As one 24-year-old put it, “*the voyenkomat really hates it when someone applies for ACS*”. Rights advocates confirm that applications are often informally blocked, especially after 2022, with draft offices arbitrarily rejecting claims by questioning the sincerity of personal convictions.

Even for those who might qualify, ACS is widely dismissed as a waste of time and opportunity. It lasts twice as long as military service, offers poor conditions and leaves little room for personal development. “*It’s like being sentenced to community labour*”, one respondent said, citing monthly pay of 15 – 20,000 rubles and menial assignments. Most imagine roles like janitor or hospital orderly, regardless of official job listings. As one rights defender noted, this image is outdated – but still dominant.

More fundamentally, ACS is not seen as a real alternative to militarism. Several respondents spoke of ACS assignees being placed in military-related institutions or even tasked with recruiting soldiers. “I don’t even know which is worse,” said a 21-year-old who had heard of such cases. Another activist recalled a religious objector nearly assigned to work at the Cathedral of the Armed Forces. Though legally civilian, ACS remains symbolically entangled with the military and the state.

The ideological foundation of ACS – ethical or religious objection – is nearly absent from how respondents speak about it. Even those with anti-war views don’t describe ACS as morally aligned or politically meaningful. It’s approached, if at all, as a bureaucratic loophole rather than an act of conscience. The phrase “I’m against war, so I’ll do ACS” simply doesn’t appear in our data. Instead, avoidance decisions remain dominated by individualised, practical reasoning.

In sum, ACS is not trusted, not appealing and not seen as distinct from the system it supposedly offers an alternative to. For most, it’s not a softer option – it’s just another coer-

cive route, sometimes more humiliating or uncertain than military service itself. Its rejection reflects both pragmatic thinking and a deeper refusal to engage with the state, even on terms it officially permits.

4. Why human rights support remains marginal

Several human rights organisations in Russia offer free legal help to potential conscripts. Yet this support is rarely used. Whether long-established or created after 2022, these groups operate within the law to help young men avoid military service. But among our interviewees, legal aid was almost never seen as a relevant or desirable option.

The main reason is lack of awareness and interest. Most respondents had never heard of any such organisation. Even when a name rang a bell, it was vague. “*Very superficially... I had the impression it’s more for those already in the army*”, said a 26-year-old from Irkutsk. Another added, “*I knew maybe two or three groups help conscripts, but I never really looked into it*”. In other words, legal assistance simply wasn’t part of how most imagined solving the problem of conscription.

Another issue is distrust and fear. Contacting a legal NGO is perceived as risky – something that could provoke the state rather than shield against it. “*If you just show up and say ‘I want to serve,’ they’ll say ‘no problem, brother’*”, shared a 21-year-old from St. Petersburg. “*But if you go through a legal organisation and something goes wrong, they’ll make an example of you. You’ll end up in a logging camp in the taiga*”. “*You don’t want to wake the giant*” – another interviewee said.

Even the act of asking for help feels like exposing oneself. Many fear they would end up in direct contact with the draft office – the very thing they hoped to avoid. “*I keep seeing warnings in the media: don’t go to the voyenkomat*”, said a 22-year-old. “*Going to a legal group means going to the voyenkomat. That’s risky*”. For those living away from their official residence, the concern was that legal aid could trigger unwanted formalities and registrations – undoing their strategy of staying under the radar.

Still, some viewed legal help as a last resort – an emergency option, not a preventative one. “*Only if the act of injustice had already been done and there were no other options*”, said a 24-year-old. Another imagined needing it “*if they tried to draft me even though I had a paper saying I don’t have a hand*”. In this case, legal advisors are not partners in a legitimate strategy – they are medics you call once you’re already wounded. “*If I were basically being held hostage at the draft point*”, said one, “*then I’d call someone – maybe they’d help me flee*”.

The only group routinely engaging with rights organisations are mothers. They act on behalf of their sons and are less afraid of confronting the state. “*It’s mostly mothers*

¹² A legally recognized substitute for military service, usually carried out in civilian roles, granted on ideological or religious grounds. See Article 59 (<https://rm.coe.int/constitution-of-the-russian-federation-en/1680a1a237>) of Russian Constitution or this publication (https://elenaforum.org/wp-content/uploads/wpforo/default_attachments/1675684903-Mobilization-in-Russia-2022-ENG-ECRE-ELENA.pdf), p. 12.

who contact the NGOs” – a pattern confirmed by several rights defenders we spoke with.

5. From rights to transactions: why people trust commercial aid more than NGOs

Across Russia, commercial firms offer “full-cycle” assistance to help young men dodge conscription – handling everything from medical paperwork to legal representation. These services range from shady Telegram channels to large firms like *Prizyva.net*, mentioned by many interviewees and described by them as both more visible and more reliable than any NGO.

When asked about legal aid, most respondents thought first of commercial providers – “*they’re the ones people actually use*”, said a 25-year-old from Kazan. Several interviewees had hired them personally; many more knew friends who had.

The appeal is simple: clear contracts, tangible results and good customer service. “*It was unprofitable for them to fail, so I trusted them*”, said a 26-year-old from St. Petersburg, who paid for a package that promised either a deferral or a refund. A man from Irkutsk echoed this logic: “*When you pay and sign a contract, it’s a working relationship. With free aid, it’s just luck – maybe they’ll help, maybe not*”. Commercial firms are seen as faster, more responsive, and more invested because “*they want to grow their business*”.

Some respondents questioned the ethics or pricing of paid services – calling them “*greedy*” or “*profit-driven*”. But even those who were sceptical didn’t see NGOs as viable alternatives.

What commercial aid offers, above all, is predictability. Packages, contracts, refund guarantees, customer support – it all feels familiar, like booking a flight or signing up for Netflix. “*I just want to get a solid deferral and be able to say: ‘Leave me alone’*”, said one man.

It’s also apolitical. Hiring a firm doesn’t require voicing beliefs or taking a stance. It’s a way to pay for results without engaging with the moral or legal meaning of the process. As one activist described it: “*They want to buy their way out of trouble – and forget it ever happened*”.

By contrast, free legal aid is viewed as helpful only when there’s no other option. It’s seen as slow, inconsistent and above all, uncertain. NGOs often don’t provide full representation, focusing on strategic litigation or high-risk cases. Worse, they expect active participation – writing appeals, studying laws, showing up for appointments. While this rarely leads to direct confrontation with the state, it feels confrontational to most young men. It also demands time and effort many are unwilling – or unable – to give.

The preference for paid services reflects a broader shift: from rights to transactions. Avoiding conscription is no longer im-

agined as a political fight or even a legal one – it’s a service problem, best solved by specialists. For many, this consumer model feels safer, clearer and more effective than navigating a murky legal system or confronting state power.

6. Refusal as Privilege: Class and the Uneven Landscape of Draft Evasion in Russia

One of the most revealing insights from our research came from a simple question: do our interviewees actually need help avoiding the draft? The project initially focused on those outside NGO’s existing client base – yet “reachable” men of conscription age. In practice, this meant a narrow demographic: urban, educated, and relatively privileged.

Although, in trying to identify these potentially “reachable” respondents, we deliberately included people with varying political views and media habits, these differences turned out not to matter much for how they viewed military service and draft evasion. Instead, what truly united these men were class-based advantages.

In large cities, evasion is easier. It’s not as difficult to remain unnoticed by the military office: paperwork is more likely to get lost in bureaucratic chaos, there are more legal grounds for deferral (such as study or work options), and people generally have more money and “non-material assets” that provide broader strategic options – from paid services to drawing on wider social and informational networks. The cultural context matters too: military service is often devalued, and evasion is socially acceptable. There is also a much larger choice of attractive career paths that don’t require a military ID. As one man from Irkutsk put it, “*The army might work as a social elevator – but only if you have no other options*”. For men like him, conscription seemed both unwanted and irrational.

But these privileges don’t travel. In smaller towns, where we drew on interviews collected in a parallel project,¹³ evasion is harder and often less desirable. Social networks are tight; officials know families personally. “*They’ll just phone the parents*”, a rights activist explained. For many, the option to “just disappear” doesn’t exist.

More fundamentally, the meaning of service differs. While urban men saw the army as a waste of time, a small-town respondent saw it as a path to employment. “*A supply clerk [in the army] is basically a merchandiser*”, he reasoned. “*That way I get more job options*”. In such contexts, military service is not a disruption – it’s a plan.

This divide isn’t just economic. In small towns, evasion carries stigma. Alternative civilian service is considered unmanly. Mental health diagnoses are hard to fake and deeply

¹³ Public Sociology Laboratory. Russian society in the wartime. Available at: <https://publicsociologylab.com/en/projects/war-perception.html> (accessed on 9 September 2025).

stigmatized. Some young men even see diagnostic exemptions as misfortunes. One 17-year-old, disqualified due to a mistaken label from his foster care record, told us bitterly: *“They ruined my whole life”*.

Service for many young men from smaller towns and less resource-rich environments can be a source of prestige and a way to confirm one’s worth. One informant, who had hoped to join elite units but was instead placed in a low prestige unit, shared: *“Just say: I served—like a champ. Even if I was just carrying boxes, I’m proud of it”*.

Others emphasised the value of collective experience, describing informal hierarchies as empowering: *“We made groups with some guys. There was a lot of action! You could rule and divide, even with the sergeants and officers”*. For them, military service can be a source of recognition and a form of self-worth both within and outside institution. Many spoke of duty – either in abstract patriotic terms or as a family expectation. *“Everyone must serve”*, one said. In contrast, an urban respondent countered: *“I don’t believe I owe anything to the Motherland. It never helped my mom raise me”*.

Yet, our interviews suggest “duty” values often follow, not precede, decisions, suggesting that pragmatism in decision making goes across class divide. For a 17-year-old waiter in a small town, the calculation was blunt: *“I’ve got nothing... if I serve, I’ll come out with money”*.

By the end of our study, the pattern was clear: the men most equipped to avoid the army – urban, educated, well-connected and better situated financially – are also the least likely to be drafted. Helping them isn’t wrong, but it risks reinforcing inequality if their stories become the default focus of support.

Reluctance does exist outside of large urban centres, too. NGOs receive inquiries from far-off regions, and documentaries like Tatyana Chistova’s *Credo* (2016) show draft evasion even in remote towns. But these cases are harder to reach, harder to support, and underrepresented.

There is no universal “draft-age man.” If support programs only focus on those who already have tools to navigate the system, we entrench inequality rather than challenge it. The more ambitious task is to reach those for whom refusal is hardest, and for whom the army still looks like the most reasonable future.

Key Outcomes

Pragmatism overrides ideology. Most interviewees avoid service for personal, practical reasons – protecting comfort, careers, or plans – not due to moral or political convictions. Even mentions of pacifism tend to justify choices already made on pragmatic grounds. In less privileged settings too, talk of “duty” often masks practical choices.

Conscription army ≠ active warfare army: Conscription is seen as a self-contained institution, largely detached from the war in Ukraine. Even anti-war men rarely frame their refusal in political or anti-militarist terms.

Service may be acceptable as a lesser evil: Even those initially unwilling to serve consider it a tolerable outcome – when it appears less risky or more convenient than evasion.

Potential conscripts avoid confrontation with the state. Young urban men seek to avoid military service through quiet strategies. Few are willing to confront the state directly or engage in rights-based advocacy. The ideal outcome is to receive a lifelong deferral with minimal contact or visibility: *“so they leave me alone forever”*.

Rights advocacy is a last resort. Interviewees don’t reach out to human rights groups unless their rights are already violated. Preventive engagement is limited and trust in legal aid is low. Many perceive rights organisations as inferior to paid alternatives.

Alternative Civilian Service (ACS) is not seen as an alternative. ACS is perceived as part of the same military system. Its ideological foundation (serving due to belief-based objections) is hollowed out and it is often viewed as more burdensome than military service itself.

Information on evasion is instrumental and informal. Most conscripts rely on peers or googling. Systematic legal knowledge is rare – often researched instead by their mothers.

Paid services are seen as more reliable and comfortable. Instead of engaging with human rights NGOs, potential conscripts are ready to delegate the issue to intermediaries in the familiar and depoliticised domain of paid services. Their main demands are clarity, guarantees and protection from risk.

Avoiding conscription is itself a form of class privilege. In smaller towns, it is not only harder to avoid due to tighter social surveillance, but evasion also carries stigma. Conversely, military service offers small-town and rural youth a source of status, income and a sense of belonging. Urban, educated men are best positioned to avoid the draft. The very capacity to avoid conscription often reflects underlying structural advantages – access to knowledge, networks and legal services.

Practical Recommendations for Human Rights Organisations

Based on our findings, an effective assistance project for conscripts should:

1. Emphasize practical solutions over ideological messaging

Given the dominance of pragmatic motivations among potential conscripts, communication and outreach strategies

should prioritize concrete problems and practical solutions rather than value-driven or ideological appeals. Framing services as tools to help individuals protect their life plans, safety, and well-being is likely to be more effective than emphasizing anti-militarist or pacifist values.

2. Avoid moralizing or taking explicit anti-war stances

Since there is no direct correlation between anti-war sentiment and refusal to serve, assistance projects should be careful not to conflate military avoidance with political dissent. Messaging should distinguish clearly between pragmatic warnings (e.g. risks to life, disruption of education, lack of control over one's future) and value-laden content. Anti-war rhetoric should, if included at all, be separated from core service promotion and left to parallel journalistic or advocacy efforts.

3. Clearly communicate scope of services and expected outcomes

Services should explicitly outline what kinds of problems they can and cannot help with, what results users can expect and what legal or procedural risks remain. Many young people are unaware that human rights organisations provide consultation services at all, let alone what outcomes to expect. Transparency regarding procedures, limitations and possible protections is essential to building trust.

4. Engage and equip relatives as a distinct target group

The relatives of draft-eligible individuals – particularly mothers – often play a more active role in seeking legal advice and asserting rights. They also consume information differently and may be more likely to read and act on detailed written guidance. Therefore, resources should be tailored to this group and their specific concerns, potentially including manuals, legal checklists, and direct consultation services.

5. Prioritize outreach to hard-to-reach populations in unprivileged settings

To meaningfully reduce conscription rates, targeted support must reach young men from small-town and socioeconomically vulnerable backgrounds. These individuals typically face higher barriers to resistance and have fewer resources or informational access.

About the author

Yakov Lurie is a PhD candidate at University of Amsterdam and researcher at Public Sociology Laboratory.

“Don’t Wake the Giant”

Who Avoids Conscription in Russia – How and Why?



The study shows that potential conscripts in Russia view compulsory military service primarily through a pragmatic lens. Military duty is seen as a disruption to personal plans and career trajectories, and often perceived as a waste of time. Ideological objections – such as pacifism – play only a secondary role. Conscription is generally understood as disconnected from the war in Ukraine. Criticism of the war, when voiced, tends to be separate from criticism of the draft system itself.



The most common strategies for avoiding service aim to minimize contact with the state. Some seek secure legal grounds for exemption, while others attempt to disappear from the view of the military recruitment office altogether. Alternative civilian service (ACS) is not seen as a viable substitute for military duty and, in some respects, is considered even less appealing. Few potential conscripts express interest in help from human rights NGOs. Both ACS and legal assistance are often perceived as carrying the risk of direct confrontation with the state by labeling the individual as a “refuser” in official eyes. In contrast, paid services that facilitate draft avoidance are widely viewed as safer, more predictable and more effective.



Attitudes toward conscription – and the resources available to avoid it – are closely tied to social inequality, including its regional dimensions. Residents of different parts of Russia have access to very different sets of privileges and opportunities.

The report concludes with practical recommendations for organisations supporting conscripts that are potentially useful for NGOs more broadly engaged in promoting social change in Russia.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➤ www.fes.de