Belarus Introduces Alternative Civilian Service

On 1 July 2016 a new law on alternative civilian service comes into effect in Belarus. This coming fall, 10,000 young Belarusian conscripts will start their compulsory military service. According to tut.by 20 of these would like to exercise their option for alternative civilian service.

Finally, after more than a decade of debates in parliament and discussions by various commissions, the new law will stipulate the conditions for such an alternative service. Known as “alternativschiki”, these young men will fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. In Belarus they will have to serve for three years, twice the time required of regular military conscripts.

Conscripts, dodgers, and ‘alternativschiki’

Twice a year the Belarusian Ministry of Defence drafts young men between the ages of 18 and 27 for conscription. During Soviet times men were eager to sign up. The received wisdom was that for men ‘the army was the school of life’. They had to serve for two years and could end up virtually anywhere in the huge territory of the Soviet Union, usually outside of Soviet Byelorussia.

Since then much has changed. For each conscription round – one in the spring and one in the autumn – the Ministry of Defence aims to draft around 10,000 young conscripts. Many young men successfully dodge the draft. The army has lost its allure since Soviet times and families pay big money and pull many
strings to get their sons out of it. Daughters are immune, as the Belarusian army conscripts only men.

Methods for dodging, postponing, or cutting the length of compulsory military service have become common knowledge. Education for one offers immediate payoffs. Men without higher education have to serve 18 months in the army. Having a university degree decreases this term to 12 months. If the individual's university itself offers military training, a conscript's time in the army is further reduced to six months.

Now, starting from 1 July, those with religious pacifist beliefs could qualify for a different kind of deal. The new Belarusian law on alternative civilian services offers conscientious objectors a paid option instead of conscription. It stipulates 36 months – instead of 18 in the army – of paid labour in the healthcare sector or social system institutions, agriculture or railroad maintenance, or other areas as delegated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.

**Victor’s story**

The new Belarusian law covers only religious pacifist beliefs as possible grounds for conscientious objection. In order to be eligible for alternative civilian service one needs to submit a written petition no later than ten days before the end of the conscription term. The committee will then consider the application, and hand down its ruling. This is how the process should work if properly applied. Victor’s story shows how the law does not work in practice.

Victor works at a factory in Brest. He comes from a middle class working family with an alcoholic father. He identifies as a Jehovah’s Witness, and has refused to serve in the army. Victor would eagerly commit to 36 months of alternative civilian service, double the time of a regular conscript. Except he faces criminal charges and a BYR 21m (roughly
Victor’s story started when the law on alternative civilian service did not exist. And yet even then two consecutive court hearings ruled in his favour. The court found his desire to serve in a ‘non-military’ way was justified by his religious beliefs. The Prosecutor General, dissatisfied with the decision of the local courts, appealed to the Supreme Court, and won.

Victor filed an appeal on 24 June, and is awaiting the decision. In his interview to people.onliner.by Victor speaks of the possible resolution:

Two courts have ruled in my favour, and on a third attempt under the same article they charged me with a criminal offence. Certainly the law (on alternative civilian services) will soon come into effect, as it is only a matter of time. But why should I depend on it? How can I account for the lack of alternative civilian services up til now? I have never dodged conscription; I wanted to serve my country. And not just for a year and a half, but for all three! I see it as my responsibility to my country, but wish to do so in an alternative way.

Naysayers

Formally Article 57 of the Belarusian Constitution grants eligible Belarusian men a right to alternative civilian service if their religious beliefs did not allow them to serve. However, in reality, no mechanism for enforcing this has existed until now. In the eyes of the Ministry of Defence, men who could not serve because of their religious beliefs were no different from other army dodgers.
Current and previous Ministers of Defence have openly denounced an alternative civilian service, called it outright harmful, and spoke about it in other negative terms. The Ministry has typically seen its biggest challenge as being to make alternative civilian service so unattractive that men would not choose to pursue it. It seems they have succeeded.

The new law takes into account only religious grounds. It stipulates double the term of service as compared to regular conscripts – three years instead of one and a half for those without higher education, and two years instead of one for college graduates. And most importantly, ‘alternativschiki’ will get paid around BYR 2m monthly, which roughly comes to $115.

These conditions certainly make it highly unappealing. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence reserves the right to deny applicants this option without explanation or recourse to appeal. It seems at least for now that the service exists only formally. And the Ministry of Defence has no intention of turning it into a viable alternative to military service.