

Desertion as Resistance: The Strategic Value of Protecting Russian Conscientious Objectors

The problem of Russian conscientious objectors is currently very serious, and helping them could have a direct, albeit limited, impact on the course of the war. Independent monitoring data shows that the Russian army's size increased to approximately 1.5 million by 2025, while it has lost at least 150,000 soldiers killed and at least 50,000 deserters, or approximately 5% of its total strength.

Meanwhile, most conscientious objectors remain trapped: data shows that approximately 60% of deserters remain in hiding within Russia, unable to leave. Those who manage to escape to "buffer" countries such as Armenia or Kazakhstan often find themselves without passports, which are regularly confiscated by military unit commanders at the front, and they also face deportation or abduction by Russian security services.

Decree No. 647 on mobilization, signed in September 2022 by Vladimir Putin (and still not repealed), not only led to forced mobilization but also indefinitely extended all military contracts until its end. Consequently, discharge by law became impossible before reaching the age of 65, except in rare cases of total disability or imprisonment. This system was strengthened by Law No. 365-FZ, which amended the Criminal Code to provide for harsh penalties of up to ten years in prison for refusing to participate in combat and leaving a unit without permission. The final step was the criminalization of voluntary surrender by Supreme Court Resolution No. 11 (May 2023). Following its adoption, a captured Russian soldier must prove that they physically resisted capture, otherwise they face up to ten years in prison.

Humanitarian Component

By the end of 2025, the implementation of this scheme had evolved into a systemic mechanism of violence. Violence is institutionalized through the use of "pits" and basements for detention—a practice reported since 2022, but effectively legalized in July 2024. This infrastructure serves to atomize the troops: by dismantling horizontal ties and punishing insubordination, commanders render collective resistance structurally impossible.

Consequently, individual desertion remains the only viable strategy, yet those caught refusing to fight face brutal coercion. Those who refuse to take up arms are starved and tortured to force them to return to the front lines. Concurrently, violence is used against conscripts who are not supposed to serve in combat zones. Through psychological pressure, torture, or deception, they are forced to sign contracts, leading to a record-breaking recruitment for the war in 2025.

Commanders, particularly in assault units, use suicidal "cannon fodder" attacks, forcing conscientious objectors to clear minefields without ammunition or armored vehicles, as the primary method of summary execution for those who refuse to fight. Documented evidence also suggests that commanders are ordering drone operators to drop grenades on their wounded or retreating soldiers to prevent them from surrendering or revealing information.

This is leading to increased desertions and conscientious objection, which is being supported by a coalition of human rights organizations, which has received over 100,000 requests for assistance over the past three years. The "Go to the Forest" initiative alone has counseled over 55,000 people, and over 6,000 soldiers have deserted, with a sharp increase in 2024.

It's important to note that, once in a safe country, many deserters enter the public space and openly speak out against the war. Their testimonies serve as a powerful demotivator for serving soldiers and potential recruits, directly undermining the morale and cohesion of the Russian army. Therefore,

supporting these individuals and the organizations that assist them is not only a humanitarian imperative but also a strategic measure to weaken Russia's military capacity.

Assistance from European institutions is possible in the following areas:

- Issue guidance (DG HOME): Clarify that Russian deserters fall under Article 9(2)(e) of the Qualification Directive (refusal to serve in a conflict involving war crimes), ensuring a unified asylum system within the EU. Security concerns associated with potentially admitting people with military experience are valid but can be minimized to the normal level of admitting ordinary political refugees. This can be possible with rigorous vetting procedures that utilize the verification expertise of Russian human rights organizations to distinguish genuine objectors from potential threats;
- Monitor extradition (EEAS): Mandate delegations in third countries to monitor judicial proceedings and exert diplomatic pressure to prevent the expulsion of deserters;
- Recognize a vulnerable group (European Parliament): Adopt a resolution recognizing deserters as a "vulnerable social group" to provide political justification for changes to national asylum policy;
- Organize assistance and funding: Create humanitarian corridors and emergency travel document procedures for deserters without passports. Increase financial assistance to civil society organizations working in transit countries to fund shelters and provide legal assistance.

This policy paper draws on the unique expertise and evidence of Platforma member organizations, such as Russie-Libertés, Get Lost!, Conscript School (netprizyvu), Appeal to Conscience (agsnowar), Connection e.V., InTransit, Citizen. Army. Law., A Farewell to Arms.