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Russian Man Accused of Being Mercenary for Kiev

By Allison Quinn

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Roman Zheleznov faces up to seven years in prison for fighting in the pro-Ukrainian Azov battalion.

Russia's Investigative Committee has opened its first criminal case against a Russian citizen accused of fighting as a mercenary in eastern Ukraine — alongside Kiev's government forces.

Roman Zheleznov faces up to seven years in prison for fighting in the pro-Ukrainian Azov battalion, a group linked to the new Ukrainian parliament's neo-Nazi Social National Assembly.

According to investigators, Zheleznov arrived in Ukraine in early July, at which point he "voluntarily entered the ranks [of the Azov battalion] and gave his consent to participate in armed conflict on the territory of Donbass in exchange for financial gain."

After receiving military training and being given his own weapons, Zheleznov then "arrived on the territory of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic, where he is currently taking

part in fighting as a mercenary along with other fighters from the Azov battalion. He receives financial compensation of 4,000 Ukrainian hryvnas ($300) each month," the statement said.

Earlier Russian media reports said Zheleznov had been met by members of the Ukrainian ultranationalist group Right Sector upon his arrival in Ukraine this summer. He was also reported to have declared his intention to seek Ukrainian citizenship at that time.

Although dozens of Russian citizens have taken up arms and joined the fight in eastern Ukraine — many of them for pro-Russian forces — Zheleznov is the first to be charged as a mercenary since the start of the conflict.

In comments to the online news site MediaZona, Zheleznov tied the criminal case against him to his recent appearance on Ukrainian television, in which he featured in a program on Russian volunteers fighting alongside pro-Kiev forces.

Disputing the investigators' allegation against him, Zheleznov also said he could not legally be considered a mercenary, defined by Russian law as anyone taking part in armed conflict in a country in which they are not a citizen in exchange for financial compensation.

"I have no material interests in my activities, not in Ukraine and not in Russia. There are many more opportunities here for self-realization than at home," Zheleznov was cited by MediaZona as saying.

The statement published by investigators on Tuesday also noted that raids had been conducted at Zheleznov's residence in Moscow, with items "relevant to the investigation" confiscated. The next step in the case will be placing Zheleznov on an international wanted list, the statement said.

Zheleznov holds prior convictions for theft and hooliganism.

Contact the author at a.quinn@imedia.ru

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