

Putin Claims Ukraine Won't Allow Azovstal Defenders to Surrender

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. kremlin.ru

Russian President Vladimir Putin accused Kyiv on Friday of not allowing its fighters in Mariupol, currently making a last stand at the city's Azovstal steel plant, to surrender to Russian forces.

In a telephone conversation with EU chief Charles Michel, Putin claimed that Kyiv is forcing its troops to continue fighting despite repeated offers to surrender by the Russian side.

"All servicemen of the Ukrainian armed forces, militants of the nationalist battalions and foreign mercenaries who lay down their arms are guaranteed life, decent treatment in accordance with international law and the provision of qualified medical care," Putin [told](#) Michel, according to the Kremlin.

"But the Kyiv regime does not allow this opportunity to be used."

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The Azovstal plant has been subject to heavy Russian bombing in recent weeks as Moscow's forces move to capture the strategic port city that sits between annexed Crimea and separatist-held eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian forces have repeatedly ignored the calls to lay down their arms, instead seeking humanitarian routes to evacuate those trapped at the plant out of the besieged city.

According to Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Iryna Vereshchuk, 1,000 civilians and 500 injured Ukrainian soldiers are believed to be sheltering in the plant's vast network of underground tunnels.

"There are about 1,000 civilians and 500 wounded soldiers there. They all need to be pulled out of Azovstal today," Vereshchuk [said](#) in an online post, calling on Russian forces to allow those trapped inside to be given safe passage out of the plant.

Michel [said](#) in a tweet that he "strongly urged" Putin to allow immediate humanitarian access and safe passage from Mariupol and other besieged Ukrainian cities to mark the upcoming Orthodox Easter holiday.

Putin had called off a planned Russian assault on the metallurgical plant in a televised appearance Thursday, hailing what he called Mariupol's "liberation" and ordering troops to secure the plant so that "not even a fly can escape."

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