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Pro-Russia Separatist Leader Threatens 'International' Tribunal for Azovstal Defenders

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Ukrainian servicemen, who surrendered at the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works, are seen on a bus.
Alexander Garmayev / TASS

Ukrainian soldiers who surrendered while defending Mariupol's besieged Azovstal steel plant will face an "international tribunal," the head of the Russian-backed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) said Monday.

DNR leader Denis Pushilin told Interfax that all 2,439 prisoners from the Azovstal site were currently on the separatist republic's territory.

"We are planning to organize an international tribunal in the republic," Pushilin said. He claimed that a charter for the tribunal was already "in the works."

Pushilin also said that 78 of those detained were women and alleged that a number of foreign citizens were among the fighters.

The mass surrender of Ukrainian soldiers at the Azovstal plant last week marked the end of a bloody, monthslong battle for control of Mariupol, a strategic southern Ukrainian port. The soldiers' resistance to the Russian forces that encircled the sprawling steelworks became one of the enduring symbols of the war.

The soldiers who made their final stand within the factory included a mix of Ukrainian troops and fighters from the Azov Battalion, a group with far-right roots that has since moved away from politics to formally fight within the Ukrainian military.

While Ukraine says it will seek a prisoner swap to return the Azovstal defenders home, Moscow has not given a clear indication of the fighters' fate.

Senior Russian negotiator Leonid Slutsky suggested Saturday that Azov prisoners could be exchanged for jailed Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk, a suggestion echoed by Moscow's Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko later Monday.

But the Kremlin poured cold water on the proposal.

"We've already said that Medvedchuk is a citizen of Ukraine, he has nothing to do with Russia and he's not a serviceman," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"And in the case of those who surrendered at Azovstal, we're talking about the military and members of nationalist formations."

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