

Moscow's Azov-Medvedchuk Swap Inflames Russian Hardliners

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Ukrainian prisoners of war posing with a Ukrainian flag after their exchange in the Chernihiv region.
Security Service of Ukraine / AFP

The exchange of 215 high-profile Ukrainian prisoners of war for 55 captured Russian soldiers and Kremlin ally Viktor Medvedchuk sparked outrage Thursday among Russian hardliners and far-right figures.

Wednesday's record prisoner swap between Moscow and Kyiv nearly seven months into the war saw the release of fighters from Ukraine's Azov Battalion who led the defense of Mariupol in the first months of the war that later became a symbol of Ukrainian resistance.

Moscow's decision to release Azov soldiers, including the battalion's commander and his deputy, was seen as a betrayal by pro-war and far-right voices.

“The release of five British mercenaries and the exchange of all the remaining members of the Azov Battalion, made yesterday by agreement with [Saudi Arabia] and respected Kyiv allies, is worse than a crime... and worse than a mistake. This is RANK STUPIDITY,” wrote Igor Girkin,

a former Russian intelligence officer who led pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine in 2014, in a Telegram [post](#).

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Russia previously considered banning the exchange of the Azov fighters, with State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin in June calling the battalion's members "Nazi criminals" who must be brought to justice.

Wednesday's swap, as a result, marked an unexpected U-turn.

"What did they say two months ago? 'We will definitely not give them away!'" said a Telegram [post](#) by Grey Zone, a Wagner-linked Telegram channel.

"This is just like before, when they said Kharkiv was Russia forever," it said, referring to Russia's retreat from Ukraine's Kharkiv region this month.

Russia also handed over 10 foreign fighters — including two U.K. citizens and one Moroccan who had been sentenced to death by a court in Ukraine's breakaway Donetsk region in May — while Kyiv gave up Medvedchuk, a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician who says Russian President Vladimir Putin is his daughter's godfather.

Officials in Kyiv lauded the prisoner swap, which came just hours after Putin ordered a "partial mobilization" of Russia's reservists.

"It is not a pity to give up Medvedchuk in exchange for real warriors," Zelensky said in a video address.

Medvedchuk had been in Ukrainian captivity since April, when he was recaptured after a failed attempt to flee arrest on treason charges.

Ukraine's successful counteroffensive in the eastern Kharkiv region has seen Russian pro-war voices grow louder in their criticism of the Kremlin and Russia's Defense Ministry.

But not all shared the collective anger at Wednesday's prisoner exchange.

"It's a miracle in itself that we rescued these guys of ours," wrote [Zakhar Prilepin](#), a novelist and ex-leader of the ultra-conservative For Truth party.

"One Russian is worth four injured Ukrainians, as it turned out."

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