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Prigozhin Welcomes Wagner Deserter's Gruesome Sledgehammer Killing

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Wagner mercenary group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin. **Vyacheslav Prokofyev / TASS**

The Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group's influential leader has voiced approval for the brutal killing of a recruit who deserted in Ukraine.

In footage published over the weekend, the man, who identifies himself as Yevgeny Nuzhin, says he surrendered to Ukrainian troops in early September but was kidnapped from the streets of Kyiv on Friday. The gruesome video then shows Nuzhin, 55, being bludgeoned to death with a sledgehammer by a Wagner fighter.

"Nuzhin betrayed his people, betrayed his comrades," Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said through his press service Sunday.

"He wasn't taken prisoner and didn't surrender but planned his escape," Prigozhin added.

Nuzhin has been identified as a convicted murderer who signed up with Wagner as part of Prigozhin's recent prison recruitment drive, which promised convicts amnesty for fighting in

Ukraine but threatened them with death if they deserted.

Ukrainian forces in September released footage of Nuzhin that shows him describing poor conditions within Wagner and the Russian army.

Unconfirmed reports said he had been part of a Russian-Ukrainian prisoner exchange.

In a Monday video interview with prominent prisoners' rights organization Gulagu.net, Nuzhin's sons Ilya and Nikita said that "the whole family was crying" while watching the video of the execution.

"He was a prisoner of the Ukrainians and then a terrible thing happened to him...all his relatives blame the Ukrainians for this," Ilya Nuzhin told Gulagu.net founder Vladimir Osechkin.

"Didn't they know what they would do to him?... Why send a person to death?" Ilya Nuzhin said.

Nuzhin's sons said Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) was "looking for them" in an apparent attempt to silence the slain fighter's relatives.

Ilya Nuzhin declined The Moscow Times' requests for comment over concerns for his safety.

Gulagu.net, citing unnamed sources within Wagner, said Prigozhin had threatened to block future exchanges if Ukraine did not release Nuzhin.

"We call on the international community to label the illegal military group Wagner PMC [private military company] as a terrorist organization and Yevgeny Prigozhin himself as a terrorist who wants to plunge the whole world into an atmosphere of fear of torture and reprisals," Gulagu.net said.

The NGO also called on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to stop exchanging captured Russians who have credible fears of retaliation at home for refusing to fight in Ukraine.

In the Monday interview, Osechkin said he planned to send a request to Russia's authorities to launch a criminal case.

Prigozhin, in his comments on Nuzhin's execution earlier Sunday, described the video as "excellent directorial work that's watchable in one sitting."

"I think this movie is called 'A Dog's Death to a Dog'," he said.

"This show shows that the sledgehammer-ed [Nuzhin] didn't find happiness in Ukraine, but was met with unkind but fair people."

The Kremlin declined to comment on the video of Nuzhin's killing, with spokesman Dmitry Peskov telling reporters Monday: "It's not our business."

Prigozhin has in recent weeks admitted to founding the Wagner Group in 2014 to fight in Ukraine and interfering in the U.S. elections after years of denials and defamation lawsuits against journalists.

Last week, Bloomberg reported that Kremlin insiders are growing alarmed over Prigozhin's increasing influence due to the war and alleged calls for "urgent Stalinist repressions" within the ruling elite.

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