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# Arms Dealer Bout Praises Putin, Backs Ukraine Assault

By AFP

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Screenshot from Viktor Bout's interview.

Viktor Bout, a notorious arms dealer dubbed the "Merchant of Death," praised Russian President Vladimir Putin and backed Moscow's assault on Ukraine in his first interview since being released from a U.S. prison as part of an exchange for U.S. basketball star Brittney Griner.

Speaking to the Kremlin-backed RT channel in an interview released on Saturday, Bout said he kept a portrait of Putin in his prison cell in the United States.

"I am proud that I am a Russian person, and our president is Putin," the former Soviet air force pilot said in the 40-minute interview.

"I know that we will win," he added, saying he was enjoying snow and "the air of freedom" since his return to Russia on Thursday.

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Bout was interviewed by Maria Butina, who herself served a short prison stint in the U.S. for illegally acting as a foreign agent for Russia.

Bout, 55, said he "fully" supported Russia's military offensive in Ukraine and would have volunteered to go to the front if he had the "opportunity and necessary skills."

"Why did we not do it earlier?" he said, referring to Putin's decision to launch an offensive against Ukraine in February.

Bout also said he had become one of the first victims of the West, noting he had been under sanctions for more than 20 years.

"Everything that happened to me is happening to our country now," he said.

Butina, who now serves as a member of the Russian parliament's lower house, said during the interview that U.S. authorities had thrown Bout in prison "because he is Russian."

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Bout, who crossed paths with Griner during their exchange on the tarmac in Abu Dhabi, said he had wished her luck.

"You have to wish everyone luck," he added.

Bout, who was accused of arming rebels in some of the world's bloodiest conflicts, was arrested in Thailand in a U.S. sting operation in 2008, extradited to the U.S. and sentenced in 2012 to 25 years in prison.

His notoriety inspired the Hollywood film "Lord of War," starring Nicolas Cage, in which the anti-hero escaped justice.

He said in the interview that he read a lot of books in prison and forced himself to laugh at the beginning of the day to keep his spirits up.

He complained about the quality of food in U.S. prisons, saying he missed the taste of garlic and strawberries.

"At some point I've lost interest in food," he said. "I have lost a lot of weight."

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