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Putin Personally Pardons Russian Prisoners Who Fight in Ukraine

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President Vladimir Putin has personally pardoned Russian convicts who fight in Ukraine with the Kremlin-linked Wagner mercenary group, a Russian investigative journalist reported Friday.

Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said last month that the first recruited inmates had been pardoned as promised after completing a six-month term of service.

The release of convict soldiers has sparked questions about the move's legality, given that jailed Russians may only walk free before finishing their sentence if they receive a presidential pardon.

According to ex-BBC Russian journalist Andrei Zakharov, a closed police database lists at least two convicts who were pardoned by Putin last summer.

Related article: First Wagner Prison Recruits Pardoned After 6-Month Ukraine Service

A convicted murderer and a convicted robber received clemency and had their criminal records expunged on July 6, Zakharov said.

One of them appeared in a video next to Prigozhin six months later.

"Released from further serving his sentence on the basis of a presidential pardon decree," the convicts' files published by Zakharov state.

A similarly worded document with the same July 6 date was spotted in an October 2022 video of wounded Wagner fighters posted by Prigozhin's press service, the German broadcaster Deutsche Well said last week.

Analysis of Russian presidential publications dated from July 5-8 shows several decrees missing from a numbered list, prompting speculation that they may contain a secret list of recruited Wagner fighters who had received Putin's pardons.

The Kremlin has declined to comment on the reported presidential pardons, citing the secrecy of some decrees.

Wagner is believed to have recruited as many as 50,000 prisoners for the war in Ukraine, a figure that correlates with a 23,000 drop in the number of Russian prisoners last fall.

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