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Russian Lawmakers Approve Punishments for Criticism, 'Fake' Info on Mercenaries

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Russian serviceman fires grenade launcher. **Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS**

Russian lawmakers have passed legislation introducing criminal punishment for "discrediting" and spreading "fake" information about any force fighting for Russia in Ukraine, not just the Russian Armed Forces.

Russia outlawed "discrediting" and spreading "deliberately false" information about the Russian military shortly after the country invaded Ukraine last February. The move has led to the silencing of nearly all anti-war statements and news that clashes with the Kremlin's narrative of the war.

The new legislation will make it a crime to publicly criticize or spread so-called "false information" about volunteer forces as well as private mercenary units such as the Wagner Group.

“Anyone who is risking their life today to guarantee the security of the country and its citizens is protected from lies and provocations,” State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said of the bill shortly after the vote Tuesday.

Once the new law is passed, violations will be punished with up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 300,000 rubles ($3,985) for “public actions” aimed at “discrediting…volunteer formations, organizations or individuals” aiding the Russian military, if that action was committed within a year since the first offense.

In cases when such “public actions” are deemed to have led to grave consequences — including unintentional death or bodily harm — the punishment would be increased to up to seven years in prison or a fine of up to 1 million rubles ($13,300).

Spreading what the authorities deem to be “false information” about military volunteers will be punishable with up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 1.5 million rubles ($20,000).

“Army fakes” that are deemed to lead to “grave consequences” could land a violator a prison sentence of up to 15 years under the new legislation.

The bill must now receive a single vote of approval in the upper-house Federation Council before being signed into law by President Vladimir Putin.

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