

Wagner Boss Defends Russians' Right to Criticize Military Top Brass

By [AFP](#)

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The outspoken founder of Russia's Wagner mercenary group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, said on Wednesday that he thought Russians should be free to criticize the country's top military commanders after lawmakers introduced tougher penalties for anyone deemed to have discredited those fighting on Russia's side in Ukraine.

On Tuesday, the Russian parliament's lower house approved legislation introducing long jail terms for anyone criticizing mercenaries including members of the Wagner group, a measure that previously only applied to criticism of the Russian military.

Prigozhin said on Wednesday that Russians should feel free to express their opinion of senior military figures and that only ordinary soldiers were beyond criticism.

"I think that the law against discrediting should not apply to the command staff, that is me,

the minister of defense, and other leaders who make or can make mistakes during the special military operation," Prigozhin said on Telegram, referring to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

"Society should say what it deems necessary about them," he said. "Only the soldier is sacred. So soldiers should be left alone."

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Prigozhin — an ally of President Vladimir Putin — has for months been involved in a power struggle with Russia's Defense Ministry, claiming battlefield victories ahead of Russia's army and accusing the military of not sharing ammunition with his forces.

Prigozhin also insisted he did not "discredit" anyone. "I only speak the truth," he said, adding that his statements were vetted by his lawyers.

"Of course, anyone can be imprisoned, and so can I," he added.

"But in that case, we should not forget that 146 million Russians could also be jailed, which is a path to nowhere."

Sanctioned by Washington and Brussels, Prigozhin had for years operated in the shadows, but has become an increasingly public figure since the start of the invasion of Ukraine and presenting his forces as more efficient than Russia's regular army.

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