

Russia Moves to Allow Convicts to Join Army

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Pavel Kolyadin / TASS

Russian lawmakers have approved [legislation](#) allowing convicts to clear their criminal records in exchange for joining the country's depleted military nearly 16 months into Russia's war on Ukraine.

The move formalizes the recruitment of prisoners for the war in Ukraine, a practice spearheaded by the Wagner mercenary group last year before the Defense Ministry took over prison recruitment in early 2023.

The lower-house State Duma voted in favor of a package of bills, which would allow current and former convicts as well as suspected criminals to enlist with the Defense Ministry, in its second and third readings Tuesday.

If signed into law, the legislation would expunge the criminal records of those who join the Armed Forces once they complete their battlefield service or receive a state award.

Criminal records could be expunged earlier if the recruits are wounded or reach the retirement age of 65, the bill states.

“A significant number of citizens was revealed among those who wish to enter contract military service [but] with whom contracts cannot be signed,” reads a note accompanying one of the bills.

Related article: [Wagner Boss Says Forces Won't Take Any More Prisoners in Ukraine](#)

A separate bill lists exceptions to the pardonable crimes that include espionage, treason, terrorism, sex crimes and other serious felonies.

Those exceptions do not apply to current service members, meaning they could theoretically be pardoned from a treason or rape conviction before the law takes effect.

For suspected criminals who agree to take up arms, authorities can suspend criminal proceedings against them if they face up to five years in prison for premeditated crimes or up to 10 years for acts of negligence.

The bill notes that crimes committed after the law takes effect will not be expunged.

The independent Meduza news website [wrote](#) that the bill's wording technically gives future recruits a “window” to commit crimes before it becomes law.

The two bills will now go through a single round of voting in the upper-house Federation Council, after which Putin is expected to sign them into law.

Putin [signed](#) a law in November allowing the conscription of citizens with unexpunged or outstanding convictions for serious crimes.

This month, Putin [confirmed](#) that he had started signing pardons for prisoners who agree to fight in Ukraine.

There are no official figures for how many inmates signed up to join Wagner in exchange for a pardon and high salaries, but estimates based on Russia's prison population decline have [placed](#) the figure at over 20,000.

Many of these recruits were killed in fighting over the fiercely contested city of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine.

The Defense Ministry was last month [reported](#) to have recruited inmates from prisons since September.

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