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Russia Backs Bill to Arm National Guard with Heavy Weapons

By AFP

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Russian National Guard officers in Grozny, Chechnya. **Yelena Afonina / TASS**

Russian lawmakers on Wednesday passed a bill that would allow the National Guard to deploy heavy weapons, including tanks, in the wake of a short-lived insurrection by the mercenary group Wagner.

The National Guard was created by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2016 with the aim of warding off unrest and breaking up protests.

The force has since taken on a broader role, joining Moscow's offensive on Ukraine launched in February last year.

According to the legislation passed by parliament's lower house, the force, which answers directly to Putin, will be able to possess military-grade weapons, including heavy weapons.

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The bill was approved after the Russian Defense Ministry said it was taking possession of military hardware from Wagner mercenaries following their aborted uprising last month.

The legislation comes as the Kremlin seeks to bolster its security apparatus after Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin staged the mutiny with a vow to topple the country's top military brass.

After Prigozhin called off his mercenaries, the head of the National Guard, Viktor Zolotov, who previously led Putin's own security detachment, said his force could receive heavy weapons, such as tanks.

The issue had been discussed with Putin, Zolotov said.

The bill still has to be approved by the upper chamber and approved by Putin, steps that are considered a formality.

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