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Murders, Drugs and Brawls: Russia's Pardoned Ex-Convicts Return Home After Fighting in Ukraine

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PMC Wagner fighters. **Erik Romanenko / TASS**

Igor Sofonov, who was recruited to fight in Ukraine from a Russian penal colony where he was serving a sentence on drug charges, returned to civilian life this spring after he was pardoned as part of a deal with the Russian military.

Sofonov's acquaintances told The Moscow Times that his military service had "changed him for the better."

But his time out of prison and the army would not last long.

Sofonov, 37, was arrested this month alongside another ex-convict Maxim Bochkarev, 38, on accusations of stabbing at least six people to death and setting the victims' homes ablaze in a village in the northwestern republic of Karelia.

The widely reported killings have sparked fierce debate about whether ex-convicts should be

pardoned in exchange for their military service — and highlights the challenges of integrating these men into society when they return home.

Sofonov's prison sentence had not been his first brush with crime. He was previously convicted of attempted murder and theft, his relatives confirmed to The Moscow Times.

"The war, I think, has changed everyone who was there, especially since Igor was on the frontline and got injured there," Sofronov's relative told The Moscow Times when asked about his military service.

"But I don't believe he's guilty. He's not ideal, especially considering his past, but he couldn't break into someone's house and kill people," she said, requesting anonymity out of safety concerns.

However, in an audio message sent by Sofonov to his friend last year from the war zone, he said: "I've witnessed blood and flesh."

"I've even killed myself. It's the same as in prison, just a little different. If you want to survive, you will survive," Sofonov said in the audio message shared with The Moscow Times.

Russia — in particular, the Wagner mercenary group run by the Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin — launched an illegal prisoner recruitment campaign to boost Moscow's military presence in Ukraine starting last summer. In exchange for their military service in Ukraine, prisoners are promised to be pardoned and their criminal records expunged.

According to leading prisoner's rights activist Olga Romanova, the total number of convicts recruited for the war could be up to 80,000 in total, with at least 20,000 ex-convicts from Wagner already returned to civil life.

Prigozhin put the number even higher, claiming in June that some 32,000 former prisoners had returned to Russia after serving with his mercenary group.

Sofonov's case — if he is found guilty — would not be the first criminal incident involving prisoners who were freed in exchange for fighting in Ukraine.

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Demyan Kevorkyan, 31, who was reportedly recruited by Wagner while serving an 18-year prison sentence for banditry, illegal arms trafficking, robbery and theft, was arrested in May on suspicion of killing two people in Russia's southwestern Krasnodar region. At the time of his arrest, Kevorkyan had around 11 more years remaining in his sentence.

The bodies of the victims — entertainers Kirill Chubko, 37, and Tatyana Mostyko, 19 — were found only four days after they were killed and dumped in makeshift graves. Police said Kevorkyan was arrested along with two other suspects.

In the Volgograd region, pardoned prisoner Alexei Khlebnikov, who served in Wagner, was reportedly put on the federal wanted list for raping a 13-year-old girl, the V1.ru media outlet said this week.

Another Wagner fighter, Ivan Rossomahin, who was serving 14 years in jail for murder and robbery, was freed this spring after fighting in Ukraine, commuting his sentence by 10 years. In March, he was arrested on suspicion of killing an 85-year-old pensioner in the Kirov region village of Novy Burets.

Just days before the killing, locals had held a meeting with village authorities where they expressed concerns about their safety and the reintegration of soldiers brutalized by their frontline experience.

“We cannot sleep at night,” pensioner Galina Sapozhnikova told local television, referring to Wagner fighter Rossomahin, who was seen walking the streets with an ax days before his arrest.

Residents from other Russian regions where ex-prisoners are returning from the frontline have also voiced fears about the potential impact of freed convicts.

In the Caucasus republic of North Ossetia, former police officer Vadim Tekhov, who was sentenced to 16 years in prison for the brutal murder of his ex-wife, was pardoned after his military service in Ukraine. His ex-wife’s relatives filed a complaint to prosecutors following his clemency, the Ekho Kavkaza news service reported in May.

Far to the north in Karelia, residents also voiced concerns following the killings in the village of Derevyannoye of which Sofonov stands accused.

"How many will return with shattered psyches? It will be a terrible time for everyone," Irina Medvedeva from Karelia’s capital of Petrozavodsk said in a comment on the VKontakte social media site.

A number of brawls and drug-related incidents involving pardoned inmates have also recently emerged in the media.

Like Sofonov, who according to his family and friends was given no psychological support after his service, former prisoners who served in the army are unlikely to have received any post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis tests.

According to Romanova, the situation with former prisoners returning home is “much more serious than was expected.”

“They were all — or at least most of them — supposed to die. And surprise — no one knows what to do with them now,” she said.

Under Russian law, inmates should serve from one-third to four-fifths of their sentence, depending on the severity of their crimes, before applying for parole. However, Russia in June approved legislation allowing convicts, except those who have committed serious crimes, to join the country’s military.

The Kremlin said in January that “the entire procedure for pardoning prisoners is carried out in strict accordance with Russian law,” but these pardon decrees have been made secret.

President Vladimir Putin confirmed in June that he was "signing pardon decrees" for

prisoners fighting in the war zone.

”The negative consequences are minimal,” Putin said, claiming that the recidivism rate among the convicts who went to Ukraine was only “0.4%” while for ex-convicts in general “in some cases it goes up to 40%."

While there are no official statistics on the crime rate among ex-convicts who have returned from the war zone, reports of crimes involving former inmates continue to emerge.

Meanwhile, Russia continues its efforts to recruit prisoners for the war, activists warn.

"Everyone has studied the algorithm for what to do next — for instance, if you kill someone — you can claim extenuating circumstances as a war hero. Even if you are imprisoned, you have the option to re-enlist in the military,” Romanova said.

“It opened a Pandora's box that will have an impact on generations to come.”

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