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Russian Deserter Decries Rampant Extortion in Military's Convict Unit – Reports

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A billboard advertising military conscription, showing Russian soldiers and reading "Army of Russia: Army of professionals," in Moscow. **Maxim Shipenkov / EPA / TASS**

A member of the Russian military's Storm-Z penal unit has alleged widespread corruption among commanders in the Ukraine war, the independent news outlet Novaya Gazeta Europe reported Wednesday.

Officers regularly extort up to 20,000 rubles ($220) in exchange for releasing troops from so-called "punishment pits" in the ground where they are placed for various infractions, the unidentified soldier said.

Commanders also extort 20,000 rubles per month from soldiers by threatening to confiscate vehicles they purchase for personal use, he added.

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The publication did not disclose the soldier's identity and rank for security reasons, but said he has been stationed in eastern Ukraine's Donetsk region since October.

The Storm-Z soldier said he was driven to desertion when his commander ordered his deployment to the battlefield when he had doctors' orders to avoid physical activity after undergoing medical treatment.

Reuters reported in October that Storm-Z fighters have typically been sent to the most exposed parts of the front line and are prone to heavy losses.

At least three other unidentified Storm-Z fighters cited by Novaya Gazeta Europe denied encountering extortion from commanders.

"I've never even heard of such a thing," one of them was quoted as saying.

Novaya Gazeta Europe said its interview subject was recruited into Storm-Z from a prison colony in Far East Russia's Primorsky region. It did not disclose which crime the soldier had been convicted of.

Novaya Gazeta Europe previously reported, citing an unidentified Russian motorized rifle unit officer, that soldiers could pay bribes to secure transfers to a different unit, vacations and hospitalizations for up to $50,000.

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