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Russian Convicts Fighting in Ukraine Accuse Army of Refusing Payments, Pardons – IStories

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Vladimir Gerdo / TASS

The Russian military is withholding payments and pardons promised to convicted criminals who signed up to fight in some of the most dangerous hotspots in Ukraine, the investigative news outlet IStories reported Thursday.

Journalists said they had obtained a copy of a letter sent to President Vladimir Putin by a group of convicts-turned-soldiers, who expressed their grievances about not receiving the promised benefits.

The authenticity of the letter was confirmed by one of the soldiers, 42-year-old Roman Polyakov.

Polyakov and six other former members of Russia's so-called "Storm Z" unit said they "still haven't received full wages, combat pay or guaranteed injury compensations" during or after

service.

It was not immediately clear whether the Kremlin responded to the letter, which was dated Jan. 21.

Related article: Russia Phases Out Pardons for Convicts Who Fight in Ukraine – BBC Russian

Storm Z fighters have typically been sent to the most exposed parts of the front line in Ukraine and have experienced heavy losses over the course of the conflict.

"Not only were we ahead of everyone at the front, but it turned out that we are now at the very end, and in general, no one cares about us," Polyakov told IStories.

He accused Russian Defense Ministry recruiters of changing inmates' contracts just before their deployment.

Instead of the promised "full social package" and equal status with other servicemen, Polyakov said their contract turned out to be an "agreement to assist in the liberation of the Donetsk and Luhansk territories as part of a volunteer formation," which was signed by the Moscow-backed head of Donetsk.

The soldier, who said he had agreed to fight in the summer of 2023 after serving 20 years of his 23-year prison sentence, claimed that neither he nor any of his comrades had their criminal records expunged.

"People had hopes that we were not being taken for idiots and were given some kind of chance, even if it was a dubious one," he told IStories.

"In the end, it wasn't a chance... we were simply used."

Russia has stopped granting presidential pardons and allowing prisoners to return home until the end of the war, the BBC's Russian service reported Thursday, citing fighters and their family members.

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