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Putin Grants Russian Citizenship to Serbian Military Volunteer

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Aleksander Jokic. **Jokic's personal archive**

President Vladimir Putin on Thursday granted Russian citizenship to 22 foreigners including a Serbian national who said he faced prosecution in his native country for fighting on Russia's side in Ukraine.

Aleksandar Jokic recorded a video appeal to Putin this spring to ask the Russian president to help him avoid serving 25 years in Serbian prison on mercenarism charges by giving him a Russian passport.

Jokic's case prompted Russian lawmakers to take up legislation banning the extradition of foreigners subject to criminal prosecution in their countries for taking part in what the Kremlin calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine.

Putin in January simplified the citizenship process for foreigners who join the Russian army.

But Jokic said in his video appeal that he had been denied Russian citizenship for three years

because the unit he fought for was based in the Russian-occupied Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine.

French media has reported that Jokic's unit OBTF Cascade may have been founded by a former Russian lawmaker and member of the ruling, pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

Jokic said he faced deportation to Serbia after his unit was expected to be disbanded in April.

Putin's decree published Thursday on an official website of Russian legislative acts states that Jokic was born in Serbia on Jan. 26, 2003.

Serbia has condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations but has always refused to sanction Moscow, with whom it has friendly relations.

Belgrade has warned Serbs that joining Russia's forces against Kyiv would lead to legal consequences. It has also asked Moscow to end its attempts to recruit Serbs to fight in Ukraine as part of the notorious Wagner mercenary group.

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