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Russia Moves to Allow Criminal Defendants to Fight in Ukraine

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Russian lawmakers adopted a bill Tuesday allowing criminal defendants to serve in the military, closing a loophole that previously limited enlistment to suspects and convicts.

The lower-house State Duma said its deputies voted in favor of two bills that, if signed into law, will allow defendants to sign military contracts or be mobilized.

"Criminal proceedings against such persons will be suspended and the measure of restraint (house arrest, bans on certain actions, bail, detention) will be scrapped," the Russian parliament said.

The defendants' criminal records can be expunged if they receive state awards or retire from the military due to age, injuries, or the end of mobilization.

The bills now face a single vote in the upper-house Federation Council, after which President Vladimir Putin is expected to sign them into law.

The first law authorizing convicts and suspected criminals to be enlisted into the Russian army passed in mid-2023. Putin, who had confirmed he pardoned prisoners who fought in Ukraine, in late 2022 allowed the mobilization of convicts on conditional release.

Before these laws formalized prisoner recruitment, the Wagner mercenary group had begun enlisting prisoners in mid-2022, offering pardons and the expungement of criminal records in exchange for military service.

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