The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Prison Population Falls to Historic Low, Deputy Chief Justice Says

March 04, 2026



A prison in Moscow. **Andrei Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency**

Russia's prison population has fallen to a historic low, the newly appointed first deputy chief justice of the Supreme Court said Wednesday, coming after years of the Russian military's recruitment of convicted criminals to fight in Ukraine.

First Deputy Chief Justice Vladimir Davydov said 308,000 people are currently incarcerated nationwide, which would represent a roughly 70% drop from the 1.06 million inmates he said were held in Russian prisons in 2001.

He added that 89,000 people are being held in pretrial detention centers, also a record low.

Davydov attributed the decline to the "humanization" of Russia's law enforcement practices since President Vladimir Putin first took office.

He did not address the likely significant impact of large-scale prisoner recruitment for the military since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when authorities stopped publishing detailed

prison statistics.

Related article: Putin Discusses Hungarian POWs in Call With Orbán

Russia's military has recruited thousands of inmates to fight in Ukraine, an enlistment tactic that the Wagner private military company spearheaded in the early months of the war. Convicts can have their criminal records expunged if they join the army.

The Defense Ministry does not publish statistics on how many inmates signed contracts to fight in Ukraine.

Ukrainian intelligence services previously estimated that between 140,000 and 180,000 convicted criminals in Russia had been enlisted to fight in the war as of November 2024.

Davydov was appointed on Wednesday as first deputy to Chief Justice Igor Krasnov, along with six other candidates to senior Supreme Court posts, following a vote in the upper-house Federation Council.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/03/04/russias-prison-population-falls-to-historic-low-deputy-chief-justice-says-a92115