

Deal with the devil: how Russia recruits imprisoned murderers and brigands

Russian media outlet Mediazona was addressed by prisoners from the Yaroslavl and Tula regions. They said that Yevgeny Prigozhin visited their colonies. The man had the star of the Hero of Russia on his chest, he offered the prisoners freedom and money in exchange for participation in the war against Ukraine.

For the first time, the human rights project Gulagu.net reported on July 2 that the “private military company **Wagner Group**” was recruiting prisoners in the colonies of the Leningrad Region to take part in the war against Ukraine. These messages were confirmed by the independent website specializing in investigative journalism “Vazhnyye Istorii” and other outlets such as Vesrtka Bumaha, and the Rus Sidyashchaya Foundation. Two weeks later, it became known about the recruitment of mercenaries from among the convicts in other regions of Russia.



At the end of July, a businessman and a close person to Vladimir Putin Yevgeny Prigozhin was noticed in different Russian colonies. He is also called the patron of the Russian PMC Wagner Group. According to Gulagu.net, Prigozhin began a recruiting tour starting from colonies for former security officials and then switching to strict regime penal colonies. In total, groups of recruiters visited at least 17 colonies from ten regions.



Prisoners from Corrective colony-4, Belgorod region

The testimonies of two prisoners who do not know each other are cited further. One is serving a sentence in the Yaroslavl region, while the other is serving his term in the Tula region. They both described in detail the meeting with the person who spoke on behalf of the Wagner Group PMC and recognized in him Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Corrective labor colony-2, Rybinsk

“Mr. Prigozhin arrived wearing the star of Russia. He said that he represents the legalized organized criminal group “Wagner PMC” and has the authority to offer us to participate in the war,” one of the prisoners of Corrective colony-2 of the maximum-security in Rybinsk, Yaroslavl region, wrote. Mediazona outlet was not the only addressee of his messages: some of them were published by the Zhitel MLS telegram channel, and one of the posts was read on Bild’s broadcast channel by human rights activist Olga Romanova.

“They removed everyone from working in the industrial zone and also kicked them on the square. Only the inhabitants of the places of strict conditions of detention, high-security barracks, and punishment cells were not taken out,” he recalls. The representative of the PMC did not arrive alone. A white minibus drove into the territory of the zone, from which eight people in civilian clothing got out.

“Three strong men were with guns in soft waist bags, and that was on the territory of a colony where it is prohibited. The fourth man was middle-aged, short, bald and with the star of the Hero of Russia on his chest,” says the prisoner. He recognized that the recruiter with a medal was Yevgeny Prigozhin.

“When from the ranks somebody asked who he was, he told to google it later. I am 1,000% sure that it was Prigozhin,” adds the source. In total, according to the source, a little less than one and a half thousand people gathered for that meeting. Convicts who could walk and all the employees of the colony, all were assembled on that square. **They were explained that the Third World War was going on and that they could take part in it on the side of Russia.**

*"We are not armed forces, but a real paramilitary organized crime group. My guys enter African countries and leave nothing alive there two days after, and now they are annihilating enemies in Ukraine in the same way. **Your decision to serve in the PMC is a deal with the devil. If you walk out of here with me, you will either come back a free man or you will die.** You will be required to kill enemies and follow the orders of the leadership. Those who turn back will be shot on the spot,"* the prisoner quotes from memory the speech of the allegedly Prigozhin.

To those who agreed to the deal, the recruiter promised 100,000 rubles per month *"plus a bonus of about the same amount"*. In case of an "honorable" death, 5 million rubles to the family were promised. *"Everything will be formalized, the documents will be stored in the appropriate institution structures,"* a source quoted the man with the hero's medal. – *"He said that we were not cannon fodder, no way. The chance of death was estimated at 15%, of injury - at 25%. Desertion, looting, and drugs would lead to the execution"*. According to a participant in the meeting at Corrective colony-2, the recruiter claimed that "prisoners were already used on July 12 as an experiment." He meant 42 convicts from near St. Petersburg, only five of whom allegedly died: *"He says they fought like lions, attacked some kind of stronghold with only knives **and massacred everyone there"**.*

*"**First of all, they are interested in murderers and brigands, they are wary of drug addicts, so of rapists. We prefer not ordinary household killers but conscious ones – the latter ones will enjoy working with us, he says. In general, he gave the impression of a maniac. Meanwhile, there is no coercion. You must understand that we need you, he says. And indeed, many, many, no less than 200 people went to sign up,**"* says the convict. According to him, first of all, these are "newcomers with long terms", but "a lot of ideological ones" accepted the conditions as well.

Those who agreed to fight against Ukraine must pass a multi-stage test: an interview, fitness tests, then a review of documents, and a polygraph examination that will show whether the prisoner is going to desert, whether he uses drugs, or whether he is capable of murder. If a candidate passes a polygraph, two weeks later he is taken out for training.

*"From corrective colony, we will head to the nearest airfield. Then we will arrive by plane at a quiet secluded place near the border. There you will change into green clothes and will be undergoing military training for several weeks. From that moment, you are **no longer prisoners, but my fighters.** You will train 20 hours per day and endure the same hardships as any of my other soldiers...After completing the course, you will cross the border of Ukraine by helicopter and become real soldiers of fortune. Only from that moment, the countdown of six months begins until your [legal] pardon,"* the prisoner of Corrective colony-2 reports the words of the recruiter.

Immediately after the departure of the Wagnerites from the Rybinsk colony, the prisoners were deprived of access to the Zonatelecom service that allows the convicts to send letters, transfer money and carry out other communication operations with the outside world. According to the source, the means of connection remained only illegal, that is, through banned mobile phones, secretly from the administration.

Corrective colony-4, Plavsk

A prisoner from Corrective colony-4 in Plavsk, Tula region, claims that Yevgeny Prigozhin visited their colony on July 25; according to the prisoner, on that day, recruiters flew by helicopter over several correctional institutions. "I know who he is, and he said that half of Russia would know about his arrival the next day," the convict writes.

His story mostly coincides with that of the meeting in Rybinsk. "He warned that the mortality rate is 15%. He said: *"We go first, you follow us. We do not need cannon fodder, only infantry."* One prisoner said that he had experienced the war in Chechnya and had a military specialty. Prigozhin



Corrective colony-4, Plavsk

replied that they were not interested in specialists, they have their own ones. They only need infantry, recalls the prisoner.

According to him, Prigozhin repeated: ***“I have special powers from the president. I don’t give a f*ck about everyone. I need to win this damn war at any cost.”*** In the Tula region, as well as in the Yaroslavl region, the recruiter admitted that he “had spent time in the North”, meaning he was in prison.

In exchange for their participation in the war, he promised not only money, but also a pardon, **the removal of a criminal record**, and for those who do not have Russian citizenship, a passport. *“I was in prison for 10 years, and therefore I think that you will fancy my proposal,”* said the guest of Corrective colony-4 and added that this war will drag on for a long time, and those who do not understand this have *“their heads in the clouds.”*

“There are no restrictions, except for the age of 50 years. And he doesn’t take the “offended” ones [slang]. Everyone else fits,” recalls the interlocutor of the outlet from the colony in Plavsk. *“By the way, the term left to serve for those who agreed to go to fight is completely different,”* he says. – Among them, there are convicts with 10-20 years left, and also a lot of those with a year or two. I even know one person who is to be released in October of this year. Why? - Pardon!

According to a prisoner from Corrective colony-4, those who agreed to the recruiters' proposal were told that they would form "assault squads." **As a result, about 100-150 people signed up.** Many prisoners sincerely believed the recruiters, the source says. “They believe the media here and think they will be lucky. They hope to return home soon. They are completely unaware of the danger. Nobody really cares about money. They believe that they will not be deceived is just due to Prigozhin’s talent for eloquence. There is no logic,” the convict argues. He believes that only a few will return from Ukraine: *“I won’t go to war, even if my sentence is extended.”*

As in Rybinsk, after the arrival of the Wagner PMC delegation, the prisoners in Plavsk were deprived of their legal connection with freedom. A close acquaintance of another prisoner told Mediazone about this and showed his messages to confirm his word. According to these messages, the administration said that payphones will not work until the required number of volunteers is recruited in the colony. At the time of publication of this text, the Zonatelecom service in Corrective colony-4 is again available.

In his speech, Prigozhyn claimed to have already visited 2,000 colonies. What is also interesting is that he promises to return when the loss is 60%. Those who accepted the terms and then refused are sent to the punishment cells.



*“ШИЗО” - punishment cell
“ПКТ” - cell-type premises*

Realizing that Russia is unable to gain a victory, Putin's terrorist system has resorted to some unprecedented means such as the exploitation of the prisoners. The recruiters try to instill the chance of receiving a legal pardon after the “service” in the minds of convicts. And the latter ones believe it. Only few truly realize the possible outcomes of the decision.

Using the desperate hope of convicts to clean themselves from their sentence in combination with sincere ruthlessness seems to be another round of madness to which the Russian authorities are ready to resort. Win at any cost becomes not just a motto, but law and the unprivileged ones are there to pay the price.