

Putin Signs Law Punishing Mercenaries' Critics With Jail

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Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Moscow Kremlin during a videoconference meeting on the socio-economic development of annexed Crimea on March 17, 2023. **Mikhail Metzel/POOL/TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin [signed a law](#) on Saturday introducing lengthy prison terms for “discrediting” and spreading “fake” information about any force, including the notorious Wagner Group mercenary unit, fighting for Russia in Ukraine.

Nearly all anti-war voices have been silenced after Russia outlawed “discrediting” and spreading “deliberately false” information about the Russian Armed Forces shortly after the country invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

The new legislation, which had been lobbied by Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, makes it a crime to publicly criticize or spread so-called “false information” about volunteer forces as well as private mercenary units.

Violators face up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 300,000 rubles (nearly \$4,000) for “public actions” aimed at “discrediting...volunteer formations, organizations or individuals”

aiding the Russian military, if that action was committed within a year since the first offense.

In cases when such “public actions” are deemed to have led to grave consequences — including unintentional death or bodily harm — the punishment would be increased to up to seven years in prison or a fine of up to 1 million rubles (\$13,300).

Spreading what the authorities deem to be “false information” about military volunteers will be punishable with up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 1.5 million rubles (\$20,000).

“Army fakes” that are deemed to lead to “grave consequences” could land a violator a prison sentence of up to 15 years under the new legislation.

“Anyone who is risking their life today to guarantee the security of the country and its citizens is protected from lies and provocations,” State Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said of the bill shortly after the vote in Russia's lower house of parliament Tuesday.

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