

4.3.2. Recruitment of prison inmates

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The practice of recruiting prison inmates was first initiated by the Wagner Group,911 which used convicts in combat operations near Bakhmut in Ukraine,912 and overtaken by the MoD in 2023.913

In October 2024,914 legislative amendments were adopted to expand the pool for potential recruits, allowing ‘criminal suspects, accused persons, and convicts’ to ‘have their sentences commuted or prosecutions dropped’ in exchange for signing military contracts with the MoD.915 According to the UN Special Rapporteur, Mariana Katzarova, approximately 12 % of all suspects signed contracts to join the military, ‘with police officers receiving financial remuneration’ for each enlistment. Overall, around 200 000 prison inmates signed contracts, reportedly leading to ‘the closure of nearly 80 of the 900 penitentiary institutions as of July 2025.’916 As noted by researcher Dmitry Gorenburg in September 2025, according to some estimates, 30 % of military recruits have criminal records.917 Thus, as reported by Novaya Gazeta Europe, the head of Unified Court Press Service of St. Petersburg stated that 287 criminal cases were dropped after defendants signed contracts with the MoD. Most of them were charged with drug possessions, fraud, and failure to pay alimony.918 In November 2024, a former soldier who had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for the murder of 13 people returned to the war in Ukraine after signing a new military contract.919

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  Gorenburg D. et al, The Future Russian Way or War. Part 1: State Mobilisation, SCEEUS, Report No 11 2025, 26 September 2025, url, p. 5; Huseyn Aliyev, Online interview with EUAA, 7 October 2025

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  UN Human Rights Council, Situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, 15 September 2025, url, para. 93

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