

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

[911](#)

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[912](#)

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[913](#)

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[916](#)

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[917](#)

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