

The Kremlin Sentenced a Popular Russian General to Lead a Penal Assault Detachment in Ukraine

By Kateryna Stepanenko

Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned former 58th Combined Arms Army [CAA] Commander Major General Ivan Popov to command a penal assault detachment in Ukraine — a demotion and effectively a death sentence — after Popov publicly appealed to Putin for his reinstatement to active military duty. Popov's lawyer, Sergey Buynovsky, announced on April 9 that Popov, who has been under arrest since May 2024, signed a military service contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and will return to military service in Ukraine in exchange for the suspension of his impending criminal trial.[1] A Russian security official later revealed to Russian state business outlet *Kommersant* on April 9 that Popov will assume command of an unspecified "Storm Z" penal detachment operating in Ukraine.[2] Such an assignment is effectively a death sentence because the Russian military command primarily uses "Storm Z" penal detachments in suicidal frontal assaults. Popov's assignment to command such a unit after having commanded a field army is a punishment and a severe demotion rather than a return to his military career.[3] The Kremlin "reinstated" Popov after he published an open letter to Putin on March 20, 2025, accusing the Russian military court of subjecting him to "unfounded prosecution" and unwarranted dismissal from the Russian Armed Forces.[4] Popov appealed to Putin as his "most important commander" to "sort out the situation" and reinstate him in active military service, claiming that he is a "faithful soldier" for whom "the army is the whole meaning of life." Popov also pledged loyalty to the Russian military and claimed that Putin is his "moral guide and role model." Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov confirmed on March 21, 2025, that Putin had been notified of the letter at the time, and Russian state media outlets later framed Popov's reported return to the frontlines as Putin's response to the appeal.[5] Peskov refused to comment on Popov's intent to return to the battlefield as of April 10.[6]

The Kremlin relieved Popov of command of the 58th CAA in July 2023 because of his perceived disloyalty and criticisms of the Russian military high command — especially in the aftermath of the Wagner Group rebellion in June 2023. Popov recorded an audio message for his "gladiators" (a term Popov used for his subordinates) in July 2023, accusing then-Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu of dismissing him for expressing legitimate grievances to senior commanders about problems afflicting Russian forces on the western Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.[7] Popov reportedly distributed the recording to select commanders, personnel, and veterans of the 58th CAA, and then-Russian State Duma Defense Committee member and former Deputy Commander of the Southern Military District (SMD) retired Lieutenant General Andrei Gurulev leaked the audio message on Telegram on July 12, 2023.[8] Russian ultranationalists and insider sources claimed that Popov threatened to blackmail the Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov, in an appeal to Putin prior to Popov's dismissal and eventual arrest in May 2024.[9] The leaked audio message outraged Russian ultranationalists, officers, and veterans who accused the Russian MoD of removing Popov to mask problems in the Russian military.[10] The Russian MoD had

celebrated Popov as the commander responsible for repelling Ukrainian efforts to break through in western Zaporizhia Oblast in early June 2023, which had likely contributed to Popov's popularity.[11]

The Kremlin attempted to suppress the backlash against Popov's dismissal and undermine Popov's reputation by exiling Popov to Syria through January 2024 and ultimately arresting him in May 2024. Russian ultranationalists and insider sources claimed that Popov assumed the role of deputy commander of the Russian forces group in Syria in mid to late July 2023.[12] The Kremlin routinely exiles commanders who suffer significant military failures or have otherwise disappointed Putin to Syria and elsewhere abroad, likely in an effort to reduce backlash and give the commanders a chance to redeem themselves by reaffirming their loyalty to Putin.[13] Russian officials later summoned Popov back to Russia in late January 2024 and reportedly ordered him to resign under threat of criminal prosecution for alleged abuse of power.[14] An insider source within the Russian security apparatus claimed in March 2024 that Popov deliberately hospitalized himself to delay the investigation and in hopes of avoiding his dismissal after a change in MoD leadership that was then being rumored.[15] Russian officials arrested Popov on May 17, 2024, on charges of large-scale fraud and forgery in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast — mere days after a large-scale reshuffling and purge of the Russian MoD leadership.[16] The insider source retroactively claimed that Popov attempted to pass incriminating evidence to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) against Gerasimov and other commanders in hopes that the new MoD leadership would replace Gerasimov prior to Popov's arrest but refused to cooperate when arrested on May 17, 2024.[17] ISW cannot independently verify these claims.

Popov denied any responsibility for embezzling defense funds even as the Russian military court began to prosecute Popov's alleged co-conspirators.[18] Buynovsky also argued for the Russian military court to dismiss Popov's case in exchange for having Popov return to the frontlines in Ukraine, but Popov stated in August 2024 that if Russian officials "take you to war, do not refuse; if [Russian officials] do not call you [to war], do not ask." [19] Russian officials later dismissed Popov from the Russian Armed Forces on March 1, 2025, and the Russian prosecution asked to strip Popov of his rank and imprison him for six years.[20]

The Kremlin also seemingly punished high-ranking Russian officials who attempted to defend Popov's criticisms of the Russian military command in July 2023, although it is unlikely that these removals were solely because of Popov's controversy. Russian Duma deputies submitted a proposal to remove Gurulev from the Defense Committee and transfer him to the Regional Policy and Local Government Committee in February 2025.[21] Unnamed sources told *Kommersant* that Gurulev's removal was due to controversial statements that reflected badly on the Russian MoD.[22] Putin also demoted former First Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council and United Russia Secretary Andrei Turchak in June 2024. Turchak had gone viral for defending Popov's right to criticize the Russian military command in July 2023.[23] A Russian political blogger attributed Turchak's demotion to his public defense of Popov.[24]

The Kremlin had largely failed to convince the Russian ultranationalists, officers, and veterans of Popov's alleged involvement in the embezzlement case, resulting in persistent backlash online. Russian ultranationalists, officers, and members of the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration defended Popov's character, demanded Popov's release and return to the front, and accused the investigation being a conspiracy.[25] Many Russian ultranationalists

demanded a reevaluation of the evidence and alleged forgery of documents and poor investigation practices[26] Russian milbloggers accused the Russian MoD of failing to prosecute commanders who were responsible for Russian military failures in Kharkiv Oblast during the failed Bilohorivka river crossing and [27] Russian officers and commanders also [28]

Loud public support for Popov may have impeded the Kremlin's efforts to coerce Popov into admitting to fraud charges and acknowledge his disloyalty to the regime before reinstating him in the military. Putin appears to have set up a new redemption system in which disgraced officials and commanders have a chance at regaining Putin's favor, provided they publicly plead guilty to their charges and then volunteer to fight in Ukraine. *BBC Russian Service* reported that Russian law enforcement officials are requiring convicted officials to plead guilty before they can avoid prison by deploying to Ukraine.[29] *BBC Russian Service* reported that such prerequisites allow Russian law enforcement to inflate the number of solved crimes, which improves law enforcement statistics. Putin may be using this scheme to portray himself as deeply involved in eliminating corruption problems while also providing a system through which loyal individuals can regain favor.

Popov once again weaponized the Russian information space by publishing a public appeal to Putin, demonstrating that the Kremlin has not yet fully solved the problem of military commanders using their popularity to pressure the president. Several Russian commanders and officers including deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Lieutenant General Mikhail Teplinsky, and Chechen Republic leader Ramzan Kadyrov resorted to blackmailing the Russian MoD and the Kremlin, leveraging popular support in the Russian ultranationalist and veteran community information space, to accomplish their various political objectives.[30] Popov may have deliberately leaked his audio message to generate backlash among his supporters, subordinates, and ultranationalists to pressure the Kremlin into reversing its decision to remove Popov from command. Popov's March 2025 appeal and persistent ultranationalist pressure may have allowed Popov to avoid imprisonment, but the Kremlin's decision to send Popov to the frontlines to command an assault detachment is effectively a death sentence. The Kremlin's decision to "release" Popov to the frontlines (as opposed to sentencing him outright) demonstrates that Putin remains sensitive to sentiments held by Russia's ultranationalist and veteran communities.

Popov is affiliated with the "Storm Gladiator" penal special purpose assault battalion, but it is unclear whether the Kremlin will assign Popov to command this unit. A Russian ultranationalist commented that Popov would be returning to his "gladiators" despite his demotion.[31] The "Storm Gladiator" penal assault battalion was formed in September 2022 and had some affiliation with the Russian 58th CAA.[32] The battalion's name is reportedly in reference to Popov's use of the term "gladiators" of Popov's own men.[33] The "Storm Gladiator" battalion was part of the "Storm Z" penal recruitment structure but operated as a separate detachment and as a main assault unit.[34] The "Storm Gladiator" battalion reportedly had hundreds of convicts with prior military experience who received training from former Wagner Group and Chechen "Akhmat" forces.[35] The "Storm Gladiator" battalion reportedly suffered significant losses during intense "meat assaults" and had reportedly been gradually disbanding as of 2024.[36] Popov and the leadership of the 58th CAA may have formed the "Storm Gladiator" battalion as a small private military company (PMC) similar to Wagner Group's penal

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detachments in Fall 2022. The Kremlin invested significant resources in centralizing control over such irregular units after the Wagner Group mutiny in June 2023.”[37]

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