

A fifth of Russian prisoners recruited to fight in Ukraine are HIV positive, with convicts promised anti-viral drugs if they agreed to fight: report

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About a fifth of recruits sent to fight in Ukraine from Russian prisons are HIV positive, according to estimates by Ukrainian authorities, with several captured Russian soldiers telling [The New York Times](#) they were promised life-saving anti-viral medications if they agreed to fight.

One detainee told The Times that he took the offer to fight in Ukraine because the Russian prison system deprived him of supplies of effective medications that he needed to survive.

Timur, 37, told the publication that in prison he was put on HIV medications that he feared were ineffective, and that he worried that he wouldn't survive on these treatments for the duration of his sentence. He was identified only by his first name

in order to avoid retaliation if he returned to Russia.

Timur told the newspaper that in December he was offered an alternative – six months with the infamous Wagner Group fighting in Ukraine in exchange for a pardon and the promise of supplies of anti-virals.

"I understood I would have a quick death or a slow death," he said, referring to the [high death toll](#) among Wagner Group soldiers. "I chose a quick death."

While anti-viral treatments don't cure HIV, they can reduce viral loads, making people less susceptible to illness caused by a weakened immune system.

Another HIV-positive soldier who fought with the Wagner Group, identified only as Ruslan, told The Times that he joined the mercenary group in December, one year into an 11-year sentence for drug dealing.

He said that at the time he feared for his life because the medications he was receiving in a penal colony were not suppressing his HIV viral load. Last year he was bedridden with pneumonia, and later became sick while at a training camp for the Wagner Group, according to the newspaper.

Ruslan said he expected to die from an illness in prison as a result of ineffective treatment, so he was ultimately grateful to get an offer to fight in return for medication, according to the Times.

Still, it's a bleak exchange.

The Wagner Group is the main pro-Russian force currently fighting to capture the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, a battle that US Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [called a "slaughter-fest" for Russian forces.](#)

Speaking at a press conference in February, John Kirby, the Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council in the White House, [said](#) the group was treating its [convict recruits](#) as "cannon fodder."

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