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Wagner Mercenary Chief Says Launching ‘People’s Militia’ Near Ukraine Border

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Evgeny Prigozhin (left). **Artem Krasnov / Kommersant**

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Kremlin-linked magnate who leads the notorious Wagner mercenary group, said Wednesday that the private military contractor was “forming a people's militia” in Russia’s Belgorod region on the Ukrainian border.

According to Prigozhin, “several companies” were producing “required items for fortifications,” while Wagner instructors were training “citizens who will defend the region’s borders.”

“We are ready to provide all possible assistance to other areas that need to take care of their defense,” Prigozhin said in a Telegram post.

He did not specify how many people would comprise the "people's militia."

Related article: Prigozhin Admits He Founded ‘Brave, Patriotic’ Wagner Mercenary Group

Belgorod and other Russian border regions have accused Ukraine of repeated cross-border attacks on their soil in the months since Moscow invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24. Kyiv has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility.

Prigozhin is also believed to be recruiting prisoners to fight in Ukraine in a bid to solve the military's manpower problems in the ongoing war.

While mercenary companies are illegal under Russian law, it is widely believed that Prigozhin is permitted to run Wagner because Moscow allegedly uses it to secretly deploy military contractors and pursue its foreign policy goals without the use of its own military.

Prigozhin admitted last month that he founded Wagner in 2014 following years of denying any role with the company.

The U.S. and the European Union have sanctioned the mercenary group over alleged atrocities committed in Ukraine, the Middle East and North and Central Africa.

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