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Wagner Mercenary Group Opens Tech Center in St. Petersburg

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The new Wagner Center in St Petersburg. **Alexander Demianchuk / TASS**

ST. PETERSBURG – The until-recently highly secretive Wagner mercenary organization continued to grow its public profile on Friday as it opened a new headquarters and technology center in Russia's second city.

The glass-fronted multistory building in St. Petersburg will not only function as the administrative hub for the military group — whose public profile has grown as it takes on an increasingly important role in Russia's military campaign in Ukraine — but be home to an innovation hub that will incubate patriotic start-ups.

"Wagnerites are achieving their goals on the frontline. We will achieve our goals here," Ruslan Ostashko, a pro-Kremlin blogger and television presenter who was representing Wagner at the opening told The Moscow Times. "Unfortunately, military conflicts have always been the driving force behind technological advancement."

Another Wagner representative at the opening, Konstantin Dolgov, said the center would be a

“think tank, where people, united by one goal, will work on the implementation of certain tasks for the benefit of the Russian Federation.”

The appearance of the center eight months into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is a sign of how the group’s star has risen during the conflict, which has seen Russia’s regular Armed Forces suffer a series of significant military defeats at the hands of Kyiv’s forces.

“The PMC Wagner Center is a complex of buildings where developers, designers, IT specialists, experimental industry and start-ups can be housed,” Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner group, said a press release last week.

"If the project shows its success and relevance, we will consider opening more branches."

The new building in the east of St. Petersburg has “Wagner” emblazoned on its revolving glass doors and above the main entrance. While Prigozhin did not appear at the opening Friday, dozens of men wearing military uniform were in attendance.

Despite never being publicly acknowledged by the Kremlin, soldiers for Wagner have been reported in a number of countries in the Middle East and Africa, including in Syria where they fought alongside regular Russian troops.

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Bolstered by convicts recruited from Russian prisons, the company’s mercenaries are currently engaged in a grinding battle to take the small, yet strategically significant, town of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk region.

One of the entrepreneurs who will be based in the new center is Dmitry Zakhilov, who runs an IT company whose main product is used to diagnose drug abuse propensity among adolescents. The Wagner facility, he said, is interested in adopting the same technology to screen potential military personnel.

“Military work presupposes a huge amount of stress. The goal is to maintain the psychological condition of the troops in acceptable condition. We will help achieve this goal,” Zakhilov told The Moscow Times.

“Sitting on the sidelines is not an option. Regardless of whether Russia is right or wrong, I see my future here, so I support my country.”

Wagner’s military prominence has been mirrored by that of Prighozin himself, who seeks the political spotlight at home with increasing regularity. After years of denial, Prigozhin admitted in September for the first time that he founded Wagner in 2014.

"Prigozhin is now willing to publicly describe his roles in a way he hasn’t been able to in the past,” said Dara Massicot, an expert on the Russian army at U.S. think tank RAND Corporation.

“He is wearing his medals, changing his style of dress, addressing his employees on camera as if he is their general."

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