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Head of Russian Region Bordering Ukraine Trains With Wagner

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The head of a Russian region on the Ukrainian border that has faced regular attacks throughout the war said he has undergone combat training with the notorious Wagner mercenary group.

Kursk region Governor Roman Starovoit said he, his colleagues in the regional administration and a volunteer territorial defense unit visited Wagner's training camp in the first week of 2023.

Footage accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack showed Starovoit firing automatic weapons, launching hand grenades and riding an armored vehicle with other uniformed troops.

"The conditions are as close as possible to combat," reads a caption in the minute-long video.

"We presume [you'll be on] duty at critical infrastructure sites in the region," Starovoit says in the video.

Embed:

> The russian state advertises joining the russian army. Kursk Governor Roman Starovoit said that he allegedly took a combat training course in the Wagner PMC camp. I wonder if he will go to war.... pic.twitter.com/QcBSJfNUrH
>
> — Iuliia Mendel (@IuliiaMendel) January 8, 2023

Wagner is run by Kremlin-linked magnate Yevgeny Prigozhin, who admitted last fall that he founded the private military company in 2014 following years of denying any ties to it. Prigozhin was also filmed touring Russian prisons to recruit inmates to fight alongside Wagner's ranks in Ukraine.

Wagner troops, including prisoners, are currently tied in a months-long grinding battle to capture the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Sunday that his troops "are repelling constant Russian attempts to advance" in Bakhmut.

Starovoit was offered to sign a contract with Wagner after completing part of the training program, Prigozhin said via his press service Sunday.

"But it turned out that he has work obligations at the moment," Prigozhin said.

While mercenary companies are illegal under Russian law, Prigozhin has been widely believed in recent years to have received permission to secretly deploy Wagner contractors to global conflict zones in order for Moscow to pursue its foreign policy goals without the use of its own military.

Russian political expert Tatiana Stanovaya called Starovoit's training "one of the main mechanisms for Prigozhin to fit in with the [Russian] elite" and gain political influence.

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) U.S. think tank said Prigozhin is "likely attempting to rally up support for the legalization of Wagner Group in Russia" by bolstering relations with politicians like Starovoit.

Kursk is among several regions near the Russia-Ukraine border which raised their "terror" threat levels in the weeks since Kremlin troops invaded Ukraine early last year.

Ukrainian leaders have neither confirmed nor denied the shelling and strikes on Russian infrastructure, military targets and villages.

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