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Russia's Wagner Mercenary Group Launches Youth Club in St. Petersburg

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Russia's Wagner mercenary group has launched a youth club aimed at fostering patriotism and preparing young Russians for military service.

The club, called Wagneryonok ("Junior Wagnerite"), is based at the Wagner Center, the group's glass-fronted headquarters and technology center that opened in St. Petersburg in November.

Wagneryonok is headed by recent high-school graduate Alexander Tronin, a former member of St. Petersburg's youth parliament, and currently has 60 members.

"Almost every day people write to us. We try to accept everyone," the group's deputy head, Kirill Ovchinnikov, told the state-run RIA Novosti news agency Friday.

Wagneryonok's activities include holding patriotic events and providing assistance to the families of volunteer fighters in Ukraine, according to RIA Novosti.

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The group is open to both boys and girls and its average age of membership is 18, RIA Novosti cited a source as saying.

Its first meeting, which was widely reported for the first time on Friday, took place Jan. 29 and was attended by noted nationalist Sergei Mironov, the head of Russia's "A Just Russia — For Truth" party.

Other guests at its events have included politicians, pro-war bloggers, military personnel, and individuals who are said to "promote the true values of Russia and work for the good of our Motherland," RIA Novosti reported.

The St. Petersburg-based independent news outlet Bumaga, which attended a Feb. 22 Wagneryonok meeting, reported that students who attended the organization's events were given a school exemption note by a 15-year-old event organizer.

Wagner, which for years operated in the shadows, has embraced the limelight following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, claiming a leading role in Moscow's offensive in eastern Ukraine and openly feuding with the Defense Ministry.

The group, headed by Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, is notorious for brutal fighting tactics and has been accused of a number of war crimes.

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