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Wagner Chief Defies Russian Military's Orders to Formalize Hierarchy

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Lev Borodin / TASS

The head of Russia's Wagner mercenary group has said he will not sign contracts with the military that seek to formalize the hierarchy of forces fighting in Ukraine.

The defiance is the latest episode in the public feud between Wagner, which has been at the forefront of Russia's offensive in Ukraine for several months, and the Defense Ministry.

Russia's Defense Ministry said Saturday that Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu had ordered "volunteer detachments" to sign contracts with the military by July 1. The military has previously referred to Wagner as a "volunteer assault unit."

On Monday, the ministry said it signed its first contract with Kremlin-allied Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's Akhmat military unit.

"PMC Wagner will not sign any contracts with Shoigu," Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin said in an audio message published by his press service Saturday.

“Shoigu can’t properly control military formations,” Prigozhin added, contrasting Wagner’s “highly efficient structure” with that of the conventional army.

Related article: Prigozhin Claims 'Deception' and 'Threats' from Defense Ministry

The rivalry between Prigozhin and Russia’s top brass has surfaced during the fight for eastern Ukraine’s Bakhmut, the longest and bloodiest of the invasion.

Wagner operated in the shadows for years before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine forced its public profile to rise due to its role in supplying thousands of privately contracted soldiers for the conflict.

Prigozhin confirmed last year that he had founded Wagner after years of denying any links with the mercenary unit, whose fighters have been accused of destabilizing countries and brutal fighting tactics in conflict zones around the world.

A legal entity called Wagner was only officially registered in January 2023 as the St. Petersburg-based joint-stock company “PMC Wagner Center.”

Its registration documents described PMC Wagner Center’s activities as business and management consulting, publishing, media, scientific development and the leasing of ships and airplanes.

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