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Russia Uses Ex-Wagner Operatives to Recruit 'Disposable' Saboteurs in Europe – FT

February 16, 2026



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Former operatives linked to the late Russian mercenary leader Yevgeny Prigozhin are helping Moscow recruit agents in Europe to carry out sabotage, the Financial Times reported Monday, citing Western intelligence officials.

Wagner recruiters who previously signed up fighters in impoverished Russian regions for the war in Ukraine have been tasked with identifying financially vulnerable people in Europe willing to carry out acts of sabotage and violence, the officials said.

Officials told the FT that the rise of "disposable" agents came after European countries expelled hundreds of Russian intelligence officers working under diplomatic cover, forcing the GRU and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to shift tactics.

They soon pivoted toward vulnerable groups including criminals, the unemployed and

migrants, who would agree to carry out acts of surveillance, arson, assaults or vandalism in exchange for small payments.

Former Wagner members easily adapted to the new role, senior European intelligence officials told the FT, calling them an "effective — if crude" tool for the GRU.

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Ex-Wagner personnel and former "Troll Factory" employees are well-equipped for recruiting proxies as they "speak the same language" as prospective agents, one European official said.

Another noted that their skillfully crafted Telegram channels demonstrate that they "know their audience."

In 2023, British authorities said that 21-year-old petty criminal Dylan Earl was recruited through Wagner-linked Telegram channels and later recruited four other young men and together set fire to a London warehouse connected to a Ukrainian company.

Earl's 9,000-pound ($12,300) payment for the arson was reportedly reduced because he failed to wait for final confirmation from handlers, according to the BBC.

The New York Times reported in 2025 that Earl also allegedly planned to "burn to the ground" a restaurant owned by exiled Russian businessman and Putin critic Yevgeny Chichvarkin, who was sentenced to prison in absentia for "fakes" about the war in Ukraine on Monday.

The London arson was one of the first in what Western officials describe as a growing wave of sabotage across Europe.

The Associated Press has identified at least 145 incidents that fit what it described as a broader campaign of hybrid warfare waged by Russia against the West.

Following the London attack, European intelligence agencies began piecing together network of Wagner-linked "disposables" carrying out sabotage across the continent, the FT said.

While outsourcing recruitment to these amateur saboteurs may expand capacity and lower costs, it reduces competence and operational security, the FT noted.

More plots have been thwarted than successfully carried out as a result, the newspaper said.

Prigozhin, who long deployed his mercenaries and "Troll Farm" propagandists in service of the Kremlin, was killed in a mysterious plane crash in August 2023 after leading an aborted mutiny against Russia's military leadership over their alleged mistreatment of Wagner fighters in Ukraine.

Following his death, Wagner's domestic forces were absorbed by the Russian Defense Ministry.

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