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WORLD

Wagner Threatens to Pull Out of Ukraine in Latest Internal Russia Spat

Graphic video shot in front of rows of dead soldiers underlines Moscow's divisions ahead of expected Ukrainian offensive

By *Thomas Grove* [Follow](#) and *Isabel Coles* [Follow](#)

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The leader of Russian paramilitary group Wagner threatened to withdraw his troops from the front line in Ukraine, citing growing losses, in a move that raises fresh tensions between Moscow's military leaders ahead of an expected offensive by Kyiv's forces.

Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin said his forces would leave their positions in the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut on May 10 after delivering an expletive-riddled broadside against Moscow's military leadership, which he accused of withholding ammunition.

"Shoigu, Gerasimov, where is the...ammunition?" he shouted into the camera, referring to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Russia's top military officer, in a video posted on his public Telegram channel.

"If you handed over the ammunition quota, there'd be five times fewer dead," he added, standing in a field covered in rows of dead soldiers.

Wagner has spearheaded Russia's offensive on the eastern city of Bakhmut, which Ukrainian forces are clinging on to after months of brutal combat that have taken a heavy toll on both sides. The White House estimated this week that about half the 20,000 Russian troops killed in Ukraine since December were from Wagner.

"I withdraw units of the Wagner [private military company] because they are doomed to a senseless death without ammunition," Mr. Prigozhin said in a later statement.



Wagner's Yevgeny Prigozhin in an image taken from a video. PHOTO: CONCORD PRESS SERVICE/REUTERS

Ukrainian officials cast doubt on Mr. Prigozhin's ultimatum. Andriy Chernyak, a spokesman for Ukraine's military intelligence agency, known as GUR, said Mr. Prigozhin was seeking a scapegoat for failure to seize Bakhmut by May 9, when Russia marks the victory of the Soviet army over Nazi Germany in 1945. Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar said Russia had deployed Wagner soldiers from other fronts to Bakhmut in an effort to capture the remainder of the city before Victory Day.

The flare-up of tensions within Russia's military machine over chronic supply shortages follows a spate of drone attacks on Russian soil. The strikes, which have targeted mainly infrastructure central for sustaining Moscow's war effort such as trains, airfields and fuel depots, have put the Kremlin on the back foot ahead of what Western analysts say is an imminent Ukrainian offensive.

A blaze at a Russian refinery near the border with Ukraine early Friday sent plumes of smoke into the sky. Military analysts have said the string of drone strikes is likely part of Kyiv's attempt to disrupt Russian logistics ahead of its planned offensive. Ukraine hasn't commented on the attacks.

The cause of the explosion at the Ilsky refinery in Krasnodar, which sits in southern Russia, wasn't immediately clear. Emergency workers speaking to state news agency TASS said it was the result of a drone attack.

Russian state television initially blamed saboteurs. State media later said the blast was caused when the blaze from a previous attack by Ukrainian drones on Thursday reignited.

In the most spectacular incident, two drones exploded over the Kremlin earlier this week after Moscow said they had been intercepted. Russia blamed Ukraine and the U.S. Both Kyiv and Washington denied involvement.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking at a Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting in India, blamed the drone attack on Kyiv and said it couldn't have

been carried out without “the knowledge of its masters.”



Workers repair a railway track at the site of a blast in Russia's Bryansk region. PHOTO: RZD RUSSIAN RAILWAYS/ZUMA PRESS

Earlier this week, an airport in Russia's Bryansk region was also targeted by a drone, and two trains carrying fuel toward the front lines were derailed in the same area.

The U.K.'s Ministry of Defense said a recent uptick in attacks targeting Russian railway lines in areas bordering Ukraine had likely caused short-term, localized disruption to Moscow's military movements. While the damage can be repaired quickly, the ministry said Russia's internal security forces were unlikely to be able to fully protect Russia's rail networks from attack.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is preparing to deploy Western weapons and troops trained by its allies in an offensive to recapture territory occupied by Russia in the east and south of the country.

Russia's Defense Ministry said its units were still pressing to take all of Bakhmut and that Moscow's troops had destroyed a bridge crucial to the Ukrainians' efforts to resupply its forces there with armament and personnel. Fighting has raged in recent days over the last road Ukraine can use to resupply its forces from the west.



A wounded Ukrainian serviceman waits to receive first aid near the front-line city of Bakhmut. PHOTO: DIMITAR DILKOFF/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Relatives and friends mourn over the coffin of a Ukrainian serviceman killed near Bakhmut. PHOTO: ROMAN PILIPEY/GETTY IMAGES

A three-day curfew came into force in the southern city of Kherson as Russian forces continued to pound the surrounding region with rockets and artillery. Three people were wounded in shelling over the past day, said the head of the Kherson military administration, Oleksandr Prokudin, adding that Russian forces had fired hundreds of projectiles across the region.

Ukrainian forces recaptured the city of Kherson last year but it and the surrounding areas remain within artillery range of Russian forces that were driven back to the east bank of the Dnipro River.

Local authorities have said the curfew aims to help law enforcement carry out unspecified activities. A Ukrainian military analyst said the curfew might make it easier for the Ukrainian military to move around and target Russian positions over the river. Ukraine has previously imposed curfews to clear the streets, making it easier to identify and root out collaborators who may be providing information to Russian forces.

In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Yevgeniy Balitsky, the Russian-backed governor of the occupied part of the region, said Friday on Telegram that some residents of 18 front-line settlements, including the elderly, would be temporarily relocated amid intensified shelling by Ukrainian troops.

Write to Thomas Grove at thomas.grove@wsj.com and Isabel Coles at isabel.coles@wsj.com

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