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Opening Statement of Chairman Stephen F. Lynch Hearing on “Putin’s Proxies: Examining Russia’s Use of Private Military Companies” September 21, 2022

Good morning, everyone. Today the Subcommittee on National Security will examine Russia’s growing reliance on private military companies, or PMCs, to further its strategic objectives and expand its geopolitical influence around the world.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s unprovoked and unlawful war against Ukraine is now entering its seventh month. Facing mounting casualties, a severe manpower shortfall, and an enduring Ukrainian military resistance backed by the United States and our allies, Russia is reportedly leaning heavily on private military companies - including the Wagner Group – to supplement its conventional military forces in Ukraine. Earlier this year, the Department of Defense estimated that at least 1,000 mercenary fighters had already deployed to the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine to reinforce Russia’s frontline troop presence.

Beyond the borders of Ukraine, the past several years have witnessed a marked increase in Russia’s reported use of private military companies to provide paramilitary capabilities and personal security services in conflicts around the world, ranging from Syria, Libya, Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, among others.

On paper, Russian law prohibits mercenary activity, but it is clear that the Wagner Group and other Russian private military companies operate as quasi-state actors. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, the Wagner Group serves as a “Russian Ministry of Defense proxy force”—financed by a Russian oligarch with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Press reports also indicate that Wagner Group entities are closely tied to Russia’s intelligence and security agencies and have even established training camps in close proximity of bases used by Russian special forces brigades. Other lesser-known private military companies, including the Anti-Terror Group, the Moran Security Group, and the Slavonic Corps, are similarly associated with Russia’s Ministry of Defense or state intelligence and security services.

Around the world, Russian PMCs have engaged in direct combat operations, propaganda and disinformation campaigns, illicit financial activities, and the exploitation of natural resources—all while under the guise of a non-state corporation, and at the expense of human lives and international law.

In the Central African Republic, the United Nations has accused Russian private military companies of carrying out systemic and grave human rights abuses and violations of international law—including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, an international crisis monitoring organization, Wagner operatives in Mali have targeted civilians in more than 70 percent of the operations they’ve carried out there since last year.

The U.S. and the European Union have imposed multiple rounds of severe financial sanctions against the Wagner Group, its Russian oligarch financier, and several associates and entities in relation to their operations in Ukraine, destabilizing activities in Syria, and human rights atrocities in Africa. Considering that Russia will continue to rely on private military companies to further its strategic objectives and exert its

influence abroad, it is imperative that we examine whether there are additional actions the United States and our international partners can take to degrade the capabilities of the Wagner Group and other similar Russian-backed proxy organizations.

Before I recognize our Ranking Member, I want to note that given some of the challenges associated with analyzing Russia's use of private military companies in an unclassified setting, I have also asked the Administration to provide Subcommittee Members with a classified briefing on Russia's use of private military companies, including in Ukraine, which we plan to schedule in November.

With that, I look forward to today's discussion, and I now yield to the distinguished Ranking Member from the state of Wisconsin, Mr. Grothman, for his opening statement.

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