

# [***US military veteran accused of having explicit images of a child apparently joined Russian army***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BS7-96J1-DYMD-610T-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BOSTON — A U.S. Air Force veteran who fled a charge of possessing sexually explicit images of a child told his lawyer he joined Russia’s army, and video appears to show him signing documents in a military enlistment office in Siberia.

Wilmer Puello-Mota, a former elected official in a small Massachusetts city, was expected to enter a guilty plea in Rhode Island in early January, but did not show up to court, according to prosecutors. Last week, video surfaced that appears to show the 28-year-old in Russia and expressing support for the country's [*war against Ukraine*](https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine) — footage that could be used to promote Moscow’s narrative of the conflict.

His lawyer, John M. Cicilline, told The Boston Globe that he called Puello-Mota on Jan. 8, the day before he was expected to plead guilty. According to prosecutors, he boarded a flight from Washington, D.C., to Istanbul, Turkey, a day earlier.

“He said, `I joined the Russian army,’ or something like that,” Cicilline told the Globe. “I thought he was joking.”

Cicilline said Puello-Mota wanted a career in ***politics*** and thought the criminal case had ruined his life.

“I’m sure he joined the Russian army because he didn’t want to register as a sex offender,” Cicilline said.

The Associated Press made several calls to Cicilline. A person answering his office phone said he would not make any additional comment.

Puello-Mota served in the U.S. Air Force and deployed to Afghanistan in 2015, when he was 19, media releases show. He later served with the Massachusetts Air National Guard’s 104th Fighter Wing as a security forces airman.

Puello-Mota was arrested in 2020 in Warwick, Rhode Island, after he called to report a stolen gun and police said they found nude images of a 17-year-old girl on his phone. He was charged with one count of having sexually explicit images of a child. He was later also charged with trying to deceive prosecutors and his commanders about the case. Cicilline told the Globe he reached a deal to plead guilty to all charges in exchange for an 18-month prison sentence.

Videos surfaced on Russian social media and local television in March showing the blurred image of a man in a uniform in what appears to be a war zone displaying the U.S. flag.

In video posted online last week, a man who looks like Puello-Mota talks directly to the camera, speaking in English over background music and Russian subtitles and discussing a military operation. His face is not blurred. He does not say his name, and the videos do not mention the Rhode Island criminal case.

President Vladimir Putin has eliminated nearly all independent media in Russia — and state media aligned regularly [*trumpet Russian victories*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-propaganda-putin-election-ukraine-712036dee8da10e35cb0d75d6ad53eea) in Ukraine, denounce the West and otherwise amplify good news while ignoring the bad.

The Rhode Island attorney general's office said in a court document last month that it had received images purporting to show Puello-Mota in Ukraine and Russia.

“While the state cannot verify the authenticity of the videos and photographs, if they are accurate the defendant is well beyond the jurisdiction of this court and, if false, the defendant is engaged in an elaborate ruse to conceal his whereabouts,” Rhode Island prosecutors said.

U.S. State Department officials said they were aware of media reports about Puello-Mota fleeing to Russia but have had no contact with him and have no way to confirm those reports.

The most recent video appears to show Puello-Mota entering a building in Khanty-Mansiysk and shaking the hand of a uniformed man. At the end of the video, he is seen signing a document.

The AP verified the location after examining satellite imagery and historical photos of the area. According to a plaque on the door, it’s a military recruitment center run by the Russian Defense Ministry.

“Obviously it’s a difficult situation. It’s war. It’s a special military operation,” Puello-Mota says in the video, adding that he was lucky to be with “people from the international brigade.”

“We did our work. We did our job. We did what we were supposed to do,” he said. “I was very lucky and fortunate to serve with those guys. I definitely would do it again.”

Ian Garner, an assistant professor of ***politics*** at Queen’s University in Canada, called it “a huge propaganda opportunity” for Russia.

"To be able to show off an American citizen who has chosen to reinvent themselves, to reform themselves and become a part of the Russian war machine seems to provide evidence that Russia is winning a much bigger spiritual war,” he said.

Puello-Mota held the rank of technical sergeant when he forced to leave the guard in October 2022 because of the criminal case, said Don Veitch, a spokesperson for the Massachusetts National Guard. His security clearance was also revoked.

Holyoke City Councilor David Bartley, who worked with Puello-Mota on the City Council, said he considers him a good friend. He said the person in the video looks and sounds like him.

“To me that’s him,” he said.

He knew of no connections between Puello-Mota and Russia and called the footage “shocking.”

“The Wil that I know was a good, decent person,” Bartley said.

A Facebook page attributed to Puello-Mota includes a photo of the Kremlin and an updated profile photo of a man in a uniform operating a drone. It says he is from Holyoke and currently lives in Moscow and works at the Russian Defense Ministry, which is spelled in Russian.

Under Rhode Island law, Puello-Mota's trial cannot begin without him being present.

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Perry reported from Meredith, N.H. Associated Press reporters Beatrice Dupuy and Rhonda Shafner in New York also contributed.

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