



russian analytical digest

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ANALYSIS

The Post-Mutiny Context of Wagner and Private Military Forces in Russia

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636561

Abstract

This short article provides a summary of how the extraordinary events surrounding Wagner private military company's (PMC) standoff with the Russian Ministry of Defense came to pass. It then considers what, if any, role Wagner will play in the Russian security landscape in the near future, and what this might suggest about the coherence of the Russian security state in general.

In May, Wagner PMC and its head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, appeared to be integral and influential players not just within the so-called “special military operation,” but within Russia’s security landscape more broadly—and even an emerging factor in the political sphere. By September, following a mutiny, an enforced relocation to Belarus, and the death of Prigozhin, Wagner had firmly returned to the shadows in which it had operated for most of its existence. Today, Wagner is once again the subject of rumors, rather than acting as a prominent voice within Russian security discourse. A consistent theme of these rumors has been that the Russian defense ministry has set about rendering Wagner irrelevant both in Russia and in the African states in which it has been employed for years. Yet the large and ever-changing social media network apparatus around Wagner maintains that the group remains active in Belarus and all the locations in Africa where it is deployed.

The Road to Mutiny

In the first year of its full-scale war in Ukraine, the Russian military’s mutually interdependent relationship with Wagner—first developed in so-called “plausibly deniable” operations in Africa—seemed to have been extended and deepened. In the first half of 2023, however, this arrangement began to unravel rapidly before exploding in a series of surreal and spectacular events bookended by an “armed rebellion” and Prigozhin’s death in an unexplained plane crash.

Prior to this, Prigozhin had been articulating increasingly frequent and hostile public criticisms of the Russian Ministry of Defense, and specifically defense minister Sergei Shoigu. He accused Shoigu of denying Wagner the supplies it needed to fight on the frontlines, as well as both Shoigu and the MoD of generalized corruption and misuse of resources. This critique overlapped with his wider, more populist narrative against Russian elites (oligarchs, state officials, and *siloviki*, although never Putin directly), which became more prominent in the weeks before the mutiny. In response, the Ministry of Defense announced a decree, publicly endorsed by

Putin, requiring all irregular units active in Ukraine—including Wagner—to sign formal contracts with them. Seemingly fearing that signing such a contract would take Wagner out of his control, Prigozhin escalated his rhetorical attacks on Shoigu et al. and began preparing for the mutiny.

It was not immediately clear if Prigozhin’s announcement of Wagner’s “March for Justice” on the evening of June 23, on the pretext of seemingly fabricated Russian military missile and helicopter strikes on Wagner field camps, represented merely the latest in a series of escalating rhetorical moves. However, the Russian state’s response soon made clear that a jump was being made from rhetoric to direct political-violent action. A special news announcement broadcast on state television denied Prigozhin’s allegations, while Wagner-leaning military generals were placed in front of cameras to call on Wagner personnel to disobey Prigozhin’s orders for insurrection. Most significantly, Putin addressed the nation the following morning, labeling Prigozhin a traitor and calling for solidarity against the “armed rebellion.” This clear-cut public declaration of Putin’s position in the standoff between Wagner and the Russian military led to a cascade of social media statements in which other Russian state officials decried the mutiny. At this point, Prigozhin and Wagner must have known that whatever their plan was, politically they were finished. The bizarre way that this spectacle was temporarily resolved—an agreement brokered by Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for Wagner to relocate to Belarus testifies to how interdependent Wagner and the Russian state had become, as well as the genuine concern that the Russian security services must have had about the consequences of eliminating Wagner fighters on the outskirts of Moscow.

Whatever the Putin regime’s aims for its “special military operation,” the situation that unfolded between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defense in 2023—much of it documented from the Wagner side on social media—was surely not intended or foreseen. The implications of these developments for the long-term config-

uration of the *siloviki*, the Russian war effort, and the political security and trajectory of the Putin regime are likely to play out for the foreseeable future. Even if the Putin regime believes this series of events has demonstrated its resolve to face down any internal challenges to regime stability and the official line, the Wagner mutiny has been a huge distraction from the efforts to hold territory against a sustained Ukrainian counteroffensive, and has at least temporarily cut off a ready and effective source of personnel for the frontlines. It has also shown the incoherence that results when a system reliant on interpreting vague directives and based on internal rivalries is placed under pressure.

Consequences of the Mutiny

It remains too early to say with any confidence what, if anything, comes next for Wagner. It seems likely, however, that without the social media figure of Prigozhin, recourse to Russian state resources, and a base in Russia, Wagner has been effectively neutralized as a political actor; it lacks the means to appeal to a wider audience beyond the niche social network community that grew out of its rise. Wagner's social media world will likely continue to voice criticism of the Ministry of Defense and its approach to the war on Ukraine, but the broader critique of Russian elites developed by Prigozhin is not likely to find a wider audience. In the interregnum between the mutiny in June and Prigozhin's plane crash in August, during which a scaled-down Wagner relocated to Belarus, it was noticeable that Wagner social media networks began to feature more interviews with senior Wagner figures other than Prigozhin. This represented a marked change: Prigozhin—as the voice of Wagner—had previously dominated these channels. However, any non-state-sanctioned Wagner figure who emerges from Prigozhin's shadow to command wider public attention will find their room to operate and communicate their messages significantly restricted by the Russian state. Indeed, even before the deaths of Prigozhin and Utkin, there was a huge question mark over Wagner's capacity to communicate to a wider public.

However, the mutual interdependence of the previous relationship cuts both ways. At least in the short term, the exiling of Wagner meant that the Russian military found itself without one of its most effective means of recruiting personnel for its war on Ukraine. Furthermore, the fear that Prigozhin and Wagner had many sympathizers within the regular military, including in mid-ranking command positions, is said to have created a climate of suspicion within an already moribund chain of command. Moreover, Prigozhin's critique of the Russian military command's corruption and ineptitude is shared by many in the nationalist establishment and fringes; despite a wider crackdown on such individuals,

the nationalist community's use of the ready-made critiques of key military figures popularized by Prigozhin continues to pose a significant risk to these figures' status.

Meanwhile, Wagner operations, or lack thereof, have receded into the realm of speculation. There are very strong indications that various Russian state agencies have moved to pressure Wagner out of the north and central African states in which it had been operating. To this end, the supposed curator of this process, Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, made multiple formal visits to these states in the weeks following Prigozhin's death; the Russian state has also pressured the incumbent regimes in Libya and Syria to prevent Wagner from using vital infrastructure. This has reportedly led to high tensions between official Russian military personnel and Wagner members in these locations. In this context, Russian state agencies have been promoting their own aligned PMCs to replace Wagner forces in Africa and thus gain access to potentially lucrative contracts and rights to exploit mineral deposits. This is a mark of how useful the Russian state considers Wagner has been for its purposes, as well as of the way in which Wagner has changed Russia's military and security landscape. The notion of privately controlled armies, seemingly only partially discredited by Wagner turning on the Russian state security organs, has gained such currency that the Russian state seems to think that the solution to its Wagner problem is a more loyal PMC, rather than bringing all operations in-house. This perspective may be shared by Belarus: there are rumors that a Belarus-based PMC connected to a close Lukashenko ally may have been established and may now be seeking to recruit Wagner personnel and secure contracts for counterinsurgency work in Africa.

The New Context?

Amid all these indications and claims about Wagner's disintegration and replacement with alternatives, the dense network of Wagner-linked social media channels insist that Wagner continues to operate both in Belarus and in the African states where it has been deployed. In late September, a set of new rumors about Wagner's future began to circulate. Wagner's senior commanders met and agreed on a new head, who goes by the call-sign Lotus. It was also rumored that Wagner was in negotiations with the Russian national guard equivalent, Rosgvardia, about signing a contract to operate under its auspices as an independent unit. These negotiations were then rumored to have failed—although the reported plan to introduce legislation into the Duma that would permit Rosgvardia to establish and direct “volunteer” units, in line with the powers granted to the Ministry of Defense during the early months of the war, seems very coincidental. At the same time, a growing

number of Wagner members are supposedly leaving to join up with Ministry of Defense-controlled volunteer units, while Putin has publicly endorsed a former Wagner figure for a role responsible for establishing such volunteer units.

All this suggests that the Wagner of the first half of 2023 is gone. It is no longer a public voice, and although a much-diminished version may continue, the form and terms thereof seem unresolved. However, the wider implications of its conflict with the Ministry of Defense will continue to play out. In the short term, the Minis-

try of Defense has reasserted some of its public authority. However, it now operates on a model that involves numerous “volunteer” units, many of which are connected to the same nationalist social media networks that echoed Prigozhin’s criticisms of the defense ministry, albeit without embracing his mutiny. Thus, the Ministry of Defense could well find itself in a similar situation again, becoming involved in a public dispute with one of these groups while relying on that group for manpower.

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ANALYSIS

The Wagner Group after Prigozhin

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636561

Abstract

This short article provides an overview of developments around the Wagner mutiny, focusing on its role in Russia’s political regime and the state’s efforts to regain control in the aftermath of the mutiny.

Against the backdrop of the unfulfilled promises of Russia’s so-called “special operation” against Ukraine and the ensuing heavy military losses, the Wagner Group revolted against Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov on June 23–24, 2023. Yevgeny Prigozhin, then-head of the Wagner Group, and his men occupied military facilities in Rostov-on-Don and advanced with a military convoy on Moscow, meeting almost no resistance from Russia’s security forces. Prigozhin had accused the Russian Defense Ministry of launching an attack on Wagner forces that killed a very large number of its people. He further claimed that Russia had not been at all threatened by Ukraine before the war. He accused the military leadership of deceiving the Russian president and the public and stated that reports of the Russian armed forces’ successes were “complete, total nonsense.”

The mutiny of the Wagner Group and the subsequent killing of its leaders Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin on August 23, 2023, shed sharp light on the modus operandi of Russia’s regime and its use of irregular armed groups. Conflict over the conduct of the

war against Ukraine and tensions between competing security agencies culminated in the mutiny. Prigozhin had vocally voiced frustration with the Russian military’s mismanagement, unachievable goals, disregard for the survival of Russia’s soldiers, and constant lies. He also exposed as propaganda the claim that Ukrainians wanted Russian forces to liberate them from fascism.

The Role of Wagner in Russia’s Political Regime

Originally, the Wagner Group had benefited the Russian regime due to the deniability of its operations, its provision of reliable killer troops, its flexibility, and the invisibility of its losses to the public. The Wagner Group represented the criminal arm of a “siloarchic” regime that fused commerce, military services, and extrajudicial killings. The Wagner Group was paraded in Russia’s political system as a licensed critic of the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff. In this respect, Wagner was an instrument of the Kremlin. Prigozhin could not have criticized Defense Minister Shoigu without the Kremlin’s acquiescence. Under Prigozhin’s leadership,

the Wagner Group was primarily interested in commercial gains and the exploitation of natural resources in its countries of operation, but its relative autonomy became a liability. The defense minister and the chief of general staff were keen to stop Prigozhin's spearhead from pointing at them. Ultimately, the defense minister and the chief of general staff provoked Prigozhin to act and Russian president Vladimir Putin to make a choice.

The mutiny and the killing of Wagner's leadership represent not just the culmination of tensions that had been growing for months, but the end of a mode of governance that had been characterized by competition between different security agents, the partial outsourcing of the war to mercenaries, the coexistence of regular and irregular armed groups, and the commercialization of military services. The Wagner mutiny highlighted the fissures within Russia's security establishment and the partial loss of political control. Putin had preferred to play the security agencies off against each other to avoid dependence on any one agency. Wagner's mutiny exposed the risks of this approach.

The mutiny revealed a "tail wagging the dog" phenomenon and a deep crisis of legitimacy. While military insubordination is quite common in fragile, corrupt, and highly polarized countries of the so-called "Global South," political control over the military has historically been very strong both in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia. The only exception to this rule is the August 1991 putsch against tattered Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. The mutiny thus took Putin by surprise. He had lost, at least temporarily, control over his own creation—the regular use of irregular armed groups to conduct undeclared wars. The state monopoly of violence visibly crumbled domestically and in view of the outside world. For a brief period, it seemed possible that Putin might lose his iron grip on power. What lessons did the Russian regime take from the Wagner mutiny and what are the prospects of the Wagner Group and related state-controlled military companies?

Regaining Control

Putin condemned the insurgency as a betrayal of Russia and had to quickly regain the appearance of being the only one in command. Observers expected a harsh reprisal. Surprisingly, a deal was initially struck with the Wagner Group following mediation by Belarusian president Alyaksandr Lukashenka. The insurgents were promised freedom from punishment if they moved to Belarus or subordinated themselves to the Ministry of Defense. Prigozhin himself was to go into exile in Belarus. However, Prigozhin, along with the military leader of the Wagner Group, Dmitry Utkin, and other Wagner personnel, died two months later in a plane crash—presumably a targeted killing intended to eliminate the leadership of the Wagner Group and enable the Russian

government to regain control over its combatants. The violent removal of Wagner's leadership and the follow-up took time to be professionally prepared so as to avoid a repeat of such botched operations as the attempted murder of former spy Sergei Skripal in Great Britain and the poisoning of opposition figure Aleksei Navalny.

It remains unclear who will ultimately replace Prigozhin as leader of the Wagner Group. Some even contemplate his son taking the helm. Shortly after the mutiny, Andrey Troshev, also known by his call sign "Sedoi," was mentioned in the Russian media as the real commander of the Wagner Group. Whatever the case may be, the official point of contact for Russia's services in Africa is no longer the leadership of the Wagner Group, but the Russian state. One of the crucial tasks facing the state after the killing of Prigozhin was to demonstrate the continuity and reliability of Russia's service provision. The Kremlin wants to show that there is clearly identifiable political supervision and that Russia's mercenaries will continue to exist, albeit with less autonomy. Indeed, the continued operation of Russian military companies is part of Russia's ambitious Africa strategy.

The Wagner Group remains a vital instrument of Russia's power projection in unstable, fractured, and anti-Western Asian and African countries. State-controlled military companies such as the Wagner Group train and equip military putschists (especially in Africa), conduct indiscriminate killing operations against insurgents, offer media campaigns, provide weapons and ammunition, replace UN-mandated international stabilization missions, and open the door for Russian arms sales and investment.

On September 16, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, one of the Russian Deputy Defense Ministers, and Andrey Averyanov, an infamous general of the GRU (Russian military intelligence), met political leaders from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The duo had visited Libya, one of the African bases of Wagner's mercenaries, a day before the plane crash in which Wagner's boss was killed. Yevkurov and Averyanov thus held talks with representatives of those countries most recently visited by the late Prigozhin. The two Russian officials indicated to the local authorities that Moscow remained committed to their governments.

Yevkurov and Averyanov, who are key figures in the reorganization of Russian operations in Africa, share traits that set them apart from Prigozhin: they are loyal and less boastful personalities than the former Wagner leader. Yevkurov, who led the violence-ridden North Caucasian republic of Ingushetia from 2008 to 2019, is the new face of relations between the Kremlin and African regimes. Averyanov, for his part, is known as head of the GRU's notorious Unit 29155, which specializes in sabotage and assassination. His spies poisoned

former double agent Sergei Skripal in 2018, blew up an ammunition depot in the Czech Republic in 2014, and attempted to stage a pro-Serb coup in Montenegro in 2016. Before taking charge of GRU Unit 29155, Averyanov also carried out special operations in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Crimea.

Takeover of Wagner's Portfolio by Loyal Companies

The Wagner Group was part of a network of military companies servicing the Russian state. Wagner, like other Russian military companies, signed contracts with foreign governments. The governments of the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger solicited the services of Russian military companies to protect their autocratic regimes and to kill insurgents. The Wagner Group, in particular, was characterized by its indiscriminate killing, abductions, torture, and sexual violence in these countries. Russia's military companies train special forces, supply combatants, organize disinformation campaigns, and exploit natural resources. The network of businessmen who benefit from Russia's state-sponsored military companies and their web of shell companies is still in existence. There are vested interests—including Putin's—in keeping the system in place. The portfolio of the Wagner Group is therefore likely to be taken over, at least in part, by competitors such as Gazprom's private military company or the military company Redut.

Created by former employees of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Foreign Intelligence Service, and the Russian Special Forces, Redut has a long history of conducting pro-Russian operations abroad. Redut will partially take over the military operations of the Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, and Africa. Redut boss Genady Timchenko, an oligarch and former KGB officer, has been recruiting fighters from Wagner and is keen to take over Wagner's portfolio.

While the Wagner Group historically operated as a semi-clandestine group, Russia is increasingly open in demonstrating its support for the autocratic regimes in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. The presence of Deputy Defense Minister Yevkurov and

GRU General Averyanov in African countries embodies this evolution. However, reducing the former autonomy of the Wagner Group will require some reorganization.

The Russian military establishment will probably broaden its reliance on irregular forces; one lesson from Wagner's mutiny is that it is advantageous to have several military companies at one's disposal. Even before the mutiny, the Kremlin therefore strengthened its cooperation with Redut in order to make itself less dependent on Wagner. Russia's state-owned Gazprom also set up a private military company. Of course, these military companies cannot replace an entire army. In the war in Ukraine, for instance, they only supplement, not substitute for, the regular armed forces.

Policy Implications

Russia's irregular military companies have become agents of the regime's influence, war profiteers, and an auxiliary force for state security agencies. They are an instrument of Russia's expansionist foreign policy, serving to destabilize pro-Western governments and shore up anti-Western ones. European policymakers should be concerned about Russia's military companies: their presence in conflict-affected regions deepens societal divides, contributes to the recruitment of Islamist militants, and undermines efforts to improve governance and reform security sectors.

In order to curb the spread of Russian-sponsored irregular armed groups, the EU might consider offering training courses for policymakers in relevant countries, as well as for the local security establishment and the media, on legal standards for private security and military companies. The EU could also consider enhancing intelligence fusion capabilities among its Member States.

Furthermore, it could trace the financial transactions of Russia's "corporate warriors" and take steps to block such transactions where possible. Similarly, it could sponsor fact-finding missions to document human rights violations. It could even go further and, on the basis of such findings, declare the Wagner Group and its successors to be terrorist organizations. Finally, the EU should consider offering leniency and exemption from prosecution to Wagner ex-combatants who are willing to cooperate in judicial investigations into war crimes.

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Further Reading

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ANALYSIS

Russia's Post-Prigozhin Footprint in Africa: Expected Continuities and Change

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636561

Abstract

Following patron Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, the Russian state seems set on tying the most notorious Russian mercenary outfit, Wagner Group, more closely to state structures. This has implications not only for the Ukrainian front, but also—and especially—for Russia's footprint in Africa. There, private military contractors previously served an important function both with and in parallel to Moscow's diplomatic and strategic efforts. While continuities are expected, it remains to be seen whether Russia's activities in Africa will be hampered by the loss of Prigozhin.

Wagner PMC and Russia's Twin Architecture

Since the first deployments of mercenary units to Eastern Ukraine in 2014, private military companies (PMCs) have been a prominent instrument in the Kremlin's toolbox. Wagner PMC, also referred to as "Wagner Group," has emerged as by far the most prominent of these units. Grasping its nature, however, has not always been straightforward. Analytical circles long discussed whether the group was best conceptualized as a deniable expeditionary force or a paramilitary outgrowth of Russia's politically connected underworld. It was embedded into the late oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin's "Network," which also included shadowy business interests, logistics companies, and "troll farms" (Rothrock, 2023). Wagner PMC served as a semi-deniable proxy at the behest of the Russian government in such places as Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. Elsewhere, Wagner paramilitaries spearheaded the overseas expansion of Prigozhin's business interests. In certain theaters, the Russian state's strategic priorities overlapped with oligarchic ones. Hence, the Wagner Group lay on a twin foundation of Russian state and shadow-state interests, priorities, and resources. While this architecture served both business and state interests well for several years, it was fraught with internal contradictions and tensions.

These contradictions were deemed tolerable during expeditionary operations in "far abroad" theatres of operation, such as Syria, where Wagner PMC at different stages served with, beside, and even in competition with the regular Russian armed forces, shifting from Russian state proxy to mercenary force in service of the Assad regime (Galeotti, 2022). The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and initial setbacks forced not only the Russian armed forces, but also the entire state apparatus to adapt. Within Putin's "personalised Regime" (Burkhardt, 2022), Prigozhin rose in prominence after devoting part of his oligarch-paramilitary Network to the war effort. Against the backdrop of the Russian state's reluctance to conscript soldiers for deployment in Ukraine,

Wagner PMC aided in "mobilizing at the margins" by not only contributing experienced troops, but also conducting a large recruitment drive to attract prisoners to serve in Ukraine (Aris, 2022, p. 6; Davies, 2023). Such Wagner conscript formations significantly contributed to Russian military advances achieved through grinding application of human wave-attacks in Severodonetsk (July 2022) and Bakhmut (May 2023). The latter, in particular, appears to have been an operational success: the Bakhmut offensive permitted Russia to maintain its offensive momentum and weaken Ukraine ahead of the latter's counteroffensives (Trofimov, 2023).

However, tensions between Prigozhin and the military rose during the attritional battle for Bakhmut. Putin and the Kremlin, however, stood by the armed forces and its figureheads, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, who had become the targets of increasingly aggressive criticism by Prigozhin (Sauer & Roth, 2023). On June 24, Wagner PMC units staged a mutiny, ostensibly designed to stave off their integration into the Russian military and Ministry of Defense. In the absence of an immediate crackdown, the mutiny was followed by a two-month interregnum in which the Russian state sought to freeze the Network, including Wagner PMC, out of "far abroad" operations, while Prigozhin visited local clients in Africa in an effort to retain his positions there (Seddon et al., 2023). The Kremlin's expected retribution, however, settled the matter, at least as far as Prigozhin himself was concerned: he and a group of associates, which included the co-founder and operational commander of Wagner PMC, Dmitry Utkin, were killed in a plane crash on August 23.

Future Pathways and Preliminary Insights

While Prigozhin is out of the picture, the future of Wagner PMCs African operations is far from certain. Analysts have identified two main pathways by which for the Russian state to deal with Prigozhin's paramilitary inheritance, which is still deployed in African theatres such

as the CAR, Mali, and Libya—assuming the Kremlin will not simply cut mercenaries loose (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2023, p. 19). The first option, “nationalization,” entails integrating Wagner PMC into Russian state structures; regarding overseas operations, the military’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GU) appears the most likely recipient of paramilitary assets, with some suspecting the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) will absorb information operations capabilities (Troianovski et al., 2023). The second option, “public-private,” assumes that the Kremlin will seek to retain or replicate a range of special attributes Wagner PMC offered the government as part of Prigozhin’s Network, such as plausible deniability and, perhaps most importantly, expertise in latching onto informal local state structures and tying their elites to Russian interests (Duursma & Masuhr, 2022, p. 413).

While the situation around Wagner PMC remains fluid, as of late September 2023, three insights appear somewhat certain. First, there has been no wholesale demolition of those structures built by Prigozhin. During the interregnum prior to his death, Wagner forces stayed put and continued their business in Libya, Mali, and the CAR, even as the state sought to marginalize the Network and discredit Prigozhin (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2023, p. 14). Wagner assets were not recalled, nor were rival PMCs sent to replace them in the field. Second, the Kremlin seeks to retain a Russian presence in Africa and has been at pains to reassure local allies/clients acquired by Prigozhin that Russian support will continue despite the disruptions of the mercenaries’ coup and subsequent decapitation. The chosen emissaries were drawn from the ranks of the Russian state’s *securocrats* (*siloviki*), specifically Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov and General Andrei Averyanov of the GU. On the surface, the tandem seems to be positioned as the points of contact for allied regimes, with Averyanov attending the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in July (Seibt 2023). Third, this emerging structure appears to be geographically differentiated. In late September, in a meeting attended by Yevkurov, Vladimir Putin charged Andrei Troshev, effectively the only surviving member of Wagner’s leadership group, with running “volunteer forces” in Ukraine. Even before Prigozhin’s death, there had been indications that Troshev was the “Kremlin’s man” inside Wagner PMC (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023b, p. 4; Faulconbridge, 2023). Hence, the Kremlin appears to be attempting to retain an entity outside the armed forces that can mobilize at the margins for the war effort in Ukraine.

Potential Continuities and Course Changes

While Prigozhin’s predominantly oligarchic model of fostering ties with local rulers in exchange for resource concessions is extremely pronounced in the CAR, it has not taken root in other operational areas. Since Prigozhin

moved into the CAR to support President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2017, Wagner has become known for filling a particular niche for autocratic governments, providing a set of services aptly termed “regime survival packages” (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023a, p. 10). While Wagner PMC personnel served as paramilitary personnel (in close protection, training, and combat roles), Prigozhin’s wider Network brought other services to the table. For example, it provided “political technologists” (effectively political consultants for autocrats) that supported efforts to entrench the Touadéra government. Hence, it can more readily be conceptualized as the Russian shadow state (logistically and financially backed by the state), reaching out to similar informally run elite networks and tying them to Russian interests—be they commercial or strategic in nature (Duursma & Masuhr, 2022, p. 413). Hence, the “CAR model” contrasts with operations in Libya and Mali that have narrower military and counterinsurgent characteristics. In Mali, Wagner PMC was brought in by Mali’s post-coup government to replace French, European, and UN troops as an external security provider—its appeal was due in part to its much less strict rules of engagement (Heinemann-Grüder, 2022, p. 4). Accordingly, a common theme of Wagner’s presence in the CAR and in Mali is its focus on a specific regime over wider stability, rather than operational priorities or methods.

In many ways, the crucial question for projecting the future contours of Wagner PMC in Africa (and the Russian presence there more broadly) is how important Prigozhin himself was to Russian efforts there. While sources from within his organization have stated that the Russian footprint cannot endure without his abilities (Seddon et al., 2023), analysts have been more circumspect (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023b, p. 1). It stands to reason that the CAR model cannot be as efficiently replicated by paramilitary forces led by *siloviki*—indeed, the more non-military elements the “regime survival package” is to include, the more the competitive advantages enjoyed by Prigozhin-era Wagner might prove to be lacking. This is not due to the “plausible” deniability of oligarch-funded paramilitary forces, since even before the events of the Ukraine war, the veneer of deniability was thin at best. Furthermore, the US has already indicated that Washington will perceive Wagner assets to be Russian proxies regardless of their label or the operational hierarchy in which they serve (Faulkner, Parens & Plichta, 2023, p. 18).

What a future iteration of Wagner might, however, lack is the flexibility to navigate highly informal African political settings and to fuse military and non-military tools in order to create Russo-African links at the level of local elites—a capability that has to date been unique to Prigozhin and his agents. In other words, while oper-

ations such as the Libyan deployment and operations in Mali might be replicated by Wagner 2.0, directed by the GU, the elaborate “regime survival package” created in the CAR might be more difficult to achieve. Of course, this logic might make the second, “public-private,” pathway more attractive to the Putin regime. However, at this stage, it appears questionable whether the Kremlin is willing to grant another organization sufficient leeway to replicate Prigozhin’s model. In particular, it is unclear to what extent a balance of autonomy and control could be struck without the emergence of a second Prigozhin rocking Putin’s personalized leadership cadre (*ibid.*, p. 19).

External Factors

Beyond this loss of flexibility, the Russian presence in Africa is affected by forces the Kremlin and its agents can only partially control. For one, its role in the Ukraine war has increased Western governments’ attention to Wagner PMC, at least temporarily, leading to the imposition of sanctions aimed at disrupting the group’s overseas operations (Plichta, Faulkner & Parens 2023). Furthermore, Wagner and the Russian government currently operate in a rather benign political environment in the Sahel region, where they have skillfully managed to exploit anti-Western (especially anti-French) resentment. Russian information operations explicitly profit from and fuel these attitudes, tying the present Russian government to the Soviet Union’s anti-colonial legacy. More difficult, however, is the question of causality and identifying where genuine public opinion ends and information operations begin. That being said, it appears much too convenient to simply blame malign Russian influence for disillusionment with the former colonizer, France, and its allies (Gain, 2023). Similarly, crowds demonstrating pro-Russian leanings in the wake of military coups might reflect disillusionment with the West and its ways of doing business rather than indicating a Russian presence. This political backdrop enormously simplifies Russian operations with or without Prigozhin, enabling Moscow to maintain a low-cost, opportunistic presence. Nationalist oligarch Konstantin Malofeyev summed up this notion: “the main thing is for them [Russian representatives] to be Russian because Russia is trusted infinitely more than the western colonizers” (Seddon et al., 2023).

Even if the anti-Western wave in public sentiment remains Russia’s to ride for the foreseeable future, its

current footprint is not entirely without danger. Even before the decapitation of Wagner, local actors viewed the Network and its actors as Russian agents. Hence, the Kremlin’s reputation is at stake if it is unable or unwilling to ensure that regime survival packages continue to be funded (Rynn & Cockayne, 2023). The Wagner Group’s less-than-stellar record as a counter-insurgent force might become an inconvenience in this regard. Since 1,000 Wagner troops replaced the UN’s 10,000-strong MINUSMA contingent in Mali, the security situation in the country has deteriorated significantly (Africa Center for Strategic Studies [US DoD], 2023a)—to say nothing of the near-constant stream of credible reports implicating Russian PMCs in human rights violations (Burke, 2023). At some stage, Russian information operations might be hard-pressed to present an image as a credible external security provider, especially in the face of increasing Islamic militant activity in the Sahel region (Africa Center for Strategic Studies [US DoD], 2023b). On the other hand, there is at present no indication that even a *siloviki*-run Russian footprint in Africa would be any less regime-focused than were previous iterations—that is, Russians are primarily there to keep individuals alive and in power, not to stabilize their countries.

Early Conclusions

While the current situation remains fluid, certain priorities are beginning to emerge. For one, the Kremlin seems intent on splitting the difference: retaining the advantages of semi-private military actors mobilizing at the margins and serving overseas without risking the reincarnation of Yevgeny Prigozhin. There are few reasons to assume a GU-led and -directed “far abroad” operations unit cannot guard allied potentates and conduct brutal suppression campaigns. It might struggle, however, to replicate the fluidity and dexterity with which Prigozhin was able to insert Russian agents into local power networks—or, indeed, to fuse military and non-military elements of state power, if previously co-located information units are absorbed by the SVR. Similarly, while the Russian position in the Sahel and beyond looks very comfortable, an opportunistic, light-footprint posture carries risks if military setbacks call Moscow’s commitment into question. At the very least, deteriorating stability in Russian client-states might force Moscow to increase its investments to retain favorable political perceptions.

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DOCUMENTATION

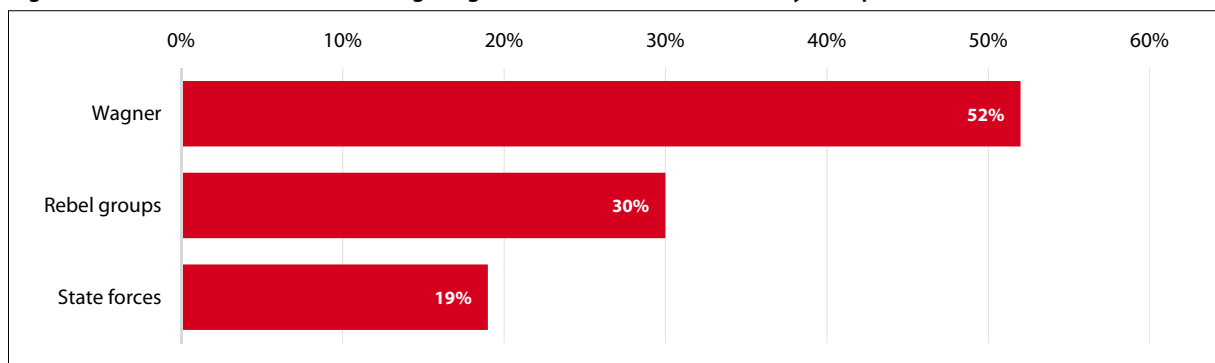
Wagner Group and Russia in Africa

Table 1: Wagner Group Influence in Africa

Military presence	Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, Sudan (briefly: Mozambique)
Economic and political presence	Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Congo, Kenya, Madagascar, South Africa, Zimbabwe

Source: *The Economist*, 31 August 2023, based on data from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/08/31/wagners-customers-will-have-to-adjust-to-new-leadership>

Figure 1: Share of Violent Events Targeting Civilians in the CAR and Mali by Group



Source: *The Economist*, 31 August 2023, based on data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/08/31/wagner-routinely-targets-civilians-in-africa>

Table 2: Public Opinion Polls: Ranking of Trust in Six Major Foreign Actors, August 2023 (based on “Which foreign actor do you trust the most?”)

	Ghana	Ivory Coast	Mali	Niger	Nigeria
Britain	3 rd	6 th	6 th	6 th	3 rd
China	5 th	5 th	2 nd	3 rd	5 th
France	6 th	2 nd	4 th	4 th	6 th
Russia	4 th	1 st	1 st	1 st	4 th
United States	1 st	4 th	5 th	2 nd	1 st
United Nations	2 nd	3 rd	3 rd	5 th	2 nd

Source: *The Economist* 07 and 24 August 2023 based on opinion polls conducted by Premise Data, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/08/24/west-african-views-on-nigers-coup> and <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/08/07/after-nigers-coup-the-drums-of-war-are-growing-louder>

ANALYSIS

Russian Foreign Paramilitary Outfits beyond Wagner

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000636561

Abstract

It is too early to predict exactly what will happen to the Wagner Group forces that are currently deployed abroad. This article considers several Russian paramilitary groups that might be alternative hosts for former Wagnerites—including Redut and Konvoy, among others—and their associated commercial and force-based activities.

It is still too early to predict what will happen to the Wagner Group following the June 2023 mutiny and August death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (Marten, 2023b). Wagner might be broken up by country or function, or kept together as a whole under new leadership. The constant release of breaking and conflicting news about Wagner's potential future (including interviews given by key Russian and local actors, their public sightings and trips, and social media posts by Wagner-affiliated groups) may at least in part be an orchestrated Kremlin disinformation campaign. Given Moscow's strong interests in avoiding sanctions and war crimes indictments, the Kremlin might want to prevent analysts from understanding too clearly who will actually have responsibility for what going forward.

Some individuals currently in the media spotlight—among them Prigozhin's young son Pavel (Troianovski, Walsh, Schmitt, Yee, & Barnes, 2023), charismatic Wagner commercial manager and negotiant in the Central African Republic (CAR) Dmitry Syty (Chason & Debout, 2023), and experienced former Wagner mid-level commander Anton Troshev, reputedly President Vladimir Putin's favorite to take over command of the group (Faulconbridge, 2023)—may emerge as key players in managing Wagner's future. They are unlikely, though, to be able to act alone, without some well-organized replacement framework for oversight and coordination.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has expressed its desire to exert stronger command and control over Wagner activities, leading some to predict that the armed forces will absorb Wagner. Yet the MoD and its branches probably lack the financial resources and administrative bandwidth to integrate such a complex commercial group fully, especially as the war against Ukraine will remain its primary focus for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the Wagner Group's key strengths—its flexibility in far-off lands, its utility for deflecting what might otherwise be concerns on the part of the Russian public about casualties from foreign adventurism, and the way in which it helps Russia to evade United Nations scrutiny by claiming to be

a private firm—would also be squandered by a complete takeover by the armed forces (Marten, 2023a).

Another possibility, then, is that the Wagner Group will somehow be absorbed by other Russian paramilitary groups. Analysts have identified more than a dozen Russian paramilitary outfits as having served in foreign locations. Most are considered more reliable by the Russian Defense Ministry than Prigozhin ever was, and a number of them have historical connections to the Wagner Group.

Redut

The first major contender is a paramilitary outfit called Redut (“Redoubt”), primarily based in Syria and known as Shchit’ (“Shield”) for several years before 2022 (Novaya Gazeta, 2022). It is probably the group originally known as Redut-Antiterror, although it is difficult to trace the precise lineage of Russian paramilitary groups with any certainty. Redut-Antiterror emerged in 2008 from the “Anti-terror Orel” training center, created in 1998 in the Russian city of Orel by former special operations (*spetsnaz*) forces (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018; Sukhankin, 2019). Anti-terror Orel also spun off the Moran Security Group, which in turn spawned the Wagner Group in 2014—hence the historical connection between Wagner and Redut. Anti-terror Orel's original personnel had a range of combat experiences, but when Redut and Moran emerged, Russian security firms were focused on protecting Russia assets abroad, such as oil and gas facilities and tanker ships, not on combat. Many (but not Wagner, which never officially existed) were at one time legally registered as security firms in Russia. Records of this commercial history that were traced in 2018 (Marten, 2019) have since disappeared from what used to be a reliable listing of every firm ever registered in Russia (<https://www.rusprofile.ru/>). Investigative journalists from RFE/RL claim Redut is a “fake” organization because it was created by the GRU, but the evidence indicates that the Wagner Group, too, was created by the Russian military and had a close relationship with the GRU. In any case, Redut seems to have been around for years before

its 2022 deployment in Russia's Ukraine war (Schemes Systema 2023).

In Syria, Schchit'/Redut has been guarding natural gas facilities and pipelines operated by Stroytransgaz since 2018 (Novaya Gazeta, 2019; Krutov & Dobrynin, 2023). Stroytransgaz was originally a subsidiary of Russia's huge Gazprom enterprise, but Russian oil baron Gennady Timchenko eventually gained control. In 2022, the Kremlin tapped Redut to send a number of combat formations into the first wave of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Yapparova, Pertsev, & Slavin, 2022). Working under the auspices of Russia's Airborne Forces *spetsnaz* 45th Guards Brigade, Redut quickly mobilized new personnel for this purpose, including veterans with problematic records whom they had previously rejected for employment.

Timchenko is a close Putin associate. The two have known each other since the early 1990s in St. Petersburg, when Putin served as deputy mayor. They were implicated in an organized criminal oil-trading scheme at that time, until official efforts to investigate and prosecute them were abruptly dropped (Dawisha, 2014). This history, along with Redut's quick move into Ukraine in 2022, likely means that the group enjoys a high degree of Putin's trust and favor.

Wagner Group forces in Syria have also primarily been guarding oil and gas facilities—namely those controlled by Prigozhin's Evro Polis firm—in recent years (Rondeaux, 2020). There is no publicly available evidence that Wagner has engaged in combat in Syria since late 2021. This means that even though Wagner forces in Syria are reported to have signed Defense Ministry contracts at the time of the June mutiny (Al-Khalidi & Gebeily, 2023), they could also easily be absorbed into Redut. Timchenko might in turn be made responsible for what had been Prigozhin's commercial enterprises there. Most analysts see those enterprises primarily as a means for Russia to maintain a permanent presence in Syria.

Konvoy

The second major contender is a group known as Konvoy ("Convoy"). It first came to attention in 2020, when it tracked and harassed CNN journalists investigating Wagner activities in the CAR (Lister, Ward, & Shukla, 2020). Konvoy has further been accused of orchestrating the murder of three Russian journalists investigating Wagner there in 2018 (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). Konvoy may in fact be the overall St. Petersburg-based coordinating affiliate of the Sewa Security company in the CAR, which has been responsible for recruiting and managing all Wagner forces there since 2018 (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020). In March 2023, Konvoy created a new armed unit in Russian-occupied Crimea

in cooperation with the head of the Russian occupation authority, Sergey Aksyonov (Meduza, 2023a).

Konvoy is headed by Konstantin Pikalov, who—in addition to his other roles in Konvoy—may have served as the primary liaison between the Russian Defense Ministry and Wagner's African operations (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020). Just before Prigozhin's death, Pikalov boasted that Konvoy planned to operate in eight unnamed African countries (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). In August, it was revealed that a major funder of Konvoy may be Arkady Rotenberg, a Russian billionaire who was a teenage Putin's judo partner back in the 1970s and has remained his close friend ever since (Meduza, 2023b).

Given that both Redut and Konvoy have financial associations with long-time Putin cronies (Timchenko and Rotenberg), as well as years of good relations with the Russian Defense Ministry, it is not surprising that they are reported to be "jockeying to replace Wagner in its operations abroad" (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). But they are not the only possible alternatives.

Other Contenders

Konstantin Malofeyev is a wealthy Russian media baron and investor known to have funded paramilitary groups in the Donbas region of Ukraine since 2014 (Titov, 2023). His International Agency of Sovereign Development was launched in concert with Russia's first Africa Summit in 2019, ostensibly to provide investment support for African countries, but with the apparent goal of brokering deals that would enable Russian firms to evade Western sanctions (Maldonado, 2020). He may thus already have been cooperating with Prigozhin's far-flung businesses in Africa. Malofeyev's monarchist rhetoric at home (touting Putin as the new tsar) and support for far-right politicians in Europe (Roonemaa, Laine, & Weiss, 2022) are matched by his enthusiasm for Russia's anti-colonial narrative in Africa. A similar narrative has been an important enabler of Wagner's spread on the continent, where Prigozhin's social media and cultural firms became known for their anti-French vitriol. Malofeyev has also been seen as one of the ideological drivers of Putin's Ukraine invasion. He too, then, is a trusted Putin crony with paramilitary ties and a potential Wagner overlap.

Several other Russian security firms could also participate in dividing Wagner Group spoils, even if they lack Wagner's track record in combat. The RSB group, for example, performed demining duties on contract for Khalifa Haftar's forces in eastern Libya, just before Wagner became Haftar's primary Russian defender (Tsvetkova, 2017). As recently as 2020, RSB claimed to be providing security for Haftar's regime, at a time when Wagner was participating in Haftar's failed combat drive

to seize the Libyan capital, Tripoli (Sidorkova, Khimshiashvili, & Kir'yanov, 2020). RSB has also serviced military aircraft in support of Haftar (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). In several ways, then, it appears that RSB may directly have cooperated with Wagner in Libya. The U.S. Treasury Department believes RSB is closely connected to Russia's FSB (Federal Security Service) intelligence agency.

Less is known about the Patriot Group, a Russian paramilitary outfit that reputedly competed against Wagner for the contract to guard gold mines in the CAR in 2018 (Warsaw Institute, 2018). It may have been on the ground in that country even before Wagner first showed up in late 2017. Patriot, like Wagner, is thought to have fought in Ukraine in 2023 (Kossov, 2023). The U.S. State Department believes Patriot to

be "associated with Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu," (US Department of State, 2023), so it could—at least in theory—be part of an MoD power grab for Wagner resources.

Recently, Russian business enterprises and state agencies have been encouraged to create ever more new "volunteer" groups to fill the ranks of those fighting in Ukraine. Among others, these have included three new paramilitary groups from Gazprom, one from the space agency Roskosmos, and several units sent by Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov. These new groups lack the heft and experience to compete with more established outfits in any Wagner takeover, but nonetheless serve as evidence that the Kremlin will likely continue to rely on paramilitary groups abroad as time goes on.

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich (<http://www.cees.uzh.ch>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University (<https://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russland-Analysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), and the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html). The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Responsible editor for this issue: Heiko Pleines

Language editing: Ellen Powell

Layout: Cengiz Kibaroglu, Matthias Neumann, Michael Clemens

ISSN 1863-0421 © 2023 by Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen, Bremen and Center for Security Studies, Zürich

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