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Wagner PMC and the Semi-Privatisation of Russian State Security

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Abstract

This article traces the increasingly significant role played by the Wagner Group private military company (PMC) within Russia. Wagner PMC's prominent, if not officially acknowledged, role in the offensive on Ukraine has accelerated a process by which it has semi-privatised certain functions of state security. This is likely to have an impact on the nature of the Russian state in the years ahead.

Wars tend to reconfigure states. The Russian government may have thought that its “special military operation” could be completed quickly and without major blowback, but ten months on, it is clear that this will not be the case. Dynamics of reconfiguration are increasingly emerging within the Russian state as it takes incremental steps to reorient its economy and society to serve the war effort. In this context, one notable shift has been towards the greater privatisation of state security functions and the accumulation of political power by a key figure within this shift, the now self-declared founder of Wagner PMC, Evgeny Prigozhin. Although it remains uncertain how the Russian state, and its prevailing political-economic elite networks, will develop in the coming years, it seems plausible that Wagner PMC and Prigozhin will play an increasingly influential role therein. This short article aims to provide a summary of how this role and influence have grown, as well as of the ways in which at least some Russian state security functions have been semi-privatised.

Pre-War Emergence of Wagner PMC and Prigozhin

The mythology of “Putin’s chef” and Wagner PMC was already a factor in Russian security and elite dynamics prior to the launch of the offensive in Ukraine. Such dynamics were, however, generally oriented towards what the Russian PMC community frequently refers to as the “far abroad.” In the years prior to February 2022, Wagner PMC had been heavily promoting itself to various governments in central and western Africa as a counterinsurgency provider for hire, following on from ongoing deployments in Libya and Syria that began in the second half of the 2010s. This promotion resulted in a significant expansion of Wagner PMC’s presence and role in the Central African Republic from December 2020, as well as a new contract for a deployment in Mali from autumn 2021. In parallel, both countries’ governments have expanded their military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation with the Russian government. In this way, Wagner PMC’s business pitch to incum-

bent governments facing the threat of an insurgency has become a component part of the Russian state’s efforts to increase its influence and role in Africa, albeit one that is not formally acknowledged.

Indeed, Wagner PMC operations in the “far abroad” are undertaken via a logic of deniability—or, perhaps more aptly, a logic of suspended disbelief. Even when discussing Wagner PMC operations that have been relatively openly covered by media and social media outlets associated to the group, Russian state officials and mainstream state media outlets continue to avoid direct references to the Wagner Group, often describing its contractors using amorphous terms such as “Russian instructors”. This approach is likely due both to a clause in the Russian criminal code expressly stating that all mercenary activity is illegal and to the state’s desire to retain plausible deniability regarding its connection to these operations. In parallel, Prigozhin and associated media sources frequently herald the successes of these counterinsurgency operations—even though they do not directly name Wagner—as well as espousing a wider anti-colonialist, and especially anti-French, narrative line similar to Russian state discourse on western and central Africa. Some of the more prominent media outlets and personalities associated with Wagner have trumpeted the group’s contribution to Russian state foreign policy, sometimes emphasising its advantages over other, more traditional foreign policy actors.

Wagner PMC and the Russian War on Ukraine

The way in which the early months of the Russian military’s “special military operation” in Ukraine played out seemingly created the conditions for a change in how the Wagner Group and Prigozhin sought to operate. The attempt by the formal Russian military to conduct a multi-vector advance on central and eastern Ukraine did not go according to plan, and heavy losses impelled a shift to a more limited geographical focus. Wagner PMC did not feature in these early months of the war, underscoring its complex relationship with Russia’s for-

mal military structure. According to the rumour mill, Prigozhin refused to deploy Wagner forces due to ongoing personal feuds with members of the presidential administration and the senior military command.

Within a few months, however, Wagner PMC entered the war in Ukraine, quickly becoming central to the advance in northern Donbas. Prigozhin and Wagner PMC-linked media and social media heavily promoted the battlefield successes of Wagner PMC forces, although some of these gains have since been lost. In so doing, these sources frequently praised the effectiveness of Wagner PMC, frequently situating such praise in terms of either an explicit or implicit comparison to the conventional Russian military. Indeed, some sources have promoted Wagner PMC as offering better service conditions and more opportunities than the Russian military for anyone seeking to join up. These service conditions come alongside a large-scale PR effort—developed over many years—that has sought to build Wagner PMC as a brand via clothing, comic books, and a general glorification of life as a PMC member. In this respect, while Wagner PMC works in concert with—and, to a significant extent, under the control of—the formal Russian military, it seems to regard the formal military as a peer competitor for resources, recruits, and status. This, in combination with Prigozhin’s public criticism of senior military commanders, has produced an uneasy relationship between Wagner and the Russian military.

At the same time, the Russian military has not been averse to copying the perceived successes of Wagner’s approach. According to some sources, in late spring and early summer, the Russian military turned to Wagner PMC, hoping to use its brand to recruit more personnel for the war without formally declaring any form of mobilisation. Wagner’s associated social media networks then began recruiting actively for Ukraine, while Prigozhin—as has been well-publicised—began visiting Russian prisons and offering inmates with long-term sentences the prospect of exoneration in return for serving in Ukraine. Subsequently, Russian law has since been changed to allow the Russian military to recruit prisoners serving long-term sentences, seemingly aping the Wagner Group’s approach.

Against the backdrop of its significant role in the war on Ukraine, the practice of referring only ambiguously to Wagner PMC has begun to fade away in some segments of the Russian information landscape. While Russian officials and state media still do not refer directly to Wagner PMC, Prigozhin’s public statement in September that he founded a PMC called Wagner in 2014 represents a major shift away from using veiled allusions to refer to Wagner operations. His statement came in a context of increasingly open references to Wagner and its role in Ukraine within non-state and social media

coverage of the war. Thus, Wagner’s role in the war on Ukraine seems to be driving a shift towards more open recognition of the PMC.

Privatising Russian State Security Functions

The war on Ukraine has also seemingly accelerated the trend of the Russian state becoming increasingly dependent on Wagner PMC in some areas of domestic and foreign policy. This has resulted in Prigozhin’s transformation from a self-styled caustic observer operating from the shadows to a personality whose voice carries weight in public and state security discourse and who is interpreted as having at least some influence within the elite networks that undergird the Putin regime. This is not to say that he is a new leader in waiting: Prigozhin is unlikely to garner sufficient public or elite support to play such a role. Furthermore, he does not seem to be seeking a formal position in politics. Instead, his increasingly diverse business interests—anchored by Wagner PMC in the security sector, but extending to management consultancies, media holdings, precious-metal mining, business centres, and residential property—suggest that Prigozhin is motivated primarily by economic opportunity.

For Prigozhin, the Russian security apparatus’ contracting out of an increasingly large portion of its functions help establish the conditions for economic opportunity. In this respect, Prigozhin’s approach and interests are somewhat different from other members of the security elites within the Putin regime. The so-called *siloviki*—elites who come, by and large, from security and intelligence agency or military backgrounds—are less entrepreneurial and more statist in mindset. By contrast, and irrespective of any pronouncements they may have made on the need for and value of a strong state, Prigozhin and Wagner PMC have worked to establish a parallel—and at least semi-private—security organisation that operates under the auspices of the Russian state. Wagner PMC undoubtedly remains dependent on the Russian state’s willingness to allow it to operate and to create the conditions for it to do so. However, this relationship seems to be evolving into one of mutual interdependence, with the Russian state ever more reliant on Wagner PMC to fulfil certain functions and, ultimately, to stave off further retreats on the front lines in Ukraine.

Not only do Prigozhin’s background and aims set him apart from the *siloviki*, but he also seems relatively unconcerned with maintaining good public relations with senior members of the Putin regime. For their part, many in the Putin regime do not seem to find Prigozhin’s ambitions to their taste. To take just one example, Prigozhin has been embroiled in a three-year public and legal spat with the mayor of St. Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, in part due to the latter’s attempt

to prevent the former from opening the Wagner PMC Business Centre in a large office building in the city—or at least this is the version of the story that appears in pro-Prigozhin accounts. Prigozhin eventually got his way: the Wagner PMC Business Centre held an opening ceremony opening in November. Its stated aim is to provide security entrepreneurs with the workspace and opportunities to develop new projects to support “national security”. It is difficult to gauge how significant this centre may become, but at least on a surface level, its opening suggests that the Wagner PMC brand is moving into the defence R&D sector, adding yet another element to the Wagner PMC portfolio—and thus to Wagner PMC and Prigozhin’s growing influence within the Russian security sector.

Conclusion

With many factors at play within Russian elite politics and society as the war on Ukraine continues into 2023,

the trajectory of the Russian state seems uncertain. However, assuming that the Putin regime endures but is driven to reconfigure itself due to the impact of the war, its new configuration will likely entail a greater role for private actors in the provision of traditionally state-directed security functions. As it stands, this would mean a greater role for Wagner PMC and Prigozhin. In light of Wagner PMC’s semi-competitive relationship with the Russian state’s formal military and security agencies, as well as Prigozhin’s sometimes open conflicts with members of the prevailing security and political elites, this new regime configuration may well prove more tense and prone to internal oscillations. As the competition between private and state security actors over resources begins to extend to control over particular security functions, an enhanced rivalry seems likely. While a greater role for security actors that formally operate outside the state would inevitably impact on the regime’s capability to maintain centralised control.

About the Author

Stephen Aris is a co-editor of the *Russian Analytical Digest*.