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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Aris, S. (2023). The Post-Mutiny Context of Wagner and Private Military Forces in Russia. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 303, 2-4. https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000636561

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https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-91427-8

ANALYSIS

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

Stephen Aris

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 callsign 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 Ministry 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.

About the Author
Stephen Aris is a former co-editor of the *Russian Analytical Digest.* His publications focus on regional security dynamics in Central Asia and regional multilateralism.

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,