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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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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.

About the Author

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Further Reading

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