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

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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 Prigoz-

hin 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.

About the Author

Niklas Masuhr is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich. His research focuses on NATO–Russia defense affairs, force development, and military aspects of great-power competition.

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DOCUMENTATION

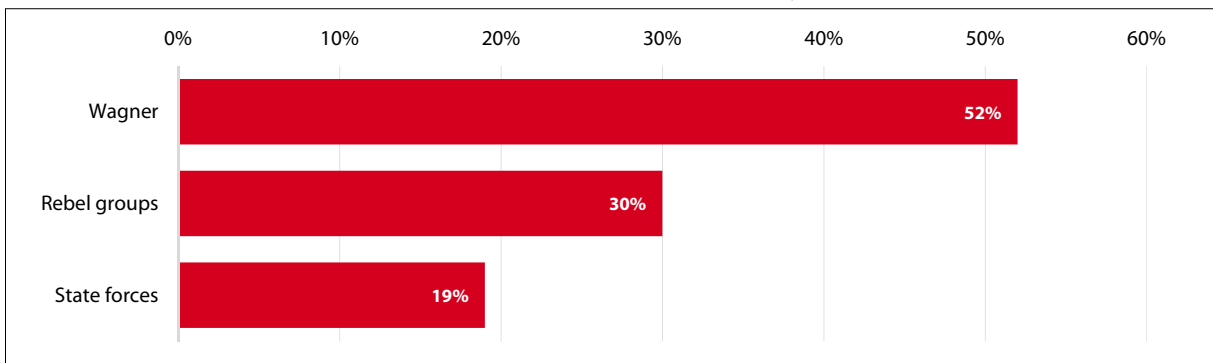
Wagner Group and Russia in Africa

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>