

WHAT THE PRIGOZHIN REBELLION MEANS FOR WAGNER GROUP OPERATIONS IN AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WEST TO ENGAGE

The events that began in southern Russia the night of June 23 and continued through mid-day on June 24 – characterized by Vladimir Putin as a “mutiny,” a “betrayal,” “treason” – are no doubt an inflection point – but the opaqueness of Russian political and security structures, which incidentally contributed to the rise and power of Yevgeny Prigozhin, have thus far obscured the true nature, as well as the true implications, of that inflection point. There are any number of forces that have been set in motion, but it may be days, weeks or perhaps months before the extent of the changes become manifest.

I explore below one facet of the forces that have been set in motion, namely the potential impact of the mutiny and subsequent response of the Kremlin on Russia’s hybrid operations in Africa. These operations, dating back to 2018 when Wagner sent “military instructors” to the Central African Republic (“CAR”) and Sudan, followed by Libya the following year, have largely been carried out by the Wagner Group. In short, what is the future of the Wagner Group operations in Africa?¹

I repeat the caution expressed by many commentators. As Russian history scholar Stephen Kotkin noted in his interview (recorded June 28) with Ezra Klein ([What's really going on in Russia](#)), “what we don’t know is much greater than what we do know.” Not only is Russia opaque at the best of times, but in the fog of a shock to the system, that opaqueness can be magnified. Also, while US intelligence played a significant role in alerting the world to the threat of invasion of Ukraine in 2021-2022, leaks today may be intended to serve a different purpose. There is always, as well, the risk of illusion.

Many Unanswered Questions

Ten days after the aborted mutiny, many questions remain unanswered. The Matryoshka dolls come to mind. One fact though stands out in complicating the search for answers, namely, the basis on which Putin has exerted his power over the years: the opaque structure by which the autocratic leader intentionally plays off the centers vying for his loyalty and support. Those centers include:

- the security apparatus (the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (commonly referred to by its old initials, the GRU), the Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO), headed by General Dmitry Kochnev, and the National Guard (Rosgvardiya), headed by General Viktor Zolotov, former bodyguard to Yeltsin and Putin);
- the oligarchs;
- the military; and
- organized crime.

¹ I described those activities and the broader aims of Russian hybrid operations in Africa in some detail in a previous briefing note, available [here](#).

Putin stands at the center of this complex, conflict-ridden and ever-shifting web of ad-hoc, informal, personal relationships, largely shrouded in secrecy and heavily influenced by the paranoia that is endemic to autocratic regimes.

As for the more immediate questions:

- Given the importance of projecting control among competing power centers, why did Putin allow Prigozhin (whom he has declined to name, though in keeping with his refusal to name Alexei Navalny) to become sufficiently powerful to have been able to pose such a challenge to the Kremlin? Was this just another in a line of critical miscalculations.
- How long had Prigozhin been planning his mutiny and what were its ultimate goals? As the Crisis Group noted in its June 29 briefing ([Assessing the Wagner Group's Aborted Run on Moscow: What Comes Next?](#)), it is unlikely that an operation on the scale of the race to Rostov was planned in the day following the reported Russian missile attack on a Wagner base. Some surmise that Prigozhin had been planning to oust corrupt and incompetent senior military leaders, and had to improvise when his intentions leaked.
- Why were the Wagner forces able to reach Rostov, seize the Southern command headquarters and then head north on the M4 highway to within 200 kilometers of Moscow (around Yeltes) on their “march for justice” unhindered ([reportedly](#) shooting down six helicopters and an Ilyushin IL-22 airborne command and control aircraft (reportedly one of only 20))?

Here, perhaps, the opaque political/military structure with its competing power centers, augmented by the preference for loyalty over competence, helped. After all, Putin had not taken sides in the very public spat between Prigozhin and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu/Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. That Prigozhin was acting with at least the tacit support of Putin would not have been an irrational conclusion before Putin’s speech Saturday morning. As the Crisis Group posited, the Prigozhin-Putin relationship may have “contributed to the security forces’ failure” to counter Prigozhin.”

There is a second element, and that is that the National Guard is not set up to deal with insurrections from the right. As Olga Oliker, Crisis Group Europe & Central Asia Director noted in a Crisis Group Hold Your Fire! [podcast](#) “No one in Russia is set up to fight insurrection.... [The National Guard] is set up to smash heads at urban protests.”

- Where was Putin for nearly two days as events unfolded?
- Did Prigozhin have help on the inside? What has happened to Air and Space Force commander Sergei Surovikin (variously also known as “General Armageddon” and the “Butcher of Syria”)?

The New York Times [cited](#) US intelligence sources as saying some in the Russian security services, including Surovikin, were aware of the plans. In its June 28 [update](#), the Institute for the Study of War cites reports from Russian military bloggers that Surovikin was arrested, that there is a large-scale ongoing purge “among the command cadre” of the Russian armed forces, the Defense Ministry is

carrying our crash loyalty tests, the FSO is reviewing military leadership, and pilots and border guards are being punished for inaction on June 24. General Gerasimov also has yet to be seen in public since the aborted mutiny.

- Who (particularly in the Russian security services) became aware of the plans before the Wagner forces set out for Rostov?
- Who really negotiated the deal between Prigozhin and the Kremlin, and if the role of Lukashenko was far less than advertised, why was he given the credit? As the Crisis Group [noted](#), “giving Lukashenko credit for saving the day strains credulity and would seem an embarrassing narrative for [Putin].” Was this the work, for example, of Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Security Council, a position akin to a national security advisor, who may be closest to Putin? Are the terms of the deal fully agreed? What are the terms? Is Prigozhin actually in Belarus, and if so, how many Wagner fighters have joined him?
- Why did Putin bother reaching a deal with someone he publicly labelled as a “traitor” – or as some have put it, how is it that Prigozhin is still alive? Why were no criminal charges filed? What leverage did Prigozhin have? Some have suggested that powerful currency – *kompromat*.
- What happens to those outside the military perceived to have supported Prigozhin, or to have been insufficiently supportive of Putin?
- What are Prigozhin’s next moves? Yesterday, speaking for the second time in public (on a voice message posted on the Grey Zone, a Telegram channel; the first being the statement that his forces were ordered back to base) he called on the Russian public to support Wagner. Separately, ads on Telegram continued to seek Wagner recruits. Prigozhin did not challenge the Kremlin directly in his message. His whereabouts, as well as his movements since June 24, remain unknown.

It is safe to say that Prigozhin is *persona non grata* in Moscow. He is unlikely to be able to recruit new members from Russian prisons (query whether he will be able to do so from Belarusian prisons, if he in fact is in Belarus).

As for the Wagner Group, there are any number of possibilities. Recall that the then looming July 1 deadline for all volunteers (read, mercenaries) to sign contracts with the military, in a June 10 Defense Ministry order signed by Putin (in effect, an expropriation of Prigozhin’s billion-dollar businesses), may well have been the bridge too far that triggered Prigozhin’s aborted mutiny. In his speech last week, Putin stated that fighters who had not participated in the mutiny could sign contracts with the Defense Ministry; the rest could join Prigozhin in exile.

That this would be viewed as an expropriation underscores the unique aspects of the Wagner Group – it is as much a private business (more accurately, as a [Stephen Kotkin](#) puts it, a private business that does state business for Russia) and a fighting force (one incidentally accused of myriad kidnappings, torture and executions and other atrocities). This distinction is critical for understanding what the fallout from the aborted mutiny means for Africa, where Prigozhin’s strategy for the past few years, as summarized for the BBC ([Wagner's network in Africa faces uncertain future](#)) by Julia Stanyard of the Global Initiative Against Transitional Organized Crime, has been to expand Wagner’s

military and economic footprint, through a network of companies pursuing commercial activities.

Impact on Wagner in Africa

What all this means for Wagner's operations in Africa and, in particular the countries where Wagner has been most active of late – Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, CAR and Sudan – remains a mystery.

It is estimated that Wagner forces in Africa number around 5,000. According to a [report](#) by The Economist published last week, Wagner has had influence (between 2017 and February 2023), in addition to the five where it is most active, in one or more of three spheres (military, political or economic) in Mozambique, Cameroon, Madagascar, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya. (For another very recent representative description of Wagner operations, *see* the June 2023 report by Sentry [The Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic](#). *See also* my [previous briefing note](#).)

There are at least four key sets of questions in the context of Africa:

- What happens to Wagner's operations and the supporting infrastructure – do they continue as they have been under new leadership, does the Kremlin impose direct control (and if so, via the Defense Ministry, or the National Guard or other elements of the security apparatus), or do other PMCs move in? None really possesses business acumen necessary to continue the group's considerable non-kinetic operations. And what of the loyalty of the Wagner fighters to Prigozhin, who undoubtedly is still revered by many?

Ultimately, Putin faces the challenge of asserting control over a sprawling commercial/political/military ecosystem, without destroying it but also without keeping its creator in place. Or does Prigozhin retain control over Wagner, now augmented by forces to be redeployed to Africa from Ukraine ([reportedly](#) as suggested by the chief of Ukraine's military intelligence, Kyrylo Budanov)?

- How are host governments (Wagner customers) likely to react to what for them would have been highly unsettling prospects as the mutiny unfolded?
- If the Wagner effort crumbles, how does the world community prevent a security vacuum, particularly in the Sahel?
- What opportunities are there for the West to reverse its perceived absence in the affected countries as a counter not only to Russian influence but Chinese influence as well?

Wagner's African operations figured in the grievances that triggered the events of June 23-24. In his June 23 Telegram audio statement, Prigozhin [said](#), "When we were fighting in Africa, we were told that we needed Africa, but after that, it was abandoned because all the money intended for aid was stolen." Various media outlets (*see, e.g.,* [Le Monde](#) and [Middle East Eye](#)) reported that, according to French diplomatic sources, Moscow had rebuffed Prigozhin's requests for additional equipment for Wagner's Africa operations.

To put this statement into context, recall that Wagner's control of mineral rights as the price for the security and other services it provides to leaders in countries facing

extremist insurgencies provide it with an independent source of funding. According to an [investigation](#) by the Financial Times, despite sanctions imposed on Prigozhin, Wagner generated an estimated \$250 million in revenue during the four years leading up to the invasion of Ukraine.

That said, in a briefing given to military personnel at the Defense Ministry on June 27, Putin for the first time publicly stated that Wagner has received “all of its funding” (from May 2022 – May 2023 alone of 80.3 billion rubles) from the Russian state (though some have cautioned about taking this statement at face value). Equally significant, it is believed that Wagner has benefitted greatly from Russian military logistics support and the supply of heavy military equipment, which incidentally, according to at least one source quoted by the [BBC](#), would end were Wagner to be disbanded. All ironic, given the Kremlin’s longstanding disavowal of control over Wagner.

The View from Moscow

Moscow is unlikely to give up on the ties Wagner has built, particularly in the Sahel following the departure of the French from Mali, and the pending departure of the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) after the military junta in Bamako called for their immediate departure two weeks ago.

Benoit Faucon, Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, writing in the Wall Street Journal, [reported](#) that very soon after the Wagner forces halted their advance on Moscow, “the Kremlin set out to seize full control of the global empire built by [Prigozhin].” On June 26, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in an interview with RT, [declared](#) in a discussion focused on Mali and CAR that Wagner’s operations in CAR will not be disrupted – “they will continue.” But what exactly does that mean?

The View on the Ground

John Lechner, a researcher and author of a forthcoming book on Wagner, believes that with Prigozhin in exile, and his forces either in exile with him or subsumed within the Russian armed forces, it is unclear how the infrastructure that Wagner painstakingly built can be replaced. Lechner was quoted in an [article](#) in the New York Times as saying that the Wagner forces “know people on the ground, they have the institutional knowledge and know-how. The Kremlin cannot replace these guys and expect things to work the way they did before.”

One complication is that, as the US Institute for Peace (“USIP”) [noted](#), Wagner projects a far more complicated footprint than other private military companies (“PMCs”), such as Blackwater (US) or Executive Outcomes (South Africa). Through Wagner, the Kremlin “seeks a broader intervention in the conflicts, governance and economies of its client states. Wagner brings not simply private soldiers, but political operatives, mining and business specialists and even social media producers — all to build influence and profits for itself and the Kremlin. Its effect in Africa is to strengthen rule by force rather than by democracy and law; to promote corruption over transparency; to drain, rather than bolster, local business and government revenues; and to parasitically keep authoritarian regimes dependent on Wagner’s presence.”

Maxime Audinet, a research fellow at France’s IRSEM and a Russian politics specialist, was [quoted](#) in POLITICO as concurring, “Replacing Wagner mercenaries overnight

would be very difficult.” Similarly, Sergey Kostelyanyets, head of the Center of Sociological and Political Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute for African Studies, [told](#) Newsweek that “Russia’s Ministry of Defense and other Russian security agencies have neither capacity nor will to replace Wagner, which has come to possess extensive physical and logical infrastructure in Africa.” “We may see rebranding of these assets or reestablishment of Wagner as a more independent entity, which, however, will continue to serve the interests of the global anti-Western – looking to change the status quo – movement,” he added.

There is also a practical consideration, namely that Wagner pays far better than the Russian military, and when contracts are up, fighters reportedly can leave. That reportedly is not an option in the Russian armed forces. If Wagner fighters are not paid, they will go elsewhere.

[The Economist](#) report suggests that there may be, from the Russian perspective, a benefit to the Russian security services assuming control over Wagner operations, for example, through nationalization. However, as the report also notes, nationalization may not suit the Kremlin, which today can deny responsibility for Wagner atrocities, and would be unlikely to suit authoritarian leaders, who today can argue that they control their own security by using mercenaries rather than foreign troops. The Kremlin could also rebrand Wagner, bring in new leaders or shift the businesses so that different elites assume control.

[The Economist](#) report concludes that ultimately the fate of Wagner may well depend on the reaction of Wagner’s customers. At a minimum, customers that have developed deep ties with Wagner are unlikely to enter into contracts with the Russian military. Moreover, various experts have highlighted the complex web of businesses that comprise the Wagner operations in Africa, which could call into question the effectiveness of the security lifeline made available to customers. These customers will also be mindful of the risks they face should a reconstituted Wagner or its replacement set its sights on them. As the Economist report stated, the mutiny “is not exactly a good advertisement for a regime selling coup-protection to autocrats and juntas abroad.” [Al Jazeera](#) makes a similar point in noting that “much like for the Kremlin, the Wagner rebellion has proved to be a cautionary tale for African governments.” Will this then lead African leaders to turn away from outsourcing their security?

After the mutiny, none of these questions are purely hypothetical. The only likely certainty is that leaders across the Sahel and other regions are monitoring the situation.

The Interests of the West

So, why does the West care what happens in Africa? As I summarized in a previous briefing note (available [here](#)), as the traditional geopolitical groupings unwind in favor of a more fragmented, multipolar world, there is a scramble for support from the so-called Global South. There are geopolitical considerations as well as national security considerations. And then there is the scramble for access to critical minerals.

As Christina Lu noted this past week in Foreign Affairs, [The US Strategic Minerals Situation is Critical](#), the United States must diversify its supply of critical minerals at a time when China has built a significant lead in mining, refining and processing critical

minerals, that are key both to economic growth and the transition to sustainable green energy. As Lu notes, this prompted John Podesta, Senior Advisor to the President for Clean Energy Innovation, to warn at the SelectUSA Summit conference that China “has the potential to use its lock on supply chains to hold politically hostage decisions by governments,” creating a vulnerability not unlike that faced by Europe as a result of its reliance on Russian oil and gas in the run-up to the invasion of Ukraine.

Key to this diversification is Africa, as many experts believe that even under the most positive scenarios, the United States will be unable to meet all of its needs. Lu notes that while the DRC accounted in 2022 for 68% of the world’s cobalt, it does not have a free trade agreement with the United States and was not included in the Minerals Security Partnership. In its report, [A Critical Minerals Policy for the United States](#), the Aspen Institute notes that of the 19 largest cobalt mines in the DRC, China has partially or wholly financed 15 of them.

Towards More Constructive Engagement

So where do we start?

John Lechner, in his 2020 [article](#), “To Counter Russia in Africa, America Should Rethink its Own Role,” cautioned against seeing a Kremlin hand in all Russian activities in Africa, notwithstanding that its overall role is by no means benign. He noted that the Kremlin’s reliance on PMCs highlighted its desire to engage at low cost, with a readiness to outsource military adventures to private individuals who could self-finance.

He urges a more constructive set of engagement efforts, prioritizing positive engagement with societies at large, rather than with the local elites. He recommended targeting economic investment, conflict resolution, more student visas, support for civil society and a robust defense of independent journalists, in place of trying to lure elites and authoritarian leaders away from Russia. The promotion of small- and medium-sized investments would have the potential of side-stepping corruption. Support of local independent journalists would help highlight the malign support Russia provides to authoritarian leaders and the myriad examples of human rights abuses.

This though will not be enough, he argues – we must address the glaring inconsistencies of supporting democracy while at the same time supporting authoritarian governments. This also means cutting back on seeing so many interactions in Africa through the lens of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, which is particularly fraught given the continuing spread of extremism across the Sahel and further south. Previous failures by the West to counter local and regional extremist groups across the region gave Wagner its opening.

Ultimately, Lechner takes issue with the “Russia in Africa” narrative, which brings us back to Wagner. By focusing only on Wagner, there is a tendency to then view the necessary response as one of countering malign forces only,² rather than also seeking more constructive engagement.

² In January, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury [designated](#) Wagner as a “transnational criminal organization.” In May, OFAC [sanctioned](#) the head of Wagner’s paramilitary units and its principal administrator in Mali.

[USIP](#) takes a similar tact. The West should avoid moral condemnation given its history of colonial exploitation in Africa and the perceptions among Africans of Western hypocrisy most recently over its response to Ukraine. Moreover, as USIP notes, “For many Africans, Wagner is a choice not of preference but of desperation following years of failed international efforts to help end violent crises. Africans’ pain over Western assaults on their sovereignty make them adamant about protecting it now.”

[USIP](#) calls for building off-ramps to wean African countries from dependence on Wagner, based on broader, more realistic and more respectful relationships that offer a stark departure from historical short-term counter-insurgency and counter-extremism programs. These need to be based on sustained engagement and equal partnerships that offer a clear alternative to the brutality and exploitation on offer from Wagner. Outreach should focus less on enhancing military skills and more on improving governance and economies. Specifically, it calls for:

- intensifying diplomacy and dialogue with Sahel countries, including Wagner clients, concurrently with sanctioning Wagner-driven corruption and human rights abuses;
- undertaking a whole-of-society effort focused on improved governance that engages with opposition, civic, religious and communal groups, women and youth leaders, and the business sector;
- emphasizing the benefits of projecting the rule of law to attract domestic and foreign investment, combined with streamlining and accelerating policy tools and staffing up commercial officers in US embassies; and
- working with neighboring countries in the Sahel, the African Union and regional groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to fashion locally-led security responses in place of foreign military-led models.

Concluding Thoughts

I purposefully left out the Ukraine angle, as that is a larger topic unto itself. I also did not dwell on what the aborted mutiny means for the future of Putin. These two themes are intertwined, and what happens in Ukraine and what happens in Moscow also could well impact my broader theme around Africa. There, however, is too much uncertainty surrounding both themes. Add to all that the many unanswered questions cited above, reflecting the understandable absence of any plan, the conflicting signals and the sheer opaqueness.

What does have greater certainty is that the United States and Europe have opportunities across sub-Saharan African that should have been, and should be, addressed, regardless

On June 27, OFAC [sanctioned](#) four companies in CAR, the UAE and Russia associated with Wagner in connection with illicit dealings in gold to fund Wagner activities. Concurrently, the State Department and five other government agencies issued an [advisory](#) on illicit trading in gold in sub-Saharan Africa linked to malign actors, including Wagner.

of what happens on the battlefields of Ukraine and/or in the halls of the Kremlin. The events of the past 10 days may facilitate taking advantage of those opportunities, and efforts to do so should be prioritized.

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Off the Coast of Norway
July 4, 2023