



| Brief |

Overview of the Wagner Group Uprising

B-2023-08-16a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: MEDIUM

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Military

August 16, 2023

Scope Note

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Brief | Overview of the Wagner Group Uprising

Executive Summary

From June 23–24, 2023, the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), staged an armed uprising in southeastern Russia. ZeroFox’s Geopolitical Working Group posits that this uprising was precipitated by long-standing tensions between the leader of Wagner, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and top-level Ministry of Defense (MoD) officials. According to Prigozhin, the MoD carried out missile strikes against a Wagner camp in the early hours of June 23, thus justifying an armed response by his fighters.¹

In a widely-circulated Telegram video, Prigozhin announced a “march of justice” to arrest Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov for this alleged crime.² On the morning of June 24, Wagner units crossed the border from occupied Ukraine into the Rostov Oblast (southeastern Russia). They captured parts of the city of Rostov-on-the-Don and took control of numerous key sites, including the Southern Military District headquarters.³ Next, a column of around 5,000 Wagner troops began to advance northwards toward Moscow along the M-4 highway. The convoy

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¹ [hXXps://www.bellingcat\[.\]com/news/2023/06/23/site-of-alleged-wagner-camp-attack-recently-visited-by-war-blogger/](https://www.bellingcat[.]com/news/2023/06/23/site-of-alleged-wagner-camp-attack-recently-visited-by-war-blogger/)

² [hXXps://t\[.\]me/Prigozhin_hat/3797](https://t[.]me/Prigozhin_hat/3797)

³ [hXXps://meduza\[.\]io/en/feature/2023/06/27/don-t-interfere-with-wagner](https://meduza[.]io/en/feature/2023/06/27/don-t-interfere-with-wagner)

moved at rapid speed and reached the town of Yelets, located just 124 miles (200 kilometers) south of the capital, by the end of the day.⁴⁵

Based on the reactions—or lack thereof—from top government officials, the Russian government appeared to be shocked by this uprising and struggled to formulate a response. On June 24, 2023, President Vladimir Putin made a short televised address to the country. He described the actions of the Wagner Group as “treason” and promised to take “harsh measures” to crush the rebellion.⁶ The Russian military attempted to carry out airstrikes against the Wagner convoy, losing an estimated six helicopters in the process.⁷ However, these actions did not have any notable effect on the convoy’s progress toward Moscow. Russian police and military units then began destroying sections of the M-4 highway and setting up barricades along the Oka River in an attempt to defend the capital.⁸

The anticipated clash outside Moscow was averted at the last minute. Late in the evening on June 24, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced that the Wagner Group had reached an agreement with the Russian government following negotiations brokered by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko.⁹ The Wagner Group pledged to end its advance on Moscow and withdraw from all occupied cities and territories. In return, the Russian government promised not to prosecute any persons involved in the uprising; Wagner Group fighters were given the choice to either sign contracts with the MoD or leave for camps in Belarus.¹⁰

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[hXXps://abcnews.go\[.\]com/International/wagner-groups-rebellion-putin-unfolded/story?id=10037355](https://abcnews.go.com/International/wagner-groups-rebellion-putin-unfolded/story?id=10037355)

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⁵ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-66080682](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66080682)

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[hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/06/24/putin-vows-to-punish-those-involved-in-uprising-accuses-the-m-of-treason.html](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/24/putin-vows-to-punish-those-involved-in-uprising-accuses-the-m-of-treason.html)

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[hXXps://www.oryxspioenkop\[.\]com/2023/06/chefs-special-documenting-equipment.html](https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2023/06/chefs-special-documenting-equipment.html)

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[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/world/2023/jun/30/could-yevgeny-prigozhin-really-have-captured-moscow-wagner-russia](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/30/could-yevgeny-prigozhin-really-have-captured-moscow-wagner-russia)

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[hXXps://www.politico\[.\]eu/article/wagner-group-russia-forces-turn-back-moscow-prigozhin-declares/](https://www.politico.eu/article/wagner-group-russia-forces-turn-back-moscow-prigozhin-declares/)

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[hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/06/24/europe/russia-putin-wagner-uprising-saturday-intl/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/24/europe/russia-putin-wagner-uprising-saturday-intl/index.html)

| Wagner Group – Organization Overview

The Wagner Group, the PMC of mercenaries, was founded in 2014 by Dmitri Utkin, a former *Spetsnaz* (special forces) commander and officer in Russia's military intelligence service (GRU). Wagner mercenaries first appeared in Crimea in February and March 2014, where they assisted with the annexation of the peninsula alongside regular Russian army units. Many of these operatives later joined Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In subsequent years, the Wagner Group expanded its operations considerably, reaching a global scale. Between 2015–2022, mercenaries from this organization deployed to Syria, Libya, Mozambique, the Central African Republic, and Mali.¹¹ They also participated in the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—especially the battle for Bakhmut, which featured repeated attritional wave attacks carried out by former prisoners enlisted into the PMC. Following nine months of bloody urban warfare, Wagner forces successfully captured the city in May 2023.¹²

The Wagner Group is thought to have received considerable financial backing and political support from Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch with close ties to the Kremlin. Known as “Putin’s chef,” Prigozhin started his business career in the early 1990s managing hot dog stands in St. Petersburg. He established a successful catering business several years later and joined Putin’s inner circle. Since then, Prigozhin has branched out into other sectors, allegedly running the Internet Research Agency (a St. Petersburg-based “troll farm” specializing in disinformation and election interference). He is also suspected of directing Wagner Group operations worldwide.¹³

| Analysis

Prigozhin’s armed uprising represented the most serious challenge to President Putin’s rule since he came to power in 1999. In the span of just one day, Prigozhin’s rebellion significantly undermined the strongman image Putin has carefully curated for the past 20 years. While this crack in Putin’s image may appear to have weakened his control of

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[hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/07/what-is-the-wagner-group-russia-as-mercenary-organisation](https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/07/what-is-the-wagner-group-russia-as-mercenary-organisation)

¹²

¹³ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-europe-64976080](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64976080)

Russian elites and society, Putin is unlikely to face an immediate threat to his grip on power.

Putin has built the entire Russian power structure around himself and continues to exert firm control on the Russian information space. For the last 20 years, Putin has employed a strategy of satisfying Russian elites with enough money and influence but not granting them enough power to oppose him meaningfully. The necessities of the Ukraine war turned Prigozhin into an outlier in this regard; he had 25,000 loyal troops, a vast international fortune, a highly influential social media machine, and extensive political influence. Putin may also have underestimated Prigozhin's loyalty and will to mount a challenge to his rule. Despite Prigozhin's success on his march to Moscow on June 24, the rebellion demonstrated that President Putin's control of vertical power is still highly effective, as no other notable Russian elite joined Prigozhin's call to march on Moscow or dismiss Shoigu and Gerasimov.

Forward Look

The brief uprising has several important consequences and implications concerning the war in Ukraine, relations between Belarus and its neighbors, and ongoing Wagner operations in Africa.

Wagner Group in Ukraine

At the time of the uprising, the Wagner Group had around 15,000 – 25,000 soldiers stationed in Ukraine.¹⁴ Experienced veterans comprised a minority of these forces. Instead, it is estimated that 80 percent of Wagner soldiers fighting in the country were poorly trained former prisoners who enlisted in the PMC in 2022 and 2023.¹⁵ Military analysts do not believe that the departure of these troops will have an immediate impact on the course of the war. However, their absence may weaken existing Russian forces, most of whom have been on the front lines without rotation since October 2022

¹⁴

[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2023-06-29/wagner-s-exit-from-ukraine-won-t-radically-alter-the-war-with-russia](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-06-29/wagner-s-exit-from-ukraine-won-t-radically-alter-the-war-with-russia)

¹⁵ [hXXps://www.bbc\[.\]com/news/world-60947877](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877)

and lack ready reserves to combat the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive.¹⁶ The remaining Wagner troops were offered to sign new contracts and become part of the regular forces. However, it remains unclear how many former Wagner fighters signed contracts with the MoD. Russian MP Vladimir Shamanov recently claimed that “33,000 Wagnerites” opted to do so following the uprising, but this number is difficult to confirm.¹⁷

Wagner Group in Belarus

The number of Wagner troops relocated to Belarus is also difficult to ascertain. A recent post on the group’s Telegram channel indicated that up to 10,000 fighters have already moved there or plan to do so in the near future.¹⁸ Belarusian Hajun, an international monitoring group that tracks military activity in Belarus, estimates that there are currently 2,000–2,500 Wagner mercenaries in the country.¹⁹ According to President Aleksandr Lukashenko, they will use their military expertise to train Belarussian special forces.²⁰ In addition, the whereabouts of Yevgeny Prigozhin remain unknown. Although the Wagner leader initially planned to relocate to Belarus, he has also been spotted back in the Russian Federation on several occasions, most recently during the Russia-Africa Summit held in St. Petersburg on July 27–28, 2023.²¹

The presence of Wagner Group fighters in Belarus has led to increased tensions with neighboring countries. On July 7, 2023, the leaders of Poland and the Baltic States published an open letter to NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, warning that these mercenaries could imperil the political stability of Belarus and potentially lead to a loss of control over Russian nuclear weapons stationed in the country.²² More recently, Belarussian army forces and Wagner soldiers began exercises near the strategically

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[hXXps://www.newsweek\[.\]com/russia-risks-degraded-troops-amid-lack-combat-ready-reserves-isw-1811467](https://www.newsweek.com/russia-risks-degraded-troops-amid-lack-combat-ready-reserves-isw-1811467)

¹⁷ [hXXps://www.gazeta\[.\]ru/army/news/2023/07/19/20906786.shtml?updated](https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2023/07/19/20906786.shtml?updated)

¹⁸ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/razgruzka_vagnera/240](https://t.me/razgruzka_vagnera/240)

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[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2023-07-18/wagner-mercenaries-boosting-presence-in-belarus-monitors-say](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-18/wagner-mercenaries-boosting-presence-in-belarus-monitors-say)

²⁰

[hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/07/15/wagner-mercenaries-entering-belarus-as-minsk-announces-road-map-for-joint-military-drills.html](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/15/wagner-mercenaries-entering-belarus-as-minsk-announces-road-map-for-joint-military-drills.html)

²¹ [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/07/27/europe/prigozhin-inside-russia-intl-hnk/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/27/europe/prigozhin-inside-russia-intl-hnk/index.html)

²² [hXXps://tvpworld\[.\]com/71138836/poland-and-baltic-states-warn-nato-of-threats-from-belarus](https://tvpworld.com/71138836/poland-and-baltic-states-warn-nato-of-threats-from-belarus)

important Suwalki gap, and, while doing so, allegedly violated Polish airspace with two military helicopters on August 2, 2023.²³ In response to this perceived threat, Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia have all deployed additional troops and equipment to their borders with Belarus.²⁴

Wagner Group in Africa

Wagner Group operations in Africa serve a dual purpose. The first rationale, which emanates from Wagner itself, is that these operations are quite lucrative for the private military contractor. The second rationale, which uses Wagner as a tool of Russian geopolitical influence abroad, is to bolster Russian relations with developing countries that can provide support on the international stage and be enticed into signing trade deals.²⁵

During the mid-2010s, France played a major role in ensuring the stability of governments in former French colonies across West Africa, particularly Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). Though these operations were typically successful in a military sense, continued French presence resulted in accusations that France was engaging in neo-colonialism. The list of countries willing to host French troops has gradually shrunk even as the jihadist threat they aided in combating grew in power.²⁶

Wagner has stepped into the breach, presenting itself as an alternative option to neocolonial occupation. These forces have provided military training and security services to the governments of Mali and the CAR, where they have also been accused of numerous human rights violations, including rape, torture, and summary execution of prisoners.²⁷ Wagner is also suspected to have arrangements with other countries such as

²³ [hXXps://www.cnn\[.\]com/2023/08/02/europe/poland-belarus-wagner-nato-tensions-intl/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/02/europe/poland-belarus-wagner-nato-tensions-intl/index.html)

²⁴

[hXXps://abcnews.go\[.\]com/International/wireStory/nervous-natos-nations-beefing-security-due-wagner-fighters-101948225](https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/nervous-natos-nations-beefing-security-due-wagner-fighters-101948225)

²⁵ [hXXps://www\[.\]cfr\[.\]org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa](https://www[.]cfr[.]org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa)

²⁶ [hXXps://hir\[.\]harvard.edu/true-sovereignty-the-cfa-franc-and-french-influence-in-west-and-central-africa/](https://hir[.]harvard.edu/true-sovereignty-the-cfa-franc-and-french-influence-in-west-and-central-africa/)

²⁷ [hXXps://www.csis\[.\]org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali](https://www.csis[.]org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali)

Burkina Faso. Ghana's president claimed that the Burkinabe government had licensed a gold mine as payment for Wagner's services, an allegation Burkina Faso denies.²⁸

It is unclear how large a role mining and natural resource concessions play in the Wagner Group's internal finances. What is clear is that its function as a military contractor can be quite lucrative. For example, in the CAR, where Russia played a central role in securing the rule of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra against rebel forces in 2016, Wagner forces began arriving in 2018. Today, an estimated 2,000 contractors are active in the country, assisting government forces in combating rebel groups and providing security services for VIPs.²⁹ While the deal details are not public, it is clear that Wagner is being well-compensated for its services.

In addition to compensation, Wagner's activities reinforce ties between Russia and partner nations. Russia's ability to provide weapons, military training, and actual fighting forces through Wagner is a major diplomatic asset in that it helps secure the often-fragile rule of leaders in developing countries. In fact, Wagner mercenaries are often used as presidential guards in many places due to their lack of local entanglements, including in the CAR.

With Wagner seemingly being folded into the main body of the Russian military, its role may change. What were formerly private funding streams that went directly into Wagner's pocketbooks might become directly accessible by the Russian Federation. Further, the plausible deniability presented by a private military contractor no longer applies to regular uniformed members of the Russian Armed Forces.

²⁸

[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2022/12/21/burkina-faso-denies-it-paid-russian-fighters-with-mineral-rights](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/21/burkina-faso-denies-it-paid-russian-fighters-with-mineral-rights)

²⁹

[hXXps://www.economist\[.\]com/international/2022/04/09/russias-brutal-mercenaries-probably-wont-matter-much-in-ukraine](https://www.economist.com/international/2022/04/09/russias-brutal-mercenaries-probably-wont-matter-much-in-ukraine)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%