


# Prigozhin's mutiny - causes, course and consequences of the Wagner Group rebellion

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## Abstract

The author seeks answers to the question of how the Prigozhin's mutiny affected the position of the Wagner Group in Russia. He mainly takes into account the events that took place on 23-24 June 2023, when the mercenaries led by Yevgeny Prigozhin carried out the so-called "march of justice" against the Russian Defense Ministry. The aim of the article is to answer three specific research questions: 1) what factors led to the Wagner Group's rebellion? 2) what was the reaction of the Russian government to these events? 3) what are the consequences of Prigozhin's rebellion for the stability of Putin's regime, the Wagner Group leadership and the organisation as a whole? In seeking answers to these questions, the author focuses on Prigozhin's relations with the Russian military elite. He then presents the course of the rebellion and the Kremlin's reaction to these events. The author further discusses the consequences of the rebellion both within Russia and internationally.

## Keywords

Wagner Group, mercenaries, hybrid threats, Russian secret services

On the night of 23-24 June 2023, the head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, carried out a rebellion against the Russian Ministry of Defence (Министерство обороны Российской Федерации). The failed attempt by a mercenary group<sup>1</sup> to take control of the ministry was the culmination of a personnel conflict that had been building up since mid-2022 between Prigozhin and Defence Minister Gen. Sergei Shoigu as well as the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces (Генеральный штаб Вооружённых сил Российской Федерации) Gen. Valery Gerasimov<sup>2</sup>. These actions can be seen as a manifestation of Prigozhin's exorbitant political ambitions, a misjudgement of his own position in the power structures and an attempt to maintain the independence of the paramilitary group he leads from the military. On 10 June 2023, General Shoigu announced that from 1 July, all irregular armed formations fighting in Ukraine, i.e. volunteer battalions and so-called private military companies, PMCs (Частная Военная Компания, ЧБК)<sup>3</sup> will be placed under the direct control of the Ministry of Defence. The head

<sup>1</sup> The author deliberately refers to members of the Wagner Group as mercenaries to emphasise their financial motivation. From the point of view of international law, Wagnerists generally (especially in Syria and Africa) meet the criteria to be considered as mercenaries according to Article 47 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions (*Protocols Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II), adopted in Geneva on 8 June 1977*), and are therefore not entitled to the status of combatants. In the case of the war in Ukraine, citizens of Russia (a party to the conflict) from the Wagner Group may be qualified as a "militia or other volunteer formation belonging to a party to the conflict" under Article 4 of the Geneva Convention III (*Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War, signed in Geneva on 12 August 1949*). Considering the numerous human rights violations and war crimes (e.g. the murder of prisoners of war in Olenivka, complicity in the Bucza massacre and ethnic cleansing in the occupied territories), however, they do not meet the condition of "respecting in their actions the laws and customs of war". In this case, the Ukrainian side may consider them as so-called unlawful combatants, which does not give them the privileges of combatant status.

<sup>2</sup> A. Legucka, F. Bryjka, *Rywalizacja między rosyjską armią a Grupą Wagnera* (Eng. Rivalry between the Russian army and the Wagner Group), PISM, 6 VI 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/rywalizacja-miedzy-rosyjska-armia-a-grupa-wagnera> [accessed: 6 VI 2023].

<sup>3</sup> In the case of Russia, such formations most often do not meet the criteria to qualify as PMCs, which are illegal under the Russian Constitution (Articles 13 § 5 and 71) and the Criminal Code (Articles 208 and 359). Russia is also not a signatory to the Montreux Document, an attempt to regulate the operation of PMCs. The definition formulated therein speaks of the defensive nature of such entities. According to it, the scope of tasks carried out by contractors should include 'protection of persons and facilities (...), maintenance and operation of weapons systems; detention of prisoners; advice and training of local security forces'. The tasks carried out by the Wagner Group often go beyond this catalogue and are offensive in nature - involving, among other things, destabilising other states, conducting covert combat, paramilitary, intelligence, sabotage and diversionary operations, etc. The Wagner Group cannot be regarded as a PMC also because it employs persons with criminal records. See in more detail: F. Bryjka, *Grupa Wagnera – paramilitarne narzędzie rosyjskich operacji hybrydowych*

of the Wagner Group consistently opposed the subordination of their army and tried unsuccessfully to negotiate an agreement allowing them to retain some operational autonomy.

President Vladimir Putin's administration, with the mediation of Alexander Lukashenko, has managed to defuse the most serious internal crisis in Russia since the Yanayev putsch. The disobedience of Prigozhin - Putin's long-time protégé - highlighted the deepening divisions within Russia's power structures. Although the Wagner rebellion targeted part of the military elite, it had serious image consequences for the president himself and the system of power he had established. The rebellion also signals that the increasing costs of the Russian invasion of Ukraine are beginning to have a negative impact on the stability of the regime, which is tightening its internal mechanisms of control and repression to avoid showing weakness.

Contrary to the frequent opinions of columnists and commentators<sup>4</sup> the putsch and the redeployment of the Wagner Group to Belarus was not operational game by the Russian secret services, but an ad hoc measure to reduce the image costs of the rebellion. It also allowed the Kremlin authorities to sort out the seizure of Prigozhin's assets in Russia, Syria and Africa. The death of the head of the Wagner Group in a plane crash exactly two months after the so-called march of justice was most likely not accidental. Treason and disloyalty in Russian strategic culture are accounted for by means of liquidation operations conducted by the special services<sup>5</sup>. According to The Wall Street Journal, the order to get rid of the putschist leader (with Putin's knowledge and consent) was given by the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation (RF) Nikolai Patrushev<sup>6</sup>.

The deaths of Prigozhin and Wagner's main commander Dmitry Utkin, aka Wagner, began a process of deep reorganisation of the group. The deployment of Russian mercenaries in Belarus may also have important consequences for

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(Eng. The Wagner Group - a paramilitary tool of Russian hybrid operations), "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2022, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 68–91. <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2022.75.2.05>.

<sup>4</sup> A review of mutually exclusive hypotheses suggesting that Prigozhin's rebellion may have been a special operation by Russian intelligence was presented by Adam Jawor. See the same: *Rosyjskie służby po buncie Prigożyna. Putin wyrównuje szeregi w kremlofskich wieżach* (Eng. Russian services after Prigozhin's revolt. Putin aligns ranks in Kremlin towers), InfoSecurity24, 31 VII 2023, <https://infosecurity24.pl/za-granica/rosyjskie-sluzby-po-buncie-prigozyna-putin-wyrownuje-szeregi-w-kremlofskich-wiezach> [accessed: 31 VII 2023].

<sup>5</sup> M.R. Gordon et al., *Early Intelligence Suggests Prigozhin Was Assassinated, U.S. Officials Say*, The Wall Street Journal, 24 VIII 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/wagner-prigozhin-russia-assassinated-intelligence-3e456fab> [accessed: 24 VIII 2023].

<sup>6</sup> T. Grove, A. Cullison, B. Pancevski, *How Putin's Right-Hand Man Took Out Prigozhin*, The Wall Street Journal, 22 XII 2023, [https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-patrushev-plan-prigozhin-assassination-428d5ed8?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos7](https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/putin-patrushev-plan-prigozhin-assassination-428d5ed8?mod=hp_lead_pos7) [accessed: 26 I 2024].

Poland's security. For through them, Russia may intensify its hybrid actions against the countries on NATO's eastern flank.

## Reasons for Prigozhin's mutiny

The immediate reason for Prigozhin's decision to march on Moscow was a missile attack on Wagnerists positions in eastern Ukraine. The mercenary chief accused Gen. Shoygu of planning it, and attributed the execution to the Russian armed forces. Although the published footage from the scene does not make it clear that the mercenaries' camp was the target of the attack and that the strike was carried out by the Russian army, it provided the pretext to justify the rebellion<sup>7</sup>. These actions were accompanied by Prigozhin's tirades targeting the military elite, whom he accused of launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine for the purpose of self-promotion, obtaining advancements and material benefits<sup>8</sup>. In doing so, Prigozhin challenged the Kremlin's propaganda justification for the war in Ukraine, undermining the claim that (...) *NATO and Ukraine pose a threat to Russia*<sup>9</sup>.

The dispute between the head of the Wagner Group and the leadership of the Ministry of Defence had been growing since mid-2022. Prigozhin used the military failures of the Russian aggression against Ukraine to openly criticise the ministry and military commanders loyal to Gen. Shoygu. He pointed out, among other things, the mistakes of the command in the conduct of the war operation, the bad situation of poorly trained and inadequately equipped units. He used, among other things, his troll farms and paid military bloggers to launch information attacks. Prigozhin's statements were tolerated by Putin for a long time, which may indicate that the president saw them as criticism of the Russian army's lack of success and pressure on the Ministry of Defence<sup>10</sup>.

The personal conflict between Prigozhin and Gen. Shoygu dates back to Russia's intervention in Syria (2015-2019), during which the Wagner Group played the role of the main land component. Problems between the mercenaries and

<sup>7</sup> Y. Prigozhin, post on Telegram channel, [https://t.me/Prigozhin\\_hat/3797](https://t.me/Prigozhin_hat/3797) [accessed: 23 VI 2023].

<sup>8</sup> Y. Prigozhin, post on Telegram channel, [https://t.me/prigozhin\\_2023\\_tg/1844](https://t.me/prigozhin_2023_tg/1844) [accessed: 23 VI 2023].

<sup>9</sup> See in more detail: *Sprawa Prigożyna a tuszowanie słabości Rosji i rys na jej wizerunku militarnej potęgi* (Eng. The Prigozhin case and the cover-up of Russia's weaknesses and cracks in its image of military power), EUvsDisinfo, 29 VI 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pl/sprawa-prigozyna-a-tuszowanie-slabosci-rosji-i-rys-na-jej-wizerunku-militarnej-potegi/> [accessed: 29 VI 2023].

<sup>10</sup> A.M. Dwyer, *Znaczenie buntu Prigożyna dla rosyjskiej polityki bezpieczeństwa* (Eng. The significance of Prigozhin's revolt for Russian security policy), PISM, 26 VI 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/znaczenie-buntu-prigozyna-dla-rosyjskiej-polityki-bezpieczenstwa> [accessed: 26 VI 2023].

the army included supply issues, a general reluctance to work together and competition for oil production profits<sup>11</sup>. In Prigozhin's view, the Wagnerists were not sufficiently rewarded for their participation in the operation (e.g. for recapturing Palmyra from the hands of the jihadists). The events of 2018, when the Russian military command failed to stop a US attack on a column of Wagner Group mercenaries storming the Conoco refinery, controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, were also a flashpoint. An estimated 200-300 Wagnerists were killed at the time<sup>12</sup>. The US attack was not met with retaliatory action by the Russian authorities, who denied links with the mercenaries. At the time, Gen. Shoygu also deprived Prigozhin's companies of numerous contracts for the military, which earned him USD 2 billion in revenue between 2011 and 2018. The defence minister created his own military company Patriot in 2018, which competed with Wagner Group for contracts in Syria and Africa<sup>13</sup>.

The conflict between this organisation and the Ministry of Defence escalated in mid-2022 as mercenaries became increasingly involved in the war in Ukraine. Initially, the invasion was supported by around 400 mercenaries tasked with assassinating President Volodymyr Zelensky in order to form a puppet government in Kiev<sup>14</sup>. However, according to Russian investigative journalists from the portals Meduza and The Insider, these were former Wagnerists, who had joined the rival military company Redut founded by the Deputy Chief Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (Главное разведывательное управление Генерального штаба Вооружённых сил Российской Федерации, GRU) Gen. Vladimir Alekseev. From August 2021, Redut began to intensively acquire Wagner personnel resources for the war in Ukraine, which led to a dispute between Prigozhin and Gen. Alekseev<sup>15</sup>. The head of the Wagner Group was not to be informed about preparations for the invasion, nor was his formation

<sup>11</sup> See in more detail: M. Gabidullin, *Wagnerowiec. Spowiedź byłego dowódcy tajnej armii Putina* (Eng. Wagnerist. Confession of a former commander of Putin's secret army), Kraków 2022.

<sup>12</sup> R. Blakely, *Russian mercenaries killed by US troops in Syria gun battle*, The Times, 14 II 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/russia-mercenaries-killed-by-us-troops-in-syria-gun-battle-g5zswflfg> [accessed: 19 I 2024].

<sup>13</sup> S. Sukhankin, *Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa?*, The Jamestown Foundation, 1 VIII 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-new-pmc-patriot-the-kremlins-bid-for-a-greater-role-in-africa/> [accessed: 12 V 2023].

<sup>14</sup> M. Rana, *Volodymyr Zelensky: Russian mercenaries ordered to kill Ukraine's president*, The Times, 28 II 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/volodymyr-zelensky-russian-mercenaries-ordered-to-kill-ukraine-president-cvcksh79d> [accessed: 19 I 2024].

<sup>15</sup> *Жаба и Минобороны. Как поссорились Евгений Викторович с Сергеем Кужугетовичем*, The Insider, 12 V 2023, <https://theins.ru/politika/261683> [accessed: 12 V 2023].

initially expected to take part in the war effort<sup>16</sup>. However, the situation changed already in the first month of the war, when, due to high losses in men and equipment, as well as numerous desertions, some Russian troops lost their ability to conduct offensive operations. When it became apparent in April 2022 that the Russian army was unable to break through the Ukrainian defensive lines in the Donbass, the Wagner Group's participation amounted to around 1,500 mercenaries, and as many as 7,000 a month later. They were recruited, among others, through veterans' associations (e.g. the League for the Protection of the Interests of Veterans of Local Wars and Armed Conflicts - the so-called League, Лига защиты интересов ветеранов локальных войн и военных конфликтов or the Volunteer Organisation for the Support of the Army, Air Force and Navy - DOSAAF, Добровольное общество содействия армии, авиации и флоту, ДОСААФ), sports clubs, as well as more than 60 regional recruitment centres<sup>17</sup>. In September 2022, with the approval of the Russian authorities, the Wagnerists began mass recruitment in prisons and penal colonies (so-called Project K). In addition to financial benefits, convicts were promised - upon completion of a six-month contract<sup>18</sup> - a pardon (regardless of sentence) by President Putin. In this way, the Wagner Group acquired nearly 40,000 war crime offenders (including those committing rape, torture and murder of civilians). Due to the shortage of artillery ammunition, the command of this organisation treated criminals like cannon fodder. The tactic adopted of continuous assaults by small groups of infantry on selected sections of the front caused losses among the convicts of up to 90 per cent and had little effect<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Грубо говоря, мы начали войну Как отправка ЧВК Вагнера на фронт помогла Пригожину наладить отношения с Путиным - и что такое «собянинский полк». Расследование «Медузы» о наемниках на войне в Украине, Meduza, 13 VII 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/13/grubo-govorya-my-nachali-voynu> [accessed: 13 VII 2022].

<sup>17</sup> K. Hird et al., *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 10, 2023*, Institute for the Study of War, 10 III 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-10-2023> [accessed: 10 III 2023].

<sup>18</sup> Those who were pardoned by Putin and returned to Russia often committed further crimes, especially murder and rape. See: *Против двоих боевиков ЧВК «Вагнер» в разных регионах России возбудили дела об изнасиловании 13-летних девочек*, Важные истории, 30 VIII 2023, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/news/2023/08/30/protiv-dvoikh-boevikov-chvk-vagner-v-raznykh-regionakh-rossii-vozbudili-dela-ob-iznasilovanii-13-letnikh-devochek/index.html> [accessed: 30 VIII 2023].

<sup>19</sup> J. Ber, *Od Popasnej do Bachmutu. Grupa Wagnera w wojnie rosyjsko-ukraińskiej* (Eng. From Popasna to Bachmut. Wagner's Group in the Russian-Ukrainian war), OSW, 28 IV 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2023-04-28/od-popasnej-do-bachmutu-grupa-wagnera-w-wojnie-rosyjsko> [accessed: 28 IV 2023]; Y. Chornogor, P. Rad, A. Chernysh, *Anatomy of "Wagner PMC": creation, war in Ukraine and ways of countering the group*, Ukrainian PRISM, April 2023, [https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PMC\\_Wagner\\_eng.pdf](https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/PMC_Wagner_eng.pdf), p. 9 [accessed: 28 IV 2023].

The Wagnerists initially fought mainly in the Luhansk region, where they played an important role in the seizure of Popasna, Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in the summer of 2022. They were then redeployed to the Donetsk region, where they announced the seizure of Soledar on 10 January 2023<sup>20</sup>. Putin publicly hailed this as a success (...) *for all forces involved in the war in Ukraine*<sup>21</sup>, rather than for the Wagner Group alone, which could be interpreted as a warning signal for Prigozhin's growing political ambitions. The head of the Wagner Group planned to run for mayor of Saint Petersburg on behalf of Fair Russia's Sergei Mironov, thus taking the office away from Aleksandr Beglov - a long-time trusted Putin associate. After winning the 2019 elections Beglov prevented Prigozhin from implementing his infrastructure investments on the outskirts of the city and in the Gulf of Finland. In retaliation, Prigozhin attempted to force the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации, FSB) and the prosecutor's office to initiate proceedings against the mayor of Saint Petersburg for embezzlement of public money, treason and destruction of cultural sites<sup>22</sup>. During the invasion of Ukraine, Beglov obstructed the Wagner Group's ability to recruit in the region, which contributed to exacerbating the dispute between them.

The role the Wagnerists played on the frontline in Ukraine led to a change in the Kremlin's narrative about the organisation. Until 2021, its existence and any links to the Russian state apparatus were denied. The successes of the Wagnerists led the Kremlin-controlled RT station to produce propaganda videos revealing, among other things, the Wagner Group's previously kept secret involvement in the 2014 aggression against Ukraine, and behind-the-scenes operations in the Middle East and Africa. The Russian authorities also agreed to partially institutionalise Wagnerists activities<sup>23</sup>. In November 2022, the Wagner Group Centre and the Wagnerenok (Вагнеренок) youth club were established in Saint Petersburg. In January 2023, the Wagner Group was registered as a business entity providing 'consultancy services'. However, Prigozhin failed to get the PMC legalised in Russia, which he tried

<sup>20</sup> S. Walker, P. Beaumont, D. Sabbagh, *Head of Russia's Wagner group says his troops have taken control of Soledar*, The Guardian, 11 I 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/head-of-wagner-group-says-his-troops-have-taken-control-of-soledar> [accessed: 1 I 2024].

<sup>21</sup> K. Stepanenko et al., *Russian offensive campaign assessment, January 16, 2023*, Institute for the Study of War, 16 I 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-16-2023> [accessed: 19 I 2024].

<sup>22</sup> Y. Chornogor, P. Rad, A. Chernysh, *Anatomy of "Wagner PMC"...*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>23</sup> K.P. Larsen, *From mercenary to legitimate actor? Russian discourses on private military companies*, "Post-Soviet Affairs" 2023, vol. 39, no. 6, pp. 420–439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2023.2247782>.

to do through the lobbying of the Fair Russia party<sup>24</sup>. As a result of the mercenaries' involvement in the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government lost all plausible deniability of the state's links to the organisation, which had previously had limited effectiveness anyway<sup>25</sup>.

The Kremlin's policy towards the Wagner Group reinforced the organisation's head's belief in his growing position in the power system and encouraged him to further confront the military. A warning signal for Prigozhin's growing ambitions was the assassination of Russian blogger Maksim Fomin (aka Vladlen Tatarsky, who was one of many war propagandists and critics of the Ministry of Defence linked to the Wagner Group). The bombing occurred on 2 April 2023 during Tatarsky's author meeting in central Saint Petersburg in a bar owned by Prigozhin. The venue also served as a discussion club for the Cyber Front Z group<sup>26</sup>. Ukraine was officially accused of carrying out the bombing, but given the context of the relationship between the mercenary chief and the Ministry of Defence at the time, it can be assumed that this was a liquidation operation by the Russian special services.

The rivalry between the Wagnerists and the military intensified on 11 January 2023, when Putin put Gen. Gerasimov in charge of the occupation troops in Ukraine directly. He replaced Gen. Sergei Surovikin, who had been cooperating with the Wagner Group. The Ministry of Defence attempted to weaken Prigozhin and the Wagnerists fighting at Bakhmut by restricting the supply of ammunition and taking control of the recruitment process in the penal colonies (by May 2023, the army had recruited 10,000 people in this way). In retaliation, Prigozhin was said to have offered Ukrainian military intelligence (Головне управління розвідки Міністерства Оборони України) information on the position of Russian troops in the Donbass in exchange for the surrender of Bakhmut<sup>27</sup>. The Ukrainian side did not accept this offer, fearing deception. The head of the mercenaries blamed

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<sup>24</sup> F. Bryjka, *Transformacja Grupy Wagnera w związku z wojną na Ukrainie* (Eng. Transformation of the Wagner Group in the wake of the war in Ukraine), PISM, 7 III 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/transformacja-grupy-wagnera-w-zwiazku-z-wojna-na-ukrainie> [accessed: 7 III 2023].

<sup>25</sup> P. Stronski, *Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2 VI 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniability-russia-private-military-companies-pub-81954> [accessed: 2 VI 2020].

<sup>26</sup> *В кафе Петербурга на «творческом вечере» «военкора» Владлена Татарского (у него полмиллиона подписчиков в телеграме) произошел взрыв. Блогер погиб*, Meduza, 2 IV 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/02/v-peterburge-v-kafe-evgeniya-prigozhina-proizoshel-vzryv-vo-vremya-tvorcheskogo-vechera-voenkora-vladlena-tatarskogo-po-predvaritelnyim-danym-on-pogib> [accessed: 2 IV 2023].

<sup>27</sup> S. Harris, I. Khurshudyan, *Wagner chief offered to give Russian troop locations to Ukraine*, The Washington Post, 15 V 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/05/14/prigozhin-wagner-ukraine-leaked-documents/> [accessed: 15 V 2023].



the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff for the high losses (estimated at 20,000-30,000 people) in the fighting for Bakhmut<sup>28</sup>, and threatened to surrender the occupied positions to Ukraine. The issue of the 'ammunition famine' was resolved with the participation of General Surovikin, who acted as an intermediary between the Wagnerists and the army. Although Putin congratulated the Wagner Group on the seizure of Bakhmut on 20 May 2023, he pointed out that units of the regular army were also involved in the operation<sup>29</sup>. Prigozhin downplayed this fact and attributed the success solely to his mercenaries. He then announced that by the end of May, the Wagner Group would hand over all seized positions to the Russian armed forces, withdraw from Ukraine and rebuild combat capability for two months<sup>30</sup>. The Ministry of Defence used this moment to subdue all irregular armed formations fighting in Ukraine. The head of the Wagnerists unsuccessfully tried to prevent them from losing their operational autonomy and subordinating themselves to the military, leading to the so-called march of justice.

### The course of the Wagner Group rebellion

On the night of 23-24 June 2023, Prigozhin declared that the Wagner Group had crossed the Ukrainian-Russian border in the Rostov region and was heading for Moscow. The mercenary chief stressed that the operation he was conducting was not a coup against Putin, but a so-called march of justice against Defence Minister Gen. Shoygu. The Wagnerists arrived without resistance at the headquarters of the Southern Military District (SMD) in Rostov-on-Don, which also acts as the command of the "special military operation" in Ukraine. On site, they were met with a positive response from the local community<sup>31</sup>. Prigozhin held talks with Deputy Defence Minister Gen. Yunus Bek Yevkurov and first deputy GRU chief Gen. Alekseyev. The putschist leader's demands to talk to Gen. Shoygu and Gen. Gerasimov were rejected, which influenced the decision to continue the march. Prigozhin called

<sup>28</sup> On the role of the Wagner Group in the battles for Bachmut see in more detail: K. Stepanenko, *The Kremlin's Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut*, Institute for the Study of War, 24 V 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut> [accessed: 24 V 2023].

<sup>29</sup> *Путин поздравил российских военных с освобождением Артемовска*, Тасс, 20 V 2023, <https://tass.ru/politika/17804025> [accessed: 19 I 2024].

<sup>30</sup> Y. Prigozhin, post on Telegram channel, [https://t.me/concordgroup\\_official/1002](https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1002) [accessed: 20 V 2023].

<sup>31</sup> P. Ivanova, A. Stognei, M. Seddon, *Russian insurrection: Prigozhin's failed mutiny and the fallout*, Financial Times, 23 VI 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/34f3a349-a05f-4672-b059-6980ecc27adf> [accessed: 23 VI 2023].

on the entire Russian army to join the rebels. However, this did not meet with the response he expected from the military. Even Gen. Surovikin, who had contributed to the rise of the Wagner Group's position during his time as commander of the military operation in Ukraine, condemned the putsch and called on the Wagnerists not to follow Prigozhin's orders. The rebels were also not supported by the federal and regional authorities, the power structures or the business elite.

The mercenary columns heading towards Moscow consisted of around 1,000 units of military equipment and vehicles (including Tigr armoured vehicles and infantry fighting vehicles, T-80 and T-90 tanks, BM-21 Grad rocket launchers, and Pancyr S-1 surface-to-air systems)<sup>32</sup>. Prigozhin declared that the force he was leading consisted of 25,000 mercenaries. It is possible that he meant all Wagner Group personnel - including those conducting operations in Africa and receiving medical treatment in Russia. In all likelihood, 5,000-10,000 Wagnerists participated in the rebellion<sup>33</sup>. In response to the rebellion, the FSB Investigative Committee opened criminal proceedings against Prigozhin under Article 279 of the Russian Criminal Code, which states the organisation of a rebellion, punishable by 20 years in prison. Security measures have been stepped up in Moscow. Federal Military Service of the RF National Guard (Федеральная служба войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации, Rosgwardia), The Special Mobile Unit (Отряд мобильный особого назначения, OMON) and the Special Rapid Response Unit (Специальный Отряд Быстрого Реагирования, SOBR) have been placed on high alert<sup>34</sup>. Military personnel and law enforcement agencies set up military posts and checkpoints near the SMD headquarters in Rostov-on-Don. The Federal Security Service and SOBR units also prepared roadblocks along the Moscow-Voronezh-Rostov route<sup>35</sup>. The Wagnerists generally encountered no resistance from the military or security services, but a few clashes resulted in the downing of six helicopters and an Il-22M aircraft. Thirteen pilots were killed<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russia's coup d'état – Nature and Implications*, In *Moscow's Shadows*, 27 VI 2023, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2023/06/27/scss10-26-june-2023-russias-coup-detat-nature-and-implications/> [accessed: 27 VI 2023].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *В Москве усилили меры безопасности*, Тасс, 23 VII 2023, <https://tass.ru/proisshestiya/18103225> [accessed: 23 VII 2023].

<sup>35</sup> *В Ростове-на-Дону рядом со штабом ЮВО выставили посты*, Тасс, 23 VII 2023, <https://tass.ru/bezopasnost/18103205> [accessed: 23 VII 2023].

<sup>36</sup> S. Mitzer, J. Janovsky, *Chef's Special – Documenting Equipment Losses During The 2023 Wagner Group Mutiny*, Oryx, 24 VI 2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2023/06/chefs-special-documenting-equipment.html> [accessed: 24 VI 2023].

Negotiations with Prigozhin were undertaken by Lukashenko, who urged the Wagnerists leader to cease hostilities to avoid further bloodshed. According to the official message<sup>37</sup>, he conducted them in consultation with Putin, who rejected the offer of a phone call or meeting with Prigozhin. General Yevkurov and FSB chief Aleksandr Bortnikov also played an important mediating role. During the negotiations, Prigozhin abandoned his planned raid on the Defence Ministry. The Wagner Group's columns stopped about 200 km outside Moscow and turned back towards the Donbass. In return, the Russian authorities abandoned the pursuit of the putschists, and the Russian president gave Prigozhin unspecified security guarantees on the condition that he would move to Belarus with the rebels<sup>38</sup>.

The Russian government admitted that on 29 June 2023 Putin met with Prigozhin and 35 commanders of the Wagner Group<sup>39</sup>. During the three-hour meeting in the Kremlin, the Russian president assessed the role of mercenaries in the war in Ukraine so far, gave his assessment of the armed rebellion, and listened to the explanations and assurances of the Wagnerists about their loyalty to the state and its president. The mercenaries were offered three options:

- 1) signing a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence and continuing to fight in Ukraine,
- 2) following their leader to Belarus,
- 3) terminating the contract and returning to Russia without legal consequences for participation in the mutiny<sup>40</sup>.

At the same time, Putin stated that such an entity as the Wagner Group does not exist, as PMC's activities in Russia are prohibited by law<sup>41</sup>.

Although Prigozhin's rebellion targeted Gen. Shoygu, and the head of the Wagnerists repeatedly stressed his loyalty to Putin, the fact that the so-called march of justice took place caused serious (negative) consequences for the Russian president. First of all, it undermined his authority as a strong and capable leader, as he was forced to negotiate with a rebel. It weakened the president's image among

<sup>37</sup> Y. Preiherman, *What Does Lukashenka's Role as Mediator in Russian Crisis Imply? – Analysis*, Eurasia Review, 29 VI 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/29062023-what-does-lukashenkas-role-as-mediator-in-russian-crisis-imply-analysis/> [accessed: 29 VI 2023].

<sup>38</sup> *Вручение генеральских погон высшему офицерскому составу*, Президент Республики Беларусь, 27 VII 2023, <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/vruchenie-pogon-vyshshemu-oficerskomu-sostavu> [accessed: 27 VII 2023].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> *Песков подтвердил встречу Путина с Пригожиным и командирами «Вагнера» 29 июня*, Интерфакс, 10 VII 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/910904> [accessed: 10 VII 2023].

<sup>41</sup> *Putin says Wagner Group doesn't legally exist*, Meduza, 14 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/07/14/putin-says-wagner-group-no-longer-legally-exists> [accessed: 14 VII 2023].

the power elite<sup>42</sup>. Putin described Prigozhin's rebellion as "treason" and a "stab in the back". He called the mercenary chief a corrupt liar who destroyed the reputation of the Wagner Group. He described the march on Moscow as (...) *a mortal threat to the state* and assured that (...) *all those who participated in the preparation of the rebellion would suffer severe punishment*<sup>43</sup>. According to The Washington Post, the Russian president was said to have received intelligence on preparations for the rebellion 2-3 days before the mutiny<sup>44</sup>. These reports seem to be confirmed by the deployment of FSB 'Alpha' special units to protect the Lubianka headquarters<sup>45</sup>. Despite this, Putin was said to have not given a single order and to have left the decision on how to respond to the so-called march of justice to the regional military and security services. The rebellion of the Wagnerists revealed the failure of the services to effectively neutralise such actions. In doing so, their inaction was due to the lack of specific orders and the belief that the head of the Wagner Group was under the Kremlin's tutelage and that the activities of his mercenaries were controlled by the authorities. The president was to be assisted in resolving the crisis by the governor of the Tula region, an FSB and GRU officer responsible in the past for, among other things, Putin's security - Colonel General Alexei Diumin<sup>46</sup>. He has been touted by many commentators as a potential successor to Gen. Shoygu.

<sup>42</sup> A. Legucka, *Konsekwencje buntu Prigożyna dla systemu putinowskiego w Rosji* (Eng. Consequences of Prigozhin's revolt for the Putinist system in Russia), PISM, 26 VI 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/konsekwencje-buntu-prigozyna-dla-systemu-putinowskiego-w-rosji> [accessed: 26 VI 2023]; M. Komin, "Fighting spirit": *Russia's technocrat elite after the Wagner mutiny*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 24 VII 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/fighting-spirit-russias-technocrat-elite-after-the-wagner-mutiny/> [accessed: 24 VII 2023].

<sup>43</sup> *Обращение к гражданам России*, Kremlin.ru, 24 VI 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230628083145/https://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71496> [accessed: 24 VI 2023].

<sup>44</sup> C. Belton, S. Harris, G. Miller, *Putin appeared paralyzed and unable to act in first hours of rebellion*, The Washington Post, 25 VII 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/25/putin-prigozhin-rebellion-kremlin-disarray/> [accessed: 25 VII 2023].

<sup>45</sup> M. Weiss, *Russia's Spies Say Putin Faces More Coups*, The Insider, 20 VII 2023, <https://theins.ru/en/politics/263596> [accessed: 20 VII 2023].

<sup>46</sup> Colonel-General Alexei Diumin (born 28 August 1972 in Kursk) - graduated from the Higher Military School of Radioelectronic Engineering in Voronezh in 1994. He then worked as an engineer at the Central Centre for Integrated Technical Control of the Russian Air Force until 1996. From 1996 to 2013, he served in the FSB, where he was responsible for, among other things, presidential security. In 2009, he graduated with honours from the Russian Academy of Public Administration (Civil Service) under the President of the Russian Federation, and in 2013 from the Military Academy of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. From 2013 to 2016, he was Deputy Chief of the GRU, Chief of the General Staff and First Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Land Forces, and then Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation. Since 2016, he has served as governor of the Tula region. See: Д. Дурова, *В России уже нашли нового министра обороны для*

To stabilise the regime and consolidate his own position, Putin decided to strengthen the National Guard in charge of internal security and commanded by General Viktor Zolotov, who is loyal to the president<sup>47</sup>. On 19 July 2023, the State Duma of the Russian Federation passed a law allowing this formation to possess heavy military equipment for the recovery of hostages, protection of citizens, officials and military personnel, providing security during riots and emergencies, combating unmanned aircrafts, as well as the activities of illegal armed groups<sup>48</sup>. In all likelihood, specialised military equipment has gone to the Oplot (Eng. Fortress) regiment. The elite Grom unit, which had previously been part of the Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN, Федеральная служба Российской Федерации по контролю за оборотом наркотиков)<sup>49</sup> was subordinated to the Rosgvardia. The strengthening of the Rosgvardia, which is a kind of security cordon for the president, shows that Putin fears further attacks of which he may be a target.

The Wagner rebellion has also resulted in purges in the Russian army. More than a dozen generals have been arrested, including former Deputy Defence Minister for Logistics Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev, who was first removed from his post at the Defence Ministry for supplying the Wagnerists with ammunition and then signed a contract with the Wagner Group. Another is Gen. Surovikin, who made the Wagnerists a key assault force in the urban fighting in the Donbass. On the day of Prigozhin's death, Gen. Surovikin was removed from his position as commander of the Russian air and space forces<sup>50</sup>. In time, however, he was released from house arrest and took up the post of head of the Coordinating Committee for Air

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*Пригожина: в сети назвали имя*, Oboz.ua, 25 VI 2023, <https://news.obozrevatel.com/russia/v-rossii-uzhe-nashli-novogo-ministra-oboronyi-dlya-prigozhina-v-seti-nazvali-imya.htm> [accessed: 25 VI 2023].

<sup>47</sup> J. Darczewska, *Rosgvardia. Siły specjalnego przeznaczenia* (Eng. Rosgvardia. Special purpose forces), "Punkt Widzenia OSW" 2020, no. 78, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> *State Duma passes bill allowing Russia's National Guard troops to use heavy military equipment*, Meduza, 19 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/07/19/state-duma-passes-bill-allowing-russia-national-guard-troops-to-use-heavy-military-equipment> [accessed: 19 VII 2023].

<sup>49</sup> М. Солопов, *Силловые ведомства прорабатывают вопрос о переподчинении полицейского спецназа «Гром» Росгвардии*, Ведомости, 4 VII 2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/07/04/983567-vedomstva-prorabativayut-vopros-o-perepodchinenii-politseiskogo-spetsnaza-rosgvardii> [accessed: 4 VII 2023].

<sup>50</sup> He was replaced by Colonel-General Viktor Afzalov, who had served as Chief of Staff of the Russian Air Force since August 2018. See: *Источник: врио главкома ВКС назначили генерала Афзалова*, РИА Новости, 23 VIII 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230823/afzalova-1891645152.html> [accessed: 23 VIII 2023].

Defence within the Council of Defence Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States<sup>51</sup>.

The authorities in the Kremlin have also taken steps to silence critics. Igor Girkin aka Strelkov - a former FSB Spetsnaz colonel and self-proclaimed defence minister of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR, Донецкая Народная Республика) - was arrested. His social media activity has pushed the boundaries of criticism acceptable to the Kremlin. He even founded the Angry Patriots Club of nationalists openly expressing their dissatisfaction with the way the war in Ukraine is being conducted<sup>52</sup>. The Russian Investigative Committee has charged him, as well as Pavel Gubarev (in the past self-proclaimed leader of the DNR and chairman of the Angry Patriots Club), with extremist activities<sup>53</sup>. The main reason for Girkin's detention was his political ambitions. He planned to capitalise on his popularity among nationalist circles by running in the presidential elections in spring 2024<sup>54</sup>. On 25 January 2024, a court in Moscow sentenced him to four years' imprisonment on charges of inciting extremism<sup>55</sup>.

## The Wagner Group in Belarus

As a result of Lukashenko's mediation, Putin gave Prigozhin and his mercenaries unspecified security guarantees on the condition that the members of the Wagner Group would be relocated to Belarus. The process of deploying the Wagnerists

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<sup>51</sup> *Генерал Суrowикин возглавил координационный комитет СНГ по вопросам ПВО* Подробнее, EurAsia Daily, 10 X 2023, <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2023/09/10/general-surovikin-vozglavil-koordinacionnyy-komitet-sng-po-voprosam-pvo> [accessed: 10 X 2023].

<sup>52</sup> In addition to Girkin, former FSB colonel Mikhail Polyakov and former GRU colonel Vladimir Kvachkov were taken into custody. They all ran channels on Telegram used to openly criticise the Kremlin, the Ministry of Defence and the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. See: K. Kirillova, *Propaganda and Repression Turn Against Their Creators in Russia*, The Jamestown Foundation, 25 VII 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/propaganda-and-repression-turn-against-their-creators-in-russia/> [accessed: 25 VII 2023].

<sup>53</sup> *Pavel Gubarev, associate of Igor Strelkov, reportedly investigated for extremism*, Meduza, 23 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/07/23/pavel-gubarev-associate-of-igor-strelkov-reportedly-investigated-for-extremism> [accessed: 23 VII 2023].

<sup>54</sup> *Jailed former 'Donetsk People's Republic' militia leader to run for president*, Novaya Gazeta Europe, 31 VIII 2023, <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/08/31/jailed-former-donetsk-peoples-republic-militia-leader-to-run-for-president-en-news> [accessed: 31 VIII 2023].

<sup>55</sup> *Russia sentences former separatist commander and pro-war blogger Igor Strelkov to four years in prison*, Meduza, 25 I 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/01/25/russia-sentences-former-separatist-commander-and-pro-war-blogger-igor-strelkov-to-four-years-in-prison> [accessed: 25 I 2024].

began during the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11 July 2023. Belarusian authorities provided them with military infrastructure in the village of Tsel near Osipovich in the Mogilev region, where the main Wagnerists' camp was established on the site of a former missile army base (military unit no. 61732). On 27 June, tents capable of accommodating a total of around 8,000 people began to be erected there<sup>56</sup>. At the end of July, the Wagner Group's previous base in Molkino, Russia, which was located at the GRU's 10th Special Purpose Brigade, was dismantled<sup>57</sup>.

On 18 July, Prigozhin and Utkin appeared in the Wagner camp. In their speeches, they emphasised the start of a new chapter in the organisation's history. Its main task in Belarus is to train soldiers and units of the Ministry of Internal Affairs<sup>58</sup>. The new location allowed for the organisation of a logistical base for Wagner Group operations in Africa. At the same time, Prigozhin did not rule out the possibility of the mercenaries returning to Ukraine<sup>59</sup>. The following day, the Wagner chief registered a subsidiary company in Belarus, Concord Management and Consulting, which was officially to deal with property management<sup>60</sup>. Sergei Chubko aka Pioneer - a veteran of operations in Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Mali and Libya, decorated with five Medals for Courage - became the commander of the Wagner Group in Belarus<sup>61</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> In addition to the base in Tsel village, the Wagnerists are also expected to have smaller facilities in the village of Sosnovi near Osipovich and the town of Narovla (Gomel region). See: *Вagnerівці продовжують прибувати у білорусь*, Центр Національного спротиву, 22 VII 2023, <https://sproutv.mod.gov.ua/vagnerivtsi-prodovzhuyut-prybuyaty-u-bilorus/> [accessed: 22 VII 2023].

<sup>57</sup> *Наемники ЧВК Вагнера объявили, что закрывают свою главную базу в краснодарском Молькино*, Meduza, 17 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/news/2023/07/17/naemniki-chvk-vagnera-ob-yavili-chto-zakryvayut-svoyu-glavnyuyu-bazu-v-krasnodarskom-molkino> [accessed: 17 VII 2023].

<sup>58</sup> The Wagner Group mainly trains special operations forces, defence troops against weapons of mass destruction, mechanised troops, engineering and communications troops, as well as territorial defence. Training takes place, among others, at the Brest training ground located near the Polish border. See: A.M. Dwyer, *Grupa Wagnera na Białorusi – potencjalne zagrożenia dla Polski* (Eng. The significance of Prigozhin's revolt for Russian security policy), PISM, 27 VII 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/grupa-wagnera-na-bialorusi-potencjalne-zagrozenia-dla-polski> [accessed: 27 VII 2023].

<sup>59</sup> *'Welcome to hell' Prigozhin reappears in Belarus, rallying Wagner Group mercenaries for future work in Africa (but not yet in Ukraine)*, Meduza, 19 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/07/19/welcome-to-hell> [accessed: 19 VII 2023].

<sup>60</sup> *Евгений Пригожин зарегистрировал компанию в Осиповичском районе*, Reformation, 22 VII 2023, <https://reform-by.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/reform.by/evgenij-prigozhin-zaregistroval-kompaniju-v-osipovichskom-rajone/amp> [accessed: 22 VII 2023].

<sup>61</sup> Sergei Chubko (born 27 X 1976 in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, then USSR) - comes from a family with military traditions. His father fought in Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion. After the collapse of the USSR, the family moved to Novorossiysk. From 1994 to 2002, Chubko served in the Russian army (including the airborne troops) and took part in the Chechen wars. After leaving the service, he moved to the private sector. In 2003, despite his lack of higher education, he unexpectedly became

According to activists from the Hajun Project, 14 convoys (a total of about 930 vehicles) of mercenaries, estimated to number between 4,000 and 5,000, had entered Belarus by 1 August. However, the Wagnerists ended up there without any heavy military equipment, as more than 2,000 pieces (including tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery and missile systems), 2,500 tonnes of ammunition and about 20,000 small arms had been seized by the Russian army on 12 July<sup>62</sup>. Therefore, the Wagner Group as an independent armed formation with only small arms did not pose a military threat to the NATO border states. However, the Wagner Group's unclear legal status, combat experience and international recognition gave Belarus and Russia an additional instrument of hybrid influence in the so-called grey zone, in which it is difficult to assess the nature of the threat and assign clear responsibility for various forms of aggression. Poland and the Baltic States feared that Belarus and Russia would use the Wagnerists to attack the services protecting the border and the infrastructure located there, increase migration pressure<sup>63</sup>, place their agents among the migrants, infiltrate the territory through sabotage and reconnaissance groups, identify critical infrastructure and prepare acts of sabotage<sup>64</sup>.

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head of the Novorossiysk municipal administration (2003 - chairman of the Youth Commission in the Novorossiysk administration; 2005 - deputy head of the Myschak Rural District administration). He then became a security guard again in a private company. In 2011, they wanted to strip him of his Russian citizenship due to suspicions of Ukrainian citizenship. In 2014, he helped to establish a Cossack association in Novorossiysk, which may indicate his involvement in the annexation of Crimea or the fighting in the Donbass (but there is no confirmation of this). He joined the Wagner Group in 2017 and took part in operations in Syria. After a year of service, he became commander of the group's operations in eastern Syria. In 2020, he was transferred to Libya, where he headed the Wagner Group's staff. See: *Journalists identify head of Wagner Group forces in Belarus as 46-year-old Ukraine native*, Meduza, 26 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/07/26/journalists-identify-head-of-wagner-forces-in-belarus-as-46-year-old-ukraine-native> [accessed: 26 VII 2023]; *Кто такой Сергей «Пионер» – глава «Вагнера» в Беларуси?*, Reformation, 19 VII 2023, <https://reform.by/kto-takoj-sergej-pioner-glava-vagnera-belarusi> [accessed: 19 VII 2023].

<sup>62</sup> *Wagner Group reportedly hands over military equipment and ammunition to Russia's Defense Ministry*, Meduza, 12 VII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/07/12/wagner-group-reportedly-hands-over-military-equipment-and-ammunition-to-russia-s-defense-ministry> [accessed: 12 VII 2023].

<sup>63</sup> A. Sari, *Hybrid CoE Paper 17: Instrumentalized migration and the Belarus crisis: Strategies of legal coercion*, Hybrid CoE, 25 IV 2023, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/hybrid-coe-paper-17-instrumentalized-migration-and-the-belarus-crisis-strategies-of-legal-coercion/> [accessed: 25 IV 2023]. On Russia's use of coercive engineered migration, see: M. Wojnowski, *The genesis, theory, and practice of Russian coercive migration engineering. A contribution to the study of the migration crisis on NATO's eastern flank*, "Internal Security Review" 2022, no. 26, pp. 263–300. <https://doi.org/doi:10.4467/20801335PBW.21.042.15702>.

<sup>64</sup> A.M. Dyer, W. Lorenz, F. Bryjka, *Grupa Wagnera na Białorusi – konsekwencje dla NATO i UE* (Eng. The Wagner Group in Belarus - implications for NATO and the EU), PISM, 7 IX 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/grupa-wagnera-na-bialorusi-konsekwencje-dla-nato-i-ue> [accessed: 7 IX 2023].



The presence of Russian mercenaries in Belarus has been used in Russia's psychological and disinformation operations. The chairman of the Defence Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma, Andrei Kartapolov, suggested that the deployment of the Wagnerists signifies Russia's preparations to occupy the so-called Suwałki Gap separating Belarus from the Russian exclave (Königsberg region)<sup>65</sup>. Lukashenko warned that the Wagnerists would like to enter Polish territory in order to carry out military actions in Warsaw and in Rzeszów, where the main logistics hub for supplying Ukraine with military aid provided by Western countries is located. Putin, on the other hand, stated that Poland has aggressive plans against Ukraine and Belarus, and Russia is ready to respond to them "with all available means"<sup>66</sup>. Coordinated actions in the information sphere were intended to intimidate Polish society and influence the Polish authorities to change their policy towards Belarus and Russia to a less confrontational one and to stop supporting Ukraine. These actions were also a clear warning that the Wagnerists could be used for a provocation that would force a disproportionate response from NATO and EU border states. In this way, Russia and Belarus created a sense of threat and increased tension within NATO and hoped that this would exacerbate political divisions among the allies over the assessment of the threat nature and its possible consequences, and thus make it more difficult for them to respond effectively<sup>67</sup>.

In order to discourage Belarus and Russia from escalating provocations and to strengthen its sense of security, Poland increased support to the Border Guard by several hundred police officers (including counter-terrorists), deployed additional military troops (up to 4,000 soldiers) on the border and created a task force in the operation codenamed 'RENGAW' (6,000 soldiers) kept in reserve<sup>68</sup>. Lithuania has closed four of its six border crossings with Belarus due to the risk of infiltration of the territory by Wagnerists using Belarusian passports. Countries in the region warned that they could close their borders with Belarus completely, which would

<sup>65</sup> *Celem wagnerowców na Białorusi będzie "przejęcie Przesmyku Suwalskiego" – rosyjski deputowany* (Eng. Wagnerists' goal in Belarus will be to 'take over the Suwałki Gap' - Russian MP), Belsat, 16 VII 2023, <https://belsat.eu/pl/news/16-07-2023-celem-wagnerowcow-na-bialorusi-bedzie-przejecie-przesmyku-suwalskiego-rosyjski-deputowany> [accessed: 16 VII 2023].

<sup>66</sup> P. Żochowski, *Rosja i Białoruś oskarżają Polskę o plany agresji* (Eng. Russia and Belarus accuse Poland of aggression plans), OSW, 24 VII 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2023-07-24/rosja-i-bialorus-oskarzaja-polske-o-plany-agresji> [accessed: 24 VII 2023].

<sup>67</sup> A.M. Dwyer, W. Lorenz, F. Bryjka, *Grupa Wagnera na Białorusi – konsekwencje dla NATO i UE...*

<sup>68</sup> *Operacja RENGAW. Na granicy polsko-białoruskiej rozpoczyna działanie wojskowe zgrupowanie zadaniowe* (Eng. Operation RENGAW. A military task force is launched on the Polish-Belarusian border), gov.pl, 12 VIII 2023, <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/operacja-rengaw-na-granicy-polsko-bialoruskiej-rozpoczyna-dzianie-wojskowe-zgrupowanie-zadaniowe> [accessed: 26 I 2024].

cut it off from trade opportunities with the EU, which - despite the sanctions imposed on the country - remains its second largest trading partner (after Russia). They also called on the Belarusian authorities to immediately remove the Wagner Group from the territory of the country, as well as to withdraw migrants used by Belarusian services to destabilise the border from the border areas<sup>69</sup>.

An important element of Russian-Belarusian psychological operations using the Wagner Group was the impact on Polish society. According to a survey by the Institute for Market and Social Research, more than half of Poles (50.6% of respondents) perceived the presence of Wagnerists in Belarus as a threat to Poland's security<sup>70</sup>. The disinformation-propaganda apparatus of Russia and Belarus tried to sustain these sentiments by, among other things, disseminating a graphic depicting a mercenary holding a knife and fork and embracing Polish soldiers against a background of a border post and the inscription 'Keep the fork in your left hand, the knife in your right, and the Poles in fear'. A reworked photo of a Polish soldier with the Wagner Group insignia and a Russian flag glued on also appeared online. Other graphics showed Polish and Belarusian border posts with the hand of a mercenary with a Wagner Group patch glued on, which was supposed to suggest that members of this organisation were infiltrating Polish territory. However, analysis of the images clearly showed that they had been manipulated. Similar activities were carried out against Lithuania and Latvia. On 11 August 2023, the Internal Security Agency detained two Russians who, on the orders of Russian intelligence, were distributing propaganda materials of the Wagner Group in Cracow and Warsaw<sup>71</sup>.

## Disintegration of the Prigozhin Empire

Russian investigative journalists have identified more than 400 companies linked to Prigozhin<sup>72</sup>. These assets are being seized by oligarchs loyal to Putin, but the details of this process are not fully known. The play focuses on two segments of Prigozhin's criminal and business activities:

<sup>69</sup> A.M. Dyner, W. Lorenz, F. Bryjka, *Grupa Wagnera na Białorusi – konsekwencje dla NATO i UE...*

<sup>70</sup> I. Kacprzak, *Wagnerowcy sieją zamęt na granicy. Ponad połowa Polaków uważa, że stanowią zagrożenie* (Eng. Wagnerists sow confusion at the border. More than half of Poles consider them a threat), *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 VIII 2023, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art38884031-wagnerowcy-sieja-zamet-na-granicy-ponad-polowa-polakow-uwaza-ze-stanowia-zagrozenie> [accessed: 1 VIII 2023].

<sup>71</sup> *ABW zatrzymała 2 obywateli Rosji* (Eng. ISA detained 2 Russian citizens), *gov.pl*, 14 VIII 2023, <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/abw-zatrzymala-2-obywateli-rosji> [accessed: 14 VIII 2023].

<sup>72</sup> *Прошлое и будущее Пригожина. Как владелец ЧВК «Вагнер» создал свою армию - и что будет делать после мятежа*, *Досье*, 6 VII 2023, <https://dossier.center/wagner-fall/> [accessed: 6 VII 2023].

- 1) a media empire used to conduct influence operations, spread propaganda and disinformation as well as interfere in the political processes of Western countries,
- 2) companies used to exploit natural resources in Africa and Syria, where in exchange for the Wagner Group's military services, Prigozhin's companies were awarded contracts for the extraction of oil, gold, diamonds or logging, among others.

According to The New York Times, the first sector was seized by the Foreign Intelligence Service of RF (Служба Внешней Разведки Российской Федерации, SVR), and the other is under the control of the GRU and the Ministry of Defence<sup>73</sup>.

Even during the so-called march of justice on Moscow, the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Communications, Information Technologies and Mass Communications, Roskomnadzor (Федеральная служба по надзору в сфере связи, информационных технологий и массовых коммуникаций, Роскомнадзор) blocked communications from the Russian media organisation Patriot Media Group, which was subsequently dissolved<sup>74</sup>. This included the RIA FAN agency, where Prigozhin served as head of the supervisory board. In addition, Prigozhin's media assets from 2013 included troll and bot farms, channels on Telegram and bloggers involved in Russian disinformation operations. Prigozhin's media assets were most likely taken over by state-owned corporations, led by Yuri Kovalchuk's holding company or one of the directors of state-owned Rostech Vasily Brovka, among others<sup>75</sup>.

During the seizure of Prigozhin's media assets, Russian government representatives (including Sergei Lavrov and Dmitry Peskov) assured that the Wagner Group would continue its operations in Africa, where 4,000-5,000 mercenaries are based<sup>76</sup>. In reality, however, the GRU and the Ministry of Defence were taking

<sup>73</sup> A. Troianovski et al., *After Prigozhin's Death, a High-Stakes Scramble for His Empire*, The New York Times, 8 IX 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-africa.html> [accessed: 8 IX 2023].

<sup>74</sup> *Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly dissolving Patriot Media Group, home of his 'troll factory'*, Meduza, 30 VI 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/06/30/prigozhin-reportedly-dissolving-patriot-media-group-home-of-his-troll-factory> [accessed: 30 VI 2023].

<sup>75</sup> J. Czerep, A. Legucka, *Przyszłość "imperium" Prigożyna* (Eng. The future of Prigozhin's "empire"), PISM, 17 VII 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/przyszlosc-imperium-prigozyna> [accessed: 17 VII 2023]; A. Stognei, M. Seddon, *Yevgeny Prigozhin's 'toxic' media empire left in Kremlin limbo*, Financial Times, 14 VII 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/723a967f-213b-45b4-8ca6-792aa8e-10ba0?shareType=nongift> [accessed: 14 VII 2023].

<sup>76</sup> See in more detail: J. Stanyard, T. Vircoulon, J. Rademeyer, *The Grey Zone: Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 16 II 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/> [accessed: 16 II 2023]; *Guns for gold:*

steps to prepare the ground for the takeover of this sphere of the Prigozhin empire. In Syria, members of the Wagner Group were coerced into signing contracts with the Ministry of Defence<sup>77</sup>. They were then denied access to the Hmeimim military airbase, used to supply operations in Syria and the CAR, where 1,900 mercenaries are deployed<sup>78</sup>.

In mid-August, at the Armia-2023 arms fair near Moscow, Gen. Shoygu urged representatives of African states not to use the services of the Wagner Group, but to cooperate only with companies subordinate to the Ministry of Defence. In doing so, he threatened to break off military-technical cooperation and withdraw Russia's diplomatic support at the UN<sup>79</sup>. On the eve of his death, the head of the Wagnerists published videos recorded in one of the countries in Africa (most likely the CAR or Mali), in which he assured the continuation of operations on the continent<sup>80</sup>. At the same time, however, Gen. Yevkurov embarked on a series of diplomatic visits to Africa and the Middle East (by mid-September he had been to Libya, Syria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Algeria, Sudan and Niger, among others), where he discussed new rules of military cooperation with Russia. These most likely included the issue

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*the Wagner Network exposed*, House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 26 VII 2023, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41073/documents/200048/default/> [accessed: 26 VII 2023]; E. Pokalova, *The Wagner Group in Africa: Russia's Quasi-State Agent of Influence*, "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism", <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2231642>; M. Weiss, P. Vaux, *The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa*, Free Russia Foundation, Washington 2020, <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/09/The-Company-You-Keep-Yevgeny-Prigozhins-Influence-Operations-in-Africa.pdf> [accessed: 16 II 2023]; L. Serwat, H. Nsaibia, N. Gurcov, *Moving Out of the Shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World*, The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2 VIII 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/02/moving-out-of-the-shadows-shifts-in-wagner-group-operations-around-the-world/#exec> [accessed: 2 VIII 2023]; G. Kuczyński, *Wagnerowcy. Psy wojny Putina* (Eng. Wagnerists. Putin's dogs of war), Warszawa 2022.

<sup>77</sup> S. Al-Khalidi, M. Gebeily, *Syria brought Wagner fighters to heel as mutiny unfolded in Russia*, Reuters, 7 VII 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/syria-brought-wagner-group-fighters-heel-mutiny-unfolded-russia-2023-07-07/> [accessed: 7 VII 2023].

<sup>78</sup> By the beginning of July, it is likely that around one-quarter (500-600) of the mercenaries had been withdrawn from CAR. See: J. Yongo, *Central African Republic says Wagner troop movement is rotation not departure*, Reuters, 8 VII 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/central-african-republic-says-wagner-troop-movement-is-rotation-not-departure-2023-07-08/> [accessed: 8 VII 2023].

<sup>79</sup> G. De Vries, *The Russian Ministry of Defense forces the countries at the Army 2023 forum to refuse to cooperate with PMC Wagner*, Savanna News, 15 VI 2023, <https://savannanews.com/the-russian-ministry-of-defense-forces-the-countries-at-the-army-2023-forum-to-refuse-to-cooperate-with-pmc-wagner/> [accessed: 15 VI 2023].

<sup>80</sup> *Russia's Prigozhin posts first video since mutiny, hints he is in Africa*, Reuters, 22 VIII 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russias-prigozhin-posts-first-video-since-mutiny-hints-hes-africa-2023-08-21/> [accessed: 22 VIII 2023].

of the provision of military services by companies supervised by the Ministry of Defence<sup>81</sup>.

These meetings were often attended by the GRU's deputy head of military intelligence, General Andrei Averjanov - commander of the GRU's Special Action Service (unit no. 29155), responsible for, among other things, the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the UK, interference in the US elections, and subversive activities in Europe (including the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Moldova and Montenegro)<sup>82</sup>. According to media reports, it was Gen. Averjanov who devised the plan for the complete takeover of Prigozhin's African assets. This plan included, among other things, the concept of creating a Russian Expeditionary Corps of 20,000 mercenaries, with Spetsnaz soldiers at its core<sup>83</sup>. Arms dealer Viktor But, who is linked to the GRU and has extensive experience in military-business activities in Africa, was also to be involved in this process. Prigozhin opposed these plans, and his increased activity on the continent was an attempt to maintain contracts in progress.

The process of disintegration of the Prigozhin empire was sealed by his death in a plane crash on 23 August 2023 in the Tver region. According to the Federal Air Transport Agency, seven executives of the Wagner Group, including mercenary chief Prigozhin, military commander-in-chief Utkin and security chief Valery Chekalov, were on board the private jet Embraer Legacy 600 No RA-02795 flying from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. All passengers and a crew of three were killed. On 27 August, the Russian Investigative Committee said that genetic tests had confirmed the presence of Prigozhin and Utkin among the victims<sup>84</sup>.

The elimination of the Wagner Group's leadership is linked to the failed mutiny carried out on the night of 23/24 June 2023 and was beneficial to the Russian army and Putin himself. By taking personal revenge, the president strengthened his position, stabilised a system of power based on fear, and sent a clear message to

<sup>81</sup> ЧВК «Вагнер» предложила бойцам найти другую работу из-за конкуренции с Минобороны и Росгвардией в Африке и на Ближнем Востоке, *Важные истории*, 30 VIII 2023, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/news/2023/08/30/chvk-vagner-predlozhila-boitsam-naiti-dругuyu-rabotu-iz-za-konkurentsii-s-minoboroni-i-rosgvardiei-v-afrike-i-na-blizhnem-vostoke/index.html> [accessed: 30 VIII 2023].

<sup>82</sup> M. Schwartz, *Top Secret Russian Unit Seeks to Destabilize Europe*, *The New York Times*, 8 X 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/world/europe/unit-29155-russia-gru.html> [accessed: 8 X 2019].

<sup>83</sup> *Putin Moves to Seize Control of Wagner's Mercenary Empire*, *Bloomberg*, 31 VIII 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-08-31/russia-moves-to-seize-control-of-wagner-empire-after-yevygeny-prigozhin-s-death#xj4y7vzkg> [accessed: 31 VIII 2023].

<sup>84</sup> *Russia says genetic tests confirm Prigozhin died in plane crash*, *Reuters*, 27 VIII 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-investigators-confirm-wagner-mercenary-chief-prigozhin-died-plane-crash-2023-08-27/> [accessed: 27 VIII 2023].

potential rebels. Strengthening his authority was important in the face of the lack of progress on the Ukrainian front, the fall in the value of the rouble and the prospect of presidential elections in 2024 Prigozhin's rebellion, whatever its fate, highlighted to the Russian power elite the weakness of Putin's system, which does not guarantee their security and revenues<sup>85</sup>.

Prigozhin's funeral was a closed one. It took place on 29 August at the Porokhov cemetery in Saint Petersburg without military ceremonies. Putin did not attend the ceremony, but only publicly referred to an acquaintance with Prigozhin dating back to the 1990s. He characterised his protégé as a person who had a "difficult fate" and "made serious mistakes". However, he emphasised Prigozhin's "loyalty, right up to his death" and "merits for the common cause"<sup>86</sup>. The authorities kept it a secret until the last minute when and where the mercenary chief would be buried. The protocol for the event was agreed between the Kremlin and the FSB. It was decided that the funeral would not be open so as not to create the myth of Prigozhin as a martyr. One FSB official was said to have stated that (...) *Prigozhin was a hero of the people, and we don't need heroes who marched on Moscow*<sup>87</sup>.

In order to mask the Kremlin's probable involvement in the elimination of the rebel, Russian disinformation channels spread lies suggesting that Western and Ukrainian special services were responsible for Prigozhin's death and that they had carried out a 'terrorist attack'<sup>88</sup>. However, even the Russians themselves do not believe this. According to a poll conducted by the Levada Centre<sup>89</sup>, only 14% of Russians agree with the Kremlin's official narrative line. The majority of respondents (26%) called the incident in the Tver region a tragic accident, and 20% outright believe that Prigozhin was murdered by the authorities for his so-called march of justice on Moscow. These reports were denied by Kremlin spokesman Peskov,

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<sup>85</sup> A. Legucka, F. Bryjka, *Konsekwencje śmierci Jewgienija Prigożyna* (Eng. Consequences of the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin), PISM, 24 VIII 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/konsekwencje-smierci-jewgienija-prigozyna> [accessed: 24 VIII 2023].

<sup>86</sup> *Putin breaks silence over Prigozhin's reported death*, BBC, 24 VIII 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66609678> [accessed: 26 I 2024].

<sup>87</sup> *'We don't need heroes who marched on Moscow': Kremlin and FSB decided to bury Yevgeny Prigozhin secretly, without military honors*, Meduza, 30 VIII 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/08/30/we-don-t-need-heroes-who-marched-on-moscow-kremlin-and-fsb-decided-to-bury-yevgeny-prigozhin-secretly-without-military-honors> [accessed: 30 VIII 2023].

<sup>88</sup> *DISINFO: The West is behind the terrorist attack on Prigozhin*, EUvsDisinfo, 29 VIII 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-behind-the-terrorist-attack-on-prigozhin> [accessed: 29 VIII 2023].

<sup>89</sup> *Запомнившиеся события августа, смерть Пригожина*, Левада Центр, 1 IX 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/2023/09/01/zapomnivshiesya-sobytiya-avgusta-smert-prigozhina/> [accessed: 1 IX 2023].

describing them as “absolute lies”<sup>90</sup>. In contrast, 16% of respondents are supporters of conspiracy theories (spread, among others, on Telegram by channels linked to the Wagner Group) suggesting that Prigozhin “lives somewhere in Africa” and that the plane crash was staged. Almost one-quarter of respondents (22%) found it difficult to respond. One factor contributing to the resistance to Kremlin disinformation in this particular case may be the high support for Prigozhin’s actions, which stood at 39% in August 2023<sup>91</sup>.

The death of the head of the mercenaries and their commander led to profound changes in the leadership of the Wagner Group and put the future of this armed formation in question. According to channels linked to the Wagnerists, after Prigozhin’s death, the command was taken over by Anton Yelizarov aka Lotos - the Spetsnaz officer under whose command the Wagnerists had captured Soledar<sup>92</sup>. He was dismissed from the army for falsifying documents. Potential successors to Prigozhin and Utkin included those in charge of military, business and political operations in Africa (Vitaly Perflyev, Dmitry Sytyi, Maksim Shugaley), as well as from the top command, such as Alexander Kuznetsov aka Ratibor or Andrei Bogatov aka Brodyaga. Other sources indicated that the Wagner Group’s assets were managed by Prigozhin’s son Pavel<sup>93</sup>.

After Prigozhin’s death, about a third of the Wagner camp in Osipovichi, Belarus, was liquidated<sup>94</sup>. Part of the Belarusian contingent was redeployed to Africa and the rest returned to Russia. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, at most 1,000 Wagnerists remain in Belarus, 200-500 of them as instructors<sup>95</sup>. It cannot be ruled out that they will eventually be officially recruited into the Belarusian army as trainers. At the end of December 2023, unconfirmed information also emerged indicating that the Wagnerists had been placed in a new special forces unit

<sup>90</sup> *Песков опроверг утверждения о причастности Кремля к крушению самолета Пригожина*, Интерфакс, 25 VIII 2023, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/917796> [accessed: 25 VIII 2023].

<sup>91</sup> *Запомнившиеся события августа, смерть Пригожина...*

<sup>92</sup> *Anton Yelizarov from “Wagner”. He commanded the offensive on Soledar, killing many of Ukrainian soldiers*, Molfar, <https://molfar.com/en/blog/komanduvav-nastupom-na-soledar-vbiv-bagato-nashih-deanon-ielizarova-z-vagnera> [accessed: 26 I 2024].

<sup>93</sup> M. Droin, T. Dolbaia, *Post-Prigozhin Russia in Africa. Regaining or Losing Control?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 IX 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/post-prigozhin-russia-africa-regaining-or-losing-control> [accessed: 20 IX 2023].

<sup>94</sup> *Satellite Images Show Wagner Camp In Belarus Being Dismantled*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 24 VIII 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-satellite-images-wagner-camp-dismantled/32563104.html> [accessed: 24 VIII 2023].

<sup>95</sup> *В Білорусі лишилось менше 1000 терористів з «пвк «вагнер»*, Центр Національного спротиву, 18 IX 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/v-bilorusi-lyshylos-menshe-1000-terorystiv-z-pvk-vagner/> [accessed: 18 IX 2023].

of the internal army, ‘Tarnada’ (English: Tornado), which was created to combat sabotage and reconnaissance groups and illegal armed groups<sup>96</sup>. Some of them may also be offered jobs in Africa by the Belarusian military company Guard Service, which is linked to Lukashenko’s close associate Viktor Sheyman<sup>97</sup>.

At the beginning of November 2023 Kartapolov stated that the Wagner Group had been fully dissolved<sup>98</sup>. Its assets are being taken over by companies controlled by the Ministry of Defence (mainly Redut and Africa Corps). However, their operational activity in Africa is based (at least in part) on the Wagner Group’s infrastructure and human resources. Former Wagnerists are also returning to the Ukrainian front, where they are fighting, among others, in the Avdiyivka and Bakhmut areas<sup>99</sup> in the structures of the DNR’s International Brigade (the so-called Fifteen) and the Rosgvardia, including the Chechen specnaz “Akhmat” (Kamerton unit)<sup>100</sup>. Supervision of the ‘volunteer formations’ - as the Russian authorities euphemistically refer to the semi-private military companies fighting in Ukraine - is exercised by Andrei Troshev aka Sedoy (English: grey-haired), who for years was Utkin’s deputy and chief of staff of the Wagner Group<sup>101</sup>. He had previously served as a liaison officer between the Wagnerists and the Kremlin and the Russian army. He also managed the Liga association of veterans, which was one of the channels for recruitment. Troshev did not support Prigozhin’s rebellion and, together with a group of ten Wagner Group commanders, signed a contract with the Ministry of Defence<sup>102</sup> and the military company Redut co-financed by Gennady Timchenko and Oleg Deripaska.

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<sup>96</sup> *Najemnicy z Grupy Wagnera zasilili bialoruski specnaz* (Eng. Wagner Group mercenaries reinforced Belarusian specnaz), Belsat, 16 XII 2023, <https://belsat.eu/pl/news/16-12-2023-najemnicy-z-grupy-wagnera-zasilili-bialoruski-specnaz> [accessed: 26 I 2024].

<sup>97</sup> *Вагнерівці, які підписали контракт з білоруською ПВК, відправляють в Африку*, Центр Національного спротиву, 12 IX 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/vagnerivtsi-yaki-pidpysaly-kontrakt-z-biloruskoju-pvk-vidpravlyayut-v-afryku/> [accessed: 12 IX 2023].

<sup>98</sup> *Картаполов заявил об окончательном расформировании ЧВК «Вагнер»*, РБК, 2 XI 2023, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/11/2023/6543d4389a794741e8fa258e> [accessed: 3 XI 2023].

<sup>99</sup> *А. Степура, Колишні бійці «Вагнера» справді перебувають на Бахмутському напрямку, це психологічна операція*, Суспільне Новини, 27 IX 2023, <https://suspilne.media/581703-kolisni-bijci-vagnera-spravdi-perebuvaют-na-bahmutskomu-napramku-ce-psihologicna-operacia-evlas/> [accessed: 27 IX 2023].

<sup>100</sup> *В «Ахмате» рассказали о массовом пополнении из экс-бойцов «Вагнера»*, Риа Новости, 28 X 2023, <https://ria.ru/20231028/akhmat-1905834455.html> [accessed: 28 X 2023].

<sup>101</sup> *Встреча с Юнус-Бекем Евкуровым и Андреем Трошевым*, Kremlin.ru, 29 IX 2023, <https://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72391> [accessed: 29 IX 2023].

<sup>102</sup> *Wagner’s second-in-command Troshev sided against Prigozhin during the coup – report*, The New Voice of Ukraine, 18 VII 2023, <https://news.yahoo.com/wagner-second-command-troshev-sided-015200321.html> [accessed: 18 VII 2023].



## Summary

Prigozhin's mutiny was the most serious manifestation of the Putin regime's instability to date. The failure of this rebellion is primarily due to the fact that it was not supported by the political elite, the power structures or part of the army. Left to their own devices, the Wagnerists were also not determined enough to achieve their goals. Although the main cause of the Wagner Group's rebellion was the conflict between the mercenary chief and the military elite, the armed march of the Wagnerists on Moscow weakened the image of the president, who had maintained close relations with Prigozhin since the 1990s. The disloyalty of a protégé who dared to form a conspiracy against the Russian state was not forgiven, and the security guarantees given to the rebel proved completely unreliable. In the two months between the mutiny and Prigozhin's death, the Russian government carried out spot purges in the army, but did not carry out a thorough personnel reshuffle. In order to stabilise the internal situation, the Rosgvardia was strengthened and some ultranationalist critics of the Kremlin and the Ministry of Defence were removed from the information space. Despite the temporary crisis, Putin's regime is strengthening and tightening the mechanisms of control and repression against opponents. It should therefore not be assumed that there will be any significant splits in the Russian power elite in the near future.

For the Wagner Group, Prigozhin's rebellion in turn proved to be the beginning of the end of its activities. The efficient takeover of Wagnerists' assets by rival military companies controlled by the Ministry of Defence and the GRU can be seen as a success allowing the government to rebuild its image after the rebellion. The division of Prigozhin's assets between several entities is most likely to prevent one company from monopolising the military services sector. Subordinating them to the Ministry of Defence will make it easier to exercise operational control over them, but will weaken Russia's ability to plausibly deny links with them. Despite the Wagnerist rebellion, according to the author, Russia will not abandon its use of semi-private armed companies in Ukraine, the Middle East or Africa. From the Polish perspective, the most important issue is the presence of Russian mercenaries in Belarus, where they may be involved in destabilising the situation on the border. Therefore, it is in Poland's interest to strengthen NATO's strategic communication on this issue. The Alliance should send a clear signal that any provocation involving the Wagner Group and their followers could be considered aggression. NATO should prepare a flexible concept of response to various forms of their actions destabilising its eastern flank and the countries of the Global South.

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