

## The Wagner Mutiny: Unveiling the Complex Interplay Between Private Military Groups and State Authority

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Source: Reuters

### Introduction

The Wagner Group, a shadowy private military company founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a wealthy businessman known as ‘Putin’s chef,’ has captured global attention due to its involvement in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Founded in 2014, the Wagner Group operated discreetly,

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<sup>2</sup> “What is Russia’s Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?”, BBC News, July 19, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

engaging in various global conflicts while maintaining a low profile.<sup>3</sup> However, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the group emerged from the shadows, attracting significant international attention.

On June 24, around 5,000 Wagner troops took control of Rostov-on-Don, a city in southern Russia.<sup>4</sup> They began advancing towards Moscow to oust the military leadership. However, Prigozhin halted the mutiny after negotiating with the Kremlin, facilitated by Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko. The future of this group is now uncertain, as the mutiny has complicated its trajectory.

This commentary briefly analyses the emergence the Wagner Group and the relationship between these PMGs and state authorities. Through a critical examination of the Wagner Group's recent mutiny, it will assess the implications of this mutiny for the Wagner group and for Russia.



Source: ABC News

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<sup>3</sup> “What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?”, BBC News.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

## **Emergence of Private Military Groups (PMGs)**

Private Military Groups (PMGs) have a long history, dating back to ancient times when mercenaries were hired to fight in conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Over the centuries, their role evolved alongside changes in warfare and governance structures. In modern times, the growth of globalization, technological advancements, and shifts in state security policies have facilitated the expansion of these PMGs. PMGs operate across borders today, providing various services, including security, logistics, and intelligence.

The rise of PMGs in contemporary conflicts can be attributed to various factors. State governments often seek their services for cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and deniability.<sup>6</sup> PMGs offer specialized expertise, quick deployment, and the ability to fill gaps in conventional forces. Additionally, the privatization of security allows governments to mitigate political risks and public backlash. For corporations, PMGs offer protection in unstable regions, safeguarding assets and personnel.<sup>7</sup>

The Wagner Group stands out as a prominent example of a PMG. It has gathered international attention for its secretive operations and involvement in conflicts worldwide. Operating as a mercenary force, Wagner has been active in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Wagner Group: A Shadowy Power**

Initially supporting pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, the Wagner group expanded its activities in Africa and the Middle East. Wagner's first commander was Dmitri Utkin, a Chechen war veteran known by the radio call "Wagner."<sup>9</sup> Unlike conventional private military contractors, the group blends mercenary activities with natural resource extraction, furthering the Kremlin's foreign-policy goals.<sup>10</sup> Though nominally private, the Wagner Group has deep ties with the Russian security apparatus, despite official denials from the Russian government. The group's

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<sup>5</sup> Sean McFate, "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today", National Defence University Press, December 4, 2019, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>.

<sup>6</sup> McFate, "Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today".

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> "What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?", BBC News.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Amy Mackinnon, "What Is Russia's Wagner Group?", Foreign Policy, July 6, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/06/what-is-wagner-group-russia-mercenaries-military-contractor/>.

mysterious nature poses significant challenges for victims, governments, and international institutions striving to hold them accountable for alleged atrocities committed in their operations.

Since 2015, Wagner’s mercenaries have been actively involved in Syria, fighting alongside pro-government forces and providing security for oilfields.<sup>11</sup> The group has also established a presence in Libya, supporting General Khalifa Haftar’s forces, and it is believed that they are responsible for guarding gold mines in Sudan. In 2020, the US military accused Wagner mercenaries of planting landmines and other improvised explosive devices in and around the Libyan capital, Tripoli.<sup>12</sup> In the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner personnel have been assigned to protect diamond mines. The UN and the French government have accused Wagner troops of committing rape and robbery against civilians in CAR. In West Africa, the government of Mali employs the group in countering Islamic militant groups.<sup>13</sup>

Originally comprising around 5,000 fighters, Wagner’s ranks swelled during the war in Ukraine, with Prigozhin stating he commanded 25,000 troops.<sup>14</sup> Despite the illegality of mercenary forces in Russia, Wagner registered as a “private military company” in 2022.<sup>15</sup>

Wagner played a significant role in the capture of Bakhmut in eastern Ukraine on behalf of Russia. Ukrainian troops reported that Wagner’s fighters were heavily deployed in large numbers, resulting in numerous casualties. According to Ukrainian prosecutors, in April 2022, three Wagner mercenaries operating alongside regular Russian troops allegedly killed and tortured civilians near Kyiv.<sup>16</sup> In March 2022, German intelligence raised concerns that Wagner troops might have been involved in massacring civilians in Bucha.<sup>17</sup> Before Russia’s invasion, there were suspicions that Wagner conducted “false flag” attacks in Ukraine, aiming to provide a pretext for the Kremlin’s intervention.<sup>18</sup> Around 40,000 of the 50,000 men deployed by Wagner in Ukraine were convicts promised freedom if they survived.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?”, BBC News.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> “Photos: The History of Russia’s Wagner Group”, Wall Street Journal, June 27, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/story/photos-the-history-of-russias-wagner-group-6cb39e54>

President Putin revealed that between May 2022 and May 2023, Wagner received 86.26 billion roubles (\$1 billion) from the government to cover troop expenses.<sup>20</sup> According to the US Treasury, Prigozhin's private companies have recorded profits in various locations where Wagner operates, such as gold and diamond mines in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan and oil and gas fields in Syria.<sup>21</sup> According to the British newspaper The Financial Times, revenues generated from Wagner's natural resources holdings were estimated to have reached around \$250 million between 2018 and 2021.<sup>22</sup> Prigozhin employs Wagner mercenaries alongside his other multinational ventures to establish and manage a transnational criminal organization.

## **The Tug of War Between State Sovereignty and Private Interests**

Traditional notions of state authority include the idea that the state holds a legitimate monopoly on the use of force and violence within its territory.<sup>23</sup> This principle, rooted in political theory, assigns the state the exclusive right to maintain law and order, protect its citizens, and defend national sovereignty. The state's ability to enforce laws and establish order through its security apparatus is fundamental to its role as a governing entity and upholding social stability. However, the emergence of PMGs challenges this traditional concept, raising complex issues about the interplay between state authority and private interests in contemporary conflicts.

As non-state actors, PMGs operate independently, blurring the lines between state-sanctioned and private interests. Their involvement in conflicts can undermine state sovereignty, impacting state control over security affairs. The rise of PMGs raises questions of accountability and oversight, as their actions may not always align with state policy objectives. Additionally, their financial motivations may exacerbate conflicts or lead to human rights abuses, complicating the delicate balance between state authority and the regulation of private military activities.

The Wagner Mutiny exemplifies the complex interplay between PMGs and state authority. It reflects internal dissent and challenges PMGs face when aligned with state forces. The mutiny revealed a clash between the group's perception of inadequacies in Russia's military strategy and

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<sup>20</sup> "What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?", BBC News.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Monir Ghaedi, "Who are Russia's mercenary Wagner Group?", DW, June 06, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-russias-mercenary-wagner-group/a-64429380>.

<sup>23</sup> Andre Munro, "state monopoly on violence", Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-monopoly-on-violence>.

the Russian government's official stance. It exposed the delicate balance between private interests and state sovereignty, as it showcased an attempt by a PMG to hold state authorities accountable. Furthermore, the Wagner Mutiny highlights issues of accountability and control.

## **The Wagner Mutiny: Unraveling the Incident**

Prigozhin frequently criticized Russia's defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, and the chief of staff of the armed forces, Valery Gerasimov, regarding their war strategy in Ukraine. He defied a direct order from the defence ministry to have the group under their control. He denounced the war in Ukraine as being built on falsehoods. He demanded an end to what he described as the "evil" within the Russian military leadership. Prigozhin accused Sergei Shoigu of ordering the concealment of the bodies of 2,000 deceased Wagner fighters, further fueling tensions between his group and the military.<sup>24</sup>

On June 23, 2023, Prigozhin called the 'march for justice'. Russia soon announced criminal charges against Prigozhin for calling for armed mutiny, and the Wagner fighters were urged to return to their military bases.<sup>25</sup> Security measures at government buildings, transportation hubs, and other critical locations in Moscow were bolstered with increased precautions and vigilance. Furthermore, military vehicles were observed patrolling the streets of Moscow, adding to the heightened security presence.

The Wagner Group crossed into Russia from Ukraine on 24 June 2023. Prigozhin demanded to receive the Chief of the General Staff and Shoigu and threatened to blockade the city of Rostov and head for Moscow if they failed to show up.

During a televised address, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged Wagner fighters as heroes who had "liberated" the Donbas region in Ukraine. However, he also expressed concerns over the elements of treason. He described Prigozhin's revolt as a betrayal and a stab in the back to Russia. A convoy of approximately 5,000 Wagner Group fighters was reportedly advancing towards the outskirts of Russia's capital.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "What happened in Russia? Here's how the Wagner Group's mutiny unfolded over the weekend", ABC NEWS, June 26, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-26/what-is-the-wagner-group-russia-mutiny-yevgeny-prigozhin-/102521218>.

<sup>25</sup> "What happened in Russia? Here's how the Wagner Group's mutiny unfolded over the weekend", ABC NEWS.

<sup>26</sup> "What happened in Russia? Here's how the Wagner Group's mutiny unfolded over the weekend", ABC NEWS.

On the same day, Belarusian President Lukashenko announced that he had reached an agreement with Prigozhin, wherein the latter pledged to de-escalate the situation. In response, Prigozhin assured his forces would retreat to their bases to prevent bloodshed. The Wagner Group started to retreat on Saturday night. Approximately 600 Wagner fighters established a camp at Tsel, located in southern Belarus.<sup>27</sup>



Source: The Star

## The Wagner Mutiny as a Turning Point

Belarus' Defence ministry has claimed that the Wagner fighters now serve as instructors for its territorial defence forces. Meanwhile, the US military asserts that Wagner troops in Ukraine are no longer actively engaged in any significant capacity in the ongoing conflict. After the mutiny's settlement, Prigozhin was supposed to go into exile in Belarus. However, on July 6th, 2023,

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<sup>27</sup> "What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?", BBC News.

President Alexander Lukashenko stated that Prigozhin was in St. Petersburg, Russia.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, President Vladimir Putin revealed that he met with Prigozhin and other Wagner commanders in the Kremlin five days after the mutiny to discuss the group's future.

Following the Wagner Group's failed march on Moscow, Vladimir Putin openly acknowledged that Wagner has operated as a Kremlin-controlled and financed entity since its inception in 2014.<sup>29</sup> The previously thin veil shrouding Moscow's relationship with Wagner was completely lifted, revealing the clear and direct connection between the group and the Russian government.

The Wagner mutiny might have some serious implications for the future operations of the Wagner Group. It showcased internal dissent and conflicting interests. Prigozhin's defiance of orders from the Russian defence ministry highlighted the group's ability to challenge state authority. This defiance must have strained the already ambiguous relationship between the PMG and the Russian government, raising questions about the level of control and influence the Russian government has over the Wagner Group.

African leaders, who previously engaged the group for military services, might now hesitate to hire them. The mutiny, where Prigozhin defied Russian authorities, could be a cautionary example, causing African nations to rethink their reliance on the group for security operations. Observing Prigozhin's actions against his patrons may lead to increased scrutiny and reservations about partnering with the Wagner Group.<sup>30</sup>

The mutiny has exposed the internal vulnerabilities of the Kremlin government. Putin appears increasingly weakened as he grapples with the consequences of this mutiny. The mutiny followed Prigozhin's extended campaign aimed to remove Russia's Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoigu, and Chief of General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov. He held them responsible for a flawed strategy and alarmingly high Russian casualty rates, reflecting the frustrations of frontline soldiers and

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<sup>28</sup> "What is Russia's Wagner group, and where have its fighters gone?", BBC News.

<sup>29</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Following Prigozhin's Aborted Mutiny, What Will Happen to the Wagner Group?", Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 13, 2023, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/07/following-prigozhins-aborted-mutiny-what-will-happen-to-the-wagner-group/>.

<sup>30</sup> "Wagner Group's mutiny impact on Middle East and Africa operations: US officials", Al Arabiya News, June 28, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/06/28/Wagner-Group-s-mutiny-impact-on-Middle-East-and-Africa-operations-US-officials>.



Russia's right-wing ultranationalist factions. As the situation unfolds, the fate of Shoigu and Gerasimov also hangs in the balance.

Amidst the losses, one clear beneficiary seems to be Ukraine. The Wagner mutiny resulted in the Russian army losing some of its most skilled and effective shock troops in eastern Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Putin might offset any reduction in Wagner forces by incorporating additional Chechen soldiers or exploring alternative ways to integrate new forces. However, the loss of highly agile and mobile Wagner fighters is still expected to pose a significant setback for Russian forces in the long term.<sup>32</sup> The unique capabilities and experience of Wagner's troops make them valuable assets, and their absence could adversely impact Russian military operations, especially in conflicts where swift manoeuvring and adaptability are crucial.

## **Conclusion**

The Wagner Mutiny exposed internal dissent within the Wagner Group. Prigozhin defied Russian authorities. It has consequences for both the Wagner Group and Russia. The mutiny's consequences may lead to African nations reconsidering hiring the Wagner Group for military services. It unveiled vulnerabilities within the Kremlin government, weakening Putin's image. The Russian army's loss of highly skilled and mobile Wagner fighters in Ukraine could impact its military operations in the long term, despite potential attempts to compensate with other forces.

Addressing the complexities of PMGs and state authority requires a multi-faceted approach. Governments must establish clear regulations and oversight mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability in the activities of PMGs. International cooperation is crucial to create standardized guidelines for engaging PMGs in conflicts. Moreover, further research and analysis should be conducted to understand the implications of PMGs on state sovereignty.

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<sup>31</sup> Mick Ryan, "It's unclear how Prigozhin's Wagner mutiny will affect operations in Ukraine. But it will corrode the fighting power of Russia's military", ABC News, June 29, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-29/prigozhin-wagner-mutiny-ukraine-operations-russian-military/102536320>.

<sup>32</sup> Armani Syed & Anna Gordon, "Russia's Notorious Wagner Group Is Being Disbanded. Here's What That Means for Ukraine", Time, June 27, 2023, <https://time.com/6290536/russia-wagner-group-disbanded-ukraine/>.