

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

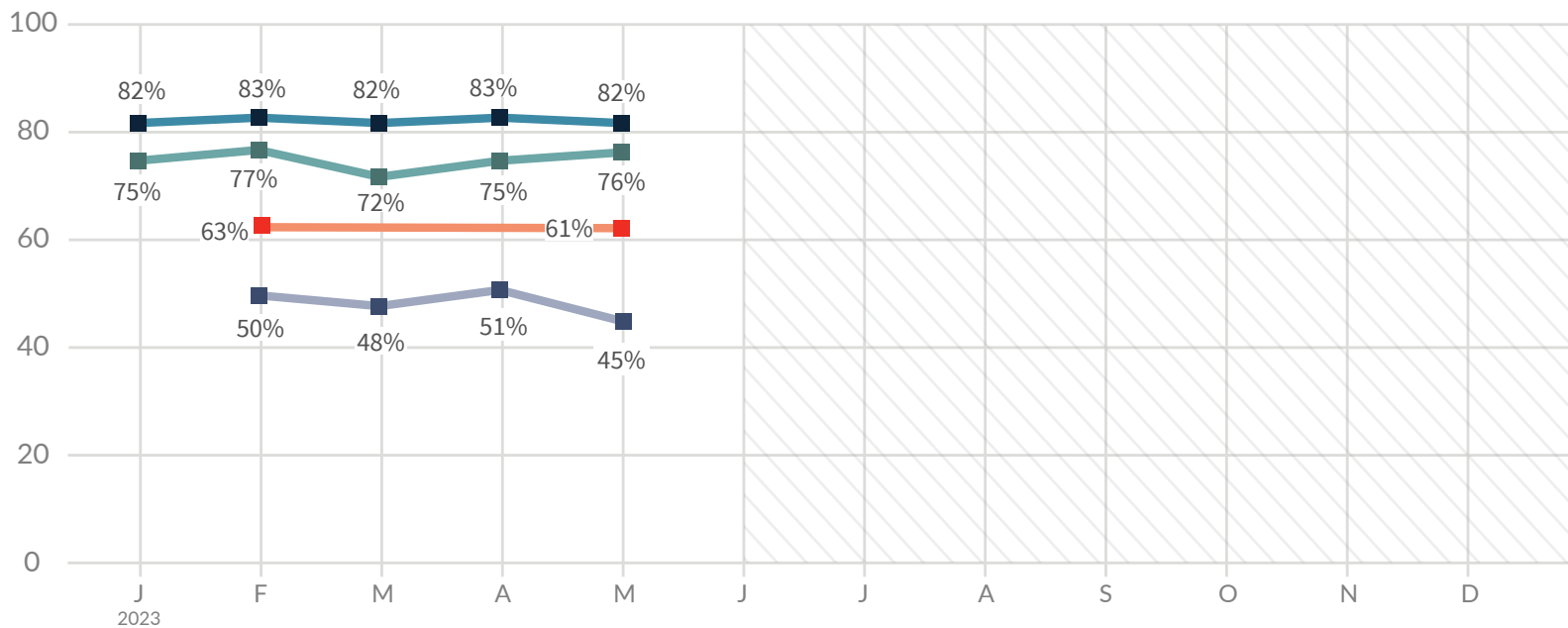
Putin's "Partners": PMC Wagner



In This Running Estimate...

- Russian Domestic Support for Putin and the Special Military Operations remains high at 83%, although 45% of Russians support negotiations to end the conflict.
- Russian society is dealing with the arrival of battle-hardened criminals into communities and a rise in violent crime.
- Wagner's long-held reputation for brutality is meant to intimidate opponents and coerce loyalty among its members.
- Wagner head Yevgeny Prigozhin's feud with the Ministry of Defense over the conduct of the war, lack of combat support to Wagner, and recognition for battlefield successes resulted in the 23-24 June mutiny.
- The popularity contest between Putin and Prigozhin suggests cracks in the stability of the regime.
- As the future of Wagner PMC is decided after the mutiny, so is the future of Russian influence and exploitation activities in the Global South, which are largely carried out by Wagner.

DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS



NOTE 1: This polling was conducted in May 2023 prior to the mutiny that occurred in late June 2023.

NOTE 2: Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Figure 1: Domestic Russian Perceptions, GCKN.

APPROVE PUTIN

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s public approval rating dropped only a percentage point in May and continues to remain consistently high since the start of the invasion. The reasons for Putin’s high approval are complex and multifaceted, including the perception among many Russians that Putin has restored stability and pride to Russia after the tumultuous post-Soviet era of the 1990s. Putin’s desire to restore Russia to great power status resonates with the public and is bolstered by his regional aggression. Putin has also ostracized the independent media to ensure that only state-sponsored propaganda about the war is available to the public. There are also indications of growing dissatisfaction with Putin among younger Russians who are disenchanted by the war’s effects. However, this is unlikely to unravel Putin’s national popularity. It remains to be seen what the effects of the Wagner mutiny will be on Putin’s popularity. Post-mutiny polling was not available at the time of publication for this update.¹

SUPPORT SMO

Domestic support for the Special Military Operation (SMO) has remained stable in 2023, increasing by 3% from March to April and by another 1% in May. Two factors likely account for the consistent high support for the war. The first is Putin’s emphasis on restoring Russia’s status as a great power, which has resonated with many Russians who see the conflict in Ukraine as a way of asserting Russia’s authority on the world stage. The second is the Kremlin’s framing of the invasion as a matter of national security. The government acts to defend Russian speakers and ethnic Russians to increase the public’s stake in the war and their desire for victory. This translates into high approval. It remains to be seen what the effects of the Wagner mutiny will be on public support for the SMO, as post-mutiny polling was not available at the time of publication for this update.²

SMO IS SUCCESSFUL

In May, 61% of the population believed the SMO was succeeding, a 2% decrease from February. While the public's initial high expectation of swift victory has tapered, the Kremlin's narrative of the conflict portrays Russia as winning or at least holding its own against the West (not Ukraine), which resonates with the public. This narrative has been reinforced by the government's control over the Russian media, which has heavily influenced public opinion on the conflict. Because the state strong-arms the media, it is difficult to say with certainty how much of the Russian population believes the Kremlin's narrative of success. While many Russians may accept the framing uncritically, some are increasingly critical of the war, the reasons for it, and how Russia is prosecuting it.³

SUPPORT NEGOTIATION

In May, 45% of Russians preferred negotiation to end the conflict with Ukraine, a 6% drop from April. It is important to note that public opinion on this issue can be influenced by various factors, including media coverage and government propaganda. Additionally, the Kremlin's messaging about its thwarting of the planned Ukrainian counteroffensives may have affected the polling.⁴ However, Wagner's late June mutiny will probably accelerate interest in negotiation to end the conflict because of the additional burden that Wagner's absence from the war's frontlines will impose on Russian forces and war dynamics.



SOURCE: ЧВК (Частная военная компания/Private Military Company) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PMC_Wagner_Center_logo.png, Public domain.

BACKGROUND: PMC WAGNER

The Wagner Group is a Russian private military company (PMC) that has gained significant attention in recent years for its involvement in various conflicts around the world. Wagner conducts security, training and advising local forces, and combat operations for its clients. While the group operates as a private entity, it is widely acknowledged to have close ties to the Russian government and security services. The group is known for recruiting former military personnel, including veterans of the Russian armed forces, and offering them lucrative contracts.⁵

The origins of the Wagner Group remain somewhat opaque. Some sources cite Dmitry Utkin, a former Russian military intelligence agency (GRU) officer, as the founder. Others, including Prigozhin himself, claim Prigozhin founded it. Still others claim both founded it. It first emerged in 2013 as the private military company (PMC) known as the "Slavonic Corps" in Syria, led by Utkin. In 2014 Utkin resurfaced leading PMC Wagner in Eastern Ukraine at the behest of the GRU. Utkin is rumored to have named the group after his army call sign, which was a tribute to one of Adolf Hitler's favorite composers.⁶

International (and Russian domestic) awareness of Wagner emerged after it suffered hundreds killed in an attack on a U.S.-advised Kurdish force in Syria in February 2018. Prior to this, combat deaths of Russian citizens were attributed to training accidents or other misadventure. The Syria mass casualty event from air strikes called in by U.S. Special Forces, forced the Kremlin to explain large numbers of dead Russian contractors, mostly veterans, in Syria to support the Assad regime. However, the Kremlin refused to admit any official connection with Wagner, despite its deployments often aligning with Russian policy objectives, and it being supported with Russian military equipment and logistics.⁷

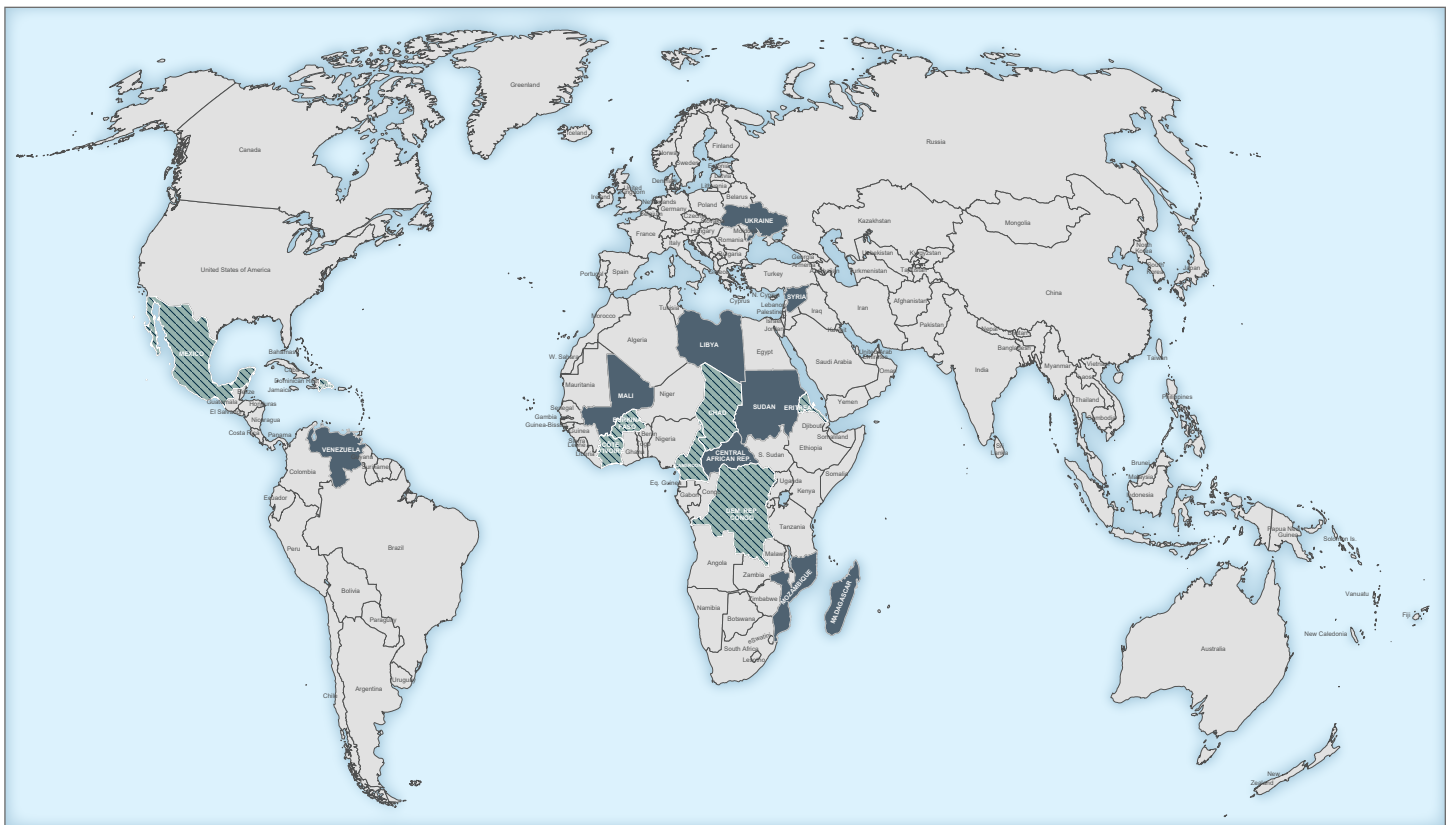
There had been reports of the group's fighters being involved in combat operations without official acknowledgment from the Russian government, until the 2022 Ukraine invasion, leading to concerns about their accountability and

continue on 4

the lack of transparency. Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin had long been tied to Wagner but did not publicly admit his ties to the PMC until September 2022.⁸ Soon after the Ukraine invasion, Wagner began conducting major combat operations alongside Russian military forces and suffered heavy losses. Needing an influx of replacements to fulfill its role as a Russian conventional ground force, Prigozhin began to personally recruit prisoners to expand the ranks of Wagner. Putin did not admit the state's relationship with Wagner until a 27 June 2023 meeting about Wagner's failed insurgency.⁹

Wagner has performed a variety of military functions for Russia across four continents. Activities range from large scale combat operations in Ukraine to various security and security assistance tasks in Syria, Venezuela, and Africa. Much of Wagner's overseas work was done in exchange for a share of natural resources, exploiting various conditions of the operational environment for financial gain and influence of Wagner and ultimately Russia.¹⁰

Wagner's activities have drawn international attention and condemnation. It has been accused of human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, and destabilization activities. It has also faced accusations of being a tool for advancing Russian interests and exerting Russian influence in various conflicts. Several countries, including the United States, have imposed sanctions on individuals and entities associated with the group for their alleged involvement in malign activities. In January 2023, the United States designated Wagner a significant transnational criminal organization.¹¹



PMC Wagner Areas of Operation and Interest, map, GCKN.

BACKGROUND: PRIGOZHIN

Yevgeny Prigozhin is a Russian oligarch and a prominent figure in Russian politics and business. Prigozhin's rise to prominence came through his involvement in various industries, including catering, military support services, and media. Prigozhin initially ventured into the catering business and founded the company "Concord Catering." Over time, he expanded his business interests into other fields, including construction, logistics, and security services.¹²

His connection to Russian politics became evident when he developed a close relationship with Vladimir Putin. He reportedly catered events for Putin and his government, which contributed to his growing influence and wealth. Prigozhin's association with Putin led to him being referred to as "Putin's chef" in the media.¹³

Prigozhin has become a billionaire through a wide array of business ventures providing financial gain and influence to him, Putin, and Russia. Some of these ventures have been at the behest of Putin and the Kremlin. Others have served as funding and logistics fronts for PMC Wagner. Some have been in support of Russian influence operations. The Wall Street Journal identified at least 64 companies associated with Prigozhin and/or Wagner, including oil and gas companies, mining companies, and media influence ventures.¹⁴

Prigozhin's international profile rose in 2018 when he and several Russian entities associated with him were indicted by the United States Department of Justice for allegedly interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The indictment accused Prigozhin of funding the Internet Research Agency, a Russian troll farm that engaged in social media manipulation and disinformation campaigns.¹⁵

Because of his alleged involvement in malign activities, Prigozhin has faced sanctions from the United States and the European Union, restricting his access to international business dealings and travel. He is a convicted felon, who served two years in prison in 1981 for assault.^{a,16}

^a Various media outlets have reported that Prigozhin served up to nine years in prison. However, according to a retraction printed by the Russian outlet Meduza after being sued by Prigozhin for defamation in 2020, official sentencing records only show that he was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison in 1981 for assault. SOURCE: "Prigozhin's criminal past, straight from the source," *Meduza*, 29 June 2021, accessed 12 July 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/06/29/prigozhin-s-criminal-past-straight-from-the-source>

KILLERS AND RAPISTS AND THIEVES (OH MY!): THE EFFECT OF FORMER WAGNER CONVICT RECRUITS ON SOCIETY

A lack of efficient mechanisms in place to reintegrate demobilized Wagner fighters, which include battle-hardened ex-convicts, into society risks escalating violent crimes, undermining the rule of law, and depressing public confidence in Russian authorities.

Before the 2022 invasion, Wagner mainly recruited former military personnel, including veterans of the Russian Armed Forces, offering lucrative contracts with much higher pay than the Russian military. Its recruitments leveraged the Kremlin's youth militarization programs and vaunted nationalism,¹⁷ and its high-risk threshold. However, high personnel attrition in Ukraine and an inability

to recruit from its traditional recruiting pool to offset combat losses led it to recruit prisoners, who are offered pardons in exchange for fighting on six-month contracts. The convict recruits are poorly trained and equipped and may be more willing to engage in high-risk and potentially illegal activities.¹⁸

- According to the U.S. Department of Defense, Wagner once had an estimated 50,000 personnel in Ukraine, including 10,000 contractors and 40,000 convicts. About half of those convict recruits were casualties in the battles for Soledar and Bakhmut.¹⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) criticized Wagner's utilization of its convict recruits, while Prigozhin criticized the war's progress. This likely led to Putin transferring prison recruitment to the MOD in March 2023. Earlier reports of prisoners refusing to contract with Wagner due to the high casualty rate supports this perspective.²⁰
- The initial cohorts of Wagner convict recruits are

reaching the end of their six-month obligations, after which they will be paid, pardoned, and demobilized. According to Prigozhin, up to 32,000 Wagner convict recruits have been demobilized, which poses great risks for the Russian communities receiving them after demobilization. Some communities have complained to the Russian government about former prisoners, now with combat experience, suddenly appearing in their communities. Several reports implicate demobilized convict fighters in serious crimes, including murder, although Prigozhin claims they committed less than 1% of the crimes,²¹ even as the national murder rate increased for the first time in 20 years.²²

WAGNER WAR CRIMES: SOCIOPATHS, INFOWAR, OR CRIMINAL 'HONOR' CODE?

Wagner's long-time reputation for brutality probably stems from a calculated decision to project fear among opposing forces by accepting, encouraging, and ordering abuses and to secure the loyalty of fighters through their complicity in perpetrating war crimes.

- Wagner was accused of the 2017 savage killing and mutilation of Syrian army deserter Hamadi Bouta in eastern Syria. The killing, which a Wagner fighter allegedly recorded, became a rallying point for Russian ultranationalists online and signaled the possible fusion of ultranationalists and Russian paramilitaries.²³
- Wagner, which has been providing security and military support to the Central African Republic (CAR) government, has been accused of abuses against civilians, including killings, torture, and other forms of violence. In 2018, they were suspected of killing 19 Muslim villagers in Boyo for allegedly supporting rebels who previously exploited gold mines that were occupied by Wagner. That same year, three Russian journalists investigating Wagner in CAR were murdered, while two other journalists investigating the PMC died under mysterious circumstances in Russia, raising concerns about attempts to suppress information and cover up potential wrongdoing.²⁴
- The UN accused Wagner of killing up to 500 people, mostly civilians, as well as torture and rape, in the village of Moura, Mali, in March 2022.²⁵
- Wagner allegedly conducted indiscriminate shelling, targeting of civilian areas, and extrajudicial killings in Eastern Ukraine after both the 2014 and 2022 invasions. In 2014, during the Battle of Ilovaik, Wagner fighters attacked Ukrainian towns, resulting in heavy civilian casualties and allegations of war crimes. During the 2022 invasion, a former Wagner commander claimed his unit acted on orders from Wagner leadership to kill women and children and torture POWs in Bakhmut. He was subsequently arrested in Russia by local authorities, allegedly accompanied by several Wagner soldiers, on suspicion of war crimes in April 2023. He claims that the Wagner soldiers threatened to kill him if he testified against Prigozhin.²⁶

WAGNER DECLARED A SIGNIFICANT TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION BY THE U.S. TREASURY DEPARTMENT

DESIGNATING THE WAGNER GROUP AS A SIGNIFICANT TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATION

PMC Wagner (Wagner Group) is a Russian private military company led by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a Putin crony and the target of multiple U.S. sanctions. Wagner Group has been involved in Kremlin-backed combat operations around the world in support of Putin's war on Ukraine. As Russia's military has struggled on the battlefield, Putin had resorted to relying on the Wagner Group to continue his war of choice. The Wagner Group has also meddled and destabilized countries in Africa, committing widespread human rights abuses and extorting natural resources from their people. Today, the Wagner Group is being redesignated pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13581, as amended by E.O. 13863, for being a foreign person that constitutes a significant transnational criminal organization. Wagner personnel have engaged in an ongoing pattern of serious criminal activity, including mass executions, rape, child abductions, and physical abuse in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali.

In light of the transcontinental threat posed by the Wagner Group, Treasury is concurrently redesignating the Wagner Group pursuant to E.O. 13667 for being responsible for or complicit in, or having engaged in, the targeting of women, children, or any civilians through the commission of acts of violence, or abduction, forced displacement, or attacks on schools, hospitals, religious sites, or locations where civilians are seeking refuge, or through conduct that would constitute a serious abuse or violation of human rights or a violation of international humanitarian law in relation to the CAR.

-U.S. Department of the Treasury press release, January 26, 2023.²⁷



Russian mercenaries provide additional security for a convoy with President Faustin-Archange Touadéra of the Central African Republic, 16 February 2022. (Photo by Clément Di Roma/VOA via Wikimedia Commons)

FAMILY FEUD: WAGNER VS. THE KREMLIN

Prigozhin's scathing criticism of the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Russian high command as "cronies" and "clowns" who are losing the war despite Wagner's valiant efforts, and his willingness to openly challenge the MOD countered Russia's efforts to steady the long flailing war and shape public opinion.

- Prigozhin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu have been feuding since 2016, when they argued over operations in Syria. Prigozhin has leveraged closeness to Putin to report the MOD's mishandling of the SMO directly to the Russian President, and then to criticize the MOD in the Russian and international press and in social media. According to Prigozhin, Shoigu retaliated by first reducing the amount and quality of materiel and operational support supplied to Wagner before denying him and Wagner media coverage of their successes.²⁸ After the internal friction between the MOD and Prigozhin on the conduct of the war went public, it was only a matter of time before their conflict came to a head.
- In January 2023, Wagner forces captured Soledar in one of Russia's first victories since the Ukrainian counteroffensives in August-September 2022. The Russian command claimed sole credit for the victory to bolster its tarnished reputation at home and abroad, raising the ire of Wagner fighters, especially its boss, Prigozhin.²⁹ Although the Russian Army later published its "thanks to the courageous and selfless actions of the volunteers from Wagner,"³⁰ the damage had already been done, deepening the feud.
- In subsequent efforts to capture Bakhmut by March, Prigozhin leaned on the media to ensure Wagner received credit. He reported that Wagner was mainly responsible for Russian gains, and he accused the MOD of not properly supplying his forces with the resources needed to complete their task.³¹ He predicted Ukraine will retake the city if Wagner departed the front lines. In turn, the MOD claimed Wagner troops lacked discipline and needlessly wasted convict recruits in frontal assaults unduly prolonged the battle for Bakhmut. This motivated the MOD to reduce supplies to Wagner and influence Putin to ban it from recruiting convicts.³²

"SNAPPED," RUSSIAN-STYLE

After months of public complaining about the MOD's mismanagement of the war, accusing it of not supporting Wagner and taking credit for Wagner's battlefield successes, Prigozhin reached his tipping point and invented a reason to depose the Russian military leadership.

- According to Prigozhin, his 23-24 June "march for justice" was aimed to remove Shoigu and Russian General Valery Gerasimov for lying about the war and for ordering an attack that allegedly killed 30 or more Wagner fighters (one report mentioned thousands of Wagner casualties). While widely reported as Prigozhin's justification for the mutiny, these alleged strikes have not been confirmed in any open-source reporting.³³
- According to a credible international press report, both Western intelligence and the Russian security service (FSB) knew of Prigozhin's plan to remove Shoigu and Gerasimov. Prigozhin made the "march for justice" public after learning his secret plan to depose the military leadership had leaked. This could suggest the alleged 23 June strike(s) on Wagner was an invented casus belli designed as justification to remove his chief antagonists.³⁴
- According to UK intelligence, one of the reasons Prigozhin called off the move to oust the Russian military leadership was that the FSB was directly threatening the families of Wagner fighters. Additionally, Wagner reportedly only had 8,000 troops on the "march of justice" instead of the 25,000 that Prigozhin

claimed, which made it highly improbable that his mutiny would succeed and necessitated a negotiated retreat. Prigozhin probably used the threat of a fight to broker an amnesty/exile deal through Belarussian leader Alexander Lukashenko.³⁵

POPULARITY CONTEST: PUTIN VS. PRIGOZHIN

The spat between Prigozhin and the Russian MOD, which provoked Wagner’s mutiny, degraded Putin’s popularity while raising Prigozhin’s domestic profile. However, Prigozhin’s reputation likely suffered more since he hastily curtailed his insurrection.

- In May, Russians searched online for information on Prigozhin 2.4 times more than they searched for Putin. This earned Prigozhin a perfect popularity rating of 100 points to Putin’s 28, according to a Verstka and Yandex Wordstat report.³⁶ However, despite the apparent popularity of the mutiny as illustrated by reports of Wagner fighters being cheered and presented with food and drinks during their uprising, some Wagner fighters and their family members fiercely criticized Prigozhin on social media. The Russian media has also helped to publicly discredit Prigozhin by publishing images of a 24 June raid on his St. Petersburg mansion showing the opulence of his home and caches of weapons and gold bars. The online criticism, the photos from the search of Prigozhin’s mansion, and indirect comments by Putin about treason may be part of a soft campaign to publicly discredit Prigozhin without depicting him as a threat that must be dealt with permanently.³⁷
- The mutiny and Putin’s response to it has generated criticism across Russia and internationally that he is weak, according to open-source reporting.³⁸ Putin’s 24 June address to the Russian people about the mutiny was ridiculed in Russia, in Ukraine, and internationally. Instead of reassuring the people that he is in control and the state will crush traitors, the address was widely interpreted as Putin pleading for support and understanding, a stunning departure from the strongman image he has strenuously cultivated over his rule. Several commentators called the speech “pathetic.”³⁹
- Belarus leader and staunch Putin ally Alexander Lukashenko reinforced the perception of Russian instability on Belarussian media on 27 June when he compared the Wagner mutiny to the 1917 Russian revolution. The negative reaction to the mutiny locally and internationally is probably motivating the Kremlin to crack down on support for Prigozhin, including arresting former commander of Russian forces in Ukraine General Sergei Surovikin, who is alleged to have had prior notice of the mutiny.⁴⁰

The triumphal march of Soviet power is another example. Approximately 100,000 Bolsheviks took power in Russia. Without weapons. I ask myself the question: Is everything so good in Russia and here? It is not. There are multiple reasons for this turmoil to spread across Russia and spill over into our country. A trigger was needed. And it emerged.

-Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, 27 June 2023⁴¹

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE PRIGOZHIN?

Prigozhin may have an “insurance policy” which has so far kept him from becoming another Putin associate who suffers a mysterious sudden death, or he and Wagner may be too useful and entangled with Putin. However, that could change if Prigozhin’s esteem rises too far with the Russian public.

- Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko claims to have convinced Putin not to kill Prigozhin when they agreed on Prigozhin’s exile to Belarus. A likely reason is fear that Prigozhin would become a martyr and loyal Wagner fighters would restart the aborted mutiny of 23-24 June. However, according to the Director of Ukrainian Defense Intelligence, the FSB is under orders to eventually assassinate Prigozhin, despite Lukashenko’s claim and the FSB’s closing of its investigation into the mutiny.⁴²
- There is widespread speculation over the reasoning for Putin’s acceptance of the Belarusian exile deal for Prigozhin and any Wagner fighters who choose to join him. Some believe the “exile” is a deception to position Wagner forces for a new attack on Ukraine from the north. Others believe it is a trap for Prigozhin and Wagner fighters more loyal to him than to Putin and Russia. Finally, others speculate that Prigozhin actually went into a form of exile until the repercussions from the mutiny calm down.⁴³
- The Kremlin revealed that Prigozhin and several of his commanders met with Putin five days after the mutiny and pledged their loyalty. This announcement supports multiple reports that Prigozhin returned to Russia to collect weapons, documents, and money seized during FSB raids on his St. Petersburg home and Wagner headquarters. It also lends credence to various theories supporting his continued survival. The most likely reason for his and Wagner’s continued existence that Putin needs him to conduct his influence and exploitation activities around the world.⁴⁴ Recent reporting indicates that mercenaries from the Wagner Group have started to train Belarusian special forces at a military range just a few miles from the border of Poland, according to the Belarusian defense ministry.⁴⁵ On 19 July, Prigozhin released a video to his soldiers explaining they would take “no further part in the Ukraine war for now” and ordered them to gather their strength for Africa while they trained the Belarusian army.⁴⁶

FUTURE OF WAGNER AS A RUSSIAN MEANS OF EXPLOITATION

Uncertainty over the future of Wagner implies uncertainty over the future of Russian influence and exploitation activities across the Global South where Wagner has acted as a Kremlin proxy, to the enrichment of the state, Putin, and Prigozhin. PMC Wagner has been a critical component for Russia’s exploitation of the OE over much of the past decade.

- Wagner has long operated as a plausibly deniable means for Russian exploitation and influence activities across the Global South.⁴⁷ A vital component to Prigozhin’s international Russian influence organization is the companies operating abroad that provide cover for Wagner activities and exploit conditions for Prigozhin, Putin, and Russia gain. These companies include mining ventures in CAR and oil and gas companies in Syria, all of which are very lucrative for Prigozhin, Russia, and presumably for Putin.⁴⁸
- The Kremlin decree for all militias and PMCs to contract with the MOD remains in effect. Putin gave Wagner fighters the choice of contracting with the MOD, demobilizing, or joining Prigozhin in Belarus—and recent reports describe the MOD confiscating heavy weaponry (tanks, artillery, etc.) from Wagner.⁴⁹ However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated after the mutiny that Wagner and its associates will continue their work in Africa.⁵⁰ He also commented that “several hundred soldiers are working in CAR as instructors.”⁵¹ Whether former Wagner fighters would continue to serve under new management

remains to be seen, but it could be a test on their loyalty to Putin.

- Wagner's overt association with the Russian government and its participation in the Russo-Ukraine War combined with Putin's recent declaration of government funding (for Wagner) has eliminated Wagner as a plausibly deniable asset. Putin is not likely to transition Wagner activities abroad to the

MOD. Such a move would likely not receive public support in Russia and would be grounds for further protest within the international community. Prigozhin's alleged pledge of loyalty to Putin after the mutiny may indicate that Wagner will continue in its security role in Africa and elsewhere.⁵²



Wagner Group mercenaries deployed in the Central African Republic, October 2022. (Photo by Corbeau News via Wikimedia Commons)



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