

Introducing WagnerWatch

WagnerWatch is a project of the U K Defence Forum which launched on 1st June 2023.

It brings together experienced observers (see explainer signatories), and builds upon works published at www.defenceviewpoints.co.uk Ã‚Â since early 2021 (see footnote)

It republishes relevant pieces of information about the Wagner Group on its group at www.linkedin.com Ã‚Â and welcomes contacts from others (particularly if they have access to non-mainstream, non-English publications. In which case please contact robin.ashby.ukdf@gmail.com)

What is the Wagner Group?

An explainer is on page 2

Yvgeni Prigozhin is seen a sinister character in the world of Russian oligarchs, a strange and mysterious being who embodies the evil of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. His private army, a private military company (PMC) known as the Wagner Group, has recently become a favourite target of Western news reporting, presented as a band of bloodthirsty assassins who spread death and terror across Ukraine, with great evidence in the city of Bakhmut, which was taken a few days ago by Russian forces after many months of intense fighting.

But is that all the Wagner Group is?

The Wagner Group is a typical product of the post-Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the decommissioning of many units of the Russian armed forces, trained and experienced soldiers, as well as personnel from other services, became unemployed and had to find work. Many of them created small private security businesses, known as private security companies (PSC), which in a short time evolved into so-called private military companies (PMC). These sold services to public and private clients in Russia, other former Soviet republics and around the world, based on the network built during the Cold War.

These networks and their growth in activity generated momentum for PMCs such as Slavonic Corps, created in Hong Kong in 2013 by two employees of a conventional Russian PSC - Moran Security Group. The Wagner Group which emerged from the Slavonic Corps, perhaps in 2014, was created by Lieutenant Colonel Dmitry Utkin, a Ukrainian-born Russian army officer who was a special forces officer in the GRU, the Russian secret services. On active duty, his nom de guerre was "Wagner", which he used to name the company.

But Utkin was not alone. Behind him was Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and close associate of Vladimir Putin, known as his cook. Prigozhin has been the financier and true leader of the Wagner Group since its inception, linking since the 1990s and 2000s the Wagner Group with other oligarchs in Putin's inner circle, all of them men from St. Petersburg. Some of these oligarchs have or had close links with countries where the presence of the Group has been detected.

Given that PMCs are prohibited by law in Russia, officially the Wagner Group does not exist. Prigozhin's connection to Putin gives him favourable, even exceptional, treatment. The headquarters of the Wagner Group is the headquarters of the GRU's 10th Spetsnaz Special Missions Brigade, located in Molkino, a small town in the Krasnodar district of Russia. This is located close to the breakaway regions of Donbass, Luhansk, Crimea and Chechnya, facilitating recruitment and surveillance.

The Wagner Group is the umbrella for many activities and operations that represent and defend Russian interests without formal Russian state intervention, all over the world. It has evolved beyond the conventional definitions of private military companies (PMC), and it has become

increasingly active globally. However, as the existence of the Group is systematically denied by the Russian authorities, these activities are rather vague and imprecise.

However, although Yvgeni Prigozhin's business connections are unclear and quite intricate, it is possible to establish connections between his holdings. Behind Prigozhin and the Wagner Group, there are countless companies with a common purpose: the geographic acquisition of commercial interests (government contracts, mines, human resources, equipment logistics, special services), all of them linked to the military campaigns of the Wagner Group. Yvgeni Prigozhin has the profile of a successful mafia tycoon: a difficult childhood in Leningrad, sports, theft and fraud, imprisonment (nine years), entrepreneurial spirit after the collapse of the Soviet Union, shady business (gambling, others), outward signs of wealth (houses, yachts, cars), cruelty, bribes, public office, and offshore holdings.

The Wagner Group has been operating in around 50 countries around the world, 40 of which are African nations. These numbers are far higher than those cited by many commentators in the media, think-tanks and development agencies, who tend to categorize these activities solely as armed security operations. In fact, the Wagner Group's modes of operation are multifunctional, ranging from political and strategic advice, information and intelligence, control of media, disinformation and propaganda, to direct warfare operations, VIP security and infrastructure, arms and equipment sales, military training, exploitation and trade in natural resources, migrant smuggling, financial movements or just an office presence. These activities are an important lever for Russian foreign policy and geopolitics, while making Prigozhin and his friends richer and more politically powerful.

So what does the West do? According to a recent article by Teresa Nogueira Pinto for GIS ("A New Cold War in Africa", 07/04/2023), despite the launch in 2022 by the Biden Administration of the US strategy for sub-Saharan Africa, exports from his country for Africa do not exceed 1% of its trade balance. On the other hand, the US only has a permanent military base in Djibouti, although it maintains a presence in West and East Africa and the Sahel, mainly for counterterrorism actions.

The position of France, a traditional power in sub-Saharan Africa, is even more serious. With the abandonment, by President Macron, of the strategy known as "FranÃ§afrique", the French armed forces have been withdrawing from countries where they had a traditional presence, such as Rwanda, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso , Ghana and even Ivory Coast. In each of these countries, the departure of French troops has been followed, shortly afterwards, by the entry of mercenaries from the Wagner Group. In this way, the African continent finds itself increasingly at the mercy of the Chinese, Russians and, in

some places, Indians.

To all this, the West closes its eyes: The USA, France, Great Britain, NATO and even the EU have been leaving Africa to its own fate. We call upon them to wake up before there is a permanent shift in power to the detriment of people, nations and continents.

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