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# The Ghost of Civil War in Russia?

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## Executive Summary

A year and a half after the start of full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, it has become obvious that there is no joint and unified system of command of all Russian forces. A significant role in the so-called “special military operation” is being played by military formations that are not part of the Armed Forces. The units are subordinate only to their own commanders. These “warlords” not only publicly condition the military command, subject it to destructive criticism, and demonstratively ignore its orders, but also insult the top leadership of the country. Wishing to gain popularity, the field commanders, whose subordinates are thousands of armed men, allow themselves to express doubts about the purpose of the war unleashed by Putin. It is logical that the private military company (PMC), Wagner Group, which in 2014 was established to wage a “secret war” against Ukraine, in 2023 challenged the military leadership of Russia, which is unwilling or unable to respond to its claims. The Wagner Group was perceived to be an important military force that had no legitimate place in the Russian system of state power. In this situation, the owner of the Wagner Group began to seek the creation of this place, by all available means. A collapse of the military management system could precede a collapse of the country, due to defeat in the war.

## Prigozhin's Rebellion

Since early May 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder and owner of the private military formation, Wagner, which has been engaged near Bakhmut in the most intense fighting against the Ukrainian army since August 2022,<sup>1</sup> has been criticising Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, in the harshest possible terms, for allegedly providing insufficient support for his unit, primarily regarding ammunition supplies. Moreover, Prigozhin threatened to leave the front line altogether if he was not provided with the necessary amount of ammunition. In the history of the Russian army, this has not happened for more than 100 years.<sup>2</sup> Prigozhin accused the Russian Ministry of Defence of losing advantageous positions on Bakhmut's flanks after MoD-subordinated units retreated from their positions, which were necessary for an encirclement. Prigozhin, who has no military rank, or official position, reported that senior Russian generals, both retired and acting, are now under his operational command. According to him, the deputy commander of the Russian group of troops, Sergei Surovikin, was now responsible for supplying Wagner with ammunition. Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, who had just been removed from his post as deputy defence minister, became Prigozhin's deputy. Later, Mizintsev approved the veracity of this information.

Finally, Prigozhin criticised Putin, albeit in veiled terms. During a discussion of ammunition shortages and Russia's prospects in Ukraine, Prigozhin referred to a “happy grandpa” figure, who “thinks that he is good.” Prigozhin then rhetorically asked what Russia and future generations should do and how Russia can win, if the “grandfather” turns out to be

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1 <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-14>

2 The last time this happened was in 1919. “Batka” Makhno, whose detachments were included for a short period in the Red Army, sent telegrams to the leaders of the Soviet government, defiantly abandoning his position.

a “complete asshole.” Some experts supposed that Prigozhin was likely referring to Putin, who is often referred to as “grandfather” (or, more specifically, “Bunkernyi ded,” or “bunker grandfather”). A little later, the Washington Post analyzed leaks from the CIA that said that Prigozhin had been in contact with Ukrainian military intelligence and promised, in exchange for the surrender of Bakhmut, to hand over data on the deployment of Russian military units. Finally, Prigozhin, who has thousands of armed men at his disposal, has taken a clear political stance in his many statements, constantly stressing the theme of social inequality in the face of war. Prigozhin argues that the hardships of a war whose goals are questionable are borne solely by ordinary people, while the elite, including the defence minister’s relatives, enjoy luxury.<sup>3</sup> He bluntly points out that not only have the declared goals of the war not been achieved, but the course of the war has led to results that are the opposite of those desired. Ukraine is rapidly forming a nation state; its army is not defeated but strengthened. Symptomatically, when responding to accusations of preparing a military conspiracy, Prigozhin noted that his lack of sufficient military might prevents him from doing so.

These statements by Prigozhin would be enough to justify several criminal charges in any army in the world, let alone Russia’s, where it is a criminal offense to express any doubt about the justness of the goals of the war against Ukraine, or about the success of the Russian armed forces. Until recently, Vladimir Putin considered the army command hierarchy the ideal model for state-building in Russia and considered any violation of it as an attempt on his own power. But the Kremlin prefers not to respond in any way to direct insults. Putin’s press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, confined himself to recommending that journalists seek clarification from the Defence Ministry. Soon after, Putin congratulated the “Wagner assault units, as well as all Russian Armed Forces units that provided them with the necessary support,” on the capture of Bakhmut (while the Ukrainian General Staff insisted that the fighting was still going on). Prigozhin immediately stated that his unit would now be withdrawn for rest and retraining. Thus, the Kremlin tried to hush up the facts of direct and grave violations of military discipline.

But the conflict is not over. Prigozhin accused the regular units of the Armed Forces of laying mines on the routes of departure of Wagner’s detachments. In support of these accusations, he distributed a recording of the interrogation of the captured commander of the 72nd Motorised Rifle Brigade. During the interrogation, Lieutenant Colonel Roman Venevitin admits that, while drunk, he ordered the disarming of Wagner PMC’s rapid reaction group and their car fired at. He also mentions that he gave the order “because of personal hostility” towards Wagner<sup>4</sup> (according to Prigozhin, the 72nd Brigade fled from its positions near Bakhmut after the Ukrainian attack). It is significant that Prigozhin had previously claimed that the incident occurred on May 17,<sup>5</sup> when Russian servicemen mined possible Wagner escape routes. Thus, the mining took place after Prigozhin’s threats to withdraw troops, but before the mercenaries began to leave their positions. It can be assumed that the mining was carried out by order of the military command, to prevent the departure of Wagner. Soon, a “retaliatory” video appeared, in which Venevitin accused Wagner PMC of numerous war crimes, including the kidnapping of Russian servicemen and violence against them, and the theft of military equipment.

Trying to regain control over the command system, Shoigu issued an order saying that all “volunteer” formations must sign a contract with the Ministry of Defence. According to Deputy

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3 <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/05/24/rodinu-lyublyu-putina-slushayus-shoygu-na-mylo-voevat-budem-dalshe>.

4 <https://theins.ru/news/262295?ysclid=liirmx8n8n55885950>.

5 <https://graniru.org/Politics/World/Europe/Ukraine/m.287869.html>.

Defence Minister Pankov, the order should give “the necessary legal status to volunteer formations, create unified approaches to the organisation of comprehensive support and fulfilment of their tasks.”<sup>6</sup> Prigozhin immediately rejected the possibility of signing such a contract, noting that Wagner does not obey nor answer to the Ministry of Defence.<sup>7</sup> Prigozhin also noted that Wagner seeks approval for its actions from the Russian military command via Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin.

These incidents show the degree of degradation of the Russian troops involved in the war, as well as the level of mutual hate between Wagner and the regular Armed Forces. There is no doubt that these are not the last of such incidents. In addition, it is obvious that all of this undermines the military command system and, most importantly, the discipline of the Armed Forces, in the most significant way. This is not some random coincidence. The presence of the Wagner Group is a natural outgrowth of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, and the current collapse of the system of command of the operation is quite logically connected with this private military company.

### **Why Does the Kremlin Need Mercenaries?**

For a long time, the Russian authorities pursued a policy that excluded the existence of any armed formations that were not formally included in the system of the Armed Forces and “law enforcement” agencies. Immediately after the end of hostilities in Chechnya, local armed formations were incorporated, either into the armed forces, or into the system of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Later, some of them became part of the Russian Guard. However, even such inclusion in the “power” structures did not guarantee the loyalty of Chechen units to Moscow. Their involvement in numerous crimes, including political assassinations, created problems for the Kremlin.

The Russian authorities had a negative attitude toward any attempts to establish private military companies. Russian law still explicitly considers mercenary activities as a criminal offense. FSB lobbyists in the State Duma blocked several attempts to pass laws that would have legalised private military companies. In 2013, the heads of the private military company, Slavyanskij korpus (Slavic Corps), whose fighters fought in Syria, were arrested after returning to Russia, and subsequently convicted. But in just the same year, the authorities developed an interest in private military formations. This interest is associated with the emergence of the so-called “Gerasimov doctrine.” In 2013, the head of the Russian General Staff made a presentation at the Academy of Military Sciences.<sup>8</sup> Apparently expressing the opinion of Russia’s military and political leadership, he argued that in today’s world there is no clear line between a state of war and a state of peace. It follows from Gerasimov’s words that wars are not currently declared and are waged almost constantly. If open hostilities do not take place, then such wars are conducted through covert operations. To Russian leaders, it probably seemed that private military companies are the ideal performers of such operations. This illusion arose, as happens in Russia, because of a misinterpretation of Western experience. The Kremlin was inspired by the widespread use, by the U.S. Pentagon and the State Department, of private military corporations in operations abroad. But Moscow did not understand that, in U.S. military operations, the reasons for the use of mercenaries was in the economic sphere. The life of an American soldier is very expensive. It is much cheaper to hire PMCs, which pay for the killed

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6 [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/person/more.htm?id=12470053@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/person/more.htm?id=12470053@egNews).

7 [https://t.me/concordgroup\\_official/1194](https://t.me/concordgroup_official/1194).

8 <https://myruwin.ru/doklad-gerasimova-tsennost-nauki-v-predvidenii/?ysclid=li8pwip6vz206315328>.

and wounded themselves. The U.S. government has not made its relations with PMCs secret.

Moscow's objectives were primarily political. The Russian bosses felt that, by hiring "civilian" people to conduct combat operations, they would be able to keep the state's involvement in this war a secret and not bear any responsibility for it. In the spring of 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, military leaders managed to prove to Putin that it was impossible to repeat the same operation in Donbass. It would have been necessary to create a border in a region where there never was one and to deploy a gigantic number of troops to cover it. Russia simply did not have the necessary number of troops to ensure the occupation of the new territories. As a result, they adopted the option of "hybrid" aggression. According to Putin's version, the Ukrainian troops were fought by locals, some "tractor drivers and miners,"<sup>9</sup> who had purchased tanks and artillery systems in certain "military trade shops."<sup>10</sup> When it became impossible to deny the participation of the Russian military, Kremlin propagandists argued that they were supposedly taking vacations to fight in Donbass. However, there were clearly not enough vacationers.

### **What Wagner is**

Subsequently, Evgeny Prigozhin, "Putin's chef" and a former criminal, who had served about 9 years in prison, was paid to recruit mercenaries, who could be passed off as locals or volunteers. That was how the "Private Military Corporation (PMC) of Wagner," which has existed for almost 10 years, was founded, without any legal basis. Allegedly, it was named after the call sign of its military commander, Dmitry Utkin, a retired lieutenant colonel in the special forces, and a fan of Nazi symbols.

Investigations by the media<sup>11</sup> indicated that the Wagner Group was associated with the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU, military intelligence) and operated under the full control of military intelligence. The fighters were trained at the GRU special-purpose brigade, in the village of Molkino, in the Krasnodar territory. As a result, a combat unit of two and a half to three thousand fighters, equipped in accordance with the standards of the Russian army, was formed and trained. The investigations dispelled the legends of mysterious elite soldiers. Only the command staff of the group consisted of military professionals – retired officers of the Army Special Forces and OMON (Special Purpose Police Unit) – usually with experience of combat operations in Chechnya. Appropriate training and combat experience were decisive factors in the hiring process, and the commanders' histories did not play a role. Thus, former major of special forces Aleksandr Kuznetsov (call sign "Ratibor") had previously served five years in prison, for robbery and kidnapping. Immediately after his release, Wagner hired him as a company commander. And two years later, he received the highest military award, the title of Hero of Russia, and was photographed next to Putin.

But the privates were represented by mediocre young men, aged 25–35 (although there were some "old men," aged 45 and over), mostly from the Russian provinces, where wages are very modest. As for military experience, all that was necessary for recruitment was a conscript military service. There were even some declassified elements who had neither a

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9 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/47706>.

10 <https://www.mk.ru/politics/news/2014/03/04/993421-putin-voyska-okkupirovavshie-chasti-v-kryimu-ne-yavlyayutsya-rossiyskimi-a-formu-mozhno-kupit-v-lyubom-voentorge.html?ysclid=li8phk3dta621292070>.

11 <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

permanent job, nor a permanent place of residence. Those who created the Wagner Group were guided by Soviet mobilisation concepts. The idea was that it was sufficient to have a core of professional officers who, within a month or two, could turn the reservists into serviceable soldiers who could be used as cannon fodder.

During the fighting in the Donbass, according to the Ukrainian Security Service, the Wagner Group was involved in the storming of Donetsk airport and combat operations near Debaltseve, in early 2015.

### **Unclassified Covert Operations**

After the end of the active phase of hostilities in the Donbass, Wagner's fighters were transferred to Syria, where Russia entered the civil war, in 2015, on the side of the Assad regime. The mercenaries' stay there has been marked by both successes and disastrous failures. Wagner's units managed to capture the ancient city of Palmyra twice. At the same time, the Wagner Group's attempts to wage a hybrid war in Syria turned into a direct military clash with U.S. troops, near Deir al-Zor, in February 2018. Syrian authorities ordered Wagner Group to seize control of oil fields. A battalion tactical group of Russian mercenaries, supported by tanks, began advancing toward positions that were in the U.S. area of responsibility and occupied by troops of the U.S. Special Operations Forces. In accordance with previously signed security protocols, the U.S. military contacted Russian officers representing the group in Syria. In response, they received assurances that the Russians had nothing to do with the operation. That was not true. And then the Americans decided to play by the rules of hybrid warfare. After all, if the Russian side, with which they had signed mutual security agreements in Syria, refused to confirm the group's affiliation, it became a legitimate target for a strike. The Wagner Battalion was attacked, first by artillery, then by helicopters, and then, again, by AC-130 aircraft armed with 105 mm cannons. The American command even used a B-52 strategic bomber to complete the assault. About 200 mercenaries were killed. Thus, due to the actions of the Wagner Group, the first US-Russian military confrontation since the Korean War took place. However, both Moscow and Washington immediately understood what a continuation of the conflict could lead to and tried to hush up the incident. At the beginning of 2022, the total number of Wagner PMC units in Syria involved 3000 people.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the civil war in Syria, the Wagner Group participated in hostilities in Africa. Yevgeny Prigozhin's PMC mercenaries worked in several African countries, including CAR, Libya, Madagascar, Sudan, Mozambique, DRC, Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>13</sup> Most of its known operations are in the Central African Republic, where some 500 mercenaries have been involved in the civil war since 2018, allowing Prigozhin to take control of diamond and gold mining, according to media reports. Wagner's actions in CAR once again demonstrated that the secrecy of such operations is an illusion. The press in the U.S., Britain and France repeatedly reported that hundreds of Russian mercenaries were involved in combat operations. In 2021, a report of the UN expert panel that was designed to monitor the implementation of sanctions against the CAR was published.<sup>14</sup> The panel claimed to have collected evidence of the active participation of Russian instructors in combat operations on the ground. The report stated that Russian instructors often led, rather than accompanied, units of the Central

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12 The Military Balance 2022, p. 357.

13 <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2022/12/22/ssha-perekirli-dostup-ktehnike-dlya-chvk-vagner-a29350>.

14 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/126/24/PDF/N2112624.pdf?OpenElement>.

African Republic's national army during the fighting. As a result, Moscow's officials have occasionally been forced to provide rather absurd explanations. For example, the Russian Foreign Ministry "explained" that, allegedly, "5 military and 170 Russian civilian instructors were sent to the Central African Republic to train Central African soldiers."<sup>15</sup> Neither before this statement, nor after it, had anyone ever heard of any "civilian instructors" of military affairs that the Russian state could send anywhere. The expert group's report stated that, according to official figures, 532 instructors were working in the CAR. However, numerous sources estimate that the number of Russian "instructors" in the CAR ranges from 800 to 2100.

According to the UN, since October 2018, Libya has deployed more than a thousand mercenaries of the Wagner PMC;<sup>16</sup> they took part in hostilities on the side of the Libyan National Army, led by Field Marshal Haftar. The media paid attention to the fact that Prigozhin was present at the official talks with Haftar in the Russian Ministry of Defence, in Moscow, in November 2018.<sup>17</sup> In September 2021, Mali authorities admitted that they turned to the Wagner PMC to provide security, military training, and the protection of senior officials. They did so as France terminated the anti-terrorist operation in that country. In December 2017, the media stated that Russian employees of several Russian PMCs, including Wagner, were involved in the civil war in Sudan.<sup>18</sup> In January 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic stated that the Wagner Group should stop trying to recruit Serbs to participate in hostilities in Ukraine.

In 2019, the media reported that about 200 mercenaries from Wagner PMC arrived in the capital of Mozambique to assist the country's authorities in the fight against Islamists. Along with the mercenaries, three combat helicopters were also delivered to Mozambique. The mission of the Russians was to conduct training and provide military support to the local military in the province of Cabo Delgado. In October 2019, sources in the Mozambican army reported that at least seven Russian mercenaries had been killed within a month. According to the publication, relations between the Mozambican military and Russian mercenaries deteriorated after a number of unsuccessful joint operations.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Kremlin's Disappointment**

It should be recognised that in the relatively "quiet" period between the two phases of aggression against Ukraine (2015–2022), the Russian authorities, although cooperating with the Wagner Group, at the same time showed disappointment with the activities of the mercenaries. There were several reasons for this. First, there was the fact that the so-called secret operations were not secret, foreign countries confidently associated Wagner with the Russian authorities. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the mercenaries constantly committed war crimes in the countries where they were located. UN experts reported crimes against humanity in Libya.<sup>20</sup> Footage of brutal executions committed by the mercenaries in Syria appeared on social networks. The killing, in the CAR, of a group of Russian journalists, who intended to shoot a film about the mercenaries, was also associated

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15 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5006336?ysclid=li8s678s44819459094>.

16 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-sanctions/up-to-1200-deployed-in-libya-by-russian-military-group-u-n-report-idUSKBN22I2XW?il=0>.

17 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-46159367>.

18 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-42225745>.

19 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-53756358>.

20 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/libya/index>.

with Wagner. PMCs, thus, have become a powerful factor in discrediting Russia.

In addition, according to media reports, Prigozhin has soured relations with many high-ranking Russian officials.<sup>21</sup> In particular, Prigozhin allegedly spoke out against Sergei Kirienko, deputy head of the Russian presidential administration. Wagner's owner was unhappy that the presidential administration supported St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov, with whom Prigozhin has had a longstanding and open conflict. The businessman criticised the actions of the Russian army in Syria, believing that "it is possible to work much more effectively." Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu did not like the way Prigozhin's firm, which has been in the restaurant business for many years, was providing food to the army. In 2018, it was reported that Prigozhin had lost a significant share of state contracts with the Defence Ministry.<sup>22</sup> It has been reported in the press that, in 2017, the Defence Ministry drastically reduced its provision of arms to the Wagner Group, in Syria. It was also reported that his patron, Vladimir Putin, had also grown cold toward Prigozhin, amid conflict with top officials.

At the same time, the intention was not to refuse Wagner's services. In 2019, in response to a question about the presence of PMC fighters in Syria, Putin said: "As for the private security companies you mentioned, they are indeed present there. They are not the Russian state. And they are not participants in hostilities, unfortunately, or fortunately."<sup>23</sup> A year later, Putin spoke in approximately the same vein about the presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya. In 2021, speaking at the United Nations, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov acknowledged the existence of private military companies.<sup>24</sup> And Presidential Spokesman Peskov said that no Russian laws are violated by PMCs, because there are no laws regulating their activities.

### **Wagner's Resurrection**

The uncertain position of the concert of the mercenary organisation in the Russian power system explains the fact that Wagner, according to media allegations, was not involved in the preparation of the invasion of Ukraine. Prigozhin's fighters were recalled when the attempt to quickly seize Ukraine failed. Wagner did not appear at the front until late March 2022, a month after the invasion began. At the same time, it was clear that the pre-existing size of the grouping did not meet the needs of the war against Ukraine. Faced with staff shortages, PMC recruiters began to turn to those who they previously refused to accept into their company. As a result, the group has grown to include tens of thousands of people. In the spring and summer of 2022, the Wagner stormtroopers played a crucial role in the capture of key Ukrainian defence nodes: Mariupol in the Donetsk region and Popasna in the Luhansk region. These successes probably made a big impression on Putin, who was irritated by the low efficiency of the regular army. According to the press, Prigozhin was awarded the title of Hero of Russia, by a secret decree, in June 2022.<sup>25</sup>

Apparently, then, this honour also awarded Prigozhin a strong confirmation of the president's trust. The Kremlin took a step that it had not taken since 1943. It authorised the recruitment of convicted prisoners from Russian jails for combat operations. According to media reports,

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21 <https://amp.meduza.io/feature/2022/07/13/grubo-govorya-my-nachali-voynu>.

22 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-43239626>

23 <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60797>.

24 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5007368?ysclid=li1rjhj5sk9346720>.

25 [https://zavtra.ru/events/evgenij\\_prigozhin\\_udostoen\\_zvaniya\\_geroj\\_rossii?ysclid=li08kdc1do197431411](https://zavtra.ru/events/evgenij_prigozhin_udostoen_zvaniya_geroj_rossii?ysclid=li08kdc1do197431411).



since June 2022, many Russian prisons have been recruiting convicts and then sending them to fight in Ukraine. Prigozhin personally toured the places of detention, agitating for the prisoners to join the PMCs. He flew there in a private helicopter, appeared with a star of a Hero of Russia medal and showed his power over the prison authorities, who were forced to obey the orders of the head of Wagner PMC.<sup>26</sup> All this was required to convince the prisoners that their participation in hostilities would lead to their release from punishment. According to the media, the enlisted prisoners were released on 5 July 2022, by a secret presidential decree of pardon.<sup>27</sup> According to the media, in recruiting for the Wagner Group, preference was given to violent prisoners, those convicted under serious articles of the Criminal Code, such as “murder,” “robbery,” and “grievous bodily harm,” as well as to repeat offenders.<sup>28</sup> Prigozhin explained that the “weaklings” (that is, those who are not murderers and robbers) had no chance of survival.

As a result of recruitment in prisons, the number of Wagner personnel has grown dramatically. In December 2022, John Kirby, of the U.S. National Security Council, said that the number of Wagner PMC fighters in Ukraine could reach 50,000, of whom about forty thousand were former prisoners.<sup>29</sup> According to Prigozhin, 50,000 people were recruited from among the prisoners during the entire war.<sup>30</sup> The relative effectiveness of the PMC was ensured by willingness to take huge losses. According to Prigozhin, ten thousand of the recruited convicts were killed in hostilities. The owner of Wagner also acknowledged the deaths of another ten thousand from among the “permanent” staff of the PMC. According to him, about 20% (that is, ten thousand) were seriously injured. Thus, Wagner’s total losses amounted to about 30,000 people. Moreover, according to Kirby’s estimates, by February 2023, even before the start of the major battles for Bakhmut, Wagner had lost about 30,000 fighters.

Prison inmates proved to be ideal cannon fodder. Those who are in prison are defenceless in the face of recruiting pressure. Many of the prisoners have had their social ties severed and the Wagner commandership does not have to answer to the convicts’ relatives for their deaths. The convicts are used to being disenfranchised and do not try to resist barbaric disciplinary measures, including numerous summary executions. At the same time, Wagner’s owner emphasised in every possible way that he is fulfilling his obligations and that those lucky enough to survive for six months actually receive a pardon and freedom.<sup>31</sup> On 31 December 2022, when Putin visited the headquarters of the Southern Military District, he presented orders and medals to servicemen, among whom was a certain Gasparyan, who had been recruited from a maximum-security prison.<sup>32</sup>

However, in February 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin said that the Wagner PMC stopped

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26 <https://www.dw.com/ru/olga-romanova-zaklucennyh-rossian-na-vojne-v-ukraine-brosaut-v-boj-pervymi/a-62793841>.

27 <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/01/27/peskov-ukazy-o-pomilovanii-voevavshikh-v-ukraine-zakliuchennykh-zasekrecheny-news>.

28 <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-62934135>.

29 <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/20/politics/us-russia-wagner-group/index.html>.

30 [www.forbes.ru/society/489801-prigozin-ocenil-poteri-cvk-vagner-v-boah-za-bahmut?ysclid=li75vcusun806519105](http://www.forbes.ru/society/489801-prigozin-ocenil-poteri-cvk-vagner-v-boah-za-bahmut?ysclid=li75vcusun806519105).

31 <https://ria.ru/20230105/wagner-1843111082.html>.

32 <https://theins.info/news/258362>.

recruiting prisoners.<sup>33</sup> The Ministry of Defence quickly realised the benefits of using prisoners in combat operations and began such recruitment of prisoners on its own. According to human rights organisations, more than 20,000 people were recruited this way.<sup>34</sup> Deprived of a replenishment resource, Wagner was rather quickly drained of blood. This was the real reason for Prigozhin's hysterical criticism of the Defence Ministry and the General Staff. Eventually, Prigozhin's threats had effect. Bakhmut was declared taken and Wagner's units had to go on vacation. The Kremlin chose not to notice Prigozhin's defiant statements.

## The Destruction of the State

Especially in a Russian context, the demonstrative disregard of command orders, up to direct military confrontation with regular army units, and public criticism of the leadership of the armed forces are remarkable phenomena, which could be and are perceived as threatening to destroy the command system of the armed forces, which is based on one command, and hierarchical subordination of all units to a single command.

However, there are currently several private military companies operating on the Russian-Ukrainian front, of which Wagner is the largest. In addition, there is an active brigade called Veterans, which "buys" soldiers from commanders of regular units to replenish their own contingents and participate in bloody assaults. There is also PMC Redut, which is associated with another of Putin's cronies, Gennady Timchenko. In addition, we know of three PMCs formed by Gazprom: Potok, Fakel and Plamya.<sup>35</sup> None of these units are subordinate to a single command.<sup>36</sup> They arose out of the Kremlin's inability to provide, through contract recruitment and mobilisation, the required number of troops on the front lines.

The payback was the de facto abandonment of the most important function of the state, the monopoly of armed violence. The existence of military formations parallel to the regular armed forces already creates an alternative command. Officers, experts in the use of violence, have been offered jobs in private military companies. Thus, Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, who was dismissed from his post as Deputy Minister of Defence, immediately became Prigozhin's deputy. And this, of course, was noticed by the officer corps. Consequently, in the case of conflict with the commanders, the experts in the use of violence have an option: to offer their services to an alternative military force and apply their knowledge on the use of military force, no longer in the service of the state, but in the interests of the PMC owner.

It cannot be ruled out that the Kremlin ignores Prigozhin's escapades because it considers his methods of warfare effective. At the same time, Putin can be confident in his ability to control Prigozhin fully. However, even if this is the case, the benefits of using Prigozhin are much less than the problems it creates. Evgeny Prigozhin does not hide his political ambitions. The fact that he and only he reports to a large military formation creates a new situation on the Russian domestic political scene. The owner of Wagner openly speculates about the benefits he has received: "The Wagner PMC now has six thousand people who

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33 <https://thebell.io/41889-2>.

34 <https://www.sibreal.org/a/zaklyuchennyye-soobschayut-o-priezde-v-kolonii-minoborony-i-verbovke-na-kontraktную-sluzhbu/32382063.html>.

35 <https://republic.ru/posts/108449>.

36 A special place is occupied by the Patriot PMC, which, according to media reports, is under the full control of the command of the Armed Forces.

are able to manage the company. That is, they can manage at least 600,000 people. If we were given, as I asked, 200,000 people, we would move the frontline by 50–150 kilometres in different directions and would take control of the entire Donbass. We are a full-fledged army. Why weren't we allowed in? It happened because of intrigues, because of the fear that when some structure expands, it can start dictating conditions and conditionally come to Moscow by tanks."<sup>37</sup>

Essentially, Prigozhin's statements are the first signs of a possible collapse of the existing state. Military failures blamed on the defence minister, war weariness, the appearance near the throne of some mystical personality hated by the official bureaucracy, the rapidly declining loyalty of the regular army: anyone familiar with Russian history will surely see here the harbingers of the 1917 revolution, over a century ago. And the parallel military structures may constitute the material basis for a possible civil war. It is no coincidence that law enforcement agencies that prevent the legalisation of PMCs are afraid of a situation when, at a time of crisis in the country, there will be thousands of soldiers, already mobilised and organised, obeying only their commanders.

## Conclusions

- The Wagner PMC appeared in 2014, when the regular army did not have enough manpower to ensure the imperialist aspirations of the Kremlin. It is logical that after the start of a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, on 24 February 2022, Wagner's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, felt confident enough to enter conflict with the leadership of the armed forces and threaten to voluntarily abandon positions on the battlefield.
- Wagner PMC has at times served Russian political aims well, in Ukraine, Africa and Syria, but is also increasingly presenting itself as a challenge to Moscow's political and military authority.
- The situation around Wagner, when the highest authorities have so far been unable, or unwilling, to punish its warlord, who is out of control, indicates a profound crisis in the entire system of governance, including the command system of the armed forces. If Wagner troops were to appear in Russia proper as paramilitary units, a crisis of the state could be triggered, which could eventually challenge the Kremlin's political authority.
- In terms of the prospects for war with Ukraine, such a crisis would lead to a significant weakening of Russia's ability to fight.
- The disintegration of the military system of government may precede the disintegration of the country, as a result of defeat in a war. In such an event, one cannot rule out a civil war waged by military formations that have broken away from central authority.

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37 <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/05/24/rodinu-lyublyu-putina-slushayus-shoygu-na-mylo-voevat-budem-dalshe>.



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The Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent Centre, funded by the Swedish Government, established in 2021. The Centre conducts policy relevant analysis on Russia and Eastern Europe and serves as a platform and meeting place for national and international discussions and exchanges on Russia and Eastern Europe. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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