



The Wagner Group's Attempted Coup in Russia

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Introduction

In late June, the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, attempted to seize power from Russia's Vladimir Putin in a short-lived coup attempt. While tensions eventually subsided and the threat was retracted, the course of events provided important insights into Russia's military status and future. In this paper, RMC's Intelligence & Analysis Division will examine the origins and activities of the Wagner Group, the events of the June 2023 coup attempt, and the implications of the coup attempt on the geopolitical and security environment. While this paper cannot provide an all-encompassing assessment of an inherently secretive event, the forthcoming analysis should highlight some of the key trends and issues impacting Russia's military and political situation.

Background: Wagner Group

The Wagner Group is the successor to two (2) earlier private military companies, the Moran Security Group and the Slavonic Corps. The Wagner Group does not formally exist as a singular company on paper, rather, it exists as a network of disparate organizations. The group's name is derived from Demitry Utkin, a retired Russian Army Colonel who was previously credited as its founder. Utkin is reportedly fascinated by Germany's Third Reich and used "Wagner" as a call-sign in tribute to 19th century classical composer Richard Wagner, whose work was appropriated by the Nazi Party.

In 2013, Utkin worked for the Slavonic Corps when it was based out of Hong Kong. The Slavonic Corps went on a single failed mission in Syria at the behest of the Syrian government. Many of its operatives were later arrested in Russia for illegal mercenary work. While the Russian constitution states that security and defense belong to the state, there are loopholes. Individuals are barred from working as independent mercenaries, but state-run enterprises can have private armed forces and security. This allows Russians to work for private military companies (PMCs). Companies registered abroad are also permitted to operate. In this case, most PMCs prefer to recruit exclusively Russian citizens. However, the laws against working as a mercenary provides the Kremlin with leverage over the companies and their operatives.^{1,2}

Following their initial arrests, those Slavonic Corps mercenaries and others like them gradually reemerged when demand for their services continued. By March 2014, Wagner Group operatives were fighting in Ukraine's Crimea and Donbass regions. Wagner backed pro-Russian separatist forces in the east and is thought to have helped Moscow annex Crimea. Wagner forces have also been active in Africa and the Middle East since then. In 2015, they received a permanent training base at a top-secret GRU facility at the Russian village of Molkyno, near Krasnodar Airport. It should be noted that the GRU is the foreign military intelligence wing of the Russian military.

It later became clear that Utkin's role as Wagner's founder had been exaggerated. He had served as a decoy to disguise Wagner's real founder and the group's connection to the Kremlin. The real founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was eventually identified in open source reporting, while Utkin serves as Wagner's field commander. Prigozhin has been nicknamed "Putin's Chef" because he owns a catering company that handles multiple contracts for the Kremlin. He denied his affiliation with the Wagner Group until 2022. Prigozhin has a long history in counterintelligence and propaganda, including election interference in the U.S. He is wanted by the FBI for "Conspiracy to Defraud the United States" for allegedly overseeing and funding the political and electoral interference of Russia's Internet Research Agency from 2014-2018. The agency allegedly tried to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election.^{2,3,4}

The Russian government's deniability of connections with the Wagner Group became more difficult after Utkin was identified in a video taken at a Kremlin reception on 09 December 2016. Following their actions in the earlier conflict in Ukraine, it became clearer that the Wagner Group is likely integrated into an overall chain of command under the Kremlin with its military intelligence apparatus.²

Before Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, estimates suggested Wagner had about 5,000 fighters. Most were veterans of Russia's elite regiments and special forces. However, Wagner's numbers grew substantially after the invasion to, according to Prigozhin, approximately 25,000 troops. Recent estimates placed the number of Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine at approximately 50,000. The numbers were bolstered substantially by recruiting Russian prisoners. About 80% of Wagner's mercenaries in Ukraine came from prisons, according to the U.S. National Security Council. Wagner was involved in the capture of the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. Ukrainian troops said they responded in large numbers over open ground, but many were killed.^{4,5}

A Ukrainian report from December 2022 described the Wagner Group as a unique threat, with enough operatives to overwhelm opposition with sheer numbers. The report stated that, as former prisoners and mercenaries, the deaths of Wagner operatives are dismissed by the Kremlin and by Russian society. The group's mercenaries do not withdraw without command, and unauthorized retreat is punishable by summary execution. Ukrainian personnel have also described battlefield atrocities committed by Wagner mercenaries.⁶

According to the report, Wagner frequently deploys small mobile groups of about a dozen or fewer, using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) with data provided by drones. The ex-prisoners typically move in the first wave of an attack. They absorb the heaviest casualties. Wagner's more experienced fighters follow. If they take a position, they dig foxholes to hold it under protection of artillery. In January of this year, Prigozhin took credit for capturing the town of Soledar, Ukraine and nearby settlements. Prigozhin frequently criticized the regular Russian Army as inept and corrupt. Wagner's successes late last year and earlier this year gave Prigozhin leverage to demand additional resources from the Kremlin. However, the group has also reportedly sourced arms from North Korea. Around that time, Prigozhin claimed that Wagner had multiple launch rocket systems, along with air defenses and artillery. Wagner's success independent of the regular Russian Army was an ongoing source of concern for both the Kremlin and the international community.⁶

June 2023 Coup Attempt

On Friday, 23 June, Prigozhin threatened a rebellion of over 25,000 Wagner Group mercenaries against Russia's military leadership. He accused them of intentionally shelling his forces earlier in the day. Putin was briefed on an "attempted armed rebellion" overnight. Early Saturday morning (24 June), Prigozhin announced that the Wagner Group had taken control of the Southern Military District and all military facilities in Rostov-on-Don, near Russia's border with Ukraine. Prigozhin threatened to continue to Moscow, after which his forces began traveling north towards the Russian capital. Vladimir Putin called Wagner's actions "a stab in the back" and stated that Russia would defend itself. Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic, ordered his own forces to move in support of Russia. Later in the afternoon, Wagner forces moved through the Voronezh region, about 300 miles south of Moscow, reportedly encountering some resistance from the regular Russian Army. They later moved through the Lipetsk region, farther north. However, at approximately 8:00 p.m., Prigozhin ordered Wagner's forces to return to their field camps. The sudden end to the coup led to confusion at both the Kremlin and in the international community.⁷

On Tuesday, 27 June, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) dropped its case against Prigozhin and the Wagner Group. On Thursday, 29 June, Putin reportedly met with Prigozhin, commanders of Wagner's detachments, and company management. The Kremlin reached an agreement, wherein Prigozhin would relocate to Belarus. However, by 06 July, Alexander Lukashenko, president of Belarus, said he was still in Russia. Multiple voices in open source media speculated that the Wagner Group's leader had been executed or secretly incarcerated. However, Prigozhin's plane landed near Minsk, the capital of Belarus, on the morning of 18 July. There was also video of him criticizing Russia's efforts in Ukraine, while confirming that Wagner's mercenaries would remain in Belarus for the near future, with a possible move to Africa to join other Wagner elements already there. President Lukashenko claimed to have brokered the deal between Prigozhin and Putin. Since then, Lukashenko has invited Wagner forces into Belarus to help train his country's military.^{7,8}

Those Wagner forces that did not join Prigozhin's coup were eligible to join the Russian military and sign contracts under the command of the Russian Ministry of Defense. By late July, there were reportedly 3,400-3,600 Wagner Group mercenaries and 700-750 armed transport vehicles in Belarus at a military base in Tsel, near Minsk. The mercenaries arrived in 10 groups with 300-500 in each. A Wagner Group representative recently claimed that as many as 10,000 fighters are in Belarus. They are reportedly those operatives that refused to enlist in the Russian Army and remain loyal to Prigozhin.^{9,10}

The Wagner Group continues to operate in Africa, largely focused on security services, paramilitary assistance, and disinformation campaigns for client regimes and rebel groups. Wagner's services are conducted in exchange for direct payment, resource concessions, and diplomatic support, based on the needs of its clients. Wagner is most active in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Mali, and Sudan. Human rights groups and the United Nations have accused them of committing war crimes there, including executions and torture, along with general threats to peace and prosperity.^{11,12}

Geopolitical Implications

The geopolitical implications of this coup attempt are profound and numerous. There are obvious implications for Vladimir Putin's leadership of Russia, Russian military command structure, effectiveness of the Russian Army in the absence of Wagner Group and the war with Ukraine. Russian influence in Africa and the Middle East, primarily through Wagner Group operations could be impacted as well. These secondary effects may change the calculus for the NATO response to the war in Ukraine and force China to reevaluate its relationship with Russia.

Analysis of Vladimir Putin's leadership of Russia, both politically and militarily, must be conducted with the understanding of his ability to consolidate control since he came to power in 2000. Over the past 23 years, Putin has systematically eroded the democratic norms of Russia's ruling elite, undermined any opposition, cracking down on protests, and created a strong propaganda system.¹³

The Wagner Group coup attempt in and of itself is not a sign of Putin's loss of strength or control. It is more likely a sign of infighting amongst leaders of the regime. However, there are other signals that indicate opposition to the current regime. The Free Russia Legion is an anti-regime movement beginning to spread through Russia. The group has been credited with several attacks inside of Russia and have fought alongside Ukrainians against Russia. Attacks on Russian critical infrastructure such as rail lines, gas and oil pipelines, and military enlistment centers has doubled thus far in 2023. Lastly, Russian citizens are emigrating from Russia at historic levels. Nearly one million Russians emigrated in 2022 according to World Bank data. Most of these citizens were younger, educated, and western leaning in their beliefs. It is difficult to estimate the level of support for Putin that exists amongst Russian citizens, however, a coup attempt, armed rebel groups, and growing emigration numbers indicate a weakening of Putin's control over Russia.^{13,14,15}

Tensions between Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Shoigu have been well documented since the beginning of the Ukraine invasion when the Russian army failed to seize Kyiv and decisively end the invasion quickly. The failed coup attempt has only added to this tension, causing many to believe that Putin may replace Shoigu (especially considering part of the stated purpose of the coup attempt was the ouster of Shoigu and leaders at the Ministry of Defense). To date, Shoigu has not been replaced by Putin. Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, Shoigu has taken the brunt of criticism over the conduct of the war, shielding Putin from such criticism of day-to-day operations, especially amongst the Russian public. Furthermore, keeping Shoigu in place gives the appearance that the military chain of command is intact and strong after the coup attempt. Most recently, Putin met with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in St. Petersburg on 23 July 2023. The location of the meeting is symbolic as it is the location of the failed anti-Bolshevik insurrection in 1921. Putin brought Shoigu with him for this meeting where he made the unusual action of taking photographs with loyal Russian citizens and children. Putin's actions on this visit indicate that he is aware and is concerned about his perception amongst Russian citizens and is signaling his strength by meeting with a critical political ally (his Defense Minister) in a place where a previous Russian insurrection was quelled.^{13,16,17}

Wagner Group is no longer participating in the war in Ukraine in any significant way. Most recently, the organization has been observed in Belarus, training the Belarusian military. Wagner Group has a significant level of combat experience and expertise which will be a loss to the Russian army capability in the Ukraine war. Wagner Group's presence in Belarus has led to speculation that they may support operations against Poland. The Suwlki Corridor is key terrain in Poland that has been a matter of contention with Russia similar to Crimea before Russia seized that region from Ukraine. The Polish Army has moved significant numbers of troops to its border with Belarus in response.^{18,19,20}

Security Implications

Recently, Vladimir Putin made claims that the Russian military had moved tactical nuclear weapons into Belarus. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) has stated there is no reason to doubt this claim. Putin originally stated his intention to move Iskander-M missile systems (which are tactical nuclear-capable systems) to Belarus in March 2023. Putin indicated that the tactical nuclear systems delivered this month are the first delivery and the project will be complete by the end of the year. Tactical nuclear systems are harder to track than their larger strategic counterparts making definitive analysis regarding the number of tactical nuclear-capable systems moved into Belarus difficult. Putin also claims that Poland has territorial goals in Belarus and warned that Russia will defend Belarus from Polish aggression. Poland denies any interest in Belarusian territory, but it is possible that Putin is setting conditions for a false flag operation.^{21,22,23}

Security implications extend well beyond the region. The Wagner Group carries significant influence for Russia across the Middle East and Africa. Leadership of these Wagner forces going forward remains unclear, but since the invasion of Ukraine, Wagner operations in the Middle East and Africa have remained separate. Russia will likely attempt to keep these operations in order, possibly changing leadership for known Putin loyalists. The contracts in these countries keep Russian influence strong in the region. Additionally, China has been intently observing and learning from the Ukraine war. The lessons that the Chinese learned from the coup attempt are unclear at this time. However, there are similarities between the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Chinese ambitions involving Taiwan.^{24,25}

Outlook

The future of the Wagner Group, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the war in Ukraine remain complicated and unclear. Wagner's recent actions and presence in other countries, highlights the group's geopolitical importance. As the Russian aggression in Ukraine continues, Russian and Ukrainian allies alike will keep a close watch on Russia's military strength and political leadership. Additionally, the upcoming 2024 U.S. presidential elections may cause uncertainty as Ukraine, NATO Allies, Russia, and China evaluate where the U.S. will stand. However, as this incident has shown, major events can occur with little warning. RMC's Intelligence and Analysis Division will continue to monitor the war in Ukraine and Russian internal power struggles and associated impacts on the geopolitical and security landscape.

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