Post-Prigozhin Russia in Africa

Regaining or Losing Control?

By Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia

Introduction

From the Central African Republic (CAR) to Libya, through Mali and Sudan, Russia has been consistently gaining ground across Africa over the past decade. Moscow owes its successes on the continent in large part to one man, the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, who until recently led the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC).

Prigozhin sensed better than anyone else in Moscow the strategic and lucrative opportunities that the resource-rich and politically fragile spots across Africa could bring to Russia. Dubbed “Putin’s chef,” Prigozhin moved from the actual catering business into the PMC business. In Africa, he made tailormade recipes for the Kremlin’s various targets, while using some signature ingredients such as security protection, election meddling, and disinformation campaigns to the benefit of local partners in exchange for deals for access to natural resources, including oil, gold, diamonds, and uranium.

After years of the Kremlin enjoying the plausible deniability granted by the Wagner Group’s murky legal status, the June 2023 armed mutiny led by Prigozhin against the Russian government exposed the intricacies of the relationship between the PMC and Moscow, including the latter’s dependence on the Wagner chief to gain influence and control over different African governments.

The elimination of Prigozhin now raises a new set of questions: How will his demise affect Russia’s clout in Africa? Will Prigozhin’s killing create a power vacuum within Wagner, as well as in the African countries where the PMC has been prominent? Will new faces emerge to assume control of Prigozhin’s formidable multimillion-dollar legacy? And does Russia’s Ministry of Defense, or others from the security apparatus, have the means to take over Wagner’s activities while the war in Ukraine is still ongoing?

So far, fluid battlegrounds and embattled regimes across Africa such as the CAR, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Sudan suggest that Russia’s appeal as a security guarantor and military partner remains intact, irrespective of the fate of the Wagner Group. One reason for this—as the authors of this piece have argued
earlier—is that Russia’s provision of **regime survival packages** in this destabilized region “supersedes any other potential gains from traditional cooperation agreements advanced by Western partners, which are usually based on institutional capacity building instead of securing the authorities themselves.”

However, a series of signs, including Russia’s military shortcomings in Ukraine, Russia’s inability to stop drone attacks on Moscow, and domestic fissures regarding Wagner’s future, might negatively impact the perception of the Kremlin as a guarantor of security and stability across Africa. As the dust keeps settling, this analysis looks at the possible directions of Wagner and its operations in Africa in a post-Prigozhin world, concluding with recommendations for U.S. and Western policymakers.

**Recapping Prigozhin’s Multimillion-Dollar Operations in Africa**

On August 21, video footage of Prigozhin, allegedly recorded in Mali, emerged on social media, in which he pledged to make “Russia even greater on every continent and Africa even freer.” Two days later—and two months after his failed armed mutiny—Prigozhin died in a **plane crash** along with other senior figures from Wagner, including Dmitry Utkin, long believed to be the founder of the PMC, and Valery Chekalov, who reportedly managed Prigozhin’s oil, gas, and mineral businesses in Africa and the Middle East.

While Prigozhin’s summer 2023 odyssey from Ukraine’s Bakhmut to Russia’s Rostov-on-Don (with a brief layover in **Belarus**) and back to Africa ultimately ended with his demise, it is not yet clear if the fall of 2023 will be fatal for the Wagner Group itself, which has now lost nearly all members of its senior leadership. Following the mutiny in June, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reassured African allies that Moscow would not withdraw Wagner mercenaries from the continent, and sources close to Prigozhin have also argued that Russia is heavily dependent on the PMC’s assets abroad and thus their removal would cause “a rapid compression of Russian influence” in Africa.

Indeed, starting from the late 2010s, Wagner has become firmly entrenched in different parts of the continent, and particularly in the countries that have created political headaches for international organizations and the Western bloc. The CAR is the most prominent case of the Wagner entrenchment in Africa, where the PMC arrived in 2018 at the invitation of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. As Touadéra has recently explained, he was desperate to find outside assistance to quell the civil war, and Russia was the only country willing to send weapons and fighters (the latter being Wagner mercenaries). In an interview, he said, “I asked all my friends, including in the United States, including France. . . . I need to protect the population. I need to protect the institutions of the republic. I asked everyone for help, and was I supposed to refuse the help from those who wanted to help us?” In exchange for providing personal security, military training, and combat assistance, the PMC has gained direct access to the CAR’s natural resources, including the Ndassima gold mining site, which, according to a recent CSIS study, Wagner-linked operatives had significantly expanded by 2023. Some estimates claim that Wagner could gain as much as $1 billion in annual mining profits in the CAR alone, which would help the Kremlin mitigate the damages of Western sanctions.

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1. Russian documents quoted in this report were translated into English by the authors.
In addition to the CAR, Moscow has taken advantage of the West’s absence or contested presence in different regions and countries across the continent, including in Libya, Mali, and Sudan, among others. In Libya—“a potential energy giant on Europe’s doorstep”—around 1,000 Wagner mercenaries have remained on the ground, providing combat assistance to strongman General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya in his fight against the internationally recognized government based in Tripoli. By supporting General Haftar, the PMC has put itself in a position to control Libyan oil production in the country’s southwestern fields, thus curbing the European Union’s potential to invest in Libyan energy infrastructure to pivot away from Russian gas.

In Mali, the Wagner forces have reportedly been present since December 2021, providing protection to the military junta that took power in 2020 and receiving $10 million per month for their services. Starting in 2022, following President Emmanuel Macron’s decision to withdraw French troops from Mali due to major disagreements between the French government and the Malian military junta, Wagner began further strengthening its positions in the country. The arrival of Wagner-linked geologists and lawyers also suggests that, similar to Wagner’s arrangements in the CAR, Russia has secured mining concessions in exchange for providing the junta with the PMC’s services.

Sudan constitutes another noteworthy case of the Wagner deployment. In 2017, then president Omar al-Bashir signed several important deals with the Kremlin, including an agreement to set up a Russian naval base at Port Sudan, which would give Russia access to the Red Sea, as well as a gold mining contract between M Invest, a Prigozhin-owned company, and the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals. Following the ousting of President al-Bashir in 2019 and the ongoing political-military turmoil in the country, various sources have claimed that, through Libya, Wagner has provided military assistance...
and equipment to Sudan’s paramilitary forces and their leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo in his fight over the country’s civilian leadership. According to international observers, the Wagner Group’s main goals in Sudan have been to ensure Moscow’s uninterrupted access to Sudanese gold reserves, the third largest in Africa; to finance its war effort in Ukraine; and to build a naval base at Port Sudan, which would only become possible after the restoration of the Sudanese civilian leadership.

These cases demonstrate Prigozhin’s mastery of exploiting fragile states and governments on the continent, making Wagner indispensable to regime survival and national security, and bringing significant geopolitical and economic gains to the Kremlin. Now, with his death, the future of Wagner is murky, as is the future of many companies across Africa linked to or owned by the late Prigozhin. At this time, any possible answers to the question of succession are highly speculative and problematic.

**Dissolved or Restructured? Wagner without Prigozhin**

It comes as no surprise that the process of “deliberate wrongdoing” that ultimately ended with Prigozhin’s demise was initiated two months before the plane crash. It started with an effort to deflect blame from the Wagner mercenaries in Rostov-on-Don entirely to the PMC boss and thus plant the seeds of disagreement between the Wagner leadership and its fighters. In the days after Prigozhin’s failed uprising, sources close to the Kremlin were encouraging the PMC forces to join the Russian Ministry of Defense, arguing that they had not done “anything reprehensible,” as they had been merely following the orders of their commander.

These statements prepared the ground for President Vladimir Putin’s closed-door meeting with Prigozhin and Wagner fighters on June 29. Two weeks later, in a rare interview with Russian newspaper Kommersant, Putin shared some important insights from that meeting. He said that the ordinary members of the PMC were “dragged into” the mutiny and seemed to agree with his suggestion to serve under the guidance of a senior Wagner commander Andrei Troshev, also known as “Sedoi” (denoting “gray hair” in Russian). As Putin explained, “He is the person under whose command Wagner fighters have served for the last 16 months. . . . They could all gather in one place and continue to serve. And nothing would change for them. They would be led by the same person who had been their real commander all along.” The president also claimed that while many in the room seemed keen to accept the offer, Prigozhin rejected his proposal.

But since August 23, the talks regarding a new Wagner chief have resumed, with the Russian state media placing a reinvigorated emphasis on the candidacy of Troshev. Sources close to the Wagner Group have also confirmed these rumors. Troshev fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya and has received the highest honorary title, Hero of the Russian Federation, for his participation in the military operation in Syria. The deaths of both Prigozhin and Utkin have made him the only remaining senior Wagner commander. Yet the same sources also claim that the only Wagner personnel who will serve under Troshev’s leadership will be those fighters who agree to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense and who remain in Russia. This interesting detail may point to the Kremlin’s decision to divide Wagner into several groups, each with different country or regional heads.

Indeed, besides Troshev as a potential successor to Prigozhin, other names have also been circulating inside Russia, including those of Alexander Kuznetsov, Andrey Bogatov, and Anton Yelizarov, all three belonging to the PMC’s current command structure. Denis Korotkov, a Russian journalist investigating the
work of the Wagner Group, believes that the division of power between different commanders within the PMC might be a possibility, arguing that even if Troshev is nominally elected as the new Wagner boss (as Utkin was for many years), he will never be the “manager” of the group (as Prigozhin actually dealt with the financial, organizational, and political aspects of the PMC). Other sources have pointed to a Wagner takeover by the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence service, notably via its deputy chief, Andrei Averyanov. At the Russia-Africa summit held in Saint Petersburg, Russia, this July, President Touadéra was introduced to Averyanov—instead of Prigozhin. By contrast, according to recent news reports, for some in the Wagner Group there is still hope that the PMC can exist autonomously under command of Prigozhin’s son Pavel, without it being subsumed within the Russian Ministry of Defense.

The question of the successor will also inevitably impact continuity of the ongoing Wagner operations in Africa. Some Russian experts believe that because Prigozhin was instrumental in developing strong personal ties with different regimes across the continent, it will not be possible to simply replace him with a new boss. “He was the only one crazy enough to make it work,” argued a longtime Prigozhin acquaintance in a Financial Times exclusive. Wagner-linked Telegram channels have also reported that the group is now facing a “very tough competition” from Russia’s Ministry of Defense and National Guard in Africa and the Middle East, as these two state entities plan to gradually assume control over the PMC’s local operations. While Wagner’s current leadership will continue negotiations with the Russian government, it is not yet known if and in what numbers Wagner mercenaries will remain in Africa.

Yet changes in Wagner’s command and control do not necessarily mean that Russia is abandoning the PMC model altogether, given that it provides significant political and economic benefits that are particularly important amid the war in Ukraine and Western economic sanctions. After reports
of Prigozhin’s death, CSIS’s Catrina Doxsee said that “Moscow is unlikely to dismantle Wagner’s operational infrastructure in host countries, as it would be difficult to rebuild the same relationships, knowledge, and systems that Wagner personnel have established over the years.” Therefore, according to Doxsee, it is more likely that Moscow will install a new Wagner leadership that will be more tightly controlled than the deceased Prigozhin-Utkin duo, and maintain relative continuity of mid- to lower-level Wagner personnel on the ground. A recent statement by a CAR official close to President Touadéra confirms as much, with the official claiming that, even with Prigozhin gone, Wagner will remain in the CAR “thanks to our agreement with the Kremlin.” According to Doxsee, it is also possible that Wagner entities could be merged with another PMC such as Convoy, a relatively new group led by Sergey Aksyonov, a pro-Russia leader in Crimea, and Konstantin Pikalov, who formerly worked closely with Prigozhin and oversaw much of Wagner’s activity in Africa.

Irrespective of the fate of the most famous Russian PMC, there seems to be a consensus regarding Russia’s reputation as a security guarantor to its African partners. For instance, Russian political scientist Aleksei Makarkin has argued that even if Wagner is ultimately replaced with new mercenary companies more tightly linked to the Russian Ministry of Defense, this will not alter Moscow’s current position on the continent. Instead, for many in the region, Wagner has been perceived not as a PMC but as a representative of the Russian state itself. In the eyes of African leaders, Russia, and not the Wagner Group, has been their loyal military-security partner throughout all these years. But besides loyalty, these events have exposed Russia’s inherent instability and unpredictability, stressing for African governments the risks of overreliance on a single partner. Alternatively, for many fragile regimes, there might also be a strengthened fear factor—now that African countries with Wagner presence have seen what the Kremlin can do to those who turn back or revolt, they might feel even more intimidated and sign new security agreements with Russia, making even bigger economic concessions to the Kremlin.

What Now? Recommendations to Western Policymakers

While the Putin administration is trying to reconfigure Russia’s current PMC model, there might be a brief window of opportunity for U.S. and Western policymakers to attempt a dialogue with different African leaders and dislodge Russian influence. This section lays out recommendations to the Western policy community to take advantage of Russia’s Wagner conundrum and counter the Kremlin’s influence on the continent. For more, see earlier CSIS analysis by the authors—“Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What’s the Limit?”—for broader sets of recommendations to U.S. and European policymakers to counter Russian political, economic, and military-security entrenchment in Africa.

- Devise a security cooperation package that is tailored to the needs of African partners while still observant of transatlantic values.

Prigozhin possessed a remarkable ability to grasp key security concerns of different leaders and regimes across Africa and promptly offered services that would temporarily solve their immediate problems. Building on the authors’ previous analysis, for an alternative Western offer to be competitive, cooperation should remain principled, but less transactional. It should remain motivated by shared values, with Western security assistance ultimately serving political objectives that are aligned with the transatlantic community’s values. Recommendations from that analysis still hold: “due diligence should be conducted upstream through arms control
policies and downstream through accompaniment and monitoring—not during the negotiation phase or political engagement, so as to alleviate the sentiment that Western support is a politically motivated bargaining chip.”

- **Actively expose atrocities committed by the Wagner Group on the continent.**

  The West should **continue** to expose the widespread **atrocities** and human rights abuses committed by Wagner paramilitaries in Africa. To do so, the West should also invest more resources in establishing and supporting reliable, Africa-based media outlets that promote local voices and perspectives on important regional issues.

- **Preserve an ability to act against traditional and potential new threats in Africa.**

  Contrary to Prigozhin’s claims that Wagner has been making African nations “freer,” Russia’s continued advances on the continent are in fact **risk multipliers**, with the most prominent one being rising levels of terrorism in the countries where Russia, including Wagner fighters, is present. According to the **Global Terrorism Index**, 48 percent of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2022, with three of the top 10 countries—Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—all having some sort of Wagner presence. The ongoing uncertainty regarding the future of the PMC may fuel further instability and insecurity on the continent. Facing these potential new threats implies that the West should retain certain capabilities in the region. This includes defensive equipment and airlift options to protect both Western citizens and African partners in the case of serious violent outbreaks—such as a recent violent outbreak in **Niger**—as well as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities to **disclose** intelligence on Wagner’s (or its future replacement’s) nefarious activities on the continent to partners in Africa and to dissuade them from working with Russian PMCs.

- **Engage with African partners to develop their energy infrastructure and natural resources in a mutually beneficial way.**

  As the cases of the Wagner deployment in the CAR, Libya, Mali, and Sudan have shown, Wagner’s goal in Africa is not only to provide military training and security assistance to the continent’s fragile regimes, but to sign exclusive energy and mining deals aimed at exploiting African natural resources. These practices should be exposed to establish a counternarrative against Wagner disinformation **campaigns**, which argue that all Western activities in Africa are grounded in neocolonialism, while eliding the economically exploitative nature of Wagner’s (and, by extension, Russia’s) own investments on the continent. Recently, Moscow has also been pushing toward the development of **nuclear energy** to meet the region’s growing economic needs. As Western countries are playing catch-up with regards to **energy diplomacy** in Africa, it is high time for them to redouble their efforts and offer fair, cooperation-based energy deals, with attractive incentives and targeted capacity building. This approach will help counter Russia’s widespread use of propaganda that depicts Western countries as plundering the continent’s resources for their own prosperity and economic well-being.
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