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ANALYSIS

Russian Foreign Paramilitary Outfits beyond Wagner

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Abstract

It is too early to predict exactly what will happen to the Wagner Group forces that are currently deployed abroad. This article considers several Russian paramilitary groups that might be alternative hosts for former Wagnerites—including Redut and Konvoy, among others—and their associated commercial and force-based activities.

It is still too early to predict what will happen to the Wagner Group following the June 2023 mutiny and August death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (Marten, 2023b). Wagner might be broken up by country or function, or kept together as a whole under new leadership. The constant release of breaking and conflicting news about Wagner's potential future (including interviews given by key Russian and local actors, their public sightings and trips, and social media posts by Wagner-affiliated groups) may at least in part be an orchestrated Kremlin disinformation campaign. Given Moscow's strong interests in avoiding sanctions and war crimes indictments, the Kremlin might want to prevent analysts from understanding too clearly who will actually have responsibility for what going forward.

Some individuals currently in the media spotlight—among them Prigozhin's young son Pavel (Troianovski, Walsh, Schmitt, Yee, & Barnes, 2023), charismatic Wagner commercial manager and negotiant in the Central African Republic (CAR) Dmitry Syty (Chason & Debout, 2023), and experienced former Wagner mid-level commander Anton Troshev, reputedly President Vladimir Putin's favorite to take over command of the group (Faulconbridge, 2023)—may emerge as key players in managing Wagner's future. They are unlikely, though, to be able to act alone, without some well-organized replacement framework for oversight and coordination.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) has expressed its desire to exert stronger command and control over Wagner activities, leading some to predict that the armed forces will absorb Wagner. Yet the MoD and its branches probably lack the financial resources and administrative bandwidth to integrate such a complex commercial group fully, especially as the war against Ukraine will remain its primary focus for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the Wagner Group's key strengths—its flexibility in far-off lands, its utility for deflecting what might otherwise be concerns on the part of the Russian public about casualties from foreign adventurism, and the way in which it helps Russia to evade United Nations scrutiny by claiming to be

a private firm—would also be squandered by a complete takeover by the armed forces (Marten, 2023a).

Another possibility, then, is that the Wagner Group will somehow be absorbed by other Russian paramilitary groups. Analysts have identified more than a dozen Russian paramilitary outfits as having served in foreign locations. Most are considered more reliable by the Russian Defense Ministry than Prigozhin ever was, and a number of them have historical connections to the Wagner Group.

Redut

The first major contender is a paramilitary outfit called Redut (“Redoubt”), primarily based in Syria and known as Shchit’ (“Shield”) for several years before 2022 (Novaya Gazeta, 2022). It is probably the group originally known as Redut-Antiterror, although it is difficult to trace the precise lineage of Russian paramilitary groups with any certainty. Redut-Antiterror emerged in 2008 from the “Anti-terror Orel” training center, created in 1998 in the Russian city of Orel by former special operations (*spetsnaz*) forces (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018; Sukhankin, 2019). Anti-terror Orel also spun off the Moran Security Group, which in turn spawned the Wagner Group in 2014—hence the historical connection between Wagner and Redut. Anti-terror Orel's original personnel had a range of combat experiences, but when Redut and Moran emerged, Russian security firms were focused on protecting Russia assets abroad, such as oil and gas facilities and tanker ships, not on combat. Many (but not Wagner, which never officially existed) were at one time legally registered as security firms in Russia. Records of this commercial history that were traced in 2018 (Marten, 2019) have since disappeared from what used to be a reliable listing of every firm ever registered in Russia (<https://www.rusprofile.ru/>). Investigative journalists from RFE/RL claim Redut is a “fake” organization because it was created by the GRU, but the evidence indicates that the Wagner Group, too, was created by the Russian military and had a close relationship with the GRU. In any case, Redut seems to have been around for years before

its 2022 deployment in Russia's Ukraine war (Schemes Systema 2023).

In Syria, Schchit'/Redut has been guarding natural gas facilities and pipelines operated by Stroytransgaz since 2018 (Novaya Gazeta, 2019; Krutov & Dobrynin, 2023). Stroytransgaz was originally a subsidiary of Russia's huge Gazprom enterprise, but Russian oil baron Gennady Timchenko eventually gained control. In 2022, the Kremlin tapped Redut to send a number of combat formations into the first wave of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Yapparova, Pertsev, & Slavin, 2022). Working under the auspices of Russia's Airborne Forces *spetsnaz* 45th Guards Brigade, Redut quickly mobilized new personnel for this purpose, including veterans with problematic records whom they had previously rejected for employment.

Timchenko is a close Putin associate. The two have known each other since the early 1990s in St. Petersburg, when Putin served as deputy mayor. They were implicated in an organized criminal oil-trading scheme at that time, until official efforts to investigate and prosecute them were abruptly dropped (Dawisha, 2014). This history, along with Redut's quick move into Ukraine in 2022, likely means that the group enjoys a high degree of Putin's trust and favor.

Wagner Group forces in Syria have also primarily been guarding oil and gas facilities—namely those controlled by Prigozhin's Evro Polis firm—in recent years (Rondeaux, 2020). There is no publicly available evidence that Wagner has engaged in combat in Syria since late 2021. This means that even though Wagner forces in Syria are reported to have signed Defense Ministry contracts at the time of the June mutiny (Al-Khalidi & Gebeily, 2023), they could also easily be absorbed into Redut. Timchenko might in turn be made responsible for what had been Prigozhin's commercial enterprises there. Most analysts see those enterprises primarily as a means for Russia to maintain a permanent presence in Syria.

Konvoy

The second major contender is a group known as Konvoy ("Convoy"). It first came to attention in 2020, when it tracked and harassed CNN journalists investigating Wagner activities in the CAR (Lister, Ward, & Shukla, 2020). Konvoy has further been accused of orchestrating the murder of three Russian journalists investigating Wagner there in 2018 (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). Konvoy may in fact be the overall St. Petersburg-based coordinating affiliate of the Sewa Security company in the CAR, which has been responsible for recruiting and managing all Wagner forces there since 2018 (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020). In March 2023, Konvoy created a new armed unit in Russian-occupied Crimea

in cooperation with the head of the Russian occupation authority, Sergey Aksyonov (Meduza, 2023a).

Konvoy is headed by Konstantin Pikalov, who—in addition to his other roles in Konvoy—may have served as the primary liaison between the Russian Defense Ministry and Wagner's African operations (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2020). Just before Prigozhin's death, Pikalov boasted that Konvoy planned to operate in eight unnamed African countries (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). In August, it was revealed that a major funder of Konvoy may be Arkady Rotenberg, a Russian billionaire who was a teenage Putin's judo partner back in the 1970s and has remained his close friend ever since (Meduza, 2023b).

Given that both Redut and Konvoy have financial associations with long-time Putin cronies (Timchenko and Rotenberg), as well as years of good relations with the Russian Defense Ministry, it is not surprising that they are reported to be "jockeying to replace Wagner in its operations abroad" (Luxmoore & Faucon, 2023). But they are not the only possible alternatives.

Other Contenders

Konstantin Malofeyev is a wealthy Russian media baron and investor known to have funded paramilitary groups in the Donbas region of Ukraine since 2014 (Titov, 2023). His International Agency of Sovereign Development was launched in concert with Russia's first Africa Summit in 2019, ostensibly to provide investment support for African countries, but with the apparent goal of brokering deals that would enable Russian firms to evade Western sanctions (Maldonado, 2020). He may thus already have been cooperating with Prigozhin's far-flung businesses in Africa. Malofeyev's monarchist rhetoric at home (touting Putin as the new tsar) and support for far-right politicians in Europe (Roonemaa, Laine, & Weiss, 2022) are matched by his enthusiasm for Russia's anti-colonial narrative in Africa. A similar narrative has been an important enabler of Wagner's spread on the continent, where Prigozhin's social media and cultural firms became known for their anti-French vitriol. Malofeyev has also been seen as one of the ideological drivers of Putin's Ukraine invasion. He too, then, is a trusted Putin crony with paramilitary ties and a potential Wagner overlap.

Several other Russian security firms could also participate in dividing Wagner Group spoils, even if they lack Wagner's track record in combat. The RSB group, for example, performed demining duties on contract for Khalifa Haftar's forces in eastern Libya, just before Wagner became Haftar's primary Russian defender (Tsvetkova, 2017). As recently as 2020, RSB claimed to be providing security for Haftar's regime, at a time when Wagner was participating in Haftar's failed combat drive

to seize the Libyan capital, Tripoli (Sidorkova, Khimshiashvili, & Kir'yanov, 2020). RSB has also serviced military aircraft in support of Haftar (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2022). In several ways, then, it appears that RSB may directly have cooperated with Wagner in Libya. The U.S. Treasury Department believes RSB is closely connected to Russia's FSB (Federal Security Service) intelligence agency.

Less is known about the Patriot Group, a Russian paramilitary outfit that reputedly competed against Wagner for the contract to guard gold mines in the CAR in 2018 (Warsaw Institute, 2018). It may have been on the ground in that country even before Wagner first showed up in late 2017. Patriot, like Wagner, is thought to have fought in Ukraine in 2023 (Kossov, 2023). The U.S. State Department believes Patriot to

be "associated with Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu," (US Department of State, 2023), so it could—at least in theory—be part of an MoD power grab for Wagner resources.

Recently, Russian business enterprises and state agencies have been encouraged to create ever more new "volunteer" groups to fill the ranks of those fighting in Ukraine. Among others, these have included three new paramilitary groups from Gazprom, one from the space agency Roskosmos, and several units sent by Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov. These new groups lack the heft and experience to compete with more established outfits in any Wagner takeover, but nonetheless serve as evidence that the Kremlin will likely continue to rely on paramilitary groups abroad as time goes on.

About the Author

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