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Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)

Russia uses private military companies (PMCs) to project power globally. These outfits range in size and scope and act as an unofficial (albeit nominally illegal) tool of Russian foreign policy. The most prominent Russian PMC is the Wagner Group, headed by Kremlin-connected businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. Instead of a single entity, the Wagner Group is more of an umbrella organization for multiple entities, operations, and actors overseen by Prigozhin. Wagner has played a key role in Russia's war in Ukraine and operates in multiple countries, particularly across Africa. Despite its widespread operations, Wagner's status is unclear after an aborted mutiny against the Russian government in June 2023 (see below).

The U.S. Departments of State and the Treasury have designated the Wagner Group and Prigozhin for sanctions under multiple executive orders. In January 2023, the Biden Administration designated Wagner a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) and simultaneously designated it under a sanctions program pertaining to the Central African Republic (CAR).

Several bills in the 118th Congresses would respond to the Wagner Group through sanctions, reporting requirements, and other measures. Considerations for Congress include the impact of such measures on Wagner's operations, its post-mutiny status and relationship with the Russian government, the extent to which the executive branch is providing sufficient information to enable oversight, and potential unintended consequences.

History

According to media reports, Wagner evolved out of earlier Russian PMC outfits, including groups operating in Syria in 2013. During this time, Russia was experimenting with PMCs, including their role and relationship to the state. Russian military intelligence (Main Directorate of the General Staff, or GU) reportedly helped establish and oversee the Wagner group, including creating training centers near GU *Spetsnaz* (elite reconnaissance) bases.

Wagner first appeared as an entity in 2014, during Russia's seizure and occupation of Ukraine's Crimea region. Wagner was involved in Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine through 2015, including carrying out alleged assassinations of local rebel leaders. During this time and into 2016, Wagner became involved in supporting Russia's intervention in Syria.

Starting in the late 2010s, Wagner established operations in several African countries, providing security services and, in some cases, engaging in mining and other private-sector activities. These countries include the Central African Republic, Libya, Mozambique, Mali, and Sudan.

Public-Private Partnership

The Wagner Group, and Russian PMCs more generally, are emblematic of Russian public-private partnerships defined by the delegation of limited governmental authority to private entities. PMCs nominally remain illegal under Russian law. The Russian government, however, provides them opportunities and protection unavailable to other businesses or people. The government, in essence, loans authority to these private entities, provided they operate at the behest of and according to the government's preferences. The U.S. Department of the Treasury identifies the Wagner Group as "a designated Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) proxy force," despite it being run by a private citizen. Such entities can pursue private or commercial interests, but they must fulfill government requests when called upon and ultimately remain under the direction of the Russian government.

Prigozhin Network and Organization

Prigozhin founded and reportedly funds and oversees the Wagner Group. He is subject to U.S. sanctions and under indictment for numerous activities, including interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Prigozhin denied operating the Wagner Group (going so far as to sue journalists in the United Kingdom for claiming he did) until September 2022, when he publicly admitted founding it. Prigozhin also reportedly oversees a broader network of entities beyond Wagner, including, for example, the Internet Research Agency, designated a "Russian troll farm" by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. Several of these entities and individuals connected to them also are subject to U.S. sanctions.

Prigozhin has used the Wagner Group to increase his personal political and financial influence by demonstrating his utility to Russian policymakers, often at the expense of other Russian agencies, resulting in increased tension and infighting among other security and military leaders.

Operations

Wagner publicly advertises a full spectrum of "regime security" services, including propaganda and other information operations. The marketing emphasizes that these services come without the conditionality often associated with Western donor support. Wagner has been linked to numerous human rights and war crimes violations, including in Ukraine and in African countries where Wagner operates. Some operations seem to have a clear connection to Russian foreign policy objectives, whereas others appear to be equally (or more) commercial in nature.

Wagner Group personnel appear to range from relatively professional and well-equipped veterans of the Russian military to convicts recruited hastily from Russian prisons

to fight in Ukraine. Even prior to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there appeared to be significant variation in the quality of personnel. Some operators and those that garnered the highest salaries came from elite units of the Russian military; others have less military experience and have been described by some observers as "adventurers" rather than military professionals.

Russia's War in Ukraine and Wagner Mutiny

The Wagner Group has played a large role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The group's role became more prominent around mid-2022, after the Russian military's initial failure to achieve key objectives. Wagner has been linked to numerous instances of potential war crimes and human rights violations in Ukraine, even against its own personnel.

Initially, Wagner reportedly provided small groups of relatively well-trained and equipped personnel to support the Russian military. As the war continued and the Russian military continued to underperform, Wagner expanded to conduct large-scale operations, specifically seeking to capture the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut. Prigozhin also recruited large numbers of convicts from prisons across Russia to fight in Ukraine, with the promise of clemency. These troops were used in "human wave" attacks, in which units composed of convicts launched assaults against Ukrainian forces and suffered numerous casualties.

As the Russian military underperformed Russian intelligence and government expectations, Prigozhin exploited the Russian military's failures and sought to increase his profile by presenting Wagner as a more capable and efficient service able to achieve objectives the military could not. This led to public infighting between Prigozhin and the military (as well as other members of the Russian elite) and included accusations of incompetence against the MoD and the withholding of needed supplies and ammunition to the Wagner Group.

In response, the Russian military hierarchy took actions to undermine Prigozhin and appeared to gain the upper hand by gradually limiting the group's autonomy. Wagner lost the right to recruit from Russia's prisons, and the MoD announced all "volunteer units" had to sign contracts with the MoD by July 1. Such measures would effectively bring Wagner under the full command of the MoD, severely undermining Prigozhin's control and the Wagner Group's independence.

Tensions and infighting culminated with Prigozhin accusing Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov of lying to Russian President Vladimir Putin about the justification for the invasion and the current state of the war. Russian authorities subsequently released an arrest warrant, leading to Prigozhin and the Wagner Group launching a mutiny against Russian authorities, including seizing the headquarters of Russia's Southern Military District in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don and marching toward Moscow. Prigozhin claimed his mutiny was not against Putin but rather against the military leadership and other advisers who were misleading the president. The short-lived

mutiny ended after a deal was announced providing for amnesty and the departure of Prigozhin and Wagner fighters for Belarus.

The status of the Wagner Group and Prigozhin remains fluid and uncertain. Reports indicate Wagner has begun setting up training camps in Belarus to train the Belarusian military, while Prigozhin has been documented at several events inside Russia. Other reports indicate some Wagner fighters felt misled by Prigozhin and signed contracts with the MoD. Russian officials also have stated that Wagner's global operations (particularly in Africa) will continue. The Russian government would likely find it difficult to replace Wagner's operations and connections in Africa and the Middle East, although the exact nature and control of these operations remains unclear.

U.S. Policy and Issues Before Congress

In 2017, the Trump Administration designated the Wagner Group for financial sanctions and entry restrictions under Executive Order (E.O.) 13660, pertaining to Ukraine. In 2022, the Department of State also designated the Wagner Group pursuant to E.O. 14024 for operating in the defense and related materiel sector of the Russian economy. In January 2023, the Biden Administration designated it as a Transnational Criminal Organization under E.O. 13581, as amended by E.O. 13863, citing its implication in human rights abuses in CAR and Mali, and concurrently designated it under E.O. 13667, pertaining to CAR. The United States also has designated Prigozhin, multiple Wagner subsidiaries, and associated individuals and entities for sanctions under E.O.s pertaining to Russia, election interference, cybercrime, and the conflict in CAR.

Several bills introduced in the 118th Congress would establish additional actions to counter the Wagner Group, increase executive branch reporting on its activities, or both. At least two bills, H.R. 506 and S. 416, would require the Secretary of State to designate the Wagner Group a Foreign Terrorist Organization. Such a designation could have implications for U.S. relations with Russia or other countries whose governments have contracted Wagner's services.

Members may consider whether to pursue other available legislative and oversight options to further restrict and counter the global presence of the Wagner Group (including its new presence in Belarus) or its affiliates. Members also may consider whether to investigate other strategies and tools for the United States to incentivize countries away from engaging with the Wagner Group. Additionally, Members may investigate what measures are available to assist in the identification and prosecution of Wagner Group personnel involved in war crimes and human rights abuses. For more, see CRS Insight IN12186, *Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia*, by Andrew S. Bowen; CRS In Focus IF12389, *Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Issues for Congress*, coordinated by Alexis Arieff.

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