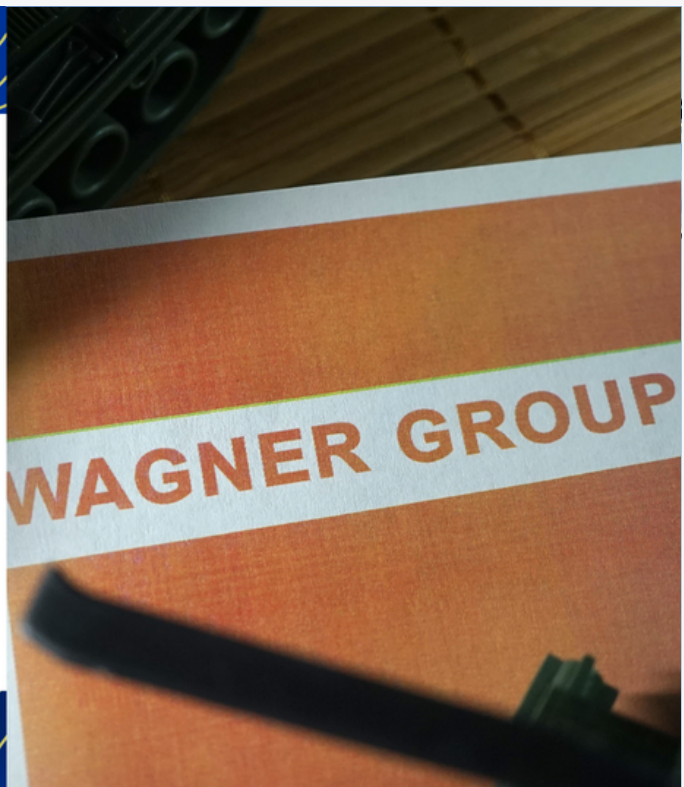


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**WAGNER'S STRATEGIC
CONTROL IN AFRICA:
YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN'S
LEGACY**

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Introduction

Following the recent death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the former leader of the Wagner Group, uncertainty clouds the future trajectory of this mercenary group and its strategic operations across Africa. Wagner has long been shrouded in ambiguity, often categorized as a Private Military Group (PMC), a Private Security Company (PSC), or simply a band of mercenaries. However, some analysts argue that it extends beyond these definitions, asserting that its influence campaigns are orchestrated on behalf of the Russian government to bolster Russia's position in strategic competition with the West (Pokalova, 2023).

Over the past decade, the Wagner Group has wielded substantial influence across Africa, utilising defence and security services to obtain access to strategically vital natural resources. Moreover, emerging evidence from Russian documents suggests a deliberate endeavour by the Kremlin to reshape Africa's mining sector, with the aim of sidelining Western competitors from critical strategic areas. Despite Prigozhin's demise, the Wagner Group's continued expansion across various African nations, including the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and Sudan, underscores its persistent pursuit of objectives with unwavering determination. After setting the context for Wagner's activities under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin, this paper will explore the current situation of the mercenary group's operations in three African countries (CAR, Mali, and Sudan). It will illustrate how the group offers security services in exchange for access to natural resources and how it has gained momentum in these contexts, partly due to the absence of a Western presence.

The Wagner Group's Grip on Africa under Yevgeny Prigozhin

Until June 2023, Prigozhin stood as one of the most prominent figures in the world of mercenaries, commanding vast financial resources and playing a pivotal role in Russia's military interventions, including the invasion of Ukraine. He was one of the few men in Moscow to notice the strategic and profitable opportunities that resourceful but politically unstable African countries could provide Russia (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023). Nicknamed "Putin's chef", Prigozhin enacted a hybrid warfare strategy, offering his African partners a package of security protection, election meddling, and disinformation campaigns in exchange for access to natural resources such as diamonds, gold, oil and uranium (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023). This strategy allowed the Kremlin to enjoy plausible deniability and not take responsibility for the PMC's actions.

Jack Watling, Senior Research Fellow for Land Warfare at the Royal United Services Institute, explains that the Group's actions follow a well-established pattern: "There is a standard Russian *modus operandi*, which is that you cover the operational costs with parallel business activity. In Africa, that is primarily through mining concessions" (Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). However, last summer, Prigozhin took the extraordinary step of protesting against the Defence Minister in Moscow, challenging Putin's authority in an unprecedented manner. Shortly after, in August 2023, Prigozhin tragically died in an aeroplane accident, raising speculations and interrogations regarding the future of the Wagner group.

Operations in Africa in the Aftermath of Prigozyn's Death

Recent insights shed light on the Group's continued presence and activities in African nations following Prigozhin's demise. According to the Blood Gold Report released in December 2023, Wagner's involvement in operations across the continent remains extensive and highly lucrative. The report claims that the PMC's monthly earnings from the African gold trade reach approximately US\$114 million (Berlin et al., 2023). Since Russia's campaign against Ukraine began in February 2022, Wagner has amassed over US\$2.5 billion from its operations in Africa, likely contributing to Russia's financing of its war efforts against Ukraine (Berlin et al., 2023).

The Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a prime example of Wagner's activities. A recent Center for Strategic and International Studies study revealed that operatives linked to the Group expanded their presence in the CAR in 2023 (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023). Wagner's involvement in the CAR commenced in 2018 when President Faustin-Archange Touadéra sought assistance from Moscow after a UN arms embargo following a rebel takeover caused a shortage of weapons. President Touadéra justified his decision by stating: "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?" (Joselow, 2023). In exchange for providing personal security, military training, and combat support, Wagner gained access to the CAR's natural resources, including the Ndassima gold mining site. According to the Blood Gold Report (Howell et al., 2023), Wagner's activities in the CAR have followed a pattern observed in other African countries, involving suppression of opposition, dissemination of disinformation, censorship of independent media, and terrorizing civilians through village attacks.

Mali

In February 2024, Russian fighters targeted Mali's Intahaka gold mine near the Burkina Faso border (Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). Dr Watling suggests that Russians strategically aim to reduce Western access to vital minerals and resources (Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). Wagner forces have reportedly operated in Mali since December 2021, providing protection to the military junta in power and allegedly earning \$10 million monthly for their services (Latorre, 2022). The situation escalated in 2022 when French President Emmanuel Macron withdrew French troops from Mali, leaving a void that Wagner sought to fill by bolstering its presence there.

Sudan

Wagner remains a significant player in Sudan's gold trade, both as a buyer of unrefined gold and a smuggler of refined gold (Howell et al., 2023). In 2017, then-President Omar al-Bashir finalised significant agreements with the Kremlin, including the establishment of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan. Additionally, the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals signed a gold mining contract with M Invest, a company owned by Prigozhin (Howell et al., 2023).

Since al-Bashir's ousting in 2019, reports have emerged alleging Wagner's provision of military support to Sudan's paramilitary forces under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo's leadership, aiding their struggle for control over civilian governance amidst ongoing political-military turmoil.

Conclusion

The demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to have had a limited impact on the Group's effectiveness in its operations across the African continent. If the mercenary group has indeed achieved success in both its African endeavours and in Ukraine through advancing hybrid warfare strategies, it is in part due to the negligence of Western governments. Over the past decade, these governments, as shown in CAR and Mali, have failed to acknowledge the strategic threat posed by hybrid warfare in Africa, thus creating a void in the region that undoubtedly facilitated the success of Wagner's operations (Howell et al., 2023). Consequently, Western nations must bolster their security cooperation and provide military support to African countries rather than merely condemning Russia's actions verbally. Nevertheless, indicators of Russia's military deficiencies in Ukraine, its inability to halt drone attacks on Moscow, and internal forecasts regarding Wagner's future may potentially undermine the perception of the Kremlin as a provider of security and stability throughout Africa (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023).

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