

## DEFENSE &amp; SECURITY

# Wagner without Prigozhin: What is Next?

AUGUST 28, 2023

The news about the downing of Yevgeny Prigozhin's plane was not unexpected. What was more surprising was the time that passed between Prigozhin's attempted mutiny and his reported death. Mr. Putin does not forget the people who betray him. So, the fact that Prigozhin was allowed to walk free for two whole months after his march on Moscow indicates that he was either very skilled in evading assassination attempts or that the Kremlin needed him to set up Wagner in Belarus and finalize Wagner deals in Africa before disposing of him.

Back in June, Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu [demanded that](#) Wagnerites who were fighting in Ukraine sign contracts with the Ministry of Defense. This looked like an attempt to get Wagner in Ukraine under the Kremlin's control and to put an end to Prigozhin's criticisms of the way Russia's military was waging war in Ukraine. Victorious in Ukrainian [Soledar](#) and [Bakhmut](#), Prigozhin became very [critical of the](#) Russian Ministry of Defense and even dared [criticize](#) President Putin himself. It was only natural that Putin wanted to unify the forces conducting his "special military operation" in Ukraine and ordered Wagnerites to join the units of the Ministry of Defense. Many "volunteer" units [obliged](#), while Prigozhin withdrew his forces from Ukraine during the mutiny. Prigozhin's loyalists instead moved to Belarus. Prigozhin was instrumental in [registering](#) his company in Belarus thus providing President Lukashenka with a key to decide Wagner's future in this country. Wagner forces in Belarus are likely to eventually join the Russian Ministry of Defense, relocate to Africa, or remain in limbo in Belarus as an irregular warfare tool at Mr. Putin's or Mr. Lukashenka's disposal.

The situation with Wagner is much more complex on the African continent. Prigozhin's post-mutiny public appearances indicated that the Kremlin might have used him to set up new and finalize existing deals in Africa. Prigozhin was [spotted](#) in multiple places in Africa before his

reported death. He was likely renegotiating contracts for his newly available forces and broaching new deals. Given the level of Wagner's coverage and penetration in Africa, it is unlikely that the Kremlin will disengage Prigozhin's network of individuals, companies, and enterprises that generate political influence and bring income. With or without Prigozhin, Wagner in Africa is too valuable for the Kremlin to dismantle its operations, especially given the group's ability to facilitate sanction avoidance and project the Kremlin's influence in nations that are reevaluating their post-colonial engagements with the West.

In all likelihood, the Wagner African empire will continue routine operations to include military and security services, political consulting, and influence operations. The Kremlin might handpick another leader for Wagner-Africa but in the short term, any restructuring of the group here is unlikely. In the long term, the Kremlin might try to absorb Wagner units in Africa into official foreign policy structures but that is contingent on what happens in Ukraine as well as on whether the Russian government would decide to shift from grey zone operations to a more official conduct of foreign policy. In the meantime, Wagner in Africa provides a valuable toolkit to operate in the shadows while allowing for plausible deniability and it would not be in the Kremlin's interest to let go of such a useful agent of influence in the near future.

*The views are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the National Defense University or the US government.*

---

*Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.*