About the Authors

Dr. Kimberly Marten is a professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University. She is a faculty member and executive committee member of Columbia’s Harriman Institute for Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies, and Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies. Her current research focuses on Russian foreign and security policies, NATO enlargement, and the global politics of climate change.

Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Transatlantic Security Program at CNAS. She works on national security challenges facing the United States and Europe, focusing on Russia, authoritarianism and threats to democracy, and the state of the transatlantic alliance. From 2015 to 2018, she was Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council.

Carisa Nietsche was an Associate Fellow in the Transatlantic Security Program at CNAS. Her research specializes in Europe-China relations, transatlantic technology policy, and threats to democracy in Europe.

Nicholas Lokker is a Research Associate for the Transatlantic Security Program at CNAS. His research focuses on the politics of European integration and security, Russia-Europe relations, and transatlantic affairs.

Kristen Taylor was a Joseph S. Nye Jr. Intern for the Transatlantic Security Program at CNAS.

About the Transatlantic Security Program

The mission of the Transatlantic Security Program is to strengthen transatlantic relations and help decision-makers understand, anticipate, and respond to challenges in Europe and Russia. Key among these challenges is the rise of China, a revisionist Russia, threats to democracy, and other changes in Europe’s security landscape that will require NATO to adapt. The Transatlantic Security Program addresses these issues by working closely with CNAS’s network of current and former U.S. and European government officials, private-sector partners, and academic experts to translate cutting-edge research into policy solutions. The program fosters high-level U.S.-European dialogue, convenes seminars and public forums, and engages with media and citizens to shape the context in which policies are made.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to all of the experts who provided input and participated in the roundtables that informed this report, especially Catrina Doxsee, Jack Margolin, and Samuel Ramani, who also provided valuable feedback on an earlier draft of the report. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone, and any errors that remain are the responsibility of the authors alone. This report was made possible with the generous support of the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command. The views in this report do not represent those of the U.S. Department of Defense.

As a research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity, CNAS maintains strict intellectual independence and sole editorial direction and control over its ideas, projects, publications, events, and other research activities. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues and the content of CNAS publications reflects the views of their authors alone. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. CNAS will not engage in any representational activities or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from non-U.S. sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. The Center publicly acknowledges on its website annually all donors who contribute.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>The Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Wagner Group's Uses and Evolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The June 2023 Mutiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anticipating the Proliferation of Similar Groups Operating in Eurasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09</td>
<td>Russia's Growing Challenges Could Increase Incentives to Deploy Paramilitaries in Eurasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Anticipating How Russian Semi-State Security Groups Might Function in Eurasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive Summary

While much remains uncertain following the June 2023 mutiny of Russia’s Wagner Group and the August death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russia will likely continue to work with semi-state armed formations. Russia’s degraded military capacity and constrained economic resources, especially as sanctions persist, will increase the attractiveness of these organizations as low-cost tools for advancing Russian objectives and competing against the West, including to a greater extent in Eurasia where Russia likely perceives the competition as most intense.

Prigozhin and his Wagner Group created a model that other opportunistic Russian actors will likely seek to replicate. Fewer financial resources available to Russia’s military and elite could increase the incentive to establish such groups, especially if these organizations can increase opportunities to improve Russia’s reputation as a reliable security provider or access new sources of wealth for the regime. Newly created organizations would likely face high barriers to entry in areas where Wagner already operates, including Africa. Therefore, if such semi-state paramilitary organizations proliferate—a prospect that has grown more likely after Prigozhin’s death—they could focus on new regions such as Eurasia. Given Russia’s declining influence in Eurasia, a region of long-standing historical importance to Russia, such groups could undertake new actions there to curry favor with Putin and the Kremlin.

There are several ways the Kremlin could use semi-state security formations to advance its interests in Eurasia, including by waging political influence and disinformation campaigns, physically protecting friendly governments, sustaining Russia’s influence as a key security provider, destabilizing unfriendly governments, and limiting any threats that Russia’s diaspora population might pose to the stability of the Putin regime from abroad.

Although Russian paramilitary and semi-state organizations are in many ways an extension of the malign activities carried out by the Russian state, the proliferation and increased activity of these groups would make it more difficult for the United States and its allies to attribute such actions to the Kremlin, complicating Western response options. These groups and the opportunistic individuals who lead them could, for example, stake out positions independent of the Kremlin or even at odds with it, especially in the case of extreme ethnic nationalists who have criticized Putin for not going far enough in his actions. The proliferation of these groups would also make it difficult to discern when and under what circumstances the Kremlin might be willing to escalate on these groups’ behalf.
Introduction

The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin on August 23, 2023, likely signals the demise of the Wagner Group as an organization, at least in its current form. The group might continue in some form under more compliant leadership, or it may eventually fragment, with some of its functions being absorbed by the Russian state while other individuals and assets are appropriated by existing and newly created organizations. Nonetheless, despite Prigozhin’s death and the failed mutiny he orchestrated in June, Russia is likely to continue working with semi-state armed formations in the future. Moscow’s resource constraints and geopolitical headwinds as a result of its war in Ukraine increase the Kremlin’s need for such semi-state organizations and the assets and capabilities they contribute to Moscow’s ability to assert influence beyond its borders.

So far, outside of Ukraine, the Wagner Group and other similar organizations have been most active in Syria and Africa, where they have contributed to Moscow’s ability to sustain its great-power status. As Russia’s reputation as a great power is increasingly challenged closer to home, however, these groups may expand their activities to new geographies. As Moscow tries to maintain its self-defined status as a great power, its budgetary and reputational constraints may make turning to supplementary contractual sources of resources and personnel more attractive than using permanently employed state actors and resources.

There is already ample evidence that Russia’s influence is declining in Eurasia as some countries have grown more wary of Russia’s presence and role in the region. Although Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has accelerated the trend, it predates the war. The limitations of Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union, for example, have become painfully clear for the regional economies linked to the ruble in an era of Western sanctions. Russia also has a recent track record of inaction in the face of regional instability, failing to help its ally Kyrgyzstan control violent unrest in 2010, or to mitigate the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and restrain Azerbaijani aggression there. Now regional fears of Russian intentions have amplified such concerns across the region.

Russia is unlikely to quietly accept its deteriorating status in Eurasia. Moscow will be highly attuned to perceptions that its role as a great power is eroding in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. The Kremlin has long judged that to be a great power, a country must first be a regional one. Russia is therefore likely to intensely contest its declining role in these regions, making Eurasia a critical focus of Russian efforts to maintain its influence and global standing. Given the importance of these regions to Moscow, as well as growing resource limitations and greater resistance to its presence, the Kremlin will look for alternative approaches to maintaining influence. Moscow will almost certainly resort to greater use of hybrid tactics and asymmetric tools of coercion, such as disinformation, cyberattacks, and sabotage, that are low cost and do not rely on conventional military capacity to execute. Semi-state paramilitary forces are particularly well suited for carrying out such concealed influence campaigns and violent actions short of full-scale war. These Russian actions in Eurasia, therefore, may increasingly involve semi-state military companies resembling the Wagner Group. This would introduce new challenges for the United States and its European allies.

This paper examines how the Kremlin could seek to employ semi-state military and security groups in Eurasia, examining the potential future role of these groups in the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, Belarus, and Moldova. The paper focuses on the impact in non-NATO and non-European Union (EU) countries, although Russian semi-state military companies could use such a Eurasian presence to interfere in neighboring NATO or EU countries as well. The paper’s goal is to anticipate how such semi-state groups could operate in Eurasia and the implications of their actions for U.S. and European interests in the region.

The paper begins by explaining the Wagner Group’s past functions and utility to the Kremlin. Although Wagner in its current form will change, the group established a useful model that any remnants of the group will likely sustain in some form and that other opportunistic actors are likely to emulate. The paper then briefly discusses the armed mutiny led by Prigozhin, the Wagner Group’s primary contractor, in late June 2023 and his August death. It then describes the likely evolution of other Russian semi-state groups that may backfill Wagner. The heart of the paper provides a series of future scenarios for how such groups could be used in the future in the Balkans, Central Asia, Moldova, Belarus, and the Southern Caucasus. The final section articulates the implications of these possible developments, highlighting the risks and challenges these groups would pose for the United States and its allies.
The authors note that there remains a high degree of uncertainty about the failed Wagner mutiny, including what motivated Prigozhin’s actions, the extent of support he had within the Russian regular armed forces and government, the circumstances surrounding his death, and the political developments that continue to unfold in the aftermath. This paper provides the authors’ best assessments of how the Kremlin may use either remnants of the Wagner Group or other similar organizations going forward, based on open-source reporting at the time of writing. The authors underscore, however, the high degree of uncertainty surrounding the paper’s judgments.

The Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin

The Wagner Group was a semi-state contracting mechanism used by the Russian armed forces for a wide variety of military and security projects. It was always strongly connected to Russia’s military forces and military intelligence agency (known as the Main Intelligence Directorate or GRU), and was likely a GRU creation. Wagner’s first commander was former GRU special forces officer Dmitry Utkin, who worked with the Russian state to deploy the group in eastern Ukraine and Syria in 2014 and 2015, and who was also killed in the plane crash that killed Prigozhin in August 2023. Wagner’s primary training base, viewable in satellite images since 2015, was adjacent to that of the GRU’s Spetsnaz 10th Special Mission Brigade in Molkino, Krasnodar. (This base was reportedly closed in July 2023.) Wagner’s deployments in Africa have used Russian military aircraft to transport troops and cargo through Russia’s Khmeimim airbase in Syria. According to the UK Ministry of Defense, Wagner Group and Russian military activities appeared to be “intertwined” in various operations, and in some areas Wagner forces reinforced Russian military forces. These linkages prompted the U.S. Department of the Treasury to identify the Wagner Group as a “designated Russian Ministry of Defense proxy force,” suggesting that the Wagner Group was fulfilling state requests and ultimately under the Russian government’s direction.

While often called a private military corporation (PMC), Wagner never registered as a legal corporate entity in Russia. Its existence remained technically illegal and even unconstitutional. This means that its functioning has been completely reliant on the protection of Vladimir Putin, in a country where the lines between state and private actors are often blurred. Prigozhin began calling himself the “founder” of the Wagner Group in September 2022, but Wagner grew out of earlier Russian security outfits and existed before any direct evidence of Prigozhin’s first involvement with the group in 2014. Prigozhin had no combat experience and was a convicted felon, revealed by court documents to have served almost a decade in Soviet prisons for common street robberies and burglaries. His rise as a restaurateur, caterer, and ultimately military contractor was facilitated solely by his relationship to Putin and Putin’s networks, beginning when Putin was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in the early 1990s. This means that any future contractor of a semi-state paramilitary group in Russia would almost certainly have to come from Putin’s network and operate under close Kremlin protection.

In June 2023, after Prigozhin’s famed mutiny (discussed below in greater detail), Putin stated that Wagner’s activities were fully financed by the Russian Defense Ministry and state budget. Prigozhin claimed at that time that Wagner’s military activities in Africa were financed out of the profits from his Russian military catering business, but there is no publicly available evidence to support this claim. Instead, the evidence indicates that when serving outside of Ukraine, Wagner was funded by security and natural resource protection contracts from Russian-supported state ministries in Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Africa (in the case of Libya, by the warlord Khalifa Haftar). It remains unclear what the balance was between Wagner’s ability to finance itself and its reliance on Russian state financial support. Because its fighters were paid on temporary contracts, Wagner was likely less expensive for the Russian state to use than regular uniformed forces, even to the extent that it was supported by the Russian budget.

The Wagner Group’s Uses and Evolution

The Wagner Group was an amorphous and adaptable entity, providing services designed to aid Russian state foreign policy and security interests along a wide geographic band that starts in Ukraine; traverses Syria, Libya, and Mali; and ends in sub-Saharan Africa (see Table 1). While a single 2019 Reuters report stated that Wagner was also in Venezuela to provide security to the Nicolás Maduro regime, a later investigation by a respected independent Russian journalist cast doubt on this, even while finding that various other Russian armed contractors had been on the ground there since 2017. There has never been any publicly available evidence that any commercial interests in Latin America are connected to Prigozhin, further casting doubt on the idea that the Wagner Group was there, given the intertwined pattern of Russian security interests and Prigozhin’s financial interests elsewhere in the world.
The Wagner Group took on a variety of roles. It has often been used as a relatively unskilled infantry force supporting regular uniformed Russian forces, for example in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015, in Syria starting in 2015, and as part of Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 and through May 2023. In Ukraine it worked directly with Russian uniformed forces in the 2022 seizure of Bucha, including by torturing and killing civilians. It also played crucial roles in securing the Russian offensives in the winter and spring of 2023 in Soledar and Bakhmut, largely because of the extraordinary number of casualties it was willing to sacrifice in the process—mostly Russian prisoners who were promised amnesty for their service with Wagner.

**The Wagner Group was an amorphous and adaptable entity, providing services designed to aid Russian state foreign policy and security interests along a wide geographic band.**

The Wagner Group engaged in military training and advising of local military forces virtually everywhere it was deployed outside of Ukraine. Sometimes (including in eastern Ukraine in 2014–2015, and in the Central African Republic) Wagner Group members acted as violent thugs, bullying recalcitrant leaders of local paramilitary groups or commercial enterprises to accept Russian dominance and torturing, raping, and killing many civilians in the process. In Libya in 2019, the Wagner Group provided highly disciplined rooftop snipers to help warlord Khalifa Haftar in his attempt to seize the capital, Tripoli, and trained Haftar’s forces in the use of sophisticated Pantsir S-1 air defense systems. It also hired former Syrian rebels to come to Libya as supplementary infantry forces. In both the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, Wagner provided palace guards for authoritarian leaders. Where it did not succeed in establishing sufficient trust with key officials or population groups, including in Madagascar and Mozambique, it ultimately failed due to a lack of adequate local intelligence. It also failed in Haftar’s drive to capture Tripoli in the face of Turkish drone strikes, with atrocities that included leaving behind improvised explosive devices in the homes of civilians who had fled the fighting. Prigozhin also helped foreign leaders with non-military activities, for example by working with former GRU representatives in CAR to facilitate negotiations between government and rebel forces. His firms waged media and social media political influence campaigns in Libya, Mali, CAR, and elsewhere to bolster Russia’s reputation, to drive out French security forces and businesses by playing on historical anti-colonialism, and to further the prospects of particular local politicians.

Prigozhin received state-supported mining and petroleum protection contracts in most countries where the Wagner Group deployed outside of Ukraine, and the group has fought local rebels and other detractors to maintain its control over those enterprises. Some of these businesses, particularly gold mines in Sudan and CAR, likely turned a profit. Yet outside of Sudan, these businesses are small-scale compared with Russia’s major natural resource conglomerates and often serve other geopolitical purposes for Russia. For example, oil and gas interests in Syria associated with Prigozhin’s Evro Polis businesses and guarded by Wagner Group forces were of relatively low value globally and seen by many experts primarily as a mechanism for Russia to gain a long-term foothold on Syrian territory. At least some of these Syrian facilities appear to have been a competitive pawn between Iran and Russia, used by Moscow in an attempt to block Hezbollah pipeline and shipment links across the Syrian border to Lebanon. Despite many sensationalist media claims and Prigozhin’s own statements in summer 2023, there is no open-source evidence that petroleum or mineral profits have substantially funded Wagner’s other military activities. For example, the revenue from the Wagner Group’s United Arab Emirates gold sales may have been flown straight to Moscow to help the Russian state evade U.S.-led sanctions on its participation in the gold market.

One of the original purposes for using the Wagner Group was to give the Russian state plausible deniability for its foreign activities. In 2016, Russian investigative journalist Denis Korotkov published a photograph of Utkin and several of his colleagues receiving state military medals from Putin in the Kremlin, as well as convincing evidence that Wagner Group forces killed in battle were buried with full military honors. Yet, the Russian state continued to deny the Wagner Group’s existence. The key example of this was in February 2018, when the Wagner Group led an attack against a gas facility on Kurdish territory in Deir el Zour, Syria. Kurdish forces there were backed by the United States, which used its military deconfliction line with the Russian command in Syria to attempt to forestall violence, after a series of what appeared to be Russian
Military tests of U.S. readiness. Russian commanders disavowed the 500 Wagner-led forces, who suffered heavy casualties from U.S. air and helicopter strikes in an hours-long battle. That marked the beginning of the end of plausible deniability, as it led the Russian legislature, the Duma, to discuss these events openly and Putin to take a question about Wagner in his scripted December 2018 press conference. Global investigative journalists also began to focus intensively on Wagner activities.

While Russia continued to deny its relationship to the Wagner Group, the international plausibility of these denials vanished. The one venue where international deniability continued to matter was the United Nations, where Russia used its permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council to impede the work of expert sanctions panels that tied Russia to illegal Wagner Group activities in CAR and Libya. Beyond those U.N. activities, denials may have mattered more to the home audience in Russia, especially those in Putin’s base who received most of their news from state television. By maintaining distance from Wagner Group activities and portraying them as private money-making operations, the Kremlin could gain military victories, influence, and control in far-flung countries in the Middle East and Africa, while ensuring most Russian citizens did not care about resulting Russian casualties.

Yet with time the Wagner Group became increasingly public about its activities, including its recruitment strategies. The PMC Wagner-Military Review group on Russia’s popular VKontakte social media site began recruiting online in 2018, and the site’s membership grew more than 5,000 percent between 2019 and late 2022. In 2021, Prigozhin-linked firms produced three action movies for both Russian and African audiences lauding the adventures of a Wagner-like group. By July 2022, after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Wagner began openly recruiting on Russian billboards. (These were taken down after Prigozhin’s mutiny.) Prigozhin continued to deny his affiliation with the Wagner Group, taking legal action against those suggesting he was connected to it. However, in summer 2022, he was filmed recruiting prisoners to go to the Ukrainian front in exchange for amnesty after six months of service. Such recruitment would have been impossible without the direct backing of the Kremlin. Wagner also began openly recruiting foreigners, including Central Asian prisoners and labor migrants in Russia and through Serbian-language videos in Serbia. This undoubtedly undercut force readiness because newly recruited Wagner Group forces were mostly inexperienced, with only a few weeks of training under their belts.

Finally in December 2022, the group erected a building in St. Petersburg displaying a huge “ChVK Wagner” (PMC Wagner) logo. The building was claimed to be various things including an administrative headquarters, a think tank, and a high-tech innovation center. (Again, after the mutiny, these offices were closed and the building logos removed.) In April 2023, the Duma adopted a law that would grant veteran status to select personnel from private military corporations or other such organizations, including the Wagner Group.

### Table 1: How the Wagner Group Has Been Used Abroad

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Probable Purposes of Wagner Group Deployments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Ukraine</td>
<td>2014–2015</td>
<td>- Intimidated and committed violence against local Kremlin rivals and independent Cossacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented combat infantry of Russian and Russian-backed local forces against national forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Possibly participated in special forces seizure of Crimea (little evidence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>2015–present</td>
<td>- Augmented combat infantry of Russian and Russian-backed national forces against rebels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Seized oil and natural gas fields from rebels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Attempted (and failed) to seize natural gas installations from U.S.-backed, non-rebel Kurds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Guarded oil and natural gas fields in return for a cut of the profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Recruited local former rebels to fight elsewhere on Moscow’s behalf (Libya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Time Period</td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>2017–present</td>
<td>- Guarded gold mines in return for a cut of the profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Partially refined and smuggled refined gold for sale to the United Arab Emirates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Trained national military forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Advised national leaders on how to control protests violently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented national forces with special forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Intimated and committed violent acts against protesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided weapons to rebel forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>- Transported embargoed weaponry into the country for the national government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Trained national military forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Guarded national leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Guarded diamond and gold mines in return for a cut of the profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Seized diamond and gold mines from rebel forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Reconstructed a collapsed artisanal gold mine (Ndassima) for industrial use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Established a pro-Russian cultural center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided media and social media disinformation against France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided transportation and other support for a (failed) peace effort between government and rebel leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented Russian-backed national forces with combat special forces against rebels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Tortured and murdered individuals and committed massacres of local groups not supporting the Russian-backed government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided election and constitutional referendum support for the Russian-backed government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madagascar</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>- Guarded chromite mine in return for a cut of the profits (little evidence of success)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided media and social media disinformation against France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided election support for various national candidates (little evidence of success)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>2018–present</td>
<td>- Maintained weaponry and equipment for warlord Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Transported weaponry into the country for Russian-backed warlord forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented Russian-backed warlord forces with combat snipers and other specialists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented Russian-backed warlord forces with combat infantry against Turkish-backed forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Trained Russian-backed warlord forces in the use of specialized missile defense technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Intimidated local civilians, including via placing post-combat improvised explosive devices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented Russian-backed warlord forces with combat aviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided election propaganda support for Russian-backed candidates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>2019–2020</td>
<td>- Attempted (and failed) to augment Russian-backed national forces with combat counterterrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>2021–present</td>
<td>- Provided disinformation against France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Trained national military forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Guarded national leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Augmented national forces fighting rebels with combat special forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Tortured and murdered individuals not supporting the Russian-backed national government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Committed massacres of ethnic groups (the Fulani) not supporting the Russian-backed national government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Possibly guarded mines in return for a cut of the profits (no evidence of success yet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>2022–present</td>
<td>- Augmented Russian invasion forces with combat infantry (using prisoners)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Possibly augmented Russian invasion forces using combat aviation (little evidence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Tortured and murdered individuals not supporting the Russian invasion forces</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The June 2023 Mutiny

Prigozhin’s infighting with the Defense Ministry (MoD) started in 2017, when the Ministry began withholding weapons and equipment from the Wagner Group. The two sides waged a series of lawsuits over corruption in Prigozhin’s military cleaning contracts and the resulting MoD nonpayment. The ministry’s disavowal of the Wagner Group in the February 2018 battle with U.S. forces in Syria may also have been evidence of infighting, something Prigozhin himself later claimed.

Throughout late 2022 and accelerating in 2023, Prigozhin criticized Russia’s military leadership for its incompetence in fighting the war in Ukraine. As Prigozhin attempted to raise his political profile, The New York Times reported that Putin met with Prigozhin and Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu on February 22, 2023, in an attempt to resolve the conflict. Meanwhile, Prigozhin claimed that the chief of the Aerospace Forces and former commander of Russian troops in both Syria and Ukraine, Gen. Sergei Surovikin, was his go-between with the MoD.

This mediation appeared to have failed, and Shoigu took action against Wagner, ordering its forces to either sign direct contracts with the MoD by July 1 or disband. Prigozhin responded with outraged refusal. Then on the night of June 23–24, he led Wagner Group forces in eastern Ukraine on what he called a “march for justice” toward Moscow, demanding the ouster of Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin stated that Putin’s public justifications for the Ukraine war—that NATO enlargement threatened Russia, that Ukraine was similar to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution pulling Russia out of World War I, and he said the leaders of the uprising were engaged in a criminal and terrorist adventure, and would be brought to account.

Yet within hours Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko appeared to have brokered a negotiated settlement: Wagner would temporarily retreat to eastern Ukraine and then relocate to Belarus. Two days later the Federal Security Service (FSB) said it was dropping its investigation of Prigozhin, yet authorities raided his office and home. Russian state television broadcasted embarrassing images exposing the contents of his home and office—including millions of dollars of cash and gold bars, an unidentified white powder, and several wigs and false passports—as commentators called him a traitor and a criminal. Putin himself explicitly labeled Prigozhin a traitor—the worst of all insults coming from Putin—all but sealing Prigozhin’s eventual fate.

Despite this, his driver reportedly visited FSB headquarters in St. Petersburg and recouped large amounts of Prigozhin’s cash and guns. In mid-July, Putin was reported to have held negotiations in the Kremlin with Prigozhin and top Wagner commanders, attempting to persuade them to put under the oversight of Wagner commander Andrei Troshev, instead of Prigozhin. They refused. On July 19, Russian state television aired a murky video of what appeared to be Prigozhin and Utkin, exhorting Wagner forces now located in Belarus to cooperate with their new hosts and prepare for further work in Africa. Verified satellite images showed that by the end of July several thousand Wagner forces were located at a refurbished military base in Tsel, in the center of Belarus, but with no heavy weaponry. They conducted exercises with Belarusian forces in Brest on the Polish border, raising Polish concerns about their intentions. Meanwhile, Gen. Surovikin, the senior military officer Prigozhin called his MoD interlocutor, was detained in early July and removed from his position in August.

The Russian state reportedly took away Prigozhin’s media holdings and evicted his companies from their new building in St. Petersburg. Yet, Prigozhin-linked Telegram social media channels were still active in Russia weeks after the mutiny, and it is unclear what will become of his Internet Research Agency (IRA). (The IRA is the organization indicted by the U.S. Justice Department for its attempts to use social media to influence the 2016 presidential elections.) While some IRA operators, identified as “trolls” by Western analysts, had turned against Prigozhin, others had not.

For two months after the mutiny, Prigozhin appeared to move freely in and out of Russia, using his private airplane. In late July 2023, social media channels friendly to Prigozhin showed him in St. Petersburg meeting with African dignitaries on the sidelines of the Russia–Africa Summit, and offering in an audio clip to send Wagner
to help coup leaders in Niger. Videos said to have been filmed in both Belarus and Mali showed him encouraging Wagner forces to prepare for more Africa deployments. Then, on August 23, 2023, two months to the day after the mutiny, Prigozhin’s private plane, apparently carrying him, Utkin, and other Wagner Group officials, crashed on a flight between Moscow and St. Petersburg. There were reportedly no survivors.

Anticipating the Proliferation of Similar Groups Operating in Eurasia

Prigozhin’s death following the failed mutiny he led raises questions about not just the Wagner Group’s future, but also the Kremlin’s interest in working with paramilitary and semi-state organizations more broadly, given the challenge that Wagner posed to Putin’s rule. As this paper posits, the Kremlin’s resource constraints and lack of institutional bandwidth to support its foreign policy objectives will likely mean that such groups persist—and possibly proliferate—as a complementary instrument of the state.

It is important to remember that the Russian state has a long history of collaboration with informal forces, dating back to Tsar Ivan the Terrible’s cooperation with Cossack groups in the 16th century and extending through Stalin’s rule in the Soviet Union. The proliferation of informal armed groups in Russia accelerated after the fall of the Soviet Union, in part because of the Russian military’s downsizing—a dynamic that could be repeated given the current degradation of the military in Ukraine. Privatization in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s also led to the rise of standard security companies guarding Russian facilities abroad rather than warfighting. For example, Antiterror Orel was founded in the 1990s to protect energy infrastructure and conduct mine clearing operations in Iraq. The group, which later became a loose confederation of firms in Russia, was primarily composed of former members of the spetsnaz special forces and Directorate A, a special forces unit in Russia’s FSB. Eventually (via an intermediate group, Moran Security) Antiterror Orel personnel spawned the Wagner Group. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also led to opportunities for the formation of both formal and informal security companies in Russia, including the creation of Lukom-A to protect Lukoil’s investments in Iraq.

As Russia’s own foreign wars and other military adventures grew, the tasks of some of these groups morphed to include more combat-oriented roles. By 2010, there were estimated 10 to 20 Russian PMCs serving abroad, including the relatively well-known Patriot, RSB Group, and Shchit (Shield now Redut [Redoubt]) companies. Redut is reported to have entered Ukraine at the start of Russia’s 2022 invasion, after working as Shchit to guard oil, gas, and phosphate businesses associated with Russian oligarch Gennady Timchenko in war-torn Syria since 2018. The now-renamed Redut remains in Syria as of mid-2023. Timchenko has been a loyal Putin crony since the early 1990s in St. Petersburg, and he is much closer to Putin personally than Prigozhin ever was; this may make Redut an especially attractive competitor for at least some Wagner Group activities in the future.

Prigozhin’s death following the failed mutiny he led raises questions about not just the Wagner Group’s future, but also the Kremlin’s interest in working with paramilitary and semi-state organizations more broadly, given the challenge that Wagner posed to Putin’s rule.

The proliferation of PMCs has already been under way since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with media outlets reporting on the creation of several new paramilitary organizations in Russia. The United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence reported that Russian authorities might seek to encourage the formation of additional private military companies to replace the Wagner Group. Reports suggest that Putin has encouraged Russian businessmen to finance volunteer forces; one such businessman is Igor Altushkin, who heads the Russian Copper Company and sponsors the Ural volunteer battalion operating in Ukraine. In June 2022, Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov announced he was forming four new Akhmat battalions from his own security forces to fight in Ukraine, and they were later reported to be cooperating on the front lines with Wagner. In February 2023, the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom created a private military corporation with three units—Potok, Fakel, and Plamya—with varying levels of ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense and to the already existing Redut PMC. In March 2023, Sergey Aksyonov, the head of Russia’s occupation regime in Crimea, established PMC Convoy—founded in affiliation with the Wagner Group and led by Konstantin Pikalov, the reputed liaison between the Russian Defense Ministry and Prigozhin’s various...

8
operations in Africa. In 2020, Pikalov established a St. Petersburg-based security company, also called Convoy, which provided surveillance for Wagner against a CNN investigative team in CAR. In June 2023, Roskosmos, the Russian space agency, also began recruiting its own militia to fight in Ukraine.

It seems, then, that Prigozhin and his Wagner Group created a model that other opportunistic Russian actors will seek to replicate. A stagnating Russian economy and fewer financial resources available to Russia’s elite are likely to increase the incentive to establish such groups, especially if these organizations can increase opportunities to access new natural resources or other wealth-generating business opportunities. Moreover, after Wagner’s failed mutiny, the Kremlin may prefer the presence of multiple, smaller semi-state organizations rather than one powerful Wagner-like entity, given the threat that such a group presented to the Kremlin’s control. In this way, the paramilitary space may reflect what already seems to be under way in the broader political system—a fragmentation of the system that is leaving it less cohesive. Whatever ultimately happens to the Wagner Group, there probably will be a proliferation of new paramilitary and semi-state organizations that fill in for or around it.

**Russia’s Growing Challenges Could Increase Incentives to Deploy Paramilitaries in Eurasia**

Looking forward, Russian semi-state security and paramilitary organizations could play a larger role in Russia’s approach to Eurasia. One of Russia’s long-standing foreign policy objectives is to keep countries along its periphery inside its self-proclaimed sphere of influence. This goal has arguably increased in importance for Moscow given the challenges from its invasion of Ukraine. Russia is likely to place importance on retaining the loyalty of its neighbors and seek to mitigate any deteriorating perceptions of Russian power and its global standing. Russia has stepped up its efforts to integrate Belarus into Russian structures, to undermine Moldova’s pro-Western orientation, and to persuade its Georgian neighbor to lean toward Moscow. In Central Asia, meanwhile, there was a steady stream of visits from Russian officials in the aftermath of the invasion, and Putin held several in-person meetings and phone calls with his counterparts. In the Western Balkans, too, Moscow almost certainly continues to view strong relations with the region as key to its broader efforts to push back against Western influence.

Despite the continued importance Russia places on Eurasia, however, its invasion of Ukraine has created (and in some cases amplified) challenges in maintaining its influence in some parts of the region. Some countries, including Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and the current government of Georgia, have drifted closer to the Kremlin since the invasion. Yet Russia’s relationships with other regional actors have been challenged by its invasion of Ukraine. In the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine, not only will Russia face a depleted military organization and constrained economic resources as a result of the sanctions, but it must also contend with the following challenges, all of which Moscow could seek to offset through informal fighters and other Wagner-like groups.

*Growing wariness about Russian intentions.*

The invasion has introduced tension into key Russian relationships, as some traditional allies (such as Kazakhstan) are concerned about Russia’s colonial intentions, while other countries, especially Moldova, fear that they will become the next victim of Russia’s military aggression. In Central Asia, most governments have opted not to openly support Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but have also refrained from condemning Moscow for the invasion. Similarly, some Central Asian leaders are withdrawing from exercises of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while also cracking down on protests condemning Russia in their countries. Although large swaths of Central Asian publics buy into Moscow’s narrative of the war, Russia’s recruitment of Central Asian migrants and prisoners in Russia has tarnished public views of Russia. In the Balkans, for instance, even longtime Putin ally Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has announced that Serbia would not stop ammunition shipments going to Ukraine. Belgrade also voted in favor of the March 2022 U.N. General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Russia now faces growing wariness about its intentions, and many countries on its periphery are increasing their efforts to chart a course more independent from Moscow.

*Russia’s reduced attractiveness as a security provider and economic partner.*

Not only are the countries in the region more skeptical of their relations with Russia, but Russia’s war in Ukraine has diminished the benefits of cooperation with Moscow. Many of Russia’s traditional partners, especially Tajikistan and Armenia, increasingly resent their dependence on a regional great power who will not come
to their aid when they face security challenges of their own. Armenia in particular, has openly questioned the value its relationship with Moscow. Russia failed to come to its ally Armenia’s assistance, first in the face of Azerbaijan’s late 2022 blockage of the Lachin corridor linking it to the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, and then in what appears to have been the destruction of the Armenian community’s presence in Nagorno-Karabakh in fall 2023. The more Russian forces are degraded in Ukraine, the less capacity Moscow will have to remain the region’s primary security guarantor not just in Armenia, but also in places such as Central Asia—a role that China increasingly contested even before the war. In 2010, for example, Russia did not intervene in Kyrgyzstan when ethnic riots broke out and Kyrgyz gangs attacked the Uzbek ethnic minority in the south of the country. Russia also failed to stop repeated clashes on the Tajik border. In January 2022, Russia intervened through the CSTO to prop up Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s regime in Kazakhstan, but Moscow’s capacity to take similar actions in the future will likely be constrained by personnel shortages and limited attention bandwidth as the Ukraine war continues.

Similar dynamics are playing out in the economic realm as sanctions hurt Russia’s economy and desirability as an economic partner, especially for those in the Eurasian Union whose own currencies are tied to the ruble. Western sanctions are pushing Russia out of some Balkans markets. Although several Balkan countries have not signed on to sanctions against Russia, the sanctions are working to reduce the region’s traditional dependence on Russian oil and gas, which is likely to further erode Russian influence. Meanwhile, Moldova reduced its exports to Russia by nearly a third in 2022 and has significantly reduced its previously near-total dependence on Moscow for gas supplies. The atrophy of Russia’s security and economic ties with countries in the region is likely to weaken these crucial and longstanding pillars of Russia’s influence.

Increasing influence of other actors in the region.

As Eurasian perceptions of Russia sour due to the invasion, countries in the region are looking for other partners, including China, Turkey, and in some cases Iran. Similarly, Turkey’s and China’s influence is on the rise in the Balkans. China aims to expand its global footprint and economic influence through Belt and Road projects in the Balkans, while Turkey seeks to position itself as a reliable regional partner by lending its influence to EU initiatives in the region and brokering economic deals with Serbia. Meanwhile, the West has increased its attention to the region, with EU enlargement becoming a higher priority in the wake of Russia’s invasion. In 2023, for example, European leaders decided to open EU membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia. Although numerous obstacles will likely prevent these countries from joining the EU in the short term, there has been a decisive shift in momentum that promises to complicate Russia’s efforts to hinder their integration with the EU.

Given the confluence of these factors—growing geopolitical challenges to sustaining its influence and a lack of resources and capacity to address its problems—the Kremlin could look to use Wagner Group remnants or, more likely, other similar organizations that can help offset the challenges it faces in Eurasia.

**Anticipating How Russian Semi-State Security Groups Might Function in Eurasia**

Even if the Wagner Group remains intact in some form, it is unlikely to play a major role in Eurasia going forward, given obstacles that would complicate its ability to function in the region. In particular, Western sanctions imposed on the Wagner Group and individuals linked to it in the wake of Russia’s 2014 invasion of Crimea and February 2022 invasion of Ukraine would likely limit Wagner’s ability to operate. Instead, Wagner remnants or newly created semi-state organizations would likely step up to fulfill Kremlin objectives. Lower-level commanders from within the Wagner Group and its semi-state competitors now have a strong incentive to make creative proposals to the state about how they might be used in new ways and new regions. Likewise, any newly created semi-state organizations would face high barriers to entry in countries and regions where Wagner already operates, especially given its complex business holdings and combat roles in Africa. Mid-level former Wagner commanders are most likely to continue those activities, perhaps under a new brand. Therefore, newly created nonstate organizations would be likely to look to new regions, such as Eurasia, to operate. New groups and entrepreneurial leaders who run them could seek to curry favor with Putin and the Kremlin by undertaking new actions in this region. This section describes potential ways that Russia could use semi-state military and security corporations to accomplish its objectives in Eurasia. Looking forward, the Kremlin could seek to use Wagner in Eurasia in the following ways.
Wage political influence and disinformation campaigns.

The Kremlin could increasingly look to the social media firms formerly owned by Prigozhin (such as the IRA, which meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential election) or other similar organizations to help sustain Russia’s political influence in Eurasian politics by launching disinformation campaigns and meddling in local politics. In July 2023, 180 of Prigozhin’s former social media trolls turned against him, indicating that the Russian state could likely continue to use his resources even after his death. Prigozhin’s toolkit, often employed alongside or in advance of Wagner Group military activities in Africa, entailed meddling in presidential elections, paying people to attend protests, and directing anti-Western and pro-Russian media coverage in local outlets. While Russia has also used GRU and other direct intelligence service employees for similar actions, it could be attractive to the Kremlin to cloak these activities by having new and unexpected contractors carry them out. Staffers with local knowledge that could support influence campaigns could be found in Eurasian countries, especially as economic stressors caused by the war and sanctions may make this work more attractive to citizens harboring pro-Russian sentiment. The large number of Russians who have left Russia in the aftermath of its invasion might also provide a robust pool of potential contributors, with such work particularly appealing to those who left to avoid being mobilized into the war but who do not necessarily harbor anti-war or anti-Putin sentiment. Russia might use these groups to carry out political influence campaigns. In particular these groups could:

Foment further polarization in the Western Balkans.

In the Western Balkans, Russia has sought to exacerbate lingering ethnic tensions in the region by playing the role of spoiler and pursuing actions that undermine regional reconciliation and integration processes while promoting itself as the traditional patron of Serbia and the Republika Srpska political entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Russia could step up destabilizing actions in these areas, trying to increase ethnic tension, fuel far-right extremism, or undermine U.S. and European peacemaking efforts. More specifically, Russian semi-state actors could launch anti-Western and anti-Kosovo propaganda to encourage further tension and violence in Serbia, the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in ethnically Serbian areas of Kosovo. Telephone channels associated with the Wagner Group are popular among far-right ethnic Serbs in the region and could be used to spread Kremlin propaganda. Wagner’s historical relations with far-right political parties and actors would likely bolster its efforts.

Influence election dynamics in Georgia and Armenia.

The authoritarian-leaning Georgian Dream government in Tblisi appears increasingly pro-Russian, despite an apparent lack of Georgian public support for Russia and massive anti-Russian, anti-authoritarian demonstrations and protests. In 2012, widespread accusations of Russian interference in the Georgian election brought the Georgian Dream to power. Smear campaigns in Georgia could be waged against politicians unfavorable to Moscow’s interests in the 2024 parliamentary elections, or to create provocations justifying a violent government crackdown against election protesters. In Armenia, in contrast, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has increasingly come to doubt the value of the Russian alliance, canceling planned CSTO exercises in the country in 2023 and even publicly criticizing the Russian military presence. Disinformation campaigns might aim to undercut the authority of his government, including by capitalizing on the discontent of Armenians in the aftermath of its hostilities with Azerbaijan. Such possibilities are enhanced in both countries because of the presence of large numbers of Russian émigrés, believed to be 3 percent of the Georgian population and even greater in Armenia. Such large flows of people provide a ready pool of individuals that such groups could employ and could easily have cloaked the presence of Russian intelligence agents and other malign actors.
Strengthen Russia’s flagging reputation in Central Asia.

In Central Asia, information campaigns could help prop up officials with close ties to the Kremlin, such as Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov as he increasingly imposes a Putin-style crackdown on both local Kyrgyz and fleeing Russian dissidents. At the same time, disinformation campaigns could be used to counter growing anti-Russian sentiment elsewhere, such as among Kazakhstan’s leadership. This might take the form of promoting pro-Russian politicians who are tied to Russia’s oil and other trade sectors there, or launching smear campaigns against those who have lost Russia’s favor.

Prevent further Euro-Atlantic integration.

For the Kremlin, a significant component of maintaining its influence in Eurasia is undermining NATO and EU cohesion, while preventing the integration of additional countries into EU and NATO formal structures. Currently, five Western Balkans states (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and Moldova are candidates for EU membership, while Kosovo and Georgia have the status of potential candidates. Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina also remain outside NATO. Although only Sarajevo and Tbilisi have explicitly expressed their desire to join the alliance so far, Russia likely harbors concerns that other non-NATO countries in the region will follow suit in the future. To impede these countries’ Euro-Atlantic integration, Moscow could use Wagner and other similar organizations to ramp up information and political influence operations against those who lean westward. These operations would likely aim to cultivate grassroots anti-Western sentiment or capture sympathetic elites in the region to exacerbate governance shortcomings and stymie the domestic reforms required for EU and NATO membership.

Physically protect friendly governments and pro-Russian figures.

The Wagner Group’s efforts to train and support local forces to “coup-proof” and strengthen authoritarian regimes—including in CAR, Mali, and Haftar’s regime in eastern Libya—are well documented. Russian semi-state forces could replicate this model to prop up the pro-Russian governments in Eurasia. Moscow has long prioritized efforts to push back against what it views as U.S. efforts to topple unfriendly regimes. For Putin, countering so-called “color revolutions” has been critical for countering what he sees as unacceptable U.S. unilateralism, and protecting against what he assumes is the ultimate goal: regime change in Moscow. Putin has gone to great lengths to shore up embattled dictators— including Belarus’s Lukashenko, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Kazakhstan’s Tokayev, and Venezuela’s Maduro—to prevent them from being ousted as a result of external pressure. Putin has also viewed the backing of autocrats as helping in his efforts to cultivate an image as a reliable partner willing and able to stand up to the United States. As Moscow is bogged down by events in Ukraine and may lack the future capacity to come to an embattled leader’s protection, groups similar to Wagner could step into that role in Eurasia to:

Provide security services to Lukashenko and smooth his succession.

Moscow could use the Wagner Group remnants or other new groups to protect Lukashenko against popular protest—while simultaneously serving as an on-the-ground monitor and implicit deterrent to ensure Lukashenko’s continued lockstep compliance with Putin’s demands. In 2020, the regime in Minsk reportedly began forming a 1,000-member semi-state security company called GardServis, based on the Wagner Group’s design and with Wagner Group training. Russian non-state armed actors could work with this group, while helping the Kremlin to more closely monitor Lukashenko’s stability. Should Lukashenko face health issues or protests, Wagner or similar Russian paramilitary networks could help orchestrate his succession, countering the efforts of Belarus’s pro-democracy opposition and ensuring the emergence of a pro-Russian leader. (Regular Russian military forces also remain on the ground in Belarus and are a more likely vehicle for any conventional military cooperation between the Russian and Belarusian armed forces.)

Strengthen pro-Russian leaders in the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As far back as 2016, Russian forces were reported to have trained ethnically Serbian special police forces in the Republika Srpska entity. Russian semi-state groups could provide similar assistance now, especially as the separatist Republika Srpska president Milorad Dodik has, with Russian support, increasingly rejected the authority of the international High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Bosnian-Herzegovina Constitutional Court.

Provide protection to the pro-Russian regime in Georgia.

Pro-Russian billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili is seen as the power behind the throne of the current Georgian Dream government in Georgia. If a future election threatens to unseat Georgian Dream, a group like Wagner could
coordinate with Ivanishvili’s network to carry out election interference of the nature common in Georgia in the 1990s. This could include threatening, beating, or even assassinating opposition politicians; physically harassing voters at the polls; and staging violent provocations to excuse police crackdowns against local citizens protesting rigged elections.

**Sustain Russia’s influence as a key security provider.**

A large and long-standing foundation of Russia’s influence in the region has been its ability to act as the preferred security provider. Russia also has long-standing concerns about the path of the narcotics trade from Afghanistan and Central Asia through to Russia, and the possibility that Islamist movements from Afghanistan or Central Asia might attempt to foment separatism in the Russian North Caucasus. The Kremlin could seek to reinforce perceptions of Russia as the go-to security provider across Eurasia at a time of constrained resources by using contracted paramilitary forces, like the Wagner Group. These forces could augment the existing presence of regular Russian forces in Tajikistan or act as a substitute for regular Russian forces elsewhere in the region, including in an effort to fulfill CSTO treaty obligations that stipulate an act of aggression against one of its members will be viewed as an act of aggression against all of its members.

**Support stability in Central Asia.**

In 2010, President Roza Otunbaeva asked Russia for help suppressing ethnic riots in southern Kyrgyzstan. Although Moscow refused in this case, it complied in January 2022 in Kazakhstan when a similar request was made by President Tokayev, sending around 2,000 troops as a temporary “peacekeeping” force under the terms of the CSTO. Growing distrust of Russia in the region makes it unlikely that many of these governments (or publics) would support a direct intervention by the Russian state. However, a lesser-known PMC that appeared to be working on an independent contract with a local government could provide a useful alternative, while actually being sent by the Kremlin to help quell protests in allied Eurasian states. Conditions in Tajikistan are ripe for such an approach. For instance, the Tajik government’s brutal crackdown in response to protests in Gorno-Badakhshan in 2022 is one example of a scenario in which informal fighters could help repress protests.

**Supplement Moscow’s “peacekeeping” presence in the Caucasus.**

The future of Russia’s peacekeeping presence in Nagorno-Karabakh is uncertain at the time of writing. Russia had deployed nearly 2,000 forces to the region in 2020 as part of a ceasefire deal it brokered between Azerbaijan and Armenia that ended six weeks of fighting for control of the territory. It is plausible that some of these forces could remain or return to the region in the future. For example, Azerbaijan could still take actions to link its exclave of Nachchivan to Azerbaijan terri-
tory by creating a new corridor through Armenia. This so-called Zangezur Corridor would link Azerbaijan (and possibly Russia) to the Mediterranean Sea via Armenia and Turkey. Given sanctions and other restrictions on Russia, the Kremlin could see it as in its interest to secure such a transport route to more easily move its goods after being cut off from its traditional Western routes in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. Russia could offer to Armenia “peacekeepers,” including non-state paramili-
ary actors to provide security along the route.

**Destabilize unfriendly governments.**

Russia has long sought to ensure the presence of Russia-friendly governments along its borders and in its neighborhood. To increase its influence in the region, Russia could use semi-state military companies to:

**Destabilize the pro-Western government in Moldova.**

Moldova appears to be set on a pro-Western course under the leadership of Prime Minister Maia Sandu. This trend predates Russia’s invasion of Ukraine but has accelerated in its aftermath, as many in Moldova began to fear that the country could soon end up as the next target in Russia’s crosshairs. Moldova applied for and received EU candidacy in June 2022, and it has also sought to distance itself from Russian-led organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Kremlin has already acted to derail Moldova’s westward move. In February 2023, the Kremlin employed more than 150 members of the Wagner Group to start protests in the country; the Moldovan police arrested at least one such alleged mercenary at a demonstration in March 2023. In planning these destabilizing operations, Russia may also seek to recruit locally. Previously reported recruiting by the Wagner Group in Moldova suggests that Russia may have fertile networks to draw on in the country. These networks may only grow if economic stresses caused by the war make mercenary work more attractive to Moldovans harboring pro-Russian sentiment.
Obstruct EU enlargement in the Balkans.
Because EU membership requires normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, Russia could prevent this goal by stoking violence between ethnic Albanians and Serbians within Kosovo. When violence erupted in northern Kosovo over mayoral elections and subsequent protests left several NATO peacekeepers injured, the United States warned Kosovo that aggressive action would affect U.S.-Kosovo relations.\textsuperscript{101}

Conduct assassination attempts.
Another way for Russian paramilitaries to destabilize unfriendly governments could be through assassination attempts. In 2016, two Russian intelligence agents tried to assassinate the prime minister of Montenegro as the country was preparing to accede to NATO, and they were convicted in absentia of attempting to lead a coup.\textsuperscript{102} This move had a chilling effect on pro-Western leaders in the Balkans and could also dissuade pro-Western candidates from running for public office. The Kremlin could prompt new groups of informal fighters or PMCs to conduct this operation, as their links to the Kremlin are still plausibly deniable.

Support the Putin regime’s stability through actions abroad.
Maintaining regime stability is the Putin regime’s top priority. Already, Moscow has approved the creation of private military formations inside Russia’s regions—a move almost certainly designed to counter potential protests or successionist moves from the region in the aftermath of the failed Prigozhin mutiny. While these new formations are only for use inside Russia’s borders, the Kremlin could also look to deploy PMCs outside Russia in ways it perceives as enhancing regime stability at home, by targeting dissident Russian émigrés in the region or by seizing or guarding foreign economic assets for use by pro-Putin Russian oligarchs.

Provide surveillance and harassment to repress émigré opposition from outside Russia’s borders.
The total number of Russians who have left the country since 2022 is hard to assess, with estimates ranging from several hundred thousand to around a million people.\textsuperscript{103} Many have settled in Eurasian countries that lack visa requirements for Russian citizens. Although some Russians left simply to avoid being mobilized into the Russian military and may not be politically active or opposed to the Putin government, others fled in opposition to the war or because they were among those most critical of the Putin regime and therefore targets of repression. The Kremlin could use organizations like the Wagner Group to monitor these individuals and target with intimidation and violence those they perceive as threatening to the regime. Russia is among the most prolific perpetrators of transnational repression, according to Freedom House.\textsuperscript{104} These tactics might be especially prevalent in political environments in which the sitting regime is supportive of the Kremlin’s goals. However, as underscored by the Russian intelligence service’s prior assassinations of regime traitors in the U.K. and Germany, the Kremlin is willing to accept risks and may be even more inclined to do so in the aftermath of its invasion of Ukraine. Already, in the Western Balkans, the Wagner Group—with the help of prominent Serbian paramilitary groups—kept tabs on Russian migrants, using escalatory tactics to intimidate these groups.\textsuperscript{105}

Protect economic resources for pro-Russian oligarchs.
The Wagner Group was regularly contracted to seize and then defend petroleum, mineral, and business locations on behalf of Prigozhin’s firms in Syria, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, and other African countries. Other Russian security groups, including Redut and Shchit, have done similar work on behalf of Russian oligarch Timchenko’s phosphate holdings in Syria. Especially as Russia is cut off from international markets and budget resources grow more scarce, opportunistic oligarchs might increasingly seek economic opportunities in Eurasia, particularly in Central Asia, given large deposits of gas, oil, and coal in the region. Russia has a history of using state pressure to compete against other foreign firms for access to oil deposits in Kazakhstan.\textsuperscript{106} One could imagine a future Russia, desperate for resources, using violence by Wagner-like groups in a new style of competition in the country.

Russian and Chinese private security companies (PSCs) could find themselves in direct competition, as Chinese PSCs are playing an increasingly large role protecting Chinese investment projects and other economic resources around the world.\textsuperscript{107} The Wagner Group was suspected of fomenting violence against a Chinese gold mining operation in CAR that led to the death of nine Chinese citizens, although there is no direct evidence of Wagner’s involvement and bilateral meetings between Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Putin did not mention the incident publicly.\textsuperscript{108} At a later summit between Xi and Tokayev, energy security topped the agenda, with a focus on the secure operation of the Kazakh section of the Central Asia–China natural gas pipeline and deeper cooperation on oil.\textsuperscript{109} While Russia until now has not challenged growing Chinese dominance in the energy sector in Central Asia—and claims to have even once rescued Chinese miners in CAR who were threatened by rebels—\textsuperscript{1010} that could change.
RUSSIA’S USE OF WAGNER AND SIMILAR GROUPS IN EURASIA HAS SO FAR BEEN LIMITED

The Wagner Group and other similar organizations have historically played a limited role in Eurasia, especially relative to the operations of these groups in Africa and the Middle East. Wagner’s previous involvement in the region (by country) includes:

**Serbia:** In 2014, Serbian volunteers reportedly fought in Crimea and the Donbas region of Ukraine. Dozens of Serbians who joined Wagner were later prosecuted as mercenaries who had violated Serbia’s criminal code. Russian groups maintain ties with Serbian paramilitary and extremist organizations already operating in the region, and several ethnic Serbian radical groups, such as the Z-Orlovi and Narodne Patrole, have established connections with the Wagner Group. In November 2022, Aleksandar Lisov and Damjan Knežević, the heads of these respective groups, visited the Wagner building in St. Petersburg. Shortly thereafter, the Wagner Group announced it had opened a cultural center in Belgrade to foster “friendship and cooperation” between the two countries. The announcement of the center came amid growing Western concern about the Wagner Group’s activities in the region, and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić reacted angrily to reports of a Wagner presence in his country as local activists began filing legal complaints against Wagner. While Prigozhin denied claims of interfering in the Balkans, there are several incidents of Wagner Group connections on public display. On Wagner-operated Telegram channels, the Wagner Group supported the actions of far-right groups, including violent demonstrations on the Kosovo border. The Wagner Group attempted to step up its recruiting in Serbia in January 2023, and then orchestrated a local media campaign on its own behalf, apparently in an attempt to exaggerate its influence there.

**Belarus:** In a puzzling episode in July 2020 where details remain murky, Belarusian authorities arrested 33 men at a resort outside Minsk. All of these men were Russian citizens who had earlier served with Wagner. They were unarmed but dressed in fatigue and carried military equipment. Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko originally accused the Wagner Group of attempting to destabilize the country ahead of upcoming presidential elections. Yet that never seemed likely because the men carried no weapons, and because Lukashenko’s rule has long been propped up by Putin. Observers soon raised questions about whether this was actually a Wagner Group gathering, or if it had instead been arranged by MAR PMC, a different mercenary group whose website claimed it was also based in St. Petersburg. Reportedly, MAR PMC told the men they were stopping in Minsk on their way to Turkey for a connecting flight to serve in a different foreign destination. Eventually Lukashenko returned the men home to Russia. Later the Russian government (and some Ukrainian journalists) claimed the men had been lured to Belarus by Ukrainian operatives, in a scheme to force their connecting Istanbul-bound plane to land in Kyiv, where they could be prosecuted for war crimes committed in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 and then exchanged in prisoner swaps with Moscow. Their true objective remains publicly unknown. Then as a purported resolution to Prigozhin’s attempted mutiny, Lukashenko offered the Wagner Group an opportunity to regroup in Belarus, if they were self-financed. A disused military base in the town of Tsel, in the center of the country, was quickly refurbished with tents, and several thousand Wagner Group forces were based there within weeks, according to independent satellite images. Lukashenko claimed they were there to train Belarusian security forces. Hundreds of troops were later observed carrying out exercises near Brest, on the border with Poland, and in a meeting with Putin, Lukashenko joked that Wagner forces were eager to move farther West. Meanwhile Telegram social media channels linked to Prigozhin showed video of him at the camp exhorting Wagner forces to prepare for future deployments to Africa. The ultimate fate of this deployment remained unknown at the time of publication, although satellite imagery indicated that the camp had been disassembled.

**Central Asia:** The Wagner Group always included some pro-Russian foreign members from Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia. When facing manpower shortages following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Wagner Group began recruiting—and at times coercing—Central Asian citizens, migrant laborers, and prisoners in Russia to fight in the war effort. The Russian government has offered expedited citizenship to Central Asian laborers in exchange for military service in Ukraine. An estimated 10 million Central Asian migrants work in Russia—making this population an attractive source of manpower for Moscow.
Implications

The proliferation of Wagner-like groups and their expansion into Eurasian countries would carry the following implications for the countries in the region and U.S. and allied interests:

Amplifying Russian malign influence.

Russia has been weakened because of its invasion of Ukraine—its economy is diminished, state resources constrained, military degraded, and its bureaucracy lacks the bandwidth to deal with the rising challenges Russia faces on its periphery as it remains bogged down in Ukraine. But rather than accept declining influence in Eurasia, Western policymakers should be prepared for new Kremlin approaches to destabilize the regions on its periphery, reinforce pro-Russian and often authoritarian governments in Eurasia, and distort the information environments in the region. Indeed, Russian losses may prompt Putin toward heightened aggression elsewhere to salvage his legacy. Many actions that organizations like Wagner might execute in the region mirror actions that Russian state actors like the GRU often pursue. But rather than having to scale back these state-led operations because of resource and bandwidth constraints, the Kremlin may turn to informal fighters and other non-state groups to provide low-cost alternatives that enable it to sustain—and in some cases amplify—its malign actions. The use of new contractors, heretofore unknown to Western intelligence agencies, could also help cloak Russian actions and protect them from new sanctions.

Complicating U.S. and allied attribution and response.

The proliferation and increased activity of groups working on the Wagner model would make it more difficult for the United States and its allies to attribute such actions to the Russian state, complicating Western response options. The proliferation of new groups would raise the risk that these groups and the opportunistic individuals that lead them might stake out positions independent of the Kremlin or even at odds with it, especially in the case of extreme ethnic nationalists who have criticized Putin for not going far enough in his actions. In some cases, opportunistic individuals might pursue actions that they perceive will please the Kremlin to curry favor in Moscow, but in fact have a poor reading on the Kremlin’s objectives. In other cases, opportunistic individuals might simply act to advance their own personal—often financial—interests, a dynamic that could become more acute as elite economic interests are hurt by Russia’s war in Ukraine. The proliferation of these groups would also make it difficult to discern when and under what circumstances the Kremlin might be willing to escalate on these groups’ behalf. As a result of these possibilities, it would become more difficult for the United States and its allies to link the actions of these groups to the Kremlin or to gauge how the Kremlin might respond to U.S. actions. If even more Wagner-like entities were to begin proliferating, it would also be that much harder for Western officials to identify and sanction Russian actions. Sanctions were already tested when Prigozhin formed dozens of opaque new shell companies abroad.111

Rising risks to NATO and EU members.

This paper has focused on how the Kremlin could use organizations like the Wagner Group in non-NATO Eurasian countries. However, the deployment of the Wagner Group to Belarus in July 2023, and the fears that it stoked in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, underscores the risks that similar groups could pose to NATO member states. The Polish government placed its forces on high alert as a result of Wagner’s presence in Belarus and Lukashenko’s threats against the country. The presence of Wagner in Belarus was seen to raise the risk that the group would be used for malign activities beyond Belarusian borders. The Kremlin also attempted to use the Wagner Group to stir up anti-Western sentiment in Estonia. In the 2019 European Parliament elections, Prigozhin’s operatives supported the far-right Euroskeptic EKRE party in Estonia by spreading anti-Western narratives through social media channels.112 These narratives pinned the blame for problems in Estonia on the European Union, then-Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, and then-Reform Party leader Kaja Kallas.113 In addition to information operations, these groups could execute other acts of hybrid war inside NATO countries. For example, informal fighters could carry out lone-wolf or small-scale terrorist attacks similar to the mail bomb attacks in Spain in late 2022, especially given the often-overlapping ties between ultranationalist and PMC circles.114 In planning these destabilizing operations, Russia may seek to recruit locally, including Russians who left the country in the aftermath of the invasion and who continue to lack opportunities in the countries where they now reside. These individuals—namely those who left to avoid being drafted rather than because of their opposition to the war—provide a potentially fertile pool that new semi-state organizations can tap into.
Conclusion

Though Russia is facing headwinds due to its war in Ukraine, the Kremlin is unlikely to give up on trying to maintain itself as a dominant regional power in Eurasia. The more likely scenario is that the Kremlin addresses challenges caused by the war—such as bureaucratic overload, strained resources, and growing skepticism in the region—by relying on semi-state military companies and other similar organizations.

Following Prigozhin’s failed mutiny and death, there remains much uncertainty about the future of the remnants of the Wagner Group and of other semi-state military companies, informal fighters, and networks in Russia. However, the Kremlin might not have many other compelling options to advance Russia’s foreign policy goals in the region. These organizations could advance Russian interests by amplifying the Kremlin’s influence operations and filling gaps in the Kremlin’s capacity and influence in the wake of the invasion.

Non-Wagner forces could be even more insidious, as they could enjoy the benefits of operating in the shadows with murkier ties to the Kremlin than Wagner eventually had. Worryingly, a non-Wagner Group PMC could learn from Wagner’s mistakes and right Wagner’s wrongs. Likewise, it could be more effective in executing its mission—one that undoubtedly amplifies the Kremlin’s interests.

Russia’s growing footprint in Eurasia will challenge the United States and Europe. It could provide a blueprint for how the Kremlin could continue to expand its influence even closer to Europe’s doorstep in NATO and EU countries using semi-state military companies and similar organizations. While the ripple effects of the June 2023 mutiny remain unclear, policymakers must be prepared for a future in which these organizations continue to operate on behalf of the Kremlin to challenge U.S. and European interests. Managing the consequences of the proliferation of these groups is key for the United States and Europe today and moving forward.


8. According to the Russian Federal Tax Service Public Registry of every legal entity in Russia, the only company ever registered as “Wagner” has been located in St. Petersburg since 2001, but engages in “water abstraction, treatment, and distribution.” There is no evidence connecting it either to Prigozhin or to the provision of any type of service security; Russian Federal Tax Service, “Predostavleniye Svedeny Iz Yegryul/Yegriz v Elektronnom Vide [Providing Information From the United States Register of Legal Entities/EGRIP in Electronic Form],” The Russian Federal Tax Service, https://eegrul.nalog.ru/index.html?i=1688322735826.

9. Russian politicians continue to raise the question of legalizing PMCs from time to time, but as of yet the Kremlin has always said no. “Mironov Stated That the Authorities Did Not Support the Law on PMCs Because of the Contradiction of the Constitution,” Novye Izvestii, Feb. 28, 2023.


21. For example, the Wagner diamond mines in CAR are artisanal (sifted by hand), rather than industrial.


52. Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

53. Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”

54. Østensen and Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies.”


65. Marat, “From Central Asia to War Zones.”


68. Marat, “From Central Asia to War Zones.”


73. An exception to this is Serbia, which increased trade with Russia in 2022. This is largely due to the increase in oil prices, which boosted the value of Serbia’s oil imports.


83. Stefan Hedlund, “Georgia’s Future May Hinge on Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Geopolitical Intelligence Services (Lichtenstein), March 20, 2023.

85. A video that circulated on Georgian social media in 2022, calling for the retaking of South Ossetia and Abkhazia while Russia was distracted by its war in Ukraine, is believed by some to be a fake engineered by Russia to allow the Georgian government to portray protesters as violent revanchists. Tony Wesolowsky, “In Georgia, Calls Emerge to Retake South Ossetia, Abkhazia,” Radio Free Europe, March 10, 2022.


97. Marat, “From Central Asia to War Zones.”


About the Center for a New American Security

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, D.C., and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and nonpartisan.

©2023 Center for a New American Security
All rights reserved.