

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



“Russia’s End State: Assessing Prigozhin’s Legacy” Strategic Competition Seminar Series (SCSS), FY25-2 November 5, 2024

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This report is a summary of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC)’s second Strategic Competition Seminar Series (SCSS) virtual seminar for fiscal year 2025 (October 2024 to September 2025). On November 5, 2024, with the Chatham House Rule in operation, 38 individuals, including desk officers from the US Department of Defense, Germany’s Federal Ministry of Defense, GCMC alumni and faculty, other subject matter experts, and Pavel Baev and Mark Galeotti, the two presenters, participated in the monthly virtual seminar. This summary includes insights shared by the presenters and points that emerged from the discussion. It is intended as an aide memoire of the event for the participants and as means of sharing key points and insights with a wider readership.

Introduction

In February 2023, during the battle for Bakhmut, then-Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin [publicly berated](#) then-Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov for shortages of ammunition, masking a pushback against a hostile corporate takeover of Wagner through the contractual subordination of its personnel into Russia’s Ministry of Defense (MoD) unified military command. By May 2023, Prigozhin threatened to withdraw Wagner from the fight, but on June 23, 2023, he took the fight to Moscow, leading an uprising/mutiny—a self-styled [“march of justice”](#). On August 23, 2023 he died in a plane crash. As a result, Prigozhin’s memorialization is understandably contested.

The Wagner Group is perhaps the world’s most recognized private military company (PMC), operating in Ukraine, Venezuela, Syria and a number of African countries including Libya, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Niger, and Burkino-Faso. At the time of his death, Prigozhin’s empire also included influential media assets and a very profitable Russian-elite network of corporate catering and other contracts, especially linked to the MoD. He embodied the role of “muzhik patriot,” with close ties to the Kremlin and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

His own media public relations styled him as a freebooting security entrepreneur, for whom “mission accomplished” was merely a synonym for “conflict monetized.” For Russian turbo-charged nationalist patriots, those in Russia that are prowar but critical of its conduct—the paradoxical pro-Putin opposition, Prigozhin has become the proverbial prophet crying in the wilderness, the martyr preparing the way for Russia’s true glory. On June 24, 2023, Putin branded Prigozhin a traitor, and with this officially uttered epithet, his death became an inevitability.

Prigozhin’s legacy understood in terms of tangible assets consists of the 25,000-strong Wagner PMC, including equipment and infrastructure, which is engaged in a series of small-scale but larger impact military deployments at the edge of Russia’s geostrategic influence, as well as his above-referenced media and business assets. These tangible assets were divided among Russia’s state agencies, though not necessarily according to an overriding need to balance interest groups and clans. The intangible part of Prigozhin’s legacy consists of a set of beliefs, practices, and norms which Prigozhin can be associated with, including lessons learned from his passing, that influences other actors. This intangible part of his legacy can either be promoted by the Kremlin as “good practice” to be emulated or, alternatively, tarnished, censored, and suppressed.

In reviewing Prigozhin’s spectacular rise and very public fall, while different Russian sub-institutional actors may identify and draw different conclusions about how to navigate tradeoffs and understand costs/benefits calculi, all such actors are forced to reconsider more fully the implications of their own actions and operating assumptions and the potential of unintended consequences.

Wagner PMC: Agility versus Unity of Command Rebalance

Given Putin’s self-interested need to eliminate threats to his power, the prime Prigozhin legacy lesson for Putin was the need to exert a much greater degree of central control over a mixed array of diverse informal military structures. (Mark Galeotti and Anna Arutunyan, “Prigozhin’s Children: the New Wave of Russian PMCs and Implications for the Unity of Command,” Research Materials, [Mayak Intelligence](#), for EUCOM RSI, 2024) With Wagner PMC autonomy came agility and military effectiveness—essential attributes for conducting warfare. But the Kremlin could not allow PMC leaders to exercise operational command and mount a coup. Post-Prigozhin, such “patriotic” expeditionary volunteer structures are no longer autonomous but subsumed and led by regular and centralized Russian state military command structures. The fact that Putin did not order their abolition highlights both Russia’s continued need for alternative recruiting streams to avoid a second-round mobilization, as well as the belief that subordination of irregular military structures to regular military command and control offsets the political risks of revolt.

This mixed array of diverse expeditionary volunteer military structures includes:

- Chechen national guard units, formally subordinated to the Rosgvardiya, but reporting to Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov;
- Akhmat battalions, PMCs also raised by Kadyrov;
- PMCs such as Patriot;

- ‘Redoubt’, a PMC close to the GRU (unit 35555 of the 76th Military Intelligence Command, based in Rostov) that is in reality a brand name for recruiting military forces;
- BARS, an enhanced reserve element, whereby reservists undergo periodic refresher training in return for a small annual stipend, of 30,000 to 40,000 troops, comprised, for example, of BARS 1 Kuban (Kuban Cossack Movement), BARS 2 Yakutiya, BARS 14 Sarmat (National Bolshevik unit), and BARS 37, the politicians battalion, able to create war veterans though kept well clear of the front;
- volunteer battalions, funded, for example, by governors in Russian regions, major corporations such as ROSCOSMOS – Uran, and mayors, such as Moscow’s Sobyanin battalion. These battalions provide sign-on bonuses and/or additional military equipment as a show of loyalty and indirect tax, but are definitively not a down payment on operational control.

[For further discussion, see: Session 7 of SCSS “Russia’s End State” Annual Conference Proceedings, Session 7, GCMC Clock Tower, forthcoming.]

Post-Prigozhin, Redut PMC and Africa Corps now offer Russian support for the constellation of pro-Russia juntas in the Sahel. However, here the indispensability of Prigozhin himself becomes apparent. GRU colonels lack Prigozhin’s innate ability to seamlessly offer a full military regime support package of PMC services in exchange for securing Russian access to strategically vital natural resources that effectively sidelined Western PMC and resource extraction competitors. Prigozhin understood what it took to make a deal. He could tailor Wagner engagement to what local and national elites deemed affordable, acceptable, and appropriate, and could also convincingly present himself as a state representative for Russia, opening the way, potentially, for other Russian state agencies to gain access.

However, Russia so far appears much less able to achieve high risk/high benefit payoffs at low cost, the hallmark of Wagner under Prigozhin. Post-Prigozhin, Putin cashes in Wagner-like innovation, agility, and high-risk appetite and the benefits of interservice competition against his overriding need for coup-proofing and so employs a more direct and unified command authority. The net result is a less effective expeditionary capability: Russia has no discernable convincing unified Russian [plan](#) for Africa.

Turbo-Patriots: Controlling Pro-War, Anti-Grandfather-in-the-Bunker Sentiment

Prigozhin’s critique of Shoigu and Gerasimov may have had its uses for Putin: the former defense minister and current chief of the general staff had become lightning rods, and public criticism of the MoD and General Staff acted as a safety-valve. Yet Prigozhin had begun to criticize Putin, obliquely at first then more directly, echoing the 2021 Navalny pejorative “grandfather in the bunker.” On June 24, 2023, Wagner’s reinforced brigade with Prigozhin at its head marched from Rostov to the village of Krasnoye in Russia’s Lipetsk region, arriving later that day. Along the march, several helicopters and one Il-22M plane were shot down, inflicting direct casualties, and the brigade met little resistance on the ground, easily pushing aside truck barricades on the main roads. Prigozhin, driven in part by frustration at the lack of credit and recognition, starkly exposed Putin’s vulnerabilities. Putin was panicked into paralysis in this

humiliating “emperor has no clothes” moment. Prigozhin’s uprising exposed the fundamental weakness of the Putin regime, even if its aftermath highlighted that same regime’s resilience, adaptability, and survival instinct. Putin promoted Prigozhin in 2013 and by 2024 was “hoist by his own petard.” This highlights Putin’s propensity to make major blunders in war-making and errors of judgment.

For Moscow, Prigozhin’s legacy is two-fold. First, all media has to be much more closely controlled and censored to avoid nationalist criticism becoming escalatory and so enabling an internally destabilizing nationalist outbidding process. The cannibalization of Prigozhin’s media empire formerly exercised through Konkord (Concord) and Media Patriot has also resulted in much greater control of the military information space and a reduced role for war correspondents. In terms of tangible media assets, the infamous Internet Research Agency (troll factory) based in St. Petersburg appears to be under SVR control, alongside the Prigozhin-created Foundation to Battle Injustice (FBI/FBR), whose disinformation content is amplified by Russian influence operations such as websites associated with pro-Russian propaganda network Portal Kombati. [Wagner-affiliated social media](#), such as Grey Zone (500k subscribers) and Wagner Orchestra (100k subscribers) appear to be GRU assets.

Second, Prigozhin’s uprising demonstrated Putin could no longer rely on abstract historical-charismatic legitimization of his political authority to bind his elite to him. Clearly Putin’s control of “his” elite was much more fragile than he had believed. Indeed, in October 2024, Kadyrov declared a [blood feud](#) with Russian lawmakers from Dagestan and Ingushetia. This, together with the September [Wildberries](#) violence in the heart of Moscow highlight that Russia’s elite at both the center and periphery are not as united as Putin may have supposed. The lesson here is that Putin needed to become more visible and connected to Russian public sentiment, at least in symbolic and theatrical terms.

Militarizing of Wagner or Wagnerization of the Russian Military?

The Kremlin has attempted to corral and then absorb the benefits associated with Wagner PMCs, including battle-trained expertise among its personnel and equipment and tactical ability. At the same time, it has tried to discard the negative by subsuming Wagnerites into a military chain of command. In the process of this digestion, the Russian military is undergoing a process of “Wagnerization.” The Kremlin, post-June 24, 2023, characterized Prigozhin and all he embodied as a malignant growth. If so, this malignant growth has entered the blood stream of the Russian military and body politic itself.

In terms of “positive” Wagner influences, we can point to its tactical legacy, which still influences the battlefield in Ukraine, namely innovative infantry-centric assault detachments operating alongside artillery rather than armored vehicles vulnerable in drone attacks. This highlights the ability of the Russian military to adapt. However, Wagnerite influences are also attributed to the greater criminalization of the Russian military and the treatment of soldiers as “worthless dirt.” The removal of Shoigu to Secretary of the Security Council and the arrests of high-ranking generals, including Timur Ivanov and Yuri Kuznetsov in the MoD and the Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff, Vadim Shamarin, took place in the shadow of Prigozhin’s own past corruption and incompetence charges levelled against military leadership.

The purging of the military also included more popular field or fighting generals, namely Sergey Surovikin and Ivan Popov. Following the muzzling of Prigozhin-affiliated media, there is much less public information on the military leadership in the Special Military Operation, and no

room for unifying military heroes to emerge and become the focal point for dissent possibly followed by outright revolt. Prigozhin's legacy limits full military-patriotic mobilization of public sentiment. Contemporary Georgy Zhukov's are replaced by anonymous captains.

Implications

What does Prigozhin tell us about the competitive “adhocracy” of Putin/Putinism mid-2020s? Prigozhin serves as a window into Russia's court politics' competitive adhocracy, “a modern, bureaucratic state. Atop it, though, is an almost medieval court, in which constantly competing factions and individuals are struggling for the most important currency of them all: Putin's favor” (Anna Arutunyan & Mark Galeotti, [Downfall: Prigozhin, Putin, and the New Fight for the Future of Russia](#) [Ebury, 2024]). This, then, is a fluid archipelago of situational alliances and interest-based coalitions. Contemporary security politics in Russia concerns itself with the art of anticipating Putin's future preference changes and benefiting, even as national strategic goals are cloaked in a restoration of an imperial past. The true North Star becomes the most accurate anticipation of Putin's intent, and Prigozhin excelled at this until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Icarus-like “minigarch” Prigozhin flew to close to the sun/Putin, propelled on the wings of war and the centrality of Wagner to key battles for not just cities, but resources, networks, control, and profits.

After this discussion of internal Russian politics, what of its global reach? After June 24, 2023, Russia shifted how it engages at the periphery of its geostrategic interests. A Wagner-lite flexible, agile, and reliable but relatively resource-poor approach was replaced by one that lacks the attributes of the former but that is more formally Russian-state backed (unified command structure) and resourced. Russia moved from a venture capitalist model of engagement to state-centric red-tape-bound relations. In expeditionary terms, the fragmentation of the Wagner multinational corporation undercut its force-multiplier effects. Moreover, the death of Prigozhin himself deprived Wagner of his ability to create and then connect the business opportunity dots. The benefits of a unified command chain in Mali are not so apparent as they are in Moscow.

Wagner represented a proxy force that offered plausible deniability. As Wagner forces moved on Kida in Mali, other Wagner troops in Kursk failed to stem the Ukrainian offensive. Russia struggles to balance Africa engagements with the resource and mobilization resulting from its full-scale attack on Ukraine. Wagner brought 50,000 prisoners in Z-Detachments to the battle front. Those convicts have been expended and Wagner has been largely disbanded and subsumed. At the same time, Putin is still fearful of a second-round mobilization, which could potentially spark a coup.

This context explains the arrival of 11,000 North Korea troops in Kursk region on November 5, 2024, which seeks to leverage the United States' [preoccupation with the election](#), exploiting the window of opportunity that could last to January 20, 2025. Russia's reliance on DPRK troops can now be considered part of Prigozhin's unintended legacy: DPRK troops represent an economic bargain at \$2000 a year, and Russia suffers no domestic political backlash when combat deaths occur. Home-grown Wagner mercenary proxy forces deployed in Ukraine are replaced by DPRK—in effect, mercenaries—deployed, for now, in Russian regions bordering Ukraine. Wagner was critical in the battles for Soledar and Bakhmut. After Ukrainian forces complete the fighting retreat from the Kursk region, more North Korean troops can be deployed to Donbas.

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