

Prigozhin's death – the cracks are beginning to show

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Yevgeny Prigozhin's death in August 2023 has sent shockwaves through the geopolitical community. The alleged founder of the infamous Wagner Group, Prigozhin, was also a Russian oligarch and close



aide to President Vladimir Putin. The killing of Wagner's leadership will have significant negative security consequences for the individuals, continents and countries caught up in the aftermath.

The Wagner Group

Wagner has been given access to considerable resources and granted many privileges from Russia since its inception in 2014. This included the recruitment of convicts that were at the time serving prison sentences. As a private proxy mercenary group dubbed 'Putin's Private Army', it has been deployed across the world including Africa, the Middle East and Ukraine. It is well documented that Wagner has also been promoting Russian foreign policy through nefarious and illegal means by exercising black ops, controlling political figures and running substantial fuel and natural resource extraction operations on behalf of its employer, Putin.

Security dynamics in Africa

The presence of Wagner in Africa has caused international observers great concern. The group's involvement in supporting illegal leaders in Libya, Sudan and the Central African Republic has increased instability and frustrated peace negotiations. Prigozhin's death will lead to Wagner's withdrawal from many regions which will fuel security concerns and create instability.

Wagner is known to be a revenue-generating vehicle that extracts gold and other resources from the continent in return for arms, training and security services to various leaders and this has been good business for Russia.

There are two likely outcomes for Wagner now that Prigozhin has gone. One, it will be rebranded, allowed to retain its previous function and integrated into the Russian Army; or, two, its name will be retained to allow ongoing recruitment and a new leader will be initiated. Analysts believe the most likely scenario is the first, where existing leadership structures are dismantled, resources confiscated and the entity absorbed into the Russian Army. Given that Russia's elite has now witnessed the dangers of home-grown proxy armies gaining too much power and influence, the second scenario – where Wagner remains with a replacement leader – is highly unlikely.

Oluwole Ojewale who is the regional coordinator for Central Africa at the Institute for Security Studies stated that Prigozhin's death is a stark reminder to all leaders across the continent that reliance on mercenary groups for protection and reform carries huge risks. Cracks in the security and stability of West African and Central African countries will now develop and conflicts will ensue. They will now have to defend themselves against rival countries and terrorism – the very enemies Wagner fought while protecting Russia's investments in Africa.

Russia and Ukraine

Analysts believe that apart from holding the area of Bakhmut, Prigozhin overstated the effectiveness of his army in Ukraine. Wagner was not successful in terms of military strategy, opting mainly for brutal tactics. It seems that the conflict in Ukraine will no longer be influenced by the group's activities but the Russian military is still rooted in the conflict. The army continues to operate with the highest commanders still in control – namely, Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov. However, there is an expectation of deteriorating performance among Russian soldiers over time.

Within days of Prigozhin's death, Putin issued a decree requiring all paramilitary soldiers to pledge individual allegiance to Russia. This move has been interpreted as a clear sign of Putin's personal doubts about his own security forces and suggests a lack of trust within the Silovaki (Russian security framework). Furthermore, the fact that the state now demands signed assurances implies legitimate concerns regarding the people's loyalty.

History has shown that money is the main thing that motivates Russian forces. Putin's decree is a sure sign of his growing insecurity, which is not unfounded.

With the potential dismantling of Wagner, another of the Kremlin's serious concerns is the possibility of 'splinter' factions. Russia will be keeping a close eye on this. There is no doubt that Putin has his plate full, and that all eyes are on his every move.

'Trust is like a vase, once it's broken, though you can fix it, the vase will never be the same again.' - Walter Anderson.

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