

# MP-IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# The Wagner Group: A Tool of Hybrid Warfare

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## **S***ummary*

The Wagner Group has furthered Russia's foreign policy objectives around the globe. The organisation remained secretive till July 2022, when the presence of the group was accepted in the Russian media. The Wagner has gained infamy for its role in the ongoing 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine. There are, however, signs of growing schism between Wagner and the Russian Ministry of Defence.

## Introduction

The Wagner group was founded around 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin, President Vladimir Putin’s former caterer and confidant. The group is not formally recognised as it is illegal to serve as a mercenary in Russia. Despite its ambiguous existence, the group has operated around the globe, from Syria to the Central African Republic, Nigeria and elsewhere, furthering Russia's foreign policy objectives and the business interests of its elites. The group maintains close ties to the country's intelligence services and has undertaken a variety of security tasks, including training of local forces and VIP protection.<sup>1</sup> Wagner gained infamy during Russia's 'special military operations' in Ukraine. This Brief examines the origin and employment of the controversial private military company and its relationship with the Russian state. It will also highlight the employment of this tool of hybrid warfare in a largely conventional war that is being fought in Ukraine since February 2022.

## Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs)

Mercenaries have been around since the time of recorded history and organized warfare. In the nineteenth century, mercenarism advanced and declined with the development of conscription based on nationalism. The use of mercenaries re-emerged, mainly in Africa, with the wars of de-colonisation and ensuing civil wars. Experts note that following the surge in mercenary activity, there has been a growth of private military companies.<sup>2</sup>

According to the UN working group on mercenaries, these companies provide services to numerous actors, including states, international organisations, non-governmental organisations and private firms, particularly in the extractive industries. They operate over a wide spectrum, from being combatants alongside a regular army to protecting humanitarian missions and securing private mining operations. The UN working group further notes that PMSCs escape the accountability and responsibilities that typically apply to a country’s armed forces. They also don’t fall specifically within the ambit of international criminal procedures.<sup>3</sup> There are nuanced differences between PMSCs, armed groups, and mercenaries, yet all of them fall within the ambit of ‘soldiers for fortune’ or mercenaries because of the transactional nature of their business.

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<sup>1</sup> Jared Thompson, [“The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia’s Irregular Strategy”](#), Modern War Institute, 14 October 2021.

<sup>2</sup> [“Mercenarism and Private Military and Security Companies”](#), United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> [“Mercenaries and Private Military Security: Africa’s Thin Grey Line”](#), Institute for Security Studies, 1 December 2021.

Scholars differentiate between private military companies (PMC) from within a broader group of private security companies (PSC), based on their functions. PSCs maybe involved in intelligence operations, act as bodyguards or guards at installations, or as contractors who provide goods and services to state military in the field. A single firm can perform multiple functions, depending on the context and contract.<sup>4</sup> But a very specific type of service is provided by PMCs. PMCs are “expeditionary conflict entrepreneurs”, who “kill or train others to kill” in foreign settings.<sup>5</sup> The US and the Western countries deployed PMSCs in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Russia soon followed suit raising a number of its own PMSCs.<sup>6</sup> The Wagner, however, does not neatly comply with any of the definitions above.

## Wagner’s Origins and Relationship with Russian State

Prigozhin, who hails from St Petersburg, spent a decade in Soviet prisons for various offenses. He received his first criminal conviction in 1979, aged 18. Two years later, he was sentenced to 13 years in jail for robbery and theft, nine of which he served behind bars.<sup>7</sup> Upon his release from jail, he set up a chain of stalls selling hot dogs in St Petersburg. Soon his business expanded and Prigozhin established contacts with the elites of St Petersburg, including with Putin, who also hails from the same city.<sup>8</sup> His catering company Concord was awarded contract to supply food to the Kremlin, earning him the nickname ‘Putin's chef’. Later firms affiliated with Prigozhin also won lucrative catering contracts from the Russian military and state-run schools.<sup>9</sup>

Sometime around 2014, Prigozhin raised the Wagner. The organisation remained secretive till July 2022, when the presence of the group was accepted in the Russian media. Prigozhin had all along been reticent, usually communicating with the media via statements issued by his catering company, Concord. The Russian military intelligence, the GRU, assisted Prigozhin in the raising of the Wagner. In the initial days, many of the recruits came from the Spetsnaz—military special forces who were traditionally supervised by the GRU. Sergei Shoigu was appointed the Russian

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences for Privatizing Security*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary*, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> FDG Corp. was possibly Russia's first PMSCs which conducted several small-scale operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in 1996. This was followed by deployment of several PMSCs in late 1990s and early 2000s, but failed to make a mark as the market was saturated by mainly Western companies.

<sup>7</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko, [“Yevgeny Prigozhin: From Putin's Chef to Wagner Founder”](#), *BBC News*, 20 March 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Defence Minister in 2012. Reports note that Shoigu provided the GRU with additional resources and personnel, several of them from the Spetsnaz. Around this time, Russia was heavily involved in Syria, and later in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.<sup>10</sup>

The complex, diffused and overlapping structure of Wagner makes it extremely difficult to define the group. Some have even gone to the extent of suggesting that there is no Wagner, but rather a network of businesses and groups of mercenaries linked by overlapping ownership and logistics networks.<sup>11</sup> Entities that make up the network have been involved in a variety of activities, including working to suppress pro-democracy protests, spreading disinformation, mining for gold and diamonds, and engaging in paramilitary activity.<sup>12</sup>

The Wagner shares an exclusive and unique relation with the Russian state. It can operate independently in conflict situations, for monetary considerations, but can also operate alongside the Russian armed forces, if required. The Wagner, while being employed alongside the Russian military, is dependent on the state for logistic and operational support. However, its chain of command remains nebulous and fuzzy. The organisation does not fit into the traditional understanding either of a paramilitary or a terrorist organisation and its members are often described as mercenaries and their commanders are often unlike disciplined military leaders.<sup>13</sup> Even though Western government agencies often allude to the Wagner Group as being under the control of Russia’s GRU and the Kremlin, few if any, have been able to definitively describe its command and control structure or link, with any certainty, the group's association with the Russian government.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian PMSCs have been known to operate in the grey zone of national and international laws and are often registered in offshore corporate havens, technically lying outside the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, but with linkages to Kremlin.<sup>15</sup> Since July 2022, when the employment of the Wagner in Russia's 'special military operations' became public, some clarity has emerged with regards to the logistic dependence of the group on the Russian Ministry of Defence. However, the command and control structure of the group continues to be obscure. A *Future*

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<sup>10</sup> Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, [“Why Putin Needs Wagner”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 12 May 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Mackinnon, [“Russia’s Wagner Group Doesn’t Actually Exist”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 6 July 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Jared Thompson, [“The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia’s Irregular Strategy”](#), no. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Candace Rondeaux and Ben Dalton, [“Putin’s Stealth Mobilization”](#), *New America*, 22 February 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Candace Rondeaux, [“Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare”](#), *New America*, 7 November 2019.

*Frontlines* study about Wagner reinforces the notion that Moscow covertly enables, endorses, and encourages its activities and also provides an insight into how it manages to use legal loop holes to pursue private and Russian interests. There is, however, very little evidence of direct link between the government and the group.<sup>16</sup>

## Wagner’s Employment

The US and NATO member states have been in the vanguard of employing PMSCs.<sup>17</sup> NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg provided a positive spin to the practice during his 2015 speech when he contended that, ‘[w]e use a combination of military and non-military means to stabilize countries’. In contrast, employment of such companies by adversarial countries was characterised as hybrid threat by suggesting that these threats have the characteristics of the comprehensive approach – such as flexibility, resourcefulness and multiple actors and were worrisome for NATO.<sup>18</sup>

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, armed groups emerged in Russia in the 1990s. These groups supported Russian nationalist interests in security operations across the newly established post-Soviet Eurasian space and the former Yugoslavia. Later, Putin's presidency provided additional impetus to informal security organisations as Russia re-emerged as a militarily strong and powerful state in the international system. Putin's administration supported the rise of such organisations and maintained an opaque relationship to further interests of the state and those of private Russian individuals closely connected to Putin's regime. Russia studied the multi-actor comprehensive approach of the US and other NATO member states which reflected in their successful employment of PMSCs during the 2014 annexation of Crimea.

## 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Wagner

In February 2013, General Valery Gerasimov, Russia’s Chief of the General Staff, published a 2,000-word article in *Military Affairs Courier*, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight” wherein he laid out a new theory of modern warfare. He wrote:

The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Tom de Groot and Salvador Santino F. Regilme, Jr, [“Private Military and Security Companies and the Militarization of Humanitarianism”](#), *Journal of Developing Societies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 25 December 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, [“Keynote Speech’, speech given in Washington DC”](#), NATO 25 March 2015.

have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. ... All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character.<sup>19</sup>

In the article, Gerasimov pointed to the emerging primacy of irregular forces and use of non-military means—most notably information warfare—for the achievement of strategic ends. The article was prophetic given that the Wagner was raised around 2014, and has since been employed to disrupt the 2016 US Presidential elections, and has furthered Russian interests in Africa and Crimea.

PMSCs are technically illegal under Article 13.5 of the Russian Constitution. However, they form a core component of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. Analysts note that the deployment of PMSCs and the Special Forces, instead of regular soldiers, provides Moscow necessary deniability and an increasingly refined and adaptable operational model.<sup>20</sup> PMSCs can support state and non-state partners, extract resources, influence foreign leaders, and engage in other activities that further Russian foreign policy goals.

In the early years of the last decade, the US withdrew its presence from parts of Africa and the Middle East. This provided Russia an opportunity to increase its influence in these parts of the world. In 2012, Russian PMSCs were reportedly operating in two countries. Their presence increased to 27 by late 2021.<sup>21</sup> In 2014, Russia employed Wagner for the successful annexation of Crimea thereby gaining necessary experience to employ PMSCs to further its geopolitical objectives. Over time, Russian PMSCs were operating in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and other regions—including countries such as Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Madagascar and Venezuela, increasing Russian economic, geopolitical, and military footprints around the globe. The Wagner Group specifically reportedly operated in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria, and by 2018 in Sudan, the Central African Republic, and perhaps Libya.<sup>22</sup>

## Command and Control Structure

There is opacity surrounding the group, hence very limited information is available about its C2 structure. *The Jamestown Foundation* study of 2019 throws some light

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<sup>19</sup> Molly K. Mckew, “[The Gerasimov Doctrine](#)”, *Politico Magazine*, September/October 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Nicholas Harrington, “[The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies](#)”, Center for Strategic & International Studies, September 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Jared Thompson, “[The Wagner Group has its Eyes on Mali: A New Front in Russia’s Irregular Strategy](#)”, no. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Kimberly Marten, “[Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military](#)”, PONARS-Eurasia Policy Memo 561, 4 January 2019.

on the group's C2 structure.<sup>23</sup> During 2016-17, the group had reportedly deployed over 2,000 personnel in Syria and followed a three-tiered military-like structure.

- The upper level, consisting of the commander-in-chief and a managing director;
- A middle level of command, which included an administrative group (388 personnel), a general staff (19 persons), and a control group (36 persons).
- A bottom level (approximately 1,904 men).

The study further concluded that the Wagner's structure followed the template of Russian armed forces and allowed for clear division of functions. The structure and manning system enabled the group to undertake offensive operations, as was witnessed in Ukraine and Syria, in conjunction with the Russian armed forces.

PMSCs, unlike most of the conventional militaries, do not follow the rules of engagement promulgated by the international organisations such as the UN. It has been reported the Wagner does not issue any code of conduct for its operatives<sup>24</sup> and many of its actions has earned it a fearful reputation.<sup>25</sup> Wagner members have been accused of torturing a Syrian captive with a sledgehammer, beheading him and then setting his body on fire in 2017. The following year, three Russian journalists were killed while investigating Wagner's presence in the Central African Republic. In 2022, Wagner was again accused of killing a man with a sledgehammer, over suspicion that he had ‘betrayed’ the group in Ukraine. After members of the European Parliament called for Wagner to be designated as a terrorist group, Prigozhin claimed he had sent the politicians a blood-stained sledgehammer.<sup>26</sup>

## Recruitment

In the initial days, the group was relatively selective while recruiting its members. It followed a process of recruitment wherein prospective members had to apply for a short-term contract with any of the shell companies of Wagner. Later, if found suitable, and after undergoing physical tests and background security checks, the candidate was shortlisted for training near Krasnodar in southern Russia, which is

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<sup>23</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, [“Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond”](#), The Jamestown Foundation, 18 December 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Nader Ibrahim and Ilya Barabanov, [“The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents Clues Pointing to a Shadowy Russian Army”](#), *BBC News*, 11 August 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko, [“Yevgeny Prigozhin: From Putin's Chef to Wagner Founder”](#), *BBC News*, 20 March 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



close to a Russian army base. The members were largely former military personnel and convicts drawn by the prospect of lucrative salary.<sup>27</sup>

A typical Wagner recruit, as per The Jamestown Foundation study, is a middle-aged man with a family, often an unsuccessful businessman and pending bank loans, from an economically depressed area, but with a military past who has either been unable to adjust to civilian life or is unable to deal with a challenging economic situation. The study also suggests that Wagner’s salary policies vary depending on the particular fighter/employee’s experience and level of qualifications as well as the nature/complexity of the mission.<sup>28</sup>

The field commanders at the heart of Wagner Group operations, however, are not private mercenaries who are hired on ad-hoc basis by private firms. The *BBC* report alludes to the linkage between the commanders and the Russian state since they act in full harmony with mission objectives set out by the Kremlin through its government agencies, including the Federal Security Service (FSB) and GRU. Furthermore, a core set of their members appear to share membership in branches of Russia’s elite special forces as well as the physical, psychological, and ideological conditioning that can unify an organized fighting force.<sup>29</sup>

## Wagner and Russia's Special Military Operation

On 24 February 2022, President Putin announced the launch of 'special military operation' in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region, in a move he said was aimed at protecting civilians and countering the encroaching threat of NATO. Neither Prigozhin nor Kremlin ever indicated that Wagner existed until 27 July 2022, when state-controlled media admitted that it was fighting in eastern Ukraine.<sup>30</sup>

The Wagner reportedly downgraded its recruiting standards for the 'special military operation'. As many as 50,000 prisoners were recruited on a promise of amnesty if they survived for six months of war fighting. Later, according to UK intelligence, the group even reportedly recruited convicts suffering from diseases including HIV and Hepatitis C. Those suffering from diseases were deployed with coloured bracelets

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<sup>27</sup> Nader Ibrahim and Ilya Barabanov, [“The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents Clues Pointing to a Shadowy Russian Army”](#), no. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, [“Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond”](#), no. 24.

<sup>29</sup> Candace Rondeaux and Ben Dalton, [“Putin’s Stealth Mobilization”](#), no. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Vitaly Shevchenko, [“Yevgeny Prigozhin: From Putin's Chef to Wagner Founder”](#), no. 26.



marking their illnesses, suggestive of an approach which prioritizes numbers over experience or quality.<sup>31</sup>

The Wagner appears to have a medieval approach to war fighting. It does not accept retreat or surrender. In another video released in November 2022, one of the prisoners traded back in a prisoner exchange was murdered on camera.<sup>32</sup> The Wagner's treatment of its members as expendable resource can be partly explained in its recruitment policy and its terms of engagement for 'special military operation' which is very different from any regular military.

## Battle for Bakhmut

The battle for Bakhmut defies military logic and provides an insight into how decision makers tend to view grey zone forces when the war is not progressing as per plans. The town has little to no strategic significance. It is a battle where both Russians and Ukrainians have lost tens of thousands of soldiers and gains are being measured in yards. In this meat grinder<sup>33</sup> battle, the Wagner has proved both useful and wasteful, for the losses it has sustained. The Wagner has employed convicts with minimal training against some of the best combat battalions fielded by Ukraine.

These units have been kitted with legacy equipment and provided limited fire support. In most cases, Wagner soldiers are expected to advance to a designated target and withdrawal is not accepted.<sup>34</sup> Prigozhin has reportedly accepted that Wagner's task was not to capture Bakhmut but to grind down the Ukrainian military. The skewed casualty ratio in favour of Ukraine is accepted to be working to Moscow's advantage.<sup>35</sup> The reported Russian strategy to exhaust Ukrainians forces in Bakhmut, despite large number of casualties to poorly trained convicts, is being considered to have worked to a large extent.

The Russian armed forces are known for great tolerance for casualties, but the tolerance for Wagner casualties is high even by Russian standards. There are reports to suggest that Wagner has been employed for missions in face of near certain death, employing human wave tactics against well defended posts. The Wagner units

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<sup>31</sup> Mallika Soni, [“Vladimir Putin's 'Private Army' Recruiting Convicts ‘with HIV, Hepatitis’”](#), *Hindustan Times*, 31 October 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, [“Wagner Chief's Feud With Russian Military Cracks Putin's Image Control”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 May 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Filipp Lebedev and Felix Light, [“Wagner's Convicts Tell of Horrors of Ukraine War and Loyalty to their Leader”](#), *Reuters*, 16 March 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Sergio Miller, [“The Battle for Bakhmut – Wagner Trench Warfare Tactics”](#), *Wavell Room*, 15 December 2022.

<sup>35</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, [“Wagner Chief's Feud With Russian Military Cracks Putin's Image Control”](#), no. 33.

manned by convicts have been employed in a manner and for tasks which regular military units are not expected to be employed.<sup>36</sup>

By the third week of January 2023, the fight for Soledar, part of the Battle for Bakhmut, was over. It was a major victory for the Russians after many months, sending pro-war media and state propaganda into a euphoric outburst. The victory at Soledar was largely the result of relentless human wave attacks exhausting Ukrainian defenses, as well as some heavy fighting by Russia's elite VDV airborne units, which were redeployed to the area.

## Growing Schism between Wagner and Defence Ministry

The Wagner was attempting to break through Ukrainian defenses at Bakhmut since at least August 2022. So, when the Russians captured Soledar, Prigozhin attempted to claim credit for his group suggesting that regular Russian forces were not involved in the battle for Soledar. The claims and counter claims for credit for capture of Soledar was a precursor to a very public acrimony between the Wagner and the Russian defence ministry.<sup>37</sup> Things came to a head on 5 May 2023 when Prigozhin released multiple expletive-ridden videos announcing that Wagner would withdraw from Bakhmut front on 10 May, because in the absence of ammunition, they're doomed to perish senselessly. He blamed Defence Minister Shoigu and General Gerasimov, the Chief of General Staff, for the deaths and injuries of tens of thousands of Russian soldiers.<sup>38</sup>

## Prognosis

Prigozhin has become an indispensable tool of hybrid warfare for the Russian state. He has publicly complained that the Russian Ministry of Defense has failed in the war effort, and that Wagner has been deliberately starved of ammunition and equipment leading to high casualties. There are reports which suggest that Prigozhin may be seeking greater political authority and is driven by greed to secure the spoils of war. Following the release of Prigozhin's Bakhmut video, General Sergey Surovikin,

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<sup>36</sup> Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, George Barros, Nicole Wolkov and Frederick W Kagan, [“Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment”](#), Institute for the Study of War, 9 February 2023.

<sup>37</sup> [“What is Russia’s Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?”](#), *BBC News*, 23 January 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Pjotr Sauer, [“Wagner Chief Rages at Russia’s Generals and Threatens Bakhmut Pullout”](#), *The Guardian*, 5 May 2023.

has been assigned to oversee provision of ammunition and resources to Wagner, a testament to the continued support for the group within the Kremlin.<sup>39</sup>

Prigozhin has been a vocal critique of defence ministry, saying things which could have landed others in prison or much worse.<sup>40</sup> This led many to speculate that he must be doing so with the tacit concurrence of President Putin, with whom he has cultivated a long relationship.<sup>41</sup> There are scholars who are of the opinion that Wagner's utility also lies in it being a counterbalancing force to the military, especially when the military's operations are not progressing well. Yet, for all his proven utility, Prigozhin seems to lack a formal status and is unlikely to have direct access to the President. For this he seems to rely on President's close friends and intermediaries.

The Wagner, for the moment, continues to prove its usefulness in the ongoing war in Ukraine. On 20 May, it claimed to have captured Bakhmut, receiving a message of praise from Putin.<sup>42</sup> Prigozhin's open defiance of the Defence Minister and the Chief of Staff has led many to speculate that he has amassed much influence through Wagner's military exploits and could also possibly challenge Putin someday. However, strong, authoritarian leaders do not suffer competition and Putin is no exception. The Wagner boss could even be offered a lucrative government appointment.<sup>43</sup> Prigozhin has spoken about transforming the group into an army based on ideology and recruiting members from schools and sports clubs. It is also unlikely that Russia's foreign policy objectives in Africa and rest of the world would change anytime soon. Given the above, it is quite possible Wagner may reinvent itself, but within limits set by the Russian state.

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<sup>39</sup> Natasha Bertrand, Oren Liebermann and Alex Marquardt, [“Russian Artillery Fire Down Nearly 75%, US Officials Say, in Latest Sign of Struggles for Moscow”](#), *CNN*, 10 January 2023.

<sup>40</sup> Anton Gerashchemko, “Prigozhin Calls for Rebellion”, Twitter, 13 May 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell MacDiarmid, [“The Week that Putin Lost Control of his Mercenary Chief”](#), *The Telegraph*, 14 May 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Darya Tarasova, Sugam Pokharel, Thom Poole and Rob Picheta, [“Russia’s Wagner Claims to Have Captured Bakhmut but Ukraine Says it Still Controls a Part of it”](#), *CNN*, 21 May 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Candace Rondeaux, [“The Higher Wagner’s Notorious Boss Rises, the Harder He May Fall”](#), *CNN*, 27 February 2023.

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