

GUEST ESSAY

Putin Created a Beast, and Now He Has No Idea How to Rein It In

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For years, Yevgeny Prigozhin's sprawling private army has quietly acted as a proxy for Russian foreign policy. The Wagner force's network of thousands of Russian mercenaries installed in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa has helped the Kremlin secure natural resources and project influence in failed states and conflict zones while allowing President Vladimir Putin of Russia to conveniently distance himself from the group's unsavory alliances and ruthless tactics.

In Syria and Libya, Wagner fighters prop up strongmen like Bashar al-Assad and Khalifa Haftar in exchange for profits accrued from the oil and gas installations the mercenaries help protect. In Madagascar and Sudan, Wagner has advised governments on stamping out protests, started disinformation campaigns and meddled in elections. In Mali and the Central African Republic, military juntas rely on Wagner for regime security while Wagner extracts gold, diamonds and timber and wages counterinsurgency campaigns against jihadist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

But Mr. Prigozhin's failed mutiny exposed Russia's dysfunctional dependence on Wagner and other private military companies, raising questions about the future of Russian global influence. The upheaval has sent the Kremlin scrambling to position the Russian state to maintain Wagner's far-flung influence and cash flow — and trying to dispel Mr. Putin's own notion that Mr. Prigozhin's army was an autonomous entity at all. Days after the doomed uprising, Mr. Putin proclaimed that Wagner was entirely funded by the Russian state, to the tune of billions of dollars.

With Mr. Prigozhin now reportedly in exile in Belarus, Mr. Putin faces a few choices for how to deal with thousands of Wagner mercenaries scattered around the world.

None are likely to play out well for Russia.

In a speech to the nation early last week, Mr. Putin said that Wagner fighters who did not participate in the coup attempt were free to sign a contract with the Russian military under the command of the Ministry of Defense. (Those who did participate could join Mr. Prigozhin in Belarusian exile.) But the mandate for Wagner mercenaries to sign a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defense — a policy Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu tried to put in place in early June — was one of the primary factors contributing to Mr. Prigozhin's mutiny attempt and isn't likely to be a popular choice for his troops.

Even if Wagner fighters do decide to join Russian military units en masse, it won't be easy for Moscow to integrate them. Wagner forces already have a well-deserved reputation for brutality, are alleged to have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in several theaters and have been credibly accused of torture, kidnapping and executing civilians.

Another option would be for Mr. Putin to leave Wagner's overseas operations as is and install a new leader to replace Mr. Prigozhin. That would avoid disrupting Moscow's foreign policy agenda and reassure its client states that Russia remains a reliable partner. Wagner's African footprint is vast, with ongoing activities in Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya. When asked immediately after the failed uprising what would happen to Wagner's presence in Africa, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, announced that Russian "instructors" would continue working in Mali and the Central African Republic. Russia has since dispatched officials to various spots where Wagner operates to reassure those governments, including Syria and Mali, that there will be no disruption in Russian assistance.

But that, too, could get messy, depending on how deep the rift between Wagner and the Ministry of Defense runs. If Wagner's midlevel commanders and foot soldiers remain loyal to Mr. Prigozhin, installing a new figurehead with the Kremlin's imprimatur may not work. Mr. Prigozhin was revered by Wagner fighters, many of whom may chafe at the prospect of new leadership or a drastic change in organizational culture.

Finally, Russia could seek to disband Wagner and disperse its fighters into existing private armies. Patriot, a group linked to Mr. Shoigu, is widely viewed as a significant competitor to Wagner, with reported operations in Burundi, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Syria and Yemen. The E.N.O.T. Corporation is another Russian private military company, founded by the Russian nationalist Igor Mangushev, with some experience abroad, but it is much less influential and experienced than Wagner. Gazprom, the Russian energy giant, has also developed its own private army, although it is designed mainly to protect oil and gas infrastructure against attacks.

None of these other Russian groups have the cachet of Wagner among Russian nationalists or citizens in favor of the war in Ukraine nor the portfolio of capabilities that make Wagner indispensable to the Kremlin in carrying out a wide range of foreign policy activities.

Kremlinologists are jostling to predict which path Mr. Putin will choose, with conflicting signals emanating from Russian leadership in recent days. The Russian government's reassurance to leaders in Africa and the Middle East that Moscow would manage Wagner's infrastructure seems at odds with a broader liquidation that the Kremlin has been conducting over the past few days.

Amid the murky messaging, this much is clear: For a leader who has worked assiduously to cultivate an image as a master strategist, Mr. Putin does not appear to have a plan for what comes next with Wagner. Instead, he looks increasingly vulnerable, both at home and in his effort to maintain Russia's influence abroad. He will almost certainly struggle to rein in the beast he helped create.

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