

# Inside the stunning growth of Russia's Wagner Group

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## Special Report

Exclusive U.S. diplomatic cables and internal documents detail the expansion of the paramilitary force and global network led by a top Putin ally.

# POLITICO



Yevgeny Prigozhin, right, shows Russian President Vladimir Putin around his factory which produces school meals, outside St. Petersburg, Russia, on Sept. 20, 2010. | Pool photo by Alexei Druzhinin

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American and European allies are mobilizing to thwart the rapid expansion of the Russian paramilitary group known as Wagner, run by a Putin-affiliated oligarch, as it captures key cities for Moscow in Ukraine and spreads its influence to Africa and other corners of the world.

With tens of thousands of fighters, many of them now battlefield-trained, the Wagner Group's emergence as a rogue military threat could become a serious global challenge in years to come, U.S. and European officials said.



Top: Visitors stand at the entrance of the PMC Wagner Centre during the official opening of the office block during National Unity Day, in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Nov. 4, 2022.

Bottom: Visitors examine an unmanned aerial vehicle in the PMC Wagner Centre. | Dmitri

Wagner's stepped-up activities in Africa, where its trained fighters perform key security functions for regimes in Sudan, the Central African Republic and other countries, are detailed in a series of U.S. government cables and documents from the internal network of the group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, which were obtained by POLITICO and verified by outside experts.

The increasing power of Prigozhin in the shrinking inner circle of Russian President Vladimir Putin, which is also detailed in the cables and documents, is prompting Western governments to take steps to stave off a threat they calculate could potentially inflict wide-ranging national security and foreign policy consequences in the years to come.

Diplomats from the U.S., Europe and Africa have met behind closed doors in capitals across the world, including Bangui, Kigali, Brussels, Washington, Kyiv, London and Lisbon, to discuss ways to limit Wagner's footprint. The officials even drafted and circulated a strategic roadmap to rout the group out of the Central African Republic, where it has sent soldiers to take control of a once-artisanal gold mine and turned it into a sprawling complex, according to the cables. U.S. officials are also debating whether to designate Wagner as an international terrorist organization.

Meanwhile, since Russia began targeting Ukraine, Wagner has recruited thousands of new troops to join its ranks on the battlefield, allowing the group to clinch military victories in the Donbas region, including the city of Soledar.

Prigozhin, who had previously denied any affiliation with the group, last year publicly acknowledged his connection. He is often seen in propaganda-style videos and social media posts from the front lines in Ukraine, pitching his forces as the heroes and leaders of the war while simultaneously mocking Western sanctions.

Wagner is just one piece linked to Prigozhin's larger sphere of influence. Some of the operations linked to a network of Prigozhin-affiliated companies have been previously reported — Prigozhin has even admitted publicly to interfering in foreign countries' elections. He's been connected to a Russian troll farm singled out by the U.S. for attempting to interfere in American elections. And he recently admitted to leading and funding that troll farm known as the Internet Research Agency. The group's presence and operations in Africa, too, has also been tracked by international human rights organizations.

But a monthslong investigation by POLITICO revealed exclusive new details about how Prigozhin's network, which includes Wagner, has grown into a far-reaching international military and political influence operation. The probe also uncovered previously unreported details of how the U.S. and its allies are seeking to blunt Wagner's expansion and influence, particularly in Africa.



“Prigozhin has been a criminal for a very long time. The nature of his activities hasn’t really changed that much. It’s just that they’ve grown,” one U.S. official said. “And really, they’ve grown in Ukraine, more than anything else.”

Officials said Wagner’s expanded footprint attests to the growing ambitions of Prigozhin — whom the U.S. and Europe believe helped to orchestrate events that have resulted in vast human rights violations such as the targeting of civilians and forced displacement of people in Africa, including in the Central African Republic.

“Wagner is this relatively unique arm of the Kremlin. Putin uses him as one of his tools in Africa and around the world,” a second U.S. official said. “So, there are concerns in our Africa policy. But for us, this is also a problem about how Russia blurs the line between covert action and military action and political influence.”



Wagner Group head Yevgeny Prigozhin attends the funeral of Dmitry Menshikov, a fighter of the Wagner group who died in Ukraine, at the Beloostrovskoye cemetery outside St. Petersburg, Russia, on Dec. 24, 2022. | AP Photo

Among POLITICO’s findings:

This report is based in part on U.S. government cables obtained by POLITICO that focus directly on Wagner. It is also based on internal documents and memos, written in Russian, from the Prigozhin network accessed via an international journalism collaboration with outlets in the U.S. and Europe. The German news outlet WELT first obtained the documents

and shared them with other media organizations, including those owned by Axel Springer, which also owns POLITICO.

The documents and cables corroborate previously published reporting and research on companies affiliated with Prigozhin's network, including those that engage in disinformation work. They also provide unprecedented insight into how one of the world's leading paramilitary groups, Wagner, functions on a day-to-day basis, including how it disciplines its fighters, prioritizes projects and decides when to spend money, along with the extent of its connections with top government officials across the world.

The documents span eight years, from 2014 to 2021, and appear to be connected to a vast global network of entities linked to Prigozhin, including Wagner.

“The thing to understand about Yevgeny Prigozhin is that his empire of influence is large but it's not entirely of his own making,” said Candace Rondeaux, director of Future Frontlines at New America, a think tank based in Washington. “It's multi-faceted, there are troll farms, there is the Wagner Group, there are shell companies, there are movie productions. This is not your standard military general.”



Visitors stand at the entrance of the PMC Wagner Centre during the official opening of the office block on the National Unity Day, in Saint Petersburg, Russia, on Nov. 4, 2022. | Olga Maltseva/AFP, via Getty Images

POLITICO and its partners engaged outside experts, including two research organizations — Recorded Future and C4ADS — to try and corroborate the data contained within the Prigozhin network’s documents. POLITICO also engaged other researchers and academics to review them.

“From what we’ve reviewed ... if these documents were inauthentic, it would require a substantial amount of effort to build a database like this or a data set like this,” said Brian Liston, a senior threat intelligence analyst at Recorded Future. “It would be the most elaborate set of fakes that I have ever seen. We believe that what we’ve viewed is authentic.”

Liston said the documents do not appear to represent “a complete dataset.”

“There’s missing data. [The documents] give us a great picture of the insides of Wagner and Prigozhin ... but there’s things in there that we would have expected to see that we have not yet seen, or are part of maybe another set or somewhere else,” he said. “And we don’t know what that intent is or why that is.”

Allen Maggard, an analyst for C4ADS who looked at a subset of the documents, said the data contained within them are difficult to corroborate because of the limited open-source financial information available on Prigozhin’s network.

Still, Maggard said he identified matches within C4ADS’ holdings of open-source data, allowing him to corroborate some of the information within the documents.

“The organization ... is seemingly revealed in these documents to be more reliant on the Russian Ministry of Defense for logistics than one would expect,” Maggard said in the statement. “The documents also seem to paint a picture of an entity that is keenly attentive to its appearances in media citations. This aligns with a conclusion that a growing number of researchers have come to — that Wagner has become, in practice, a PR outfit with a paramilitary arm, rather than the other way around.”

Maggard and other experts noted that it is difficult to prove the legitimacy of all the data contained within the entire tranche of documents because of the opaque nature of how Prigozhin’s network operates. For example, the corporate structure of its affiliated companies is not transparent.

The documents cited in this report are only those that POLITICO was able to independently verify and receive further corroboration through interviews with experts and officials.

POLITICO spoke with dozens of current and former U.S. and European officials to discuss Wagner’s activities. Almost all were granted anonymity to discuss sensitive national security matters.





National Security Council Coordinator John Kirby speaks as a picture shows Russian rail cars in North Korea during a White House daily news briefing on Jan. 20, 2023. | Alex Wong/Getty Images

U.S. and European intelligence agencies declined to comment on the documents. The U.S. National Security Council declined to comment. A spokesperson for the European Commission, Peter Stano, said Wagner “constitutes a threat” for the European Union and for all the countries where the group operates.

“The Wagner Group has recruited, trained and sent private military operatives to conflict zones around the world to fuel violence, loot natural resources and intimidate civilians in violation of international law,” he said.

A representative for Prigozhin did not respond to POLITICO’s detailed questions.

“We have answered these questions many times,” the person said. “It’s embarrassing to say the same thing every time.”

## A growing network

Born in Leningrad, the 61-year-old Prigozhin spent nine years in Soviet prisons for robbery, fraud and other crimes before earning a fortune in the newly independent Russia as a caterer, including for Putin.



Prigozhin initially publicly denied playing any role in the creation of the Wagner Group as it came onto the radar screen of international intelligence organizations, especially during Russia's efforts to prop up regimes with notoriously egregious human rights records. But last year Prigozhin publicly acknowledged forming the group in 2014 to protect Russian interests in the Donbas region of Ukraine.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine early last year prompted an immediate acceleration of the group's recruitment efforts, scope of activities and influence within Putin's inner circle, according to the cables.

Over the past nine months, the U.S. and European officials said they have been surprised by the extent to which Russia is utilizing the group on the ground to serve alongside Russian army troops, and have moved to try and prevent the same scenario playing out in other countries across the world. The U.S. and Europe have each levied harsh new sanctions in an attempt to limit the group's access to weapons and blunt its progress in Ukraine.

One U.S. government cable obtained by POLITICO underscores the U.S. concern about Wagner and Prigozhin, saying he has gained "newfound prominence."



Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin is shown prior to a meeting of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping in the Kremlin in Moscow, Russia. | Pool photo by Sergei Ilnitsky

“Prigozhin has become a leading voice seeking a wider escalation of the Ukraine war,” the cable reads, adding that the Wagner leader has “leveraged his role as a warlord to increase his access and influence with Putin and to gain financially from the war.”

In an interview, a senior European official made a similar point.

“Not only is Wagner fighting [along] with the Russians, Prigozhin is forcing the Russian Defense Ministry to recognize [the group]. This is a totally new thing,” said the official, who previously dealt with the group in Mali. “They have clearly gained militaristic strength but also political stature. We would have never thought that they would become such a huge player. The fact that he [Putin] now recognizes crazy people basically – criminals, basically – is a change.”

In Ukraine, the Wagner Group has brought on tens of thousands of prisoners from Russia to fight on the frontlines to help Moscow boost its offensive in the Eastern part of the country, especially in the city of Bakhmut.

“They just keep coming. It’s like they have nothing to lose,” an adviser to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense said in an interview in January.



A poster displaying a Russian soldier with a slogan reading ‘Glory to the Heroes of Russia’ decorates a street near the PMC Wagner Centre in Saint Petersburg, on Nov. 4, 2022 | Olga Maltseva/AFP, via Getty Images

The documents reviewed by POLITICO offer fresh perspective on how the Wagner group recruits heavily from poorer neighborhoods in Russia and then seeks to instill discipline in the ranks. For example, Wagner punishes its fighters for using social media, storing photos from sensitive missions on their phones, stealing money and engaging in drug or alcohol abuse. Its leaders also surveil employees' phones and even give out polygraph tests to investigate potential wrongdoing.

In one widely-reported incident from 2017, Wagner fighters were caught filming and posting a video of beheading a prisoner in Syria. The victim's family sued Wagner after the publishing of the video.

Documents and memos reviewed by POLITICO and corroborated by experts confirm that the incident included at least five Wagner fighters from the 4th assault battalion in Homs. The documents and memos also detail an extensive internal investigation with polygraph tests to identify who filmed the incident and how the video leaked to the public.

Despite the chaos inside parts of his ranks, Prigozhin has continued to expand his global empire. Over the last five years, he has sent new recruits to countries in Africa and the Middle East to beef up Wagner's operations. His network has also tried to establish new offices and operations in countries with historically strong ties to the West, according to the documents.

In 2020, people linked to Prigozhin's network tried to open an office in Mexico but the Covid pandemic appeared to delay or sidetrack that plan. The group also tried to carry out influence operations in Estonia in an attempt to stir Euroskepticism and distrust toward NATO, according to documents. And in the last two years, Wagner fighters have popped up in African countries such as the Central African Republic, Ghana and Burkina Faso.





Honor guards escort the coffin of Alexei Nogin, who was killed in combat in Ukraine, during a mourning ceremony, in Volgograd, Russia, on Sept. 24, 2022. | AP Photo

U.S. officials are also concerned about Wagner’s potential influence in places like Kosovo, according to a U.S. cable obtained by POLITICO, and they’ve received reports that Wagner troops are in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, though local officials there have denied their presence.

To support the group’s expansion, Wagner has purchased and dispatched vehicles, ammunition and weapons to its forces, finding ways to secure arms and ship them internationally despite Western sanctions.

Several of the documents show how Prigozhin’s companies can procure supplies for its forces on the open market despite Western governments cracking down.

Documents appear to include extensive financial and inventory information — details on how Prigozhin’s network purchased and shipped items to support its efforts across the globe. One document includes a long list of vehicles. Experts who studied it pinpointed several of the cars listed in open-source trade and customs data and traced one of them back to a Mitsubishi dealership in the Netherlands.

The U.S. and Europe have in recent weeks levied fresh sanctions on Wagner and affiliated Prigozhin corporations to try to blunt the group’s ability to purchase new weapons and equipment for its operations in Ukraine. The U.S. has levied similar financial punishments

on companies linked to Prigozhin and Wagner's work in Africa. The sanctions levied in the past several years have targeted Prigozhin directly, his businesses as well as his associates. The Treasury Department blacklisted Prigozhin. The U.S. also moved to block his companies from acquiring new business and to make it more difficult for them to operate across the world.

The most recent set of financial punishments added on to those existing sanctions. The Biden administration also moved to classify Wagner, which was previously blacklisted by the U.S. in 2017, as a transnational criminal organization. It sanctioned several of its offshoots in an attempt to make it more difficult for the group to acquire resources that would help it gain ground on the battlefield in Ukraine.

“They threaten stability, they undermine good governance, they rob countries of mineral wealth, they violate human rights,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said of the Wagner group in January during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington.

## **The Moscow connection**

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Prigozhin appears to have been emboldened by the war in Ukraine, experts said.

His posture changed when his fighters began making advances on the battlefield. In September 2022, via a statement through his catering company, Prigozhin admitted to founding the group in 2014.

Still, details about how the group is funded — and who calls the shots inside the organization — are scant. That's partly because the group is known to use shell corporations and cutouts to do business in defiance of Western sanctions. For example, it relies on a Madagascar-registered company known as Midas Resources to do mining business in CAR, according to one of the U.S. cables obtained by POLITICO.

Experts have for years hypothesized that the group receives significant funding from the Russian state, supplementing that money with profits from security and mining contracts from governments who do not adhere to the sanctions.

Wagner's main headquarters is located in Molmino, Russia, in the form of a base that the group shares with the 10th Separate Special Purpose Brigade of Russia's GRU, the country's foreign military intelligence agency.

Despite the obvious public connections between Wagner and the Russian state, however, the Kremlin has not acknowledged its ties to Wagner and there are few reliable reports on whether and how money from Moscow flows into the group's coffers.

Other journalists and researchers have identified instances in which Wagner operatives have coordinated with the Russian intelligence services. And several of the documents reviewed by POLITICO corroborate that relationship.

The documents show the group is directly linked to the Russian state — that it communicates and strategizes with senior Russian officials on some of its most sensitive operations. For example, several of the documents point to close coordination between the Federal Security Service, also known as the FSB in Russia, and Wagner in countries such as Syria.



A member of Ukraine’s military looks away as a BM-21 “Grad” MLRS 122mm rocket launcher fires on the outskirts of Soledar, Ukraine, on Jan. 11, 2023. | Arman Soldin/AFP, via Getty Images

Wagner employees also deal directly with senior Russian officials from across the government.

“I think it’s always been clear that Wagner is acting as a parastatal arm of the Russian government,” said Michael van Landingham, a former Russia analyst for the CIA. “[They’re] deployed where the Russian government may not have the resources or may not see a direct interest but they can do it through Wagner.”

Officials in the UK House of Commons foreign affairs committee recently highlighted Wagner and Prigozhin’s connections to the Russian state in an October 2022 inquiry.



“Wagner Group shifts almost seamlessly between being an out-and-out proxy of the Kremlin, and an essentially commercial organization driven by the search for profit,” according to the official findings of the probe. “This not only makes it often difficult to grasp its motivations in any one theater, it also highlights the challenges of dealing with regimes in which the boundaries between the private and the public are both porous and mobile.”

U.S. officials, too, have linked Prigozhin’s work to the Kremlin. They believe Prigozhin’s recruitment of prisoners for the war in Ukraine — though unlawful — is supported by authorities in Moscow, according to one of the cables obtained by POLITICO.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov talk during a meeting in Moscow, on Dec. 21, 2021. | Pool Photo from Sputnik, Kremlin

Despite these clear linkages, the question for researchers and academics who study Wagner — even intelligence officials — has been the extent to which Wagner receives funds from the Russian state, even if indirectly through shell corporations. One document reviewed by POLITICO, which experts have also studied, appears to show a financial link.

In a letter to Sergei Shoigu, the Russian minister of defense, Prigozhin writes that the Kremlin in 2015 put out a broad directive to purchase eight cargo ships for the ministry. Prigozhin said in his letter that four separate businesses — businesses linked to his empire and registered as limited liability corporations — purchased the vessels and shipped them through the Port of Novorossiysk. Prigozhin asked Shoigu for help with customs fees.

The experts could not confirm the transfer of the ships in part because, in the past, Prigozhin has moved to hide the companies' registrations from official international customs and trade offices. But the experts ran the corporations mentioned in the letter through open-source trade and customs databases, confirming that at least one appears to be linked to Prigozhin and has been used to transfer his assets in the past.

"Trade data possessed by C4ADS indicates that the company named in the letter was also the receiver of a private jet shipped from a Seychelles-based company," C4ADS said in a statement. "Notably, the identifying information listed for that private jet is a match for the one that U.S. authorities believe belongs to Prigozhin."

The Russian government did not respond to a request for comment.

Despite the connection between Wagner, Prigozhin's network and units within the Russian government, Prigozhin also has a history of public fights with the Kremlin, particularly with the Ministry of Defense. Officials and experts said tensions appear to have grown more intense in recent months with Prigozhin's frequent media appearances from the frontlines in Ukraine and his troops' taking over key battlefield operations in Bakhmut, among other cities.

Following Russia's capture of the strategic town of Soledar, Prigozhin boasted about Wagner's success while downplaying the defense ministry's role in the victory.

"I want to emphasize that no units other than the Wagner fighters took part in the assault on Soledar," Prigozhin said in a statement through his press service.

In further proof of the ongoing squabble between Wagner and the ministry of defense, a leaked video published on social media in December shows Wagner fighters criticizing the Russian defense office, calling the chief of staff a "piece of shit" and demanding more shipments of ammunition.

The media attention on Wagner has only further fueled speculation that Prigozhin is angling for a political position inside the Russian government — one that would give him direct access to public funds and solidify his group's role, experts said.

"Prigozhin has political ambitions. He doesn't just want to stay as an oligarch or wealthy man. His political ambitions are growing," said Sergey Sukhankin, a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation, a conservative think tank based in Washington. "The Russian authorities and political elite are recognizing that Wagner is here and Prigozhin has political ambitions they have to deal with."

## **Paying to cheerlead for Putin**

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Yevgeny Prigozhin, top, serves food to then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at Prigozhin's restaurant outside Moscow, Russia, on Nov. 11, 2011. | AP Photo

Prigozhin's network's connection to the Russian state is further solidified by the work it carries out domestically to support Putin and other top Russian officials, including through media and disinformation campaigns, according to the documents.

He has for years been accused of meddling in foreign elections, including U.S. elections, and launching disinformation campaigns across the globe. Prigozhin's network uses the same tactics domestically.

Prigozhin is affiliated with a set of online news outlets — a conglomerate known as the Patriot Media Group — and pays for journalists to write articles that both promote anti-Western sentiment and support select candidates, according to the documents and experts.

POLITICO reviewed a series of financial plans and memos about how operatives linked to Prigozhin's disinformation activities planned, financed and carried out an operation to sway coverage of the 2018 Russian presidential election. Although Prigozhin's network's influence efforts are well known, the documents reveal new details about exactly how it planned its



domestic campaigns, who it paid and the extent to which it guides journalists' coverage. The messaging and methods contained in the papers broadly align with how Prigozhin's trolls operate abroad, experts said.

Between March 17 and 19 of 2018, Prigozhin's operatives tapped seven news outlets under the Patriot Media Group to plant stories to bolster Putin's image and promote anti-Western sentiment, the documents show.

One document included a list of instructions that pushed reporters to write about the legitimacy of Russia's 2018 elections despite credible public claims of election fraud and ballot stuffing. It also asked journalists to refrain from writing about problems at polling stations and to speak with celebrities, athletes and other public figures to back up their claims.

At the time, Russian authorities were concerned about opposition politician Alexei Navalny's momentum: Although he was denied the right to run as a candidate, Navalny went on a Russia tour and called for citizens to boycott the elections altogether.

By day three of the election, the outlets covered Putin's claim of victory and accused Navalny of attempting to manipulate the vote. The Prigozhin network's operatives directed the media organizations to use "experts" to back up the claim that Putin "did a lot for his country and its citizens," according to one of the documents.

Experts studied the documents and cross-checked their contents — including the instruction list — with open-source networks. The orders appear to have been carried out by at least one of the outlets under Prigozhin's media empire, experts said.

Politexpert, one of the outlets in the Patriot Media Group, published stories in line with Wagner's demands, including "Expert explains emergence of myths about forced voting." Another piece focused on how Navalny's team "used methods to manipulate consciousness." The URLs now return 404 errors, suggesting the articles were deleted or moved to hidden corners of the internet. The outlet also published a story following the initial results of the election that quoted the then- speaker of the Russian Duma as saying he had "no doubts" about the legitimacy of the election.

## **Worldwide propaganda webs**

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The building for the the Internet Research Agency, known as the “troll farm,” is shown in St. Petersburg, Russia, on Feb. 17, 2018. | Naira Davlashyan/AP Photo

Prigozhin’s network also carries out disinformation campaigns across the world in an effort to promote Russian geopolitical interests and spread anti-Western sentiment.

The former caterer has long been linked to a troll farm — the Internet Research Agency — known for repeatedly trying to interfere in U.S. elections. The agency was the subject of an investigation by the Department of Justice and a focal point of Robert Mueller’s special probe into the 2016 presidential race. The U.S. announced an eight-count indictment of Concord Management and Consulting, Prigozhin’s firm, for the meddling in the election but eventually dropped the charges.

Despite the charges and investigations, Prigozhin has ramped up efforts to try and interfere in Western political systems, including U.S. elections, in part by setting up troll farms outside of Russia in places like Ghana and Nigeria, according to the documents reviewed by POLITICO and interviews with Western officials. The Russian oligarch himself recently bragged about meddling in the 2022 American midterms.

“Gentlemen, we interfered, we are interfering and we will interfere,” Prigozhin wrote on his Telegram channel. “Carefully, precisely, surgically and in our own way.”

Some of Prigozhin’s influence operations appear to fall under a project dubbed “Magadan,” according to documents reviewed by POLITICO.

Several of those documents include salary information for Prigozhin's employees to carry out wide-ranging influence operations for the Magadan project. Experts who reviewed the documents confirmed the identities of several of the individuals listed on the payroll, including Mira Terada, the head of a group known as the Foundation for the Fight Against Repression. The organization is linked to Prigozhin and is known for disseminating Russian propaganda. Canada recently levied sanctions against it.

The foundation acknowledged in a statement to POLITICO that Terada works as the head of the organization but that she did not know anything about the Magadan project. The statement also said the foundation's mission is to influence public opinion in the West and in Russia.

"We want as many people as possible to know about police lawlessness in the US, France and Britain, about monstrous violence and labor exploitation of the prisoners in Western countries and about war crimes committed by NATO," the statement, which was originally sent in Russian, said.

The scope of the Magadan project is not clear, experts who reviewed documents with POLITICO said. But it appears the group has also tried to launch newly designed influence campaigns in Europe, Mexico and parts of Africa.

For example, the Prigozhin network tried to interfere in the political system in Estonia, according to a strategy memo reviewed by POLITICO and corroborated by experts using open-source information.

The small Baltic country is particularly wary of its larger eastern neighbor meddling in domestic politics. Estonia shares a border with Russia and about a quarter of the country's total population identifies as a member of the Russian minority.



Estonian Conservative People's Party Chair Mart Helme speaks at the headquarters after parliamentary elections in Tallinn, Estonia, on March 4, 2019. | Tanel Meos/AP Photo

Prigozhin's operatives schemed to support the far-right Eurosceptic EKRE party ahead of the country's 2019 European Parliament elections, according to one of the documents.

"The cooperation started because EKRE wanted to be radically against the liberal parties, and they were happy to receive this very professionally prepared package," said Viljar Veebel, a researcher at the Baltic Defense College.

To do so, the operatives planned to peddle some of the Kremlin's favorite anti-Western narratives like "problems in Estonia because of the EU" and anti-NATO messages, along with campaigns against then-President Kersti Kaljulaid and the liberal Reform Party's leader at the time, Kaja Kallas, who is now prime minister.

It's unclear whether the operatives executed this specific plan before the European parliament elections in 2019 — the Facebook group names suggested in the document weren't created on the social network, according a Meta spokesperson. However, the strategy is strikingly similar in tone and themes to operations in late 2018 ahead of national parliamentary elections, experts who reviewed the documents said. The experts scoured



open-source networks and social media sites and found that Wagner set up groups on Facebook and Russian-language equivalent VKontakte to try to whip up social discord and push for the far right.

The hashtag #ESTexitEU mushroomed on social media, according to Estonian propaganda researchers at Propastop. Lewd memes and caricatures of Kaljulaid also started appearing on Facebook, the Estonian news outlet Postimees reported.

Ultimately, it's hard to measure the impact of the operation but experts said the efforts were small-scale and quickly disproven. Facebook and Twitter banned accounts associated with the network.

The EKRE party declined to comment on the campaign. The Meta spokesperson confirmed that Facebook removed the “Estoners” group in late 2018 and suspected that the operation was conducted by Prigozhin’s network.

Harrys Puusepp, who is head of bureau of the Estonian Internal Security Service, said the Wagner strategy for Estonia looked similar to previously drafted Russian propaganda projects for the country.

The real threat “[is] not about one project — the long-term effort, that is much more dangerous than any specific project,” Puusepp said. And “if we see a rise of populism in Europe, I think [Russian propagandists] understand that this might be a chance for them as well.”

Russian information operations are “a persistent threat to Estonian national security,” he said, describing attempts by the Kremlin and its backers to influence Estonia as “a regular Tuesday.”

## **The Africa problem**

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Three Russian mercenaries walk in northern Mali. | French Army via AP Photo

In the last five years, Wagner has expanded its operations to politically turbulent countries in Africa, signing contracts with governments to help quell resistance and provide security to high-level officials. From Libya to Sudan to Madagascar to the Central African Republic, the group is seeking to make inroads by building cultural hubs — complexes to host meetings and events — and establishing military bases.

Western officials and experts alike have tracked Wagner's attempts to ratchet up its work in Africa. The documents reviewed by POLITICO also highlight that expansion. Beyond the security work Wagner completes for governments, which includes the protection of sensitive natural resource extraction sites, Prigozhin's network also appears to participate in disinformation campaigns by paying people to attend protests and to write pre-approved stories in the local press.

Prigozhin's network creates a group of media outlets that are either operated by his people or willing to provide favorable coverage in exchange for financial support, the documents show. The campaigns are usually pro-Russian and anti-Western.

"A hallmark of Russian disinformation campaigns is that they are very opportunistic. If something happens that could in some way be reframed to benefit them, they will do it," said Jean le Roux, a research associate at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab

who analyzed Prigozhin's propaganda campaigns in African countries in the past. "It's right out of their playbook."

In Ghana, Prigozhin has been linked to a Russian troll farm in Accra where employees have worked on disinformation campaigns related to the U.S. elections by focusing on racial issues and dividing voters. CNN profiled the troll farm in an investigation published in 2020. The operation was run by an organization called Eliminating Barriers for the Liberation of Africa and overseen by a man named Seth Wiredu. Previous reports have identified Wiredu as the leader of the operation.

One of the documents reviewed by POLITICO appears to link Wiredu financially to Prigozhin's network. The document shows a MoneyGram transfer to Ghana from Yulia Wiredu, the wife of Seth, experts who reviewed the document confirmed. Yulia sent the transfer on March 20, 2020, just three days after her husband was arrested and arraigned on money laundering charges in Ghana.

Efforts to reach out to Wiredu and his wife were unsuccessful.



Russian mercenaries board a helicopter in northern Mali. | French Army via AP Photo

In Madagascar, a group of Prigozhin-linked operatives tried to meddle in 2018 presidential elections supporting Hery Rajaonarimampianina's reelection campaign, according to an investigation by *The New York Times* that was corroborated by Petr Korolyov, an electoral

sociologist who worked with the group in Madagascar in 2018. Eventually, Prigozhin's network realized that Rajaonarimampianina was unlikely to win and they threw their support behind his opponent and current president, Andry Rajoelina, instead.

Despite a seemingly unsuccessful campaign in Madagascar, the documents reviewed by POLITICO show that some of the same people who participated in the influence operations in the country moved on to other operations in countries including Congo, South Africa and Sudan.

One memo reviewed by POLITICO describes in detail how Prigozhin's network planned to create fake social media accounts, including on Twitter and Facebook, for activists in Sudan, including journalists.

The Prigozhin propaganda efforts are adding to Western anxieties about Wagner's presence on the continent.

U.S. officials are actively engaged in conversations with allies in Africa about limiting the group's influence, according to the cables and interviews with Western officials.

Their concern: Wagner's increasing linkages with countries in Africa present an unprecedented opportunity for Russia to forge new partnerships at a time when European forces are withdrawing. The vacuum could leave an opening for Moscow to shape diplomatic relations on the continent and push anti-Western sentiment.

"Maybe three, maybe four years ago, you started seeing reports coming out from DoD saying 'it's not working.' The sheer number of terrorist organizations particularly in the Sahel region, but all across the African continent, have really increased," said Elizabeth Shackelford, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs who served as a diplomat in Somalia. "Now it's like all of a sudden Wagner is there, Russia is there. We deeply, deeply fear that vacuum. And we fear what Russia does if they enter that vacuum."

## **Wagner gains in CAR**

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Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group stand in Bangui, Central African Republic, on May 1, 2019. | Ashley Gilbertson/The New York Times/Redux Pictures

U.S. officials are particularly concerned about Wagner’s presence in the Central African Republic, according to the U.S. cables.

“They’re really just trying to drive African governments away from the West and away from democratic values more broadly,” one of the U.S. officials said. “Pretty much the whole point is to undermine our relationships, the West’s relationships, with African governments.”

Wagner set up operations in CAR in 2017, creating a cultural center in Bangui, the capital, and forging a partnership with the central government. Since then, the paramilitary group has helped fight rebels, protect government officials and secure a key gold mine. They have also engaged in wide-scale influence operations in an attempt to sway political favor against the West and in favor of Moscow.

Prigozhin’s network carried out a range of influence campaigns between 2018 and 2021, according to several of the documents and experts that detail the group’s internal business structure. They lay out in detail how the group conducted media campaigns by organizing rallies and protests and directing coverage.

Two documents — memos — detail how the group brainstormed and organized a local media campaign that focused on creating anti-French and anti-United Nations content. The budget documents also show payments for people who organized small groups of protesters,

transportation of the protesters and even a small number of the protesters in attendance.

Experts said these types of efforts have been long-documented in the country.

“The stakes for them are high, they need to run their military operations but also to exploit natural resources. For these reasons, various propaganda and influence strategies are increasingly part of the Wagner modus operandi,” said Jelena Aparac, an independent expert with the working group on the use of mercenaries at the United Nations.

Wagner’s operations in CAR focus primarily on security. The group has partnered with the government in Bangui to train government forces and to protect high-level officials as well as key mining sites.

Representatives for CAR did not respond to requests for comment.

In 2021, the Wagner Group had at least 13 bases across the country, stretching from Bouar to Ouadda, according to several documents — including a map — as well as experts familiar with the positions of Wagner in the country. The bases vary by size and purpose, the documents show. For example, some bases were established as training centers for local troops. A [United Nations report](#) corroborates some of the information about the bases in the documents, including that at least one, Berengo, has been used to train CAR forces.

Prigozhin uses several corporations to run security operations in CAR, including Sewa Security Services. The U.S. and Europe [sanctioned the company](#) in January. One of the documents further connects Wagner to the company and includes a screenshot of the badges worn by Sewa officers in CAR.

Wagner’s connection to the CAR government has grown even stronger since France announced in 2021 its intention to withdraw its troops from the country. France deployed more than 1,000 troops to CAR to help stabilize the country following a coup in 2013.

But the last 130 French troops stationed in CAR departed in December 2022. The government in Bangui is now dependent on the Wagner forces to help maintain security, according to U.S. government cables obtained by POLITICO — an increasing point of contention between Washington and the CAR government. The cables underscore the extent to which the U.S. is worried about Wagner’s footprint in CAR and its attempt to rout the group out of the country.

U.S. diplomats based in Europe, Africa and Washington have over the last several months conducted meetings with their counterparts about Wagner’s role in CAR, including its protection of the Ndassima gold mine, located about 40 miles north of Bambari, according to the cables.

Wagner showed up at the mine in 2020 — the same year the CAR government revoked the mine's license from the Canadian firm Axmin. The group has previously been accused of summarily executing rebels and other people living in the Bambari area to push them out from their homes in order to develop the site.



Gold miners work in the Ndassima gold mine in the Eastern part of CAR, in May 2014. | Thierry Bresillon/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

One U.S. cable details how Wagner has expanded the mine's production area in the last nine months — a worrying sign for officials who see it as a potentially lucrative operation the group could use to prop up its forces in the future.

Wagner is overseeing the mine and running operations under the cover of the Madagascar-registered company, Midas Resources, according to one of the cables.

POLITICO called a representative for Midas who did not respond to questions about its affiliation with Prigozhin and asked reporters to stop contacting them.

The U.S. has assessed, based on newly captured satellite imagery and through other means of intelligence gathering, that the group is helping construct the site for long-term exploitation and has fortified the mine, constructing bridges at river crossings and with truck-mounted anti-aircraft guns at key locations. The U.S. information shows the facility is capable of

separating gold deposited in both soft surface ore and the bedrock underneath. U.S. officials described Wagner's production of the site as having moved at "extraordinary speed," according to one of the cables.

Now, the mine spans eight production zones in various stages of development — the largest estimated to be approximately over 200 feet deep, according to one cable.

The site could eventually produce rewards upward of \$1 billion, U.S. officials said. But experts say that's likely a long-term goal and only possible if the group finds a way to transport the minerals and find a market to sell it. Still, U.S. and African officials are convinced that as long as Wagner controls the mine, the group will remain in the country.

The CAR government is now refusing to grant UN operators in the country clearances to fly over the mining site — and Wagner forces have even shot down several of its drones.

"We are concerned that the denial of UAV overflight clearances over what is probably the Central African Republic's most sensitive site is merely the latest indicator that WG is, in fact, calling the shots in the Central African Republic and will act aggressively to protect its rapidly expanding increasingly lucrative revenue generating activities in the country," the cable said.

Washington's increasing concern about Wagner's presence in the CAR has pushed officials in meetings across the world in recent months to circulate a U.S. strategy for pushing the group out of the country, according to several of the cables.

"Wagner is a cancer. It doesn't just sit in one country," one of the U.S. officials said. "It's something that spreads to those adjacent countries and then all of a sudden you have a much bigger problem to worry about."

The cables did not describe the strategy in detail, but they show U.S. officials engaging African leaders in the region to get on board. The conversations appear to have increased in recent months, particularly after Wagner publicly alleged that one of its top leaders in the CAR was attacked in an assassination attempt.

Prigozhin claimed Dmitry Sytii received a package that exploded in his hands, calling it a "terrorist attack." He alleged in a publicly released statement that the package came with a note indicating that the French were responsible.

Attempts to reach Sytii were unsuccessful. But one of the documents reviewed by POLITICO from 2018 lists Sytii as a "translator" in CAR.

But in the days following the incident, U.S. officials scrambled to determine if an attack had occurred or whether Prigozhin's network was spreading disinformation for political reasons — a tactic often used by the group, according to the cables. U.S. officials could not immediately determine if Wagner was attempting to make it look as though the French had attacked the group. French officials denied any involvement.



U.S. officials met with representatives from the UN peacekeeping mission in CAR, known as MINUSCA, in December and January to discuss Wagner's operations in the country and the degree to which UN peacekeepers could track the group's movements, according to two of the cables obtained by POLITICO.

Representatives from MINUSCA relayed to the U.S. officials that France's decision to pull troops from the country had only complicated matters on the ground for the UN peacekeepers.

The representatives questioned whether CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera would disengage from his partnership with Wagner even if other countries stepped in to offer security services as a stop gap. The Portuguese have a quick-reaction force stationed in the country, but MINUSCA is the only entity in the country with the ability to fill the security vacuum left by the French, UN representatives told the U.S. officials.

MINUSCA did not respond to a request for comment.

European and UN officials in the country — though aware of the risk Wagner poses to the international community — are not convinced the group is a legitimate, long-term solution for the CAR government's security problems.

Wagner's efforts on the ground in CAR have inspired U.S. officials to plead with the government in Bangui to consider breaking ties with Wagner. Their message to President Touadera: CAR's more traditional, Western partners are still the most effective and reliable.



Faustin-Archange Touadera, president of the Central African Republic, gives a speech in a campaign rally in Bangui, Central African Republic, on Dec. 12, 2020. | André Bâ/Xinhua, via AP

The U.S. has gone as far as presenting a strategy and roadmap to partners in Africa and Europe — its plan to convince the CAR government to isolate Wagner.

“This is a Kremlin tool. And the tool is being used to increase official Russian influence. And that’s easier to do when there is instability,” one of the U.S. officials said. “It is in Russia and Wagner’s interests to keep a kind of level of chaos there that is against our interests and allows Russia to come in and maintain its security relationships, maintain its political support.”

In meetings in Kigali last month, U.S. officials discussed the plan with top officials in Rwanda. Rwandan officials said the country could not be the only one in the region to try and convince the CAR president to go against Wagner and asked if Washington would consider sending troops to Bangui. U.S. officials said there was “no appetite” for such a move in Washington, according to a cable.

Similar conversations about Wagner’s footprint in CAR took place in Lisbon in January between U.S. and Portuguese officials. There, Portuguese officials said they were willing to potentially reconsider the country’s decision to leave the European training mission in CAR

in April so long as the Bangui government showed a willingness to cooperate with the U.S. roadmap and strategy for Wagner. Officials in Lisbon also raised concerns about continuing to keep Portuguese troops in CAR without other European support — France’s departure from the country had left the remaining forces exposed, according to a cable.

The Portuguese government did not respond to a request for comment.

Washington’s push to remove Wagner from CAR has not been met with acceptance in Bangui, according to a cable obtained by POLITICO.

In a January meeting with U.S. officials, Felix Moloua, the prime minister in CAR, pushed back on the U.S. messaging that the CAR government should isolate and disconnect from Wagner.

Moloua, who had recently returned from Moscow, told U.S. officials he wants to “work with all partners” and that CAR will “not accept partners telling it with whom it could or could not work,” according to one of the cables obtained by POLITICO. According to that cable, the prime minister questioned U.S. officials on why they would condemn CAR for accepting “the help it needs,” adding that “at least Wagner does something.”