



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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## THE ARGUMENT OVER RUSSIA'S EMBASSY IN AUSTRALIA

Even as its military campaign against Ukraine continues, the Kremlin is picking new political fights abroad. The latest is taking place in Canberra, where Moscow is embroiled in an acrimonious dispute with the Australian government over the placement of its embassy to the country. The government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese recently canceled the Russian government's lease on its current property in the nation's capital, citing national security concerns stemming from the facility's proximity to the country's seat of Parliament. The Kremlin launched a legal challenge in protest, but its attempts to obtain an injunction have failed, with Australia's high court upholding the government decision and ruling that Russia needed to vacate the location. (*France 24*, June 26, 2023)

## WHAT'S WAGNER'S STATUS IN AFRICA?

Since the Wagner paramilitary group took up arms against the Russian government last month, many have speculated as to what the organization's future global presence might end up looking like as a result. The changes in Africa might be most pronounced. Wagner, for instance, is notorious for its involvement in the Central African Republic (CAR), where it has a presence of some 1,500 mercenaries deployed in support of the ruling government in Bangui. Rumors that this presence is now in flux has been fueled by recent reports of "hundreds" of Wagner troops departing the country in recent days, leading to speculation in the international media that the Kremlin may be carrying out a purge of Wagner in Africa.

Local officials, however, have implied otherwise. According to Fidele Gouandjika, an adviser to the President of the Central African Republic, there has been "no change" in the Wagner Group's presence, and the conflict between Wagner and the Russian government is "an internal matter for Russia." That sentiment tracks with the recent statement of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who emphasized in an interview that "Prigozhin's revolt would not affect Moscow's relations with partners and friends," and that Wagner operatives "would remain in the Central African Republic." (*NBC*, July 8, 2023)

## THE HUMAN COST TO RUSSIA OF THE UKRAINE WAR

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, the fog of war has descended on the battlefield, as both Kyiv and Moscow attempt to shape the narrative regarding the Kremlin's "special military operation." The former has done so by exaggerating the number of killed and wounded by Ukrainian defenders. The latter has done the opposite, and minimized and hidden the casualties resulting from the conflict. Western intelligence sources, meanwhile, have made their own best – but admittedly imperfect – calculations about how many men under arms have been claimed in Russia's war of choice. Now, however, a new joint investigation by *Meduza* and *Mediazona* has offered up a different calculation. According to the study, "roughly 47,000" soldiers have died so far as a result of the conflict. The authors of the report, which include Tübingen University statistician Dmitry Kobak, examined published obituaries in Russian papers, data from ROSSTAT, Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, as well as records from the country's National Probate Registry to come up with their tally.

The new figure, while lower than estimates proffered by the Ukrainian government, is nonetheless striking. It indicates that in roughly a year-and-a-half of conflict in Ukraine, nine times more Russian soldiers have died than did during the entirety of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, which stretched from 1979 to 1989. Moreover, as the authors point out, it represents only a partial accounting, because it deals strictly with war dead. If Russians wounded on the battlefield are taken into account, the costs of the conflict are significantly higher. "When factoring in the number of men wounded so seriously that they did not return to military service, Russia's total casualty count rises to at least 125,000 soldiers, based on our calculations," the authors write. (*Meduza*, July 10, 2023)

### **PRIGOZHIN: NOT SUCH A PARIAN AFTER ALL?**

Despite conflicting reports of Yevgeny Prigozhin's whereabouts following his failed rebellion against the Kremlin, the Wagner chief was apparently in Moscow meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin – just five days after the abortive uprising. At the meeting, which included 35 other Wagner commanders, the Russian President provided an assessment of "the Ukraine war effort and the mutiny." According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin even "suggested variants of [the commanders'] future employment and their future use in combat." Putin's leniency toward Wagner's leadership and troops in the wake of the rebellion has turned some heads. As for Prigozhin, according to Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, the mercenary chief is now in Belarus but appears to enjoy freedom of movement there. (*BBC*, July 10, 2023)