



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

Russia Policy Monitor No. 2600

September 5, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor**

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MOSCOW STILL SHOOTING FOR THE STARS

Last month, Russia suffered a very public black eye when its Luna-5 probe crashed as it attempted a landing on the Moon. In the aftermath of the botched foray into space, however, Kremlin officials are striking a defiant stance – and doubling down on the importance of their country's space program. "Interrupting the lunar program for almost 50 years is the main reason for the failure," Yuri Borisov, head of Russia's state space agency, ROSCOSMOS, has told reporters. "The invaluable experience that our predecessors accumulated in the 1960s and 1970s was practically lost." Moscow, however, remains committed to rebuilding its space expertise. "In no case should the lunar program be interrupted, that would be the worst decision," Borisov has insisted. (*Agence France-Presse*, August 21, 2023)

WAGNER NEEDS TO BEND THE KNEE

Immediately following the suspicious death of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in a plane crash, Russian President Vladimir Putin took steps to bring the paramilitary group more tightly under state control. Pursuant to a new Kremlin edict, all Wagner fighters – and anyone else carrying out work on behalf of the Russian military – must sign a formal oath of allegiance to the Russian government. The decree was described as "a step to forge the spiritual and moral foundations of the defence of Russia," and included a promise "to strictly follow the orders of commanders and senior leaders." (*Reuters*, August 26, 2023)

PRIGOZHIN'S PEOPLE EYE THE EXITS

Meanwhile, Wagner fighters now in exile in Belarus don't seem to be settling in well to their new circumstances. According to sources inside the country, the size of the Wagner contingent stationed in Belarus has dropped from 5,800 to 4,400 over the past several weeks, with still more planning to leave. According to the assessment of Ukraine's Special Operations Forces, the reason is purely financial; "The regime in Belarus does not yet satisfy Wagner instructors with its level of payment for services, as a result, most instructors do not plan to stay in the country," Ukrainian officials have noted. Others, however, have noted that the dispersal coincides with the elimination of their group leader, suggesting that at least some are seeking greener (and safer) pastures to ply their trade – including, potentially, in Africa. (*Newsweek*, August 24, 2023; *The Daily Beast*, August 24, 2023)

WAGNER'S REPLACEMENTS?

In the wake of the death of Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, speculation has abounded as to the future disposition of the notorious paramilitary group. Wagner, however, is hardly the only game in town – and now other mercenary outfits are beginning to garner attention as dependable proxies for the Kremlin.

One is Redut, which is said to be controlled by the country's military intelligence agency, the GRU, making it more dependable than the fully private Wagner force ever was. Redut, which got its start as a protection force mobilized by oligarch Gennady Timchenko, has more recently had a modest deployment to Syria and subsequently in Ukraine, before being shouldered aside by Wagner.

Another is Convoy, a private military company set up last year by the Kremlin-appointed governor of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov. Though a small force, Convoy boasts a robust social media presence and is active in Ukrainian regions now under Kremlin control. There are also indications that Convoy, despite its small size, is becoming active in Africa – a development likely attributable to the fact that most of Convoy's commanders are ex-Wagner mercenaries. At least two other groups bankrolled by Russia's energy colossus, GAZPROM, are also active as part of the Russian government's hybrid warfighting strategy. (*DNYUZ*, August 25, 2023)

A REQUIEM FOR PRIGOZHIN

Even as Prigozhin's business empire undergoes massive changes in the wake of the oligarch's death, at least some in Russia are remembering the chef-turned-mercenary and his contributions to the country. In the wake of the August 23rd crash, mourners from a variety of backgrounds gathered at the former Wagner center in St. Petersburg to eulogize the warlord as a "hero." Prigozhin was remembered as a "huge presence," and a man who "kept his word" no matter the cost. (*Meduza*, August 25, 2023)