

THE WIDER WORLD

Prigozhin May Be Dead, but Wagner Lives On

By Diane Chido
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The latest news about Wagner mercenary army chief Yevgeny Prigozhin again shocked the world as we learned on August 23 that he died in a plane crash. Prigozhin first came to public notice in late June when he moved the bulk of his soldiers contracted to the Russian government for combat operations from the war theater in Ukraine to seize an army base inside Russia. From there, he threatened to storm Moscow if the war's conduct was not revised and specific senior Defense Ministry officials were not replaced.

Experts believe the crash was caused by an onboard explosion. Prigozhin was allegedly buried in a small ceremony in a St. Petersburg cemetery, which Russian President Vladimir Putin pointedly did not attend, despite their long history of cooperation. Prigozhin's Wagner Group was allegedly composed of seasoned Russian, Chechen, and assorted other military veterans and violent prisoners conscripted in place of serving time. This organization has been operating as an arm of Russian policy in Ukraine since 2014 and in other locales where the Kremlin has interests but does not want to officially show its hand or send its troops.

Unless the conspiracies are to be believed and reports of his death have been greatly exaggerated, after the June events that the Kremlin termed an attempted coup, Putin no longer needed Prigozhin's services. However, Russia cannot do without Wagner.

Some observers anticipate that Wagner will not survive in its current formation and may be broken up into smaller capability-based companies or simply renamed to diffuse global scrutiny. Such a move has precedents, such as American contract firm, Blackwater, whose license was revoked by the Iraqi government after one of its security teams killed Iraqi civilians at a checkpoint in 2007. Consequently, it was reorganized and emerged from the ashes as Xe Services, and then again was renamed once acquired by private investors as Academi.

As described [in an earlier post](#), it is well known that Wagner employees and contractors have been operating extensively in Africa, mainly providing third-party security and investing in mining projects. I also briefly [explored](#) that Wagner was working closely to augment governmental security in most of the African countries that have recently experienced military coups with supporters often waving Russian flags. I even previously mentioned that Russian disinformation campaigns may have contributed to support for these coups. However, the truth may be much more widespread and sinister.

As the bipartisan U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence found, “the Russian government engaged in an aggressive, multi-faceted effort to influence, or attempt to influence, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election”^[1] in then-candidate Donald Trump’s favor. Far beyond the U.S., Russian disinformation is actively working to change governments around the world.

In 2022 the European Union released a report on widespread Russian disinformation campaigns in numerous European countries intended to influence election outcomes.^[2] One of these targeted the 2016 Brexit referendum, which ended with a popular majority voting for the United Kingdom (U.K.) of England, Scotland, and Wales to leave the European Union. The basis for fears stoked was that it would make it easier for third-world migrants to move freely into and around the U.K. taking jobs and diluting British culture.

The report further confirms findings of Russian interference in 2019 elections across Europe to support right-wing nationalist candidates, most obviously in the 2017 and 2022 French elections. The report describes how:

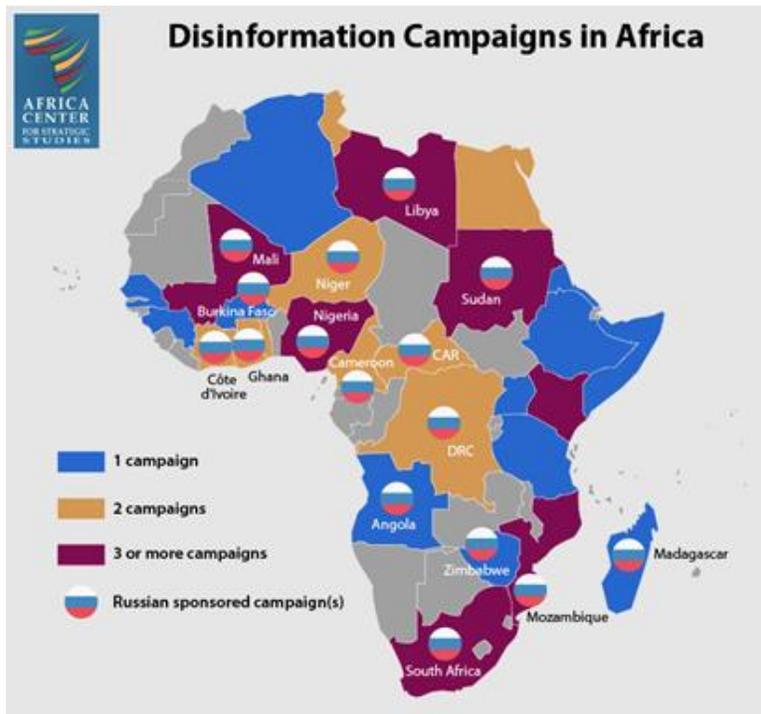
[a]rmies of trolls post content under fake profiles, which is further amplified on platforms such as Twitter (now X Corp.) via automated 'bot' accounts. In elections, disinformation can be used to promote candidates and outcomes perceived as favourable [sic] to the interests of a foreign state. However, it also serves the more general purpose of destabilising [sic] democratic societies through inflammatory content on terrorism, separatism, migration, Covid-19 vaccination, and other polarising [sic] issues.

Hungary and Poland have already fallen victim to these efforts, as ultra-nationalist right-wing authoritarian governments now rule those countries. While they are nationalists who put their individual ethnic backgrounds first, they are united through various organizations such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which originated in the United States and now has chapters in many other countries. In Hungary, President Victor Orban spoke at that country's 2022 CPAC annual meeting on familiar themes, such as excoriating "woke culture," and touting restricting migration transgender and LGBTQ+ rights, and closer scrutiny of educational content for children to eliminate exploration of such themes.[3]

As another aside, "woke" is used by conservatives to attack liberal views supporting these rights, originally concerns over treatment of minorities, especially Black Americans in the wake of the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd, which brought the Black Lives Matter movement into focus. The ironies abound as this term is never used by those on the left coupled with the sad origin of this now appropriated expression.

It is believed to have begun with Marcus Garvey's call to Jamaicans to "Wake up" and fight for their civil rights in the 1920s. By 1938, it gained new traction due to the lyrics of a song by American Blues musician Lead Belly (aka Huddie Ledbetter), called "Scottsboro Boys." It tells the story of four young Black men sentenced to death in Alabama after a false accusation of raping a white woman, as Lead Belly sings, "I advise everybody to be a little careful when they go down there. Stay woke. Keep your eyes open." [4] The term is now pejoratively applied to a host of liberal causes, but it is fascinating how everything eventually comes back to race in America with the new use of the term coded specifically to *not* bring attention to its white supremacist legacy.

Now, back to Africa. In a similar vein, renewed recognition of the continuing ills of colonialism have provided fodder for Russian-inspired disinformation campaigns. In 2022 the U.S. defense think tank, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, conducted a study of Russian disinformation campaigns across the continent. The map shows how widespread and effective they have been. The report also determined that Wagner Group personnel are spearheading these efforts.[5]



Map of Disinformation Campaigns in Africa, 2022

It is clear that coups and violence have successfully altered the governments of many of the countries with the most significant interference led by Russia. Since 2020, there have been at least seven such overthrows in the region: Burkina Faso, Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Niger, Mali, and Sudan. The 2022 report, which is now a year old, specifically shows Russian interference in all but Chad and Gabon. The BBC’s updated reporting includes these countries as also falling sway to a social network (called Russosphere, which translates to ‘Russian Sphere’) active in all those shown on the map and likely others as well. Themes focus on the horrors of French colonialism, say great things about Putin and Russia, which did not have colonies on the continent, and calls Ukrainians Nazis. Again, familiar refrains.[6] In addition, they speak directly about the Wagner Group and its security and other support in the region, and even include recruitment advertising.

The campaign is managed by a self-described Stalinist from Belgium, Luc Michel, whose stated aim since the 1980s is to rid the world of America. Michel also worked closely with Kremlin-supported youth movement “Nashi,” meaning “Ours,” that oversaw the referenda in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk in 2014, which resulted in a vote to rejoin Russia. Nashi declared the obviously rigged elections “free and fair.”

What is most concerning is the likely future fate of the countries that have not yet fallen. For instance, Nigeria is the largest economy with the biggest population in the region. It has struggled with instability between its Muslim North and Christian South for over a decade, specifically driven by the violent Islamic extremist group, Boko Haram. The name is typically translated as “Western education is forbidden.” Western education in the region has traditionally been mainly for the elites, whom Boko Haram’s founders saw as corrupt and far removed from the populace. Thus, the term is more likely to mean something closer to “deceitful or useless education is forbidden,” promoting a return to traditional religious teaching.[7] Nigeria was not a French colony, but British, so any Russian-directed messaging would be adjusted to this history, thus broadening the European target countries.

While the United States did not have colonies in Africa, its participation and ramping up of the slave trade makes it the ideological successor to its parent country of Britain. The rhetoric is easily adjusted, particularly in Nigeria, where American, Dutch, and French oil companies are blamed for destroying the Niger Delta’s rich farmland and fishing, and not providing compensation or jobs for displaced locals who tend to have disproportionate rates of negative health effects such as cancer and Parkinson’s disease.

This led to violent conflict that ended in 2006 but which ramped up again with the advent of the Niger Delta Avengers in 2016, attacking drilling facilities and killing Nigerian soldiers guarding them. They eventually receded into a political activist group by 2019, whose members could serve as a vanguard to a coup attempt, which would be the sixth since independence was declared in 1960.

As I have written about [here](#) and [here](#), global history is long and rich and seemingly random events require context to be understood as not simply relating to violent groups that just crop up from nowhere. Acknowledging and addressing their grievances before they can be used for disinformation and before they turn into what Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed as, “the violence of desperate men”[8] are critical ingredients to maintaining stability.

Many thought that Putin’s failure to secure Ukraine quickly would lead him to using tactical nuclear weapons or other desperate acts of violence. Instead, he is using Stalin’s forms of “ambiguous warfare” through Putin’s continued use of the Wagner Group, in whatever new form it may take, even without his old pal, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Despite our vast military might, this type of warfare is a threat so pervasive and so imperceptible, it is having far greater success around the world and in our own political culture than we know how to combat.

Putin’s Russia aims to upend the post-World War II *Pax Americana*, under which we and our western allies have managed global events since colonial times admittedly to our collective advantage. His traditional military tools are in short

supply and his allies are unlikely to approve of the use of nuclear weapons, so he effectively uses cyber-based proxies, like Wagner, in the developing world to recreate the international order, along with his allies in Beijing.

[1] "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 5: Counterintelligence Threats and Vulnerabilities" available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[2] "Foreign interference in EU democratic processes," European Parliament *At a Glance* press release, March 2022 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[3] "Conservative Political Action Conference, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban Remarks," C-SPAN video, August 4, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[4] "How Woke Went From "Black" to "Bad", *The Power of Words*, Legal Defense Fund, August 26, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[5] "Mapping Disinformation in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, April 26, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[6] "Russia in Africa: How disinformation operations target the continent," BBC News, February 1, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[7] "Searching for Boko Haram, Strategy Bridge, Diane Chido, March 6, 2019 available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

[8] "Chapter 8: The Violence of Desperate Men," *Autobiography of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, digitized by Stanford University Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute available [here](#), accessed on August 30, 2023.

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