

## **Wagner Group activities in Libya and the Sahel region after the failed "putsch" in Russia – business as usual**

The failed rebellion of the Wagner Group troops against the Kremlin authorities on June 24 this year also had quite unexpected repercussions in Libya, a place far away from Russia. The Wagner putsch has clearly had an impact on rising tensions in this North African country, where both the Russian government and the mercenaries themselves from the group led by

The autonomization of the Wagner Group's activities and military position in Libya corresponds with the growth of the group's business and political position throughout the North African region. For several years now, the Wagner Company's activities in Libya have become increasingly (and more pronouncedly) autonomous from Moscow's policies, objectives and, above all, organizational and logistical resources.

Yevgeny Prigozhin have become heavily involved over the past decade. The issue of the Wagner Group's continued presence and activity in the North African and Sahel region could have a destabilizing effect not only on the conflict in Libya itself, but also in neighboring countries - especially Mali and Niger, where Russian mercenaries have established complex networks of political, economic and military influence. All of this is taking place in the reality of Europe's ongoing energy crisis and growing migratory pressure to the south of the Old Continent.

When the dictatorial rule of Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in Libya in 2011 as a result of the so-called Arab Spring revolution, the country was plunged into a prolonged civil war. The result has been, since 2014, the division of Libya into two rival parts, governed by separate government administrations: The Government of National Accord (RPN) in Tripoli ("western Libya") and the so-called House of Representatives government in Tobruk ("eastern Libya"). An attempt by the UN in 2021-2022 to form a unified, joint government in Libya failed, and the country is still divided into the western part (currently run by the Government of National Unity,(RJN), Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in Tripoli) and the eastern part (led by the Syrian-based Government of National Stability

(RSN), headed by Prime Minister Osama Hamada). During Libya's more than a decade of civil war, many powers, supporting rival forces and competing for control of natural resources, flooded the country with weapons and mercenaries. The main external players in the Libyan drama have, as of 2019, become Turkey (which supports the government in Tripoli) and Russia, which has supported the authorities in the east of the country and their Libyan National Army (LAN), led by the charismatic Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Part of this military support from Moscow included the deployment of some 2,000 Wagner Group mercenaries to eastern Libya. Initially (2015-2019), the Wagner Group's operations in Libya focused on training LAN forces in handling Russian and post-Soviet weaponry. In the summer of 2019, however, the Wagner Group undertook active combat operations in Tripoli, supporting the LAN's stalled assault on the capital. The intervention of Russian mercenaries tipped the balance of the war in favor of Marshal Haftar's forces and nearly led to the fall of the Tripoli government. Only Turkey's direct military intervention - directed against the LAN and Russian mercenaries - saved Tripoli. A few months later, Ankara and Moscow reached an agreement to impose a ceasefire on the warring parties in Libya, which in principle remains in effect today without major violations. An important element of this strategic and political arrangement, however, is the continued presence of Turkish forces in western Libya and Russian mercenaries in the east.

Although the activity of Wagner Group mercenary troops in eastern Libya has not changed since the failed June putsch in Russia, growing tension has been perceptible there in recent weeks. Concerns are mounting among military and civilian leaders in Sirte and Tobruk about the possible behavior of Wagner's mercenaries. After all, if they were able to rebel against the Russian military and the Kremlin, what might they be capable of in Libya? The question is all the more pertinent since the Libyan contingent of the Wagner Group operates completely independently of the LAN's command structure and logistics. The Wagner formations in Libya are not only battle-hardened ground troops<sup>1</sup>, but also "air force" (equipped with, among other things, Mi-24/35 attack helicopters, Mi-8 transport helicopters, and combat aircraft, including Su-24/25-class attack bombers, as well as MiG-29 multirole fighters). The Wagnerians also have high-tech means of anti-aircraft and anti-missile defense (OPL-OPRAK), such as Pancyr-S1M self-propelled sets. Currently, Wagner Group troops are stationed primarily in several locations in eastern Libya, notably at the al-Khadim air base near the city of al-Marj, as well as in the cities of Sirte and al-Jufrah in the central region. It is here that the main bases and most of the

forces and resources of the Libyan contingent of the Wagner Group are located, but its smaller units are also dislocated in the south of Libya, including in the desert region of Sabha, where they officially help LNA forces oversee the oil production and transmission facilities. In practice, however, they exercise almost exclusive control over them.

1 It is worth remembering that, unlike the units formed for operations on the front lines of the war in Ukraine (composed mainly of criminals recruited among prisoners and gulags in Russia), the Wagner Group's units for overseas operations are composed mainly of ex-military men - people with professional training, and often combat experience from wars in Ukraine (before 2022), Chechnya, Georgia and Syria.

The activities of the Russian mercenaries are taking place completely outside the supervision of the LNA command. Such a situation could put Marshal Haftar's army in a very difficult position if it is forced to try to control or even limit the activity of the Wagner Group contingent in eastern Libya. Indeed, in military terms, the Wagnerians are today an unrivaled force among local Libyan formations in eastern Libya.

### **Libya as Moscow's geopolitical outpost in North Africa and the Sahel**

The autonomization of the Wagner Group's activities and military position in Libya correspond with its business and political standing throughout the North African region. For several years now, the Wagner Company's activities in Libya have become increasingly (and more pronouncedly) autonomous from Moscow's policies, objectives and, above all, organizational and logistical resources. This is largely due to the fact that the Wagnerians have created something like a thriving multi-industry enterprise in Libya, whose business portfolio includes a wide variety of activities: from the extraction and transportation of crude oil and other natural resources, to consulting, media and commercial services, to strictly military activity. The unanswered question remains, for the time being, whether this is a process planned and carried out in coordination with the Kremlin, or whether its implementation is the result of this and not another course of events, exploited by the management of the Russian mercenary company for its needs and purposes.

Undoubtedly, the Wagner Group is not a typical private military company, operating under strict rules and regulations, like registered and licensed private military companies (PMCs) in the West. Rather, the most accurate Western equivalent for the Wagner Group would be a mafia structure or organized crime group. There is also no equivalent for it in

international law, which refers only to classic PMCs. The Wagner Group's actions during the war in Ukraine, including in particular its massive recruitment of prisoners and equally massive losses, influenced the creation of its image as a gang of thugs, psychopaths and pathological criminals. In reality, however, the Wagner Group is a complex, at times brutal and ruthless, business model, possible only under Russian conditions, and operating most efficiently in the gray zone of conflicts in Libya, Mali, Sudan or eastern Ukraine.

This multilateralism and multi-industry nature of the Wagner Group (which includes dozens of formally separate companies and firms in and around Libya) was somewhat forced when the United Arab Emirates ceased financial support for its Libyan operation around 2020. Responsibility for funding the Wagner Group's direct operations in eastern Libya was then formally assumed by the eastern Libyan government, although it is now known that funding for Russian mercenaries' operations in the country comes from a number of different sources. This applies not only Libya. Indeed, there is now no doubt that the Wagner Group seeks to use its Libyan assets as a forward base for operations throughout the Sahel region, especially in Chad, Mali and Niger. The group has succeeded (through bribery or violence) in building spheres of influence in local communities and establishing partnerships with smuggling networks in the southern border regions of Libya and neighboring countries. In these areas, Wagnerians help supply weapons and military equipment, as well as technologies for mining gold, precious stones and rare earth metals. The activities of "companies" and corporations under the Wagner Group also include organizing operations to smuggle people, weapons, fuel and drugs into Europe. In addition to undertaking strictly military or shady business operations, Wagner Group structures are also active in the region in the sphere of information (and, of course, strictly disinformation) activities carried out to influence public opinion in favor of Russia and its local allies and against the policies and actions of the United States and the West more broadly. Recent events in Niger - where there was a surprise military coup organized by a group of officers evidently infiltrated by the Russians - show that Wagnerians (on their own or at Moscow's behest) are also active in the political arena among the elites of the countries of the sub-Saharan African region.

In addition to the efforts to expand its influence in Libya and the Sahel region, the Wagner Group is seeking a level of revenue that will enable its self-finance of operations in Africa, and arguably other regions (including Russia and Belarus). This is currently an important

aspect of the activity of this Russian mercenary group, as according to Libyan sources, the government in Tobruk was said to have stopped payments to the Group. Arrears in the payment of wages to the mercenaries were said (at the beginning of this year) to be as long as ten months. This means, in effect, that Wagner is effectively self-financing in Libya. This, in turn, entails not only a deterioration of the security situation in the places where the Group's troops are stationed (brawls instigated by Russian mercenaries, as well as extortion and robberies carried out by them are common), but also an increase in tension between it and the authorities in Sirte/Tobruk.

### Western counteractions

Not surprisingly, the government of eastern Libya has been seeking a way for the Wagner Group to leave its territory for some time. Especially since this is also one of the main goals of US policy toward Libya. During the surprise visit of CIA chief William Burns to Libya in January of this year, the eastern Libyan authorities were open to a frank discussion about the withdrawal of the Wagner Group. However, the government in Sirte and LAN leaders have placed certain conditions. First and foremost is an end to the Turkish military presence in western Libya, as well as an increased military and security cooperation with Western countries, including the provision to the LAN of advanced air defense systems and armaments that could replace those currently deployed by Wagner. During Burns' visit, talks also touched on the issue of funding the Wagner Group's activities in Libya, accompanied by a clear warning from Washington against any form of cooperation between the eastern Libyan authorities and the group. A few weeks later, the United States explicitly recognized the Wagner Group as a "significant transnational criminal organization," putting it on a par under U.S. law with, for example, drug cartels from Mexico or Colombia.

The Wagner Group's leadership is fully aware of the current complex situation in Libya. Even before the failed Russian putsch (and already after Burns' visit), the Wagnerists had unequivocally warned the government in Sirte against attempts to remove their forces and resources from Libya, threatening unspecified consequences. These warnings were also to be repeated after June 24 of this year. The Eastern Libyan Government of National Stability must take these warnings seriously. After all, given Wagner's military resources in the country, Russian mercenaries would probably be able to overthrow the authorities in the eastern part of Libya without too much trouble and effectively confront local Libyan

military formations. However, it seems that the Wagnerians can more effectively influence the decision-making process of the authorities in Sirte by, for example, blocking the operation of the oil installations they control, both in the south of the country and at port terminals in Benghazi, Sirte, etc.

An additional problem for the RSN and the LAN command is becoming the actions of the rival Tripoli-based government, which is trying to take advantage of the eastern administration's plight by attacking the Wagner Group's resources and bases, presumably hoping to provoke its retaliatory actions. On July 1 of this year (just days after the failed putsch in Russia) several drones attacked Wagner bases in central Libya. According to unconfirmed information, the attack was carried out using, among other things, a state-of-the-art Turkish Bayraktar Akinci drone, which the Tripoli government recently bought from Turkey. Incidents of this type could lead to an increase in tensions between the two sides and even a resumption of open armed conflict in Libya. Paradoxically, this would also be to the advantage of the Wagner Group, as it would reassert its position as the main military guarantor of the Syrta/Tobruk government's functioning.

### Summary and conclusions:

1. The prolonged civil war in Libya provided an excellent opportunity for Russia to become directly politically and militarily involved in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa - regions that after the collapse of the Soviet Union became an almost mythical "lost land" for Moscow. On this occasion, the Kremlin was also able to test in practice a new formula for foreign intervention: acting with non-state forces, i.e. mercenary groups, operating in the interest of and on behalf of Russia, but under a formally independent (because private) flag. This was a creative development of the tactics of the notorious "green men" who seized Crimea for Moscow in early 2014.

2. The scale of Russian involvement in the Sahel region came into full view when a military coup took place in Niger in late July this year, which turned out to be clearly inspired by (pro)Russian centers of influence. The events in the country drew international public attention to the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, where the role of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group cannot be underestimated. Niger is a country sandwiched between Mali and Libya - in both of these countries the Wagnerists have had their influence and significant forces and resources for many years. The seizure of power

in Niger by a junta similar in political and economic interests to Russia (the Wagner Group?), in this context raises the question of Moscow's long-range goals for this part of Africa.

3. As the United States and its NATO allies (especially France and Italy) increasingly seek to curtail the Wagner Group's operations and influence in Libya, concerns are growing about how it will respond. In the first instance, the situation raises the risk of attacks on Libya's oil and gas infrastructure or halting their proper functioning, which would have a negative impact on the European energy market. Equally serious are the destabilizing activities of mercenaries aimed at resuming open conflict between the parties to the Libyan civil war. The Wagnerians could also use their contacts among African human smugglers to increase migration pressure on southern European Union countries. Many experts suggest that this scenario is already playing out, and the observed increase in migrant flows to Italy and Spain is precisely the result of, among other things, Wagnerite activities in Libya and the Sahel.

4. Both the European Union and NATO, as well as the United States, should intensify diplomatic and political efforts in the coming months to identify and penalize business entities (companies, corporations, foundations) operating in the North and Sub-Saharan African region that have ties to the Wagner Group and/or individuals involved in its activities in this part of the world. The essence of these activities should be to restrict the free movement of pro-Russian entities, companies and institutions in the public space of the North and West African region.

5. The parallel task of Western countries and institutions should be to support local efforts to combat the influence of Moscow and its actors/tools in the sub-Saharan African region. These efforts should be manifested in the strengthening of economic ties, political and military cooperation (mainly from training and advice). However, there should be a move away from the hitherto preferred policy of conditioning effective support for the region's countries on their respect for the canon of human, civil rights and democratic principles as they are understood in the West. For more than a decade, the West has been losing the race for geopolitical influence in Africa to China (and more recently to Russia) precisely because of, among other things, its insistence on implementing in the Black Continent its own ideological models regarding human rights, political rules, etc., which are alien to local culture and tradition.

6. Developments in the sub-Saharan African region and Libya in recent months indicate that it is necessary for the European Union to implement a more proactive, anticipatory policy towards this part of the world. These actions should be correlated and consistent with those of other allies - primarily the US, but also local partners. The need to develop a common Western policy regarding the Sahel, Maghreb and West Africa (the EU in economic and political terms, NATO in terms of military security - e.g. in terms of combating Islamist threats, etc.) is of particular importance in the context of growing migratory pressure on the southern borders of the European continent.

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Founded in 2005, the Casimir Pulaski Foundation is an independent, non-for-profit, non-partisan Polish-think tank conducting research on different aspects of European and Transatlantic security, with a special focus on Central and Eastern Europe.

The Foundation brings together dozens of international experts in various fields (foreign policy, defence, energy, democratic resilience) and publishes analysis describing and explaining international events, identifying trends in the European and Transatlantic security environment and recommending solutions for government decision-makers and the private sector.

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Each year the Foundation presents the "Knight of Freedom" award to outstanding figures who contribute to the promotion of the values of General Casimir Pulaski, such as freedom, justice and democracy. It is also the home to the Polish branch of the Women in International Security network.

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