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THE COMPANY YOU KEEP: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa



FREE RUSSIA FOUNDATION
WASHINGTON, DC
2020

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Contents

Introduction	3
Wagner and the GRU	5
To the Shores of Tripoli	6
Wagner and Neo-Nazis	17
Haftar's Fiasco	19
The Son Also Rises	20
Mozambique	22
Out of AFRIC	24
Prigozhin TV	31
Conclusion	36
Authors	38

Introduction

The Wagner Group, founded in 2014 and financed by catering magnate Yevgeny Prigozhin, has become a near-ubiquitous instrument of Russian foreign policy. Initially conceived as a private military company whose mercenaries provided plausibly deniable cannon fodder for Russian military operations overseas, its remit has in the last few years expanded into the realm of political consulting, or “political technology” in Russian parlance.

Prigozhin’s unnamed organization—coily referred to internally as “the Company”—no longer just sends soldiers of fortune into dangerous European or Middle Eastern combat zones. It now performs government-in-a-box contract services for a wide variety of politicians and combatants in the developing world. It negotiates arms sales and military repair work on behalf of the Rus-

sian government and mining and extractive projects on behalf of Prigozhin. It builds or revives national media enterprises as part of its influence operations. It hires European neo-Nazis and white supremacists to “monitor” (read: sway) elections in sub-Saharan Africa, ironically instructing them to use the pretext of anti-colonialism and pan-Africanism to advance Russian interests at the expense of American, British, and French ones. It provides security details, drawn from the past or present ranks of Russian intelligence organs, to its foreign clientele. Brand consistency, to say nothing of client loyalty, is never a factor for the Company, which works for and against practically everyone, including bitter opponents in the same country. Such a scattershot and contradictory approach is couched in a kind of neo-Soviet management-speak, with the goal being the creation

of “stable equilibrium” to ensure no one actor or party can become so powerful that it ceases to require the bespoke services of the Company. Paul Manafort was more scrupulous than “Putin’s chef.”

Things have not always gone as intended. Wagner mercenaries performed unspectacularly in Ukraine and suffered devastating losses after making the ill-advised decision to attack the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and U.S. military advisers in eastern Syria in 2018, but it has kept alive the specter of “little green men” materializing, unannounced, to seize turf for the Kremlin¹.

Serially sanctioned by Washington for his role in Russia’s 2016 interference operation in the U.S. presidential election, Prigozhin is no less of an ominous figure. What he toyed with in America four years ago he has since refined and exported to smaller and more fractious republics, ones with fewer

oversight and counterintelligence capabilities, bankrolling disinformation and influence operations aimed at undermining Moscow’s geopolitical rivals. What began as the Internet Research Agency or “troll farm” has metastasized into dozens of fake but constituency-specific news outlets targeting foreign electorates and drawing on local or imported talents.

Last year, the Free Russia Foundation published the chapter “Putin’s Expendables” in its lengthy *Misrule of Law* report², detailing the military and political activities of both Wagner and Prigozhin’s army of political technologists and communications consultants as they set to work promoting Russian influence around the globe. This analysis should be read as an update of that earlier effort, incorporating newly revealed or reported information, particularly in light of recent revelations about the Company’s ties to Russian special services.

1 Natalia Arno et al., *Misrule of Law. How the Kremlin Uses Western Institutions to Undermine the West* (Washington D.C.: Free Russia Foundation, 2019). <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/MisruleOfLaw-Web.pdf>

2 Arno et al., *Misrule of Law*.

Wagner and the GRU

A Western intelligence official queried for “Putin’s Expendables” described Wagner as a “tool” of the GRU, Russia’s military spy agency. The conspicuous location of Wagner’s training camp in Molkyno, Krasnodar, right next to a GRU Spetsnaz facility (such real estate simply isn’t available to anyone) was certainly a big clue. Coupled with the manifold deployments of Wagner operatives to any number of declared or undeclared Russia combat zones around the world, as well as Prigozhin’s role in facilitating arms contracts on behalf the Russian Defense Ministry, this “private military company” was more akin to an outcropping of the Russian army, irregulars as easily deployed as they were disavowed.

However, journalistic spadework has since unearthed still more persuasive evidence connecting Wagner, and Prigozhin personally, to the GRU.

A joint investigation by the digital forensic website Bellingcat, the Russian website *The Insider* and German newspaper *Der Spiegel* found, using leaked telephone metadata, that Prigozhin “spoke more than 25 times with Lt. General Alexey Dyumin—

Putin’s ex head of security and—at the time of the calls—deputy director of GRU who supervised the Crimea annexation” as well as with Russia’s Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and other officials in Russia’s military-security establishment. Additionally, the three outlets found the putative founder of the Wagner Group, Dmitry Utkin, is in fact a probable decoy, selected by as-yet-unknown party or parties to elide the Russian government’s involvement in standing up and directing this now-ubiquitous mercenary army³.

Utkin apparently posted a job application online in 2013, just months prior to Wagner’s deployment to Ukraine, in which he sought a position as “deputy general director” with a modest salary of 30,000 rubles (or \$1,000) per month. In that application, Utkin described himself as a former GRU unit commander who fought in both Chechen wars and was later deployed to the Russian-Estonian border, where for the next ten years he commanded the GRU’s Second Spetsnaz Brigade⁴.

Phone intercepts subsequently released by Ukraine’s domestic intelligence service, the SBU, showed Utkin deferring to three

3 “Putin Chef’s Kisses of Death: Russia’s Shadow Army’s State-Run Structure Exposed,” Bellingcat, August 24, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>

4 “Putin Chef’s Kisses of Death.”

Russian superiors on the battlefields of east Ukraine in 2015. The first was Oleg Ivanikov, whom Bellingcat identified as “a senior GRU officer who helped procure at least one Buk missile system for the militants in Donbass in the days before the downing of MH17.” The second was Andrey Troshev, a former police colonel from St. Petersburg. The third was Maj. Gen. Evgeniy Nikiforov, at the time chief of staff of the 58th Western Army.

In a photograph obtained from the Russian social media platform VKontakte and displayed by Bellingcat, Utkin and Troshev are shown flanking Vladimir Putin, the occasion being Troshev receiving the Hero of the Russian Federation, the nation’s highest military honor, as well as the Gold Star for his “volunteer” service in Syria. Utkin, meanwhile, is seen sporting the lesser Bravery medals, which is another sign of his subordinate status within the Wagner hierarchy⁵.

To the Shores of Tripoli

The death of Muammar Gaddafi, following a NATO-led intervention with UN approval in 2011, caused significant distress for Vladimir Putin, then castled as prime minister. In the aftermath of the fall of the regime, power struggles brewed between regional seats of power, and the elected General National Congress (GNC) party proved unable to impose security, failing to suppress Salafist militants, some affiliated with ISIS or al-Qaeda, and rebellious paramilitaries. The anarchy was exemplified by the kidnapping⁶

of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan and the assassination⁷ of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi.

By 2014, with the moribund GNC coming under assault after attempting to extend its stay in power, Khalifa Haftar, a former colonel in the Libyan army, challenged the government and marshalled forces in the east as the country descended into civil war. Haftar was one of the officers who had taken part in the 1969 coup that brought Gaddafi to power, but was abandoned by the dicta-

5 “Putin Chef’s Kisses of Death.”

6 Carlotta Gall, “Show of Power by Libya Militia in Kidnapping,” New York Times, October 10, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/11/world/africa/libya.html>

7 David D. Kirkpatrick and Steven Lee Myers, “Libya Attack Brings Challenges for U.S.,” New York Times, September 12, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/world/middleeast/us-envoy-to-libya-is-reported-killed.html>

tor after being captured in Chad following a disastrous offensive blocked by highly maneuverable Chadian forces on Toyota Hilux pickups, supported by French air strikes. Haftar was subsequently exfiltrated to the United States by the CIA, which recruited him as an asset⁸ in opposition to Gaddafi, and resettled just outside Washington, D.C. in Falls Church, Virginia.

Given Haftar's CIA ties, U.S. citizenship and long-standing opposition to the late Colonel whose death was so lamented by Putin, it seemed strange that the Kremlin decided to invest in this leader, albeit a strongman of the type preferred by Moscow, in order to regain influence in Libya. Nevertheless, news reports abounded in 2018 and 2019 of Russian support for Haftar, and he was photographed⁹ meeting with not only Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, but also Prigozhin in Moscow.

But the arrest¹⁰ in Tripoli of two Russian nationals in May last year revealed a more

nefarious scheme. The men had just returned from a meeting with another Libyan politician seeking power, Saif al-Islam, Gaddafi's son.

The men were employees of the St Petersburg-based Fund for the Defense of National Values, often referred to as Prigozhin's "back office" for running political influence operations abroad. The organization, which called the detainees "sociologists" dispatched to Libya "to observe the situation," is headed by Aleksandr Malkevich¹¹. Malkevich was put on the U.S. sanctions list¹² in December 2018 for running the bogus American news site USA Really, a subsidiary of RIA FAN, the news agency operated from the same former premises of Prigozhin's notorious "troll farm," the Internet Research Agency.

Documents from the laptop of one of the Russians, Maksim Shugaley, were obtained by the Dossier Center in London (funded by exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky), and shared with journalists from the Russian news portal the Project and the Daily Beast.

8 Julian E. Barnes, "Ex-C.I.A. Asset, Now a Libyan Strongman, Faces Torture Accusations," New York Times, February 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/us/politics/hifter-torture-lawsuit-libya.html>

9 Irek Murtazin, "Na etoy kukhne chto-to gotvitsya" [Something is cooking in this kitchen], Novaya Gazeta, November 9, 2018, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/11/09/78517-na-etoy-kuhne-chto-to-gotovitsya>

10 Samer Al-Atrush, Ilya Arkhipov, and Henry Meyer, "Libya Uncovers Alleged Russian Plot to Meddle in African Votes," Bloomberg, July 5, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-05/libya-arrests-two-russians-accused-of-trying-to-influence-vote>

11 Amy Mackinnon, "The Evolution of a Russian Troll," Foreign Policy, July 10, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/10/the-evolution-of-a-russian-troll-russia-libya-detained-tripoli/>

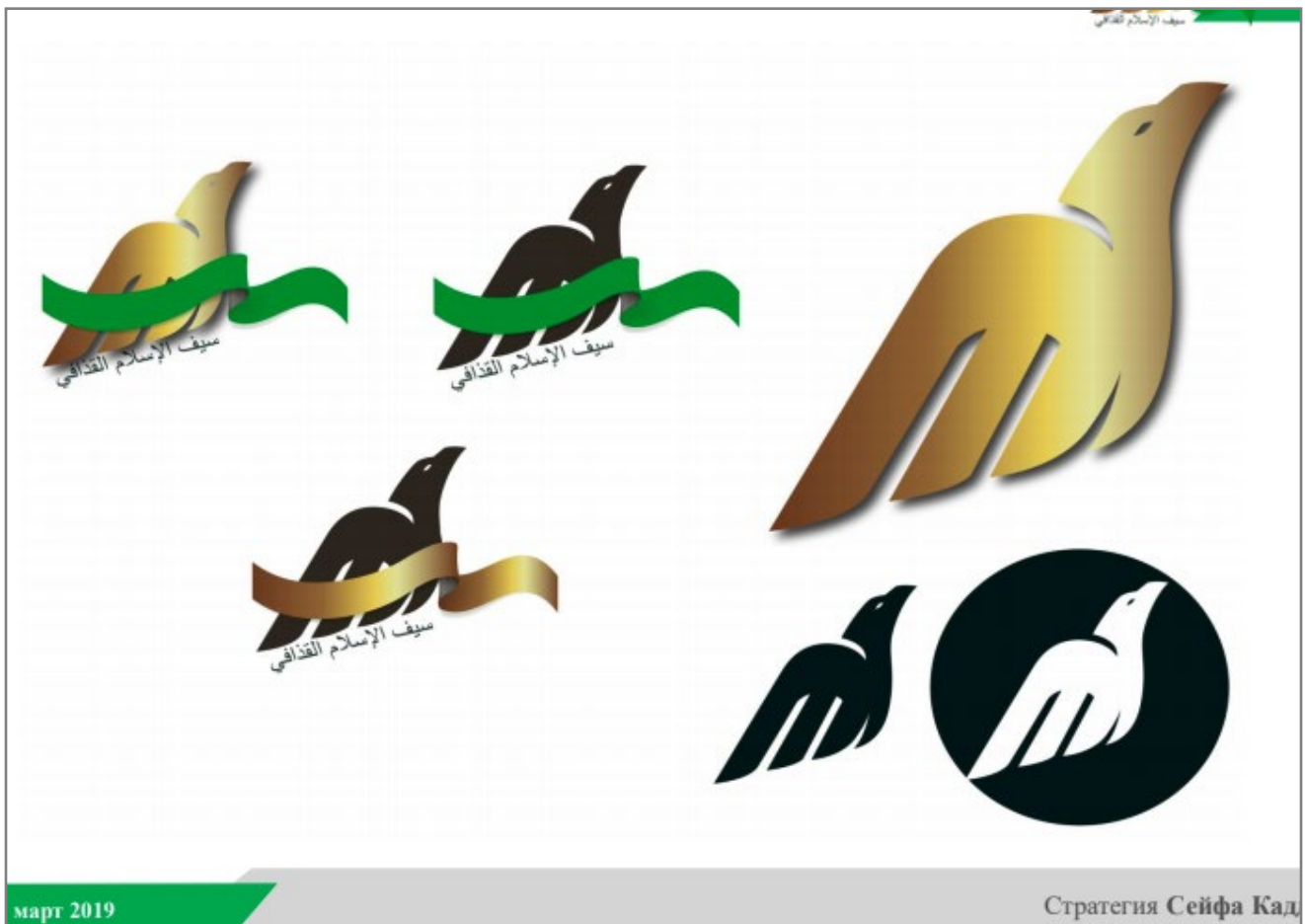
12 "Treasury Targets Russian Operative over Election Interference, World Anti-Doping Agency Hacking, and Other Malign Activities," Press Releases, U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 19, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm577>

The documents contained a wealth of information on the political technology elements of the Prigozhin operation, particularly its cynical double-dealing. A pair of campaign strategy presentations prepared for Haftar and Saif al-Islam promised both men the presidency.

Both PowerPoint decks are supported with extensive polling, both online and by telephone, as well as expert interviews, building the research required to develop

electoral campaigns. While not quite at the level of McKinsey (all the documents are produced on a cracked copy of Microsoft Office apparently downloaded from a torrent site), there is a clear aim to emulate a professional political consultancy.

The proposals ranged from recommended slogans and logos to detailed, step-by-step instructions on timing media appearances and international meetings (to be hosted in Russia, of course).



Proposals for Saif al-Islam's campaign logo, March 2019 (from the Dossier Center)

ЕДИНЫЙ ЛИДЕР – ЕДИНОЙ ЛИВИИ

Основные претензии к Халифу Хафтару:

1. ущемление национальных меньшинств;
2. узурпация власти.

Ливия нуждается в новом едином сильном Лидере.

Главные условия для нового Лидера:

1. Легитимное получение власти в результате выборов;
2. Истинная поддержка большинством населения;
3. Признание избранного лидера мировым сообществом.

Формирование имиджа Халифы Хафтару:

- современный цивилизованный политик;
- «Спаситель Ливии», остановивший кровавый хаос;
- «Собиратель земель», возрождающий Ливийское государство;
- победитель ИГИЛа, Аль-Каиды, радикальных исламистов, продолжающий борьбу.



A slide from a deck proposing Haftar's campaign strategy, 2019.

"One leader – One Libya" (from the Dossier Center)

Both campaigns would also be supported by the generation or resurrection of media outlets. In the case of Haftar, several print publications were created, with the Prigozhin organization going as far as to deliver a new printing press to the country to manufacture four newspapers and single-page "comic strip" format propaganda,

targeting Arabic-, Berber-, Toubou-, and Tuareg-speaking communities. Saif al-Islam Gaddafi would be promoted by Jamahiriya TV, the vestigial remains of his father's state television apparatus, now operating out of Cairo. The channel was lavishly refurbished, staff retrained, and had its debts paid off by the organization.

Эфирная студия до начала сотрудничества с Компанией



Эфирная студия после начала сотрудничества с Компанией



Photos of Jamahiriya TV studio before and after receiving help from the Prigozhin organization, dates unknown. (from the Dossier Center)

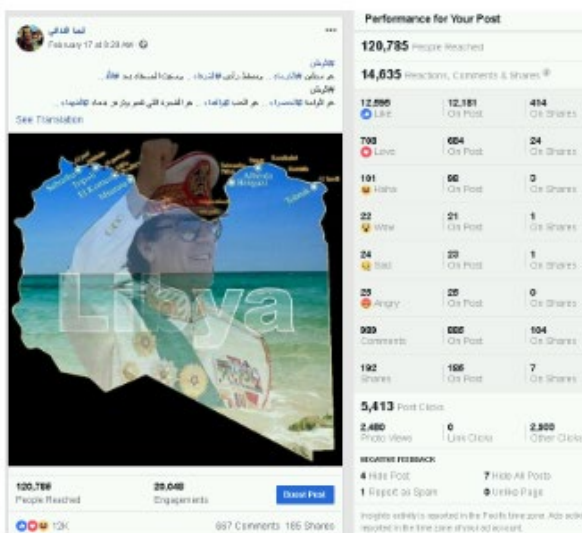
Social media campaigns were also launched, with an internal memo reporting that 12 news groups, reaching an audience of over two million users a week, had been

created by March 2019. The groups were divided between those praising Haftar and those supporting Gaddafi. Several of these

pages would later be deleted by Facebook for their connection to the Company.

По состоянию на март 2019 года, создано 12 групп в социальной сети Facebook по следующим направлениям: поддержка Сейфа Каддафи, новостные группы в основных регионах Ливии, поддержка генерала Халифа Хафтара. Число постоянной аудитории ливийских групп в социальной сети Facebook составляет более 250 000 человек, а еженедельный охват публикаций - более 2 000 000 пользователей.

Пример публикации в социальных сетях (тема «поддержка Каддафи»)



Патриотический пост про лучшее время Родины.

Дата размещения: 17.01.2019

120 785 просмотров

12 595 лайков

Prigozhin Organization report on social media campaigns in support of both Haftar and Gaddafi, January 17, 2019 (from the Dossier Center)

According to the internal documents, as of April 2019 there were 17 employees of "the Company" (as the organization was referred to throughout the internal memos) in Libya and Egypt, assigned to different cities and power brokers, presumably to collect intelligence, advise, and pitch political con-

sultancy bids. Only six military specialists and 23 "employees from repair units" were deployed at this point to fix and restore 125 pieces of military hardware for the Libyan National Army (LNA), including tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery. Whether these military personnel were members of the

Russian armed forces or contractors for Wagner is unclear, but the “Company” field in the metadata for the Word document detailing the hardware repairs contains the word “FAUGI,” the Russian initials for the Federal Agency for State Property.

These disclosures not only undercut previous reporting which put the scale of Russian mercenary intervention as far greater; the documents made clear that the previous reporting was part of a disinformation campaign run not by the Kremlin or the Company but by Haftar himself.

The relationship with the warlord had been turning sour, with Prigozhin’s political technologists and military advisers sending frequent complaints back to St. Petersburg about the warlord’s behavior and alleged duplicity. According to several of the memos, Russian specialists were not being allowed what they called “access to real work” while “Haftar [used] his relationship with the Russian Federation as an instrument of influence, supporting rumours about the participation of Russians in his military campaigns.”

Haftar’s rumor-mongering went as far as having his soldiers place fake paper stickers of Russian license plates on their vehicles for a photo opportunity designed to boost the supposed number of Russian soldiers embedded with his LNA forces. Company employees were dispatched to remove them before international observers fell for the hoax.

For the Russians, Haftar was too close to

France, too close to the UAE, and remained a U.S. citizen to boot (a hangover from his stay as a guest of the CIA). Haftar was rightly suspicious of the Russians’ motives, refusing them permission to fly from his territory to meet with Saif al-Islam, with whom the Company would also work, offering its services to help him win the presidency (as it had to Haftar).

The treachery was laid out plainly in a report from Pyotr Bychkov, one the main coordinators in the Company, whose formal role is on the board of the Fund for the Defense of National Values, the main Prigozhin cutout in Libya. Remarkably, the Company’s political double-dealing was now transformed into military support to the one client, Saif al-Islam, against the other, Haftar, with the objective being the creation of a “stable equilibrium” between the two, managed and mediated by Russia. As Bychkov wrote:

There are serious grounds to believe that, in the event of his military-political victory, Haftar would not be loyal to the interests of Russia. To relieve risks, it is proposed that we strengthen the position of the western portion of Libya, uniting all the forces under Saif Gaddafi or another figure, using the factor of the Tou-bou and Sudanese opposition:

Agreements have been reached with the leader of the Rapid Support Forces of the Republic of Sudan, Mohamed Hamdan Degalo, “Hemedti,”

on possible joint operations in Libya. The interest of the Sudanese side is the crushing of a group of mercenaries from among the Sudanese opposition (3,000 fighters), fighting on the side of Haftar. Hemedti's forces (up to 30,000 fighters) may, in cooperation with the Toubou (no less than 6,000 fighters), be able to level-out Haftar's military-political successes in the south of Libya (the LNA and their allies have 22,000 fighters), forcing the latter to come to the negotiating table. A demonstration of intent by the coalition of the Toubou and Hemedti to move towards Tripoli would also create the prerequisites for the unification of the disparate factions in the west of the country. The result of the operation will be a stable equilibrium between the military factions of the East (Cyrenaica, Haftar), South (Fezzan, Toubou and their allies) and the West (Tripolitania), allowing a return to the normal negotiation process under the mediation of the Russian Federation.

Where a Western consultancy might have viewed this as a conflict of interest, the Company clearly saw their interest as conflict.

Still another unintended revelation, again related to Prigozhin's nexus to the Rus-

sian military establishment, was contained in these PowerPoints. While Haftar excluded the Russians from strategic decision-making, the LNA was simultaneously begging for greater military support, particularly in the form of drone reconnaissance and air strikes. These requests were, the Company reported, denied by "the commander of the Russian group," one Lieutenant General Andrei Vladimirovich Kholzakov, deputy commander of the Airborne Assault Forces (VDV). Thus, the Russian Defense Ministry had put a senior officer in the field and was fully integrated with the Company's decision-making, replicating the kind of relationship Utkin maintained with Ivannikov in the Ukrainian battlespace.

By the end of the summer of 2019, the dynamics of the Libyan civil war had shifted drastically.

Hemedti's Janjaweed ("devils on horseback") militiamen, notorious¹³ for their genocidal campaign in Darfur and brutal attacks on protesters in Khartoum, did enter the conflict but in support of, rather than against, Haftar's LNA. Bychkov's report, written in March, had mentioned an alternative possibility: "Hemedti is also prepared to replace the Sudanese opposition with his own forces, strengthening the LNA for a joint military operation to take full control of the territory of Libya. In such an event, the Russian Fed-

13 Jérôme Tubiana, "The Man Who Terrorized Darfur Is Leading Sudan's Supposed Transition," Foreign Policy, May 14, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/14/man-who-terrorized-darfur-is-leading-sudans-supposed-transition-hemeti-rsf-janjaweed-bashir-khartoum/>

eration maintains a loyal and powerful ally in the structure of the LNA, which Haftar will have to reckon with. This is particularly true in light of the Marshal's deteriorating health."

The first reports¹⁴ of Janjaweed militias came in late July, as around 1,000 Sudanese militiamen arrived in Libya. Significant Russian military support would soon follow.

On September 19, the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), supported militarily by Turkey and Qatar, announced¹⁵ that they had conducted a drone strike on an alleged Wagner position south of Tripoli on September 9.

On September 25, Bloomberg reported¹⁶ that more than 100 Wagner fighters had been deployed to a base near the front line in Libya since the first week of that month in sup-

port of Haftar's renewed offensive on Tripoli. One "Russian mercenary commander" told the news agency that several Wagner fighters had already been killed in combat.

At around the same time, the GNA-affiliated 3rd Tripoli Infantry Company announced that they had seized personal items abandoned after Wagner fighters fled Espiaa, around 12 kilometers south of Tripoli Airport. The unit published photos and video¹⁷ footage of the material, which included a MON-50 landmine, currency, notebooks, airline tickets for Russia's Pobeda Airlines, testosterone supplements, military and religious paraphernalia, a bank card and a mobile phone, both identified by the Conflict Intelligence Team¹⁸, a group of Russian investigative bloggers, as belonging to Vadim Bekshenyov.

14 "Hundreds of Sudan Militia Fighters Deployed to Haftar's Libya Offensive," New Arab, July 26, 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/7/26/hundreds-sudan-militia-fighters-deployed-to-haftars-libya-offensive>

15 Mustafa Dalla, "Has Russia's 'Wagner' Entered the Battle for Tripoli?" Anadolu Agency, September 19, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/1588153/ةيسورلارن غاف-تل خدله/ةيل يلى حتراب خا>

16 Samer Al-Atrush and Stepan Kravchenko, "Putin-Linked Mercenaries Are Fighting on Libya's Front Lines," Bloomberg, September 25, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-25/-putin-s-chef-deploys-mercenaries-to-libya-in-latest-adventure>

17 Third Company of the Misurata Infantry, "Finding documents, mines, weapons and family photos of the dead Russians who were fighting with Haftar," Facebook (video), September 25, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/293411454513679/videos/408829926440699>

18 Ruslan Leviev, "Russia's 'Afrika Korps': 'Wagner' Mercenaries on the Frontline in Libya," Conflict Intelligence Team (website), September 27, 2019, <https://citeam.org/wagner-mercenaries-on-the-frontline-in-libya/?lang=en>



Bekshenyov at the 841st Independent Electronic Warfare Center of the Baltic Fleet in Yantarny (posted on May 10, 2016 on his Facebook page)

Bekshenyov's social media history suggests he served in Russia's Pacific Fleet, possibly in the air assault battalion of the 165th Naval Infantry Regiment and had recently been serving with the 841st Independent Electronic Warfare Center of the Baltic Fleet in Yantarny. Significantly, Bekshenyov's bank card, valid until 2022, was issued by a Sberbank branch in Yantarny. Another photo on his phone showed a medal awarded for combat with Wagner in Syria.

The logistics train was a further indication of direct support for the LNA from the Russian Defense Ministry. An internal UN report seen by authors of this report tracked a significant increase in Russian Air Force transport aircraft flights between Latakia, Syria, and airfields in Libya between August 2019 and February 2020. At least 52 such flights arrived in Libya between January 1 and February 28 alone, potentially carrying as much as 2,232 metric tons of cargo.

That period coincided with Turkey's direct intervention in the Libyan civil war on the side of the GNA. Ankara sent 100 military officers, and shiploads of arms and material to bolster the Serraj government. It also dispatched warships and conducted missile strikes and fixed-wing sorties on Haftar's forces, launched from the Mediterranean. Even more significantly, it also deployed as many as 2,000 mercenaries commanded under the Syrian National Army, a Turkish-built umbrella for the disparate remaining factions of the Free Syrian Army, which, beginning in 2012, took up arms against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria¹⁹.

Libya's civil war, in a sense, has become a sideshow of the Syrian civil war.

The report also identified 53 flights by

Cham Wings, a Syrian airline, from Damascus to Benghazi between April 2019 and March 2020, with a marked intensification in schedule since January. That coincides with reports that Wagner, too, has been recruiting pro-Assad Syrian fighters from the Levantine warzone to fight on behalf of the LNA in Libya.

Documents examined by one Syrian opposition news site purport to show that it was using the Syrian National Youth Party to recruit mercenaries from the province of Suweida, enticing them with "monthly salaries that range from 1,000 dollars to fighters who will protect the facilities, to 1,500 dollars to those who will join the war, as well as additional compensation for their families in the case of death or loss²⁰."

19 International Crisis Group, Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters, Europe Report no. 257, April 30, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/257-turkey-wades-libyas-troubled-waters>

20 "Wagner Mercenary Group Recruits Syrians to Fight in Libya: Report," Syrian Observer, February 19, 2020, <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/56150/wagner-mercenary-group-recruits-syrians-to-fight-in-libya-report.html>

Wagner and Neo-Nazis

The name Wagner derives, or so it's been alleged in Russian media, from Dmitry Utkin's fascination with Nazi Germany, Hitler's favorite composer being the anti-Semitic creator of the "Ring Cycle."

Yet the mercenary group's connection to fascism extends beyond the semiotic. A noteworthy component of Wagner's fighting forces in Syria is the Imperial Legion, the paramilitary wing of the Russian Imperial Movement, a far-right group with extensive international links, which was designated²¹ as a global terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in early 2020. The Imperial Legion provided combat training²² to two Swedish members of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, who would return home to mount

a bombing campaign in early 2017. Two years prior to that, its members fought and died during the assault on the Ukrainian city of Debaltseve²³ in early 2015, a major military operation of which Wagner played an integral role. (The SBU intercepts of Utkin's conversation with GRU officer Oleg Ivanikov concerned Wagner's role at the battle for Debaltseve²⁴.)

In November 2019, the *Washington Post* published photos²⁵ of a Russian-language military training manual found in Libya by GNA-affiliated fighters. While the report did not note this, the cover of the manual bore the logo and name of the Russian Imperial Movement, with a number assigned for the Imperial Legion.

21 Michael Pompeo, "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists," Press Statement, U.S. Department of State, April 7, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/>

22 Jonathan Berntsson and Daniel Olsson, "Här krigstränar nazisterna i Ryssland före bombdåden," [Here are the Nazis training for war in Russia before the bombings], GT, June 9, 2017, <https://www.expressen.se/gt/militarutbildades-i-ryssland-precis-fore-bombdagen/>

23 Imperskiy Legion, "6 fevralya 2015 g. den' skorbi, pamyati i chesti Imperskogo legionna. Ocherednaya godovshchina 'Debal'tsevskoy operatsii'" [February 6, 2015 is the day of mourning, memory and honor of the Imperial Legion. Another anniversary of the 'Debaltseve operation'] VKontakte, January 25, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3486

24 "SBU intercept of Utkin and Ivannikov" [in Ukrainian], YouTube video, streamed on June 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/embed/6AHRh5RSBRQ>

25 Sudarsan Raghavan, "Arrival of Russian Mercenaries Adds Deadlier Firepower, Modern Tactics to Libya's Civil War," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arrival-of-russian-mercenaries-adds-deadlier-firepower-modern-tactics-to-libyas-civil-war/2019/11/05/f330820c-fa03-11e9-9534-e0dbcc9f5683_story.html



*Russian Imperial Movement training manual found in Libya
(courtesy of the Washington Post, November 2019)*

Two months later, the Imperial Legion reported²⁶ that two of their members had indeed been killed within the last two months in Libya.

²⁶ Imperskiy Legion, "Liviya prodolzhaet zabirat' nashikh tovarishchey" [Libya continues to take our comrades], VKontakte, January 27, 2020, https://vk.com/wall-10533171_3488

Haftar's Fiasco

Haftar's offensive on Tripoli never built up the required momentum, and Wagner continued to lose soldiers²⁷ in combat. By the end of May 2020, the Russians had been forced to retreat²⁸ away from the capital after Turkey mounted a major intervention, using drones to destroy Russian-made antiaircraft systems, allowing GNA-affiliated forces to retake al-Watiya Airbase. Wagner fighters were accused²⁹ of leaving booby traps in residential areas as they pulled back.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin has not abandoned the Libyan mission. Its stated preference is to ensure a key place for Russia at any negotiations over an outright victory for Haftar, as seen in documents from the Company. And so it was not a surprise when the Russian military responded to the Turkish of-

fensive by reinforcing their position behind the front line. The clearest sign of this was the deployment³⁰ of combat jets, including MiG-29 fighters and Su-24 bombers, to Libya's al-Khadim Airbase just days after the fall of al-Watiya.

Intriguingly, the aircraft, having flown from Russia to Syria with Russian Air Force markings, were stripped of identifying insignia in Latakia³¹ before flying on to Libya. The U.S. Defense Department's Africa Command (AFRICOM) has claimed that the Russian government wishes to pass these aircraft off as Wagner assets.

To further ensure Russia's hand in Libya's future, Wagner fighters took control³² of the strategically significant Es Sider oil terminal on July 12.

27 "A Small Price to Pay for Tripoli," Meduza, October 2, 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/10/02/a-small-price-to-pay-for-tripoli>

28 Richard Spencer, "Humiliated Russian Mercenaries Wagner Group Make Hasty Retreat from Tripoli," Sunday Times (UK edition), May 25, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/elite-russian-mercenaries-wagner-group-run-out-of-tripoli-by-turkish-forces-j5bqcmjlz>

29 Salem Soloman, "Russian Mercenaries in Libya Leave Mines as Deadly Calling Cards, Observers Say," VOA, August 4, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/russian-mercenaries-libya-leave-mines-deadly-calling-cards-observers-say>

30 "Russia and the Wagner Group Continue to be Involved in Ground, Air Operations in Libya," U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs, July 24, 2020, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/33034/russia-and-the-wagner-group-continue-to-be-in>

31 US AFRICOM (@USAAfricaCommand), "They are flown by Russian military members & escorted by Russian fighters based in Syria to Libya, landing in Eastern Libya near Tobruk for fuel," Twitter, May 27, 2020, <https://twitter.com/USAAfricaCommand/status/1265630880124547080>

32 Benoit Faucon and Jared Malsin, "Russian Oil Grab in Libya Fuels U.S.—Kremlin Tensions in Mideast," Wall Street Journal, July 26, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-oil-grab-in-libya-fuels-u-s-kremlin-tensions-in-mideast-11595772000>

The Son Also Rises

The Company also appears to have reverted to Plan A, hedging its bets by promoting Saif al-Islam Gaddafi once again.

By March this year, the Stanford Internet Observatory had already noted³³ shifts in the purported political allegiances of Prigozhin-linked Facebook pages. Many of these pages, built up from the remains of Gaddafi's state media apparatus to promote Saif's political aspirations in early 2019, had become, by December, markedly pro-LNA, with some users referring to the process as "Haftarization." This reflected Russia's military commitment to the LNA offensive from September onwards. But with the offensive floundering

just a few months later, this network of pages and channels was beginning to pour scorn on the Marshal, with one video³⁴ released by Jamahiriya TV, a Russian-funded TV channel based in Cairo, highlighting a BBC report on Haftar's history as a CIA asset.

Promotion of Jamahiriya TV intensified dramatically from May, with a significant increase in the use of a hashtag³⁵ linked to the channel on Facebook. The pro-Gaddafi outlets simultaneously intensified their criticism of Haftar and, just two weeks after the loss of al-Watiya Airbase, Jamahiriya TV published³⁶ disinformation claiming that leaked documents had revealed Haftar's plans to

33 Shelby Grossman, Khadija H., and Renee DiResta, "Blurring the Lines of Media Authenticity: Prigozhin-Linked Group Funding Libyan Broadcast Media," Internet Observatory News, Cyber Policy Center, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford, March 20, 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/libya-prigozhin>

34 Aljamahiria tv, "Watch British BBC: Haftar, Commander in Chief of the Libya Army, how he was enlisted by the CIA" [in Arabic], Facebook (video), February 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/aljamahiriya/videos/758298001362358/>

35 Jamahiriya TV, Facebook, Accessed September 28, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B8%D9%85%D9%89_%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9_%D9%83%D9%84_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%B1

36 "Leaks reveal Haftar's unprecedented powers in the draft of the proposed constitutional declaration," Jamahiriya TV (website), June 3, 2020, <https://www.ljbctv.tv/2020/06/%d8%a%d8%b3%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%aa%d9%83%d8%b4%d9%81-%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%b5%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%ad%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ba%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d9%85%d8%b3%d8%a8%d9%88%d9%82%d8%a9-%d9%84%d8%ad%d9%81.html>

abolish all legislative and executive entities, leaving him sole executive, should he win power.

Despite previous efforts by Facebook to delete Prigozhin-linked Facebook pages targeting Libya, the network is alive and well, with many pages just slightly altering their name or URL³⁷, and the pro-Gaddafi chan-

nels continue to attack both Haftar and the GNA, while promoting Saif al-Islam. One notable thread in recent posts has been the appearance of photos of the late dictator's son affixed³⁸ to buildings in various, named³⁹ locations⁴⁰ around Libya. The images are likely part of a campaign orchestrated by the Company.

37 "Jamahiriya News Agency," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/jana2.ly/>

38 Jamahiriya News Agency, "With pictures. In the framework of the popular movement supporting Dr. Saif Al-Islam Muammar Gaddafi in #Libya's regions, cities and villages from the lowest...", Facebook (photos), September 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/jana2.ly/posts/186872489567977>

39 Jamahiriya News Agency, "Photos of Dr. Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi decorating the streets and reviving Al-Ajeelat city," Facebook (photos), September 12, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/jana2.ly/posts/186908262897733>

40 Jamahiriya News Agency, "Photos | The spread of photos of Dr. Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, in Zintan city southwest of the capital #Tripoli, Facebook (photos), September 14, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/jana2.ly/posts/186809212907638>

Mozambiqueak

While the Russians reweighed and stabilized their position in Libya following major setbacks, things had gone even worse in another new battlefield.

On September 12, 2019, Moz24Horas in Mozambique reported⁴¹ that around 160 Russian military personnel had arrived in the country's northwestern Cabo Delgado region to combat insurgency. Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi had only returned from a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow three weeks earlier, but the website cited security forces as saying that the Russian troops had already been in the region for two weeks.

The rapid deployment followed deals⁴² between Nyusi and Putin on trade, security, and oil exploration rights for Rosneft, Russia's

state oil company. By the end of September, photos were circulating⁴³ of Russian Mi-8 helicopters being unloaded from transport aircraft at Nacala Airport.

The Wagner group had already reportedly⁴⁴ been bidding against former Blackwater CEO Erik Prince's L6G private military company for a contract to take over security in Cabo Delgado since late 2018, and on September 27 *Carta de Moçambique* reported⁴⁵ that the soldiers and hardware arriving in Mozambique didn't belong to the Russian Armed Forces but to Wagner.

Cabo Delgado had seen a violent Islamist insurgency with alleged ISIS links since 2017 and is still reeling⁴⁶ from the devastating effects of Hurricane Kenneth in April

41 Estacio Valoi, "Tropas russas em Cabo Delgado" [Russian troops in Cabo Delgado], Moz24horas (website), September 13, 2019, <https://www.moz24h.co.mz/post/tropas-russas-em-cabo-delgado?fbclid=IwAR2BwHOntr7jxwCeK39b1Q07RemTQdJ27FjY33kgIzSWNCwV8NJQyhC3mXs>

42 "Mozambique, Russia Sign Energy, Security Deals," France24 (website), August 22, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190822-mozambique-russia-sign-energy-security-deals>

43 Eric Morier-Genoud, "Photos circulating on social media of Russians offloading military material at #Nacala airport in #Mozambique," Twitter (photos), September 26, 2019, <https://twitter.com/emorier/status/1177154389771001858>

44 "Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique," Headlines, Club of Mozambique (website), September 27, 2019, <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/russian-military-hardware-delivered-to-mozambique-143265/>

45 "Insurgência em Cabo Delgado: Governo recebe material bélico russo" [Insurgency in Cabo Delgado: Government receives Russian war material], *Carta de Moçambique* (website), September 27, 2019, <https://www.cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/3182-insurgencia-em-cabo-delgado-governo-recebe-material-belico-russo>

46 Philip Kleinfeld, "Fear, Hunger, and Mystery Killers Stalk Mozambique's Cabo Delgado," New Humanitarian (website), December 4, 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/>

2019. Wagner was, as former Rhodesian soldier and private security company chief John Gartner told⁴⁷ the *Moscow Times*, “out of their depth.”

They were also out of luck.

On October 10, two Wagner fighters were shot dead⁴⁸ in the Macomia district of Cabo Delgado. Then, a little more than a fortnight later, a convoy of Mozambican and Wagner troops was ambushed⁴⁹ and

torched in Miangalew. Twenty government soldiers and five Russian fighters were beheaded.

By the end of November, with casualties continuing to rise, Wagner had reportedly⁵⁰ mounted a “strategic retreat” from Cabo Delgado to Nacala, 360 miles⁵¹ to the south. As of the time of writing, there has been little sign of Wagner success in the region, with Islamist militants having seized⁵² the port of Mocimboa da Praia on August 12.

feature/2019/12/4/Mozambique-Cabo-Delgado-hunger-displaced-crisis

47 Piotr Sauer, “In Push for Africa, Russia’s Wagner Mercenaries Are ‘Out of their Depth’ in Mozambique,” *Moscow Times*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/11/19/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-a68220>

48 Piotr Sauer, “7 Kremlin-Linked Mercenaries Killed in Mozambique in October – Military Sources,” *Moscow Times*, October 31, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/31/7-kremlin-linked-mercenaries-killed-in-mozambique-in-october-sources-a67996>

49 “Insurgentes emboscaram e mataram 20 membros das FDS e cinco russos” [Insurgents ambush and kill 20 SDS members and five Russians], *Carta de Moçambique* (website), October 29, 2019, <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/3469-insurgentes-emboscaram-e-mataram-20-membros-das-fds-e-cinco-russos>

50 Geoffrey York, “Russian Mercenaries Regroup After Setback in Mozambique,” *Globe and Mail*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-russian-mercenaries-regroup-after-setback-in-mozambique/>

51 Jane Flanagan, “Bloodshed and Retreat from Mozambique for Putin’s Private Army the Wagner Group,” *Times* (UK edition), November 25, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bloodshed-and-retreat-from-mozambique-for-putin-s-private-army-the-wagner-group-696tnpzqh>

52 Andrew Harding, “Mocimboa da Praia: Key Mozambique port ‘seized by IS,’” *Africa*, BBC News, August 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53756692>

Out of AFRIC

While Prigozhin's political technologists operated under the name of the Fund for the Defense of National Values in Libya, the same personnel would provide these services to the authorities in Mozambique under the guise of two other front groups: the International Anticrisis Center (IAC) and the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC).

PowerPoints dated April 2018 prove AFRIC was contrived as more of a private intelligence organ or Russian consulate than an NGO, an "instrument of soft power influencing international organizations and media in

the name of a community of independent experts." AFRIC, one slide states, is a "network of agents of influence" paid in untraceable forms of cryptocurrency to provide "expert evaluations and opinions beneficial to Russia." Local Africans are hired and compensated, while Russia's hand remains invisible.

In one slide labeled "Advantages," the espionage component is even nakedly addressed, with bulleted items reading: "'Cover' and legend for conducting activities," "Anonymity," "No need to register a legal entity," and "No need for a public leader."

AFRIC - это

- **платформа www.afric.online**
(аналитика и мнения «из первых рук»)
- **сеть агентов влияния**
(эксперты из любых интересующих стран)
- **продвижение собственной повестки**
от лица экспертов и граждан
- **мобилизационный потенциал**
(публичные акции, флешмобы и т.д.)



Преимущества

- ✓ анонимность
- ✓ не нужно регистрировать юр.лицо
- ✓ не нужен публичный лидер: деятельность ведется от платформы AFRIC: сообщества независимых экспертов
- ✓ «прикрытие» и легенда для проведения мероприятий
- ✓ привлекательный современный формат

PowerPoint slides from AFRIC, 2018 (from the Dossier Center)

On October 4, 2019, as Mozambique prepared for a general election, IAC published⁵³ an opinion poll giving a dramatic lead to the incumbent Filipe Nyusi's FRELIMO party. The IAC also claimed that the United States was spreading disinformation, organizing protests, and "radicalizing so-

ciety" in support of the opposition Mozambique Democratic Movement party.

The release of this poll was illegal⁵⁴ under Mozambican law as it took place during the formal electoral campaign. Despite this, it was shared widely by a number of suspicious Facebook pages⁵⁵ and WhatsApp⁵⁶

53 "Forecast for General Election Results in the Republic of Mozambique," International Anticrisis Center (website), October 4, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191209220904/http://u0803407.isp.regruhosting.ru/2019/10/04/forecast-for-general-election-results-in-the-republic-of-mozambique/>

54 Joseph Hanlon, "Mozambique Elections" Russians Help Frelimo Backers to Break the Law – CIP Eleições," Headlines, Club of Mozambique (website), October 10, 2019, <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/mozambique-elections-russians-help-frelimo-backers-to-break-the-law-cip-eleicoes-144220/>

55 Geoffrey York, "Network of Fake Facebook Pages Shows Russian Campaign to Gain Influence in Africa," Globe and Mail, December 30, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-network-of-fake-facebook-pages-show-russian-campaign-to-gain-influence/>

56 Mozambique Presidential, National and Provincial Assembly Elections, Commonwealth Observer Group, October 15, 2019, https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Mozambique%202019%20COG%20Report_0.pdf

groups that would subsequently be deleted by Facebook for their connections to Russia.

The polling data was purportedly provided to IAC by AFRIC, whose chairman, Mozambican Jose Matemulane, studied in St. Petersburg. Matemulane told the *Globe and Mail* in December last year that the publication of the survey was “a mistake.”

AFRIC had dispatched electoral observers⁵⁷ to at least five sites across Mozambique. Their electoral observation team was made up of a mix of locals (recruited under the pretense that the organization was a grassroots, pan-African effort) representatives from Kremlin-friendly international bodies, and a number of fringe European far-right factions who have been regular guest “observers” in previous rigged or illegal ballots, such as those in occupied regions of Ukraine.

This was not the first time that AFRIC had organized such electoral observation missions. The organization had already sent delegations to “monitor” voting in South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and the very same Malagasy election

that saw much-publicized interference from the Company.

In South Africa, AFRIC and IAC conducted opposition research against rivals of the ANC in order to develop communications campaigns to undermine support for Julius Malema’s EFF and the Democratic Alliance.

The tight links between the various Prigozhin operations are clear. An investigation⁵⁸ by the Dossier Center and South Africa’s *Daily Maverick* found that it was once again Pyotr Bychkov who had directed the groups’ activities from the St. Petersburg “back office.” Leaked documents from that office were authored by Yulia Afanasyeva, a founding member of AFRIC and director of the Center for Social and Cultural Initiatives, itself founded by Bychkov.

The most high-profile public connection between AFRIC and the Company came in January, when AFRIC co-hosted a conference in Berlin with the Fund for the Defense of National Values, presided over by the Fund’s founder, Aleksandr Malkevich.

57 Shekhovtsov, Anton, “Fake Election Observation as Russia’s Tool of Election Interference: The Case of AFRIC,” European Platform for Democratic Elections (website), April 10, 2020, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/fake-election-observation-as-russias-tool-of-election-interference-the-case-of-afric-2599.html>

58 Ferial Haffajee, “Exclusive: Did Putin’s ‘Chef’ Attempt to Interfere in South African Election?” *Daily Maverick*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-05-07-exclusive-did-putins-chef-attempt-to-interfere-in-south-african-election/>



From left: Yulia Afanasyeva, Wilhelm Domke-Shultz, Clifton Ellis, Stefan Keuter, Nathalie Yamb, Aleksandr Malkevich and Billy Six at the Berlin Hilton Hotel on January 20, 2020 (from Afric.online)

Malkevich is perhaps the most well-known figure in Prigozhin's empire bar the caterer himself. Having founded USA Really, a fake American news site spreading disinformation during the 2016 electoral campaign, and played a major role in the Internet Research Agency or "troll farm," Malkevich was added⁵⁹ to the U.S. sanctions list in December 2018.

Some of AFRIC's international contacts

help shed light on the wider network of Russian influence operations. Note again the nexus between a Prigozhin entity and far-right and neo-Nazi elements:

- **Vaiva Adomaityte:** The Lithuanian founder and CEO of ADMIS Consultancy, a communications agency registered⁶⁰ in Warrington, England. Adomaityte has been closely involved with AFRIC since at least 2019, helping

⁵⁹ "Treasury Targets Russian Operatives over Election Interference, World Anti-Doping Agency Hacking, and Other Malign Activities," Press Releases, U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 19, 2018, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm577>

⁶⁰ "ADMIS Consultancy Limited," Companies House (Public Beta Search Service, website), accessed September 28, 2020, <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/10920953>

draft⁶¹ a policy program presented to African delegates in Sochi for a larger conference hosted by President Putin. ADMIS has been placed closer to the forefront⁶² in recent months, while AFRIC's website has been deprecated and stripped of much content. In July this year, the company announced⁶³ it was now "an official agency for Yemen's government" following a meeting with the BRICS International Forum and the Yemen Oil Company.

- **Volker Tschapke:** The honorary president of Germany's right-wing, pro-Russian Prussian Society has participated in a number of AFRIC electoral observation missions and events.
- **Purnima Anand:** Indian President of the BRICS International Forum—both

regular participants in AFRIC electoral missions.

- **Stefan Keuter:** An MP in Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party who has taken part in electoral "observation" missions in Russia and visited occupied Crimea, Keuter has taken part in at least two AFRIC conferences and received delegations from the group at the Bundestag⁶⁴. Keuter has also appeared as a guest on Jamahiriya TV.
- **Stephan Ossenkopp:** A member of the Schiller Institute—the pro-Russian and pro-Chinese think tank that forms a core part of the conspiratorial cult founded by Lyndon LaRouche—Ossenkopp was a speaker at an AFRIC web conference⁶⁵ in June 2020.

61 ADMIS Consultancy, "ADMIS Consultancy is working in collaboration with a Global NGO AFRIC (Association of Free Research and International cooperation)," Facebook, March 3, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ADMIS.consultancy/posts/104354481180799>

62 "Covid-19 Global Impact: Digital Summit and Expert Discussion," Radio Révolution Panafricaine (website), June 12, 2020, <https://www.radiorevolutionpanafricaine.com/single-post/2020/06/12/Covid-19-Global-Impact-Digital-Summit-and-Expert-Discussion>

63 ADMIS Consultancy, "Today was announced the beginning of a beautiful friendship between ADMIS Consultancy and BRICS Youth parliament in Yemen," Facebook, July 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ADMIS.consultancy/posts/160695975546649>

64 Charles HV Allen (@charles_hv), Twitter (photo), August 4, 2019, https://twitter.com/charles_hv/status/1158051450636951554

65 "Covid-19 Global Impact."

- **Vávra Suk:** A Swedish far-right politician and editor in chief of the *Nya Tider* magazine, Suk participated, along with his colleague Sanna Hill, in the AFRIC mission to observe the 2018 Zimbabwean elections, and both have also traveled as a member of the group to Damascus to meet⁶⁶ with Syrian regime officials. Both Suk and Hill are out-and-out white supremacists⁶⁷. Suk has been a speaker at fascist conferences organized by everyone from David Duke to Aleksandr Dugin, and both the Swedes are enthusiastic supporters of racist Afrikaner groups promoting the narrative of “white genocide.” This did not stop them taking part in the Zimbabwean mission, which saw AFRIC “observers” pay a visit to the home of deposed President Robert Mugabe, the man who defeated the white supremacist Rhodesian regime of Ian Smith.
- **Mirjam Zwingli:** A Swiss consultant and member of Vladimir Yakunin’s German-Russian Forum, Zwingli took part in the AFRIC mission to Zimbabwe as well as participated in events put on by the Rhodes Forum (another Yakunin cutout) and the BRICS International Forum. She acted as an “independent observer” during Russia’s 2018 presidential elections and joined⁶⁸ the Westminster Russia Forum (WRF), formerly Conservative Friends of Russia, in December that year. Zwingli has since been made a member⁶⁹ of the board of Cobb Energy Communications—the company run by WRF Chair Nick Cobb.

66 “Visit to Syria: Will the Refugees in Europe Return?” AFRIC (website), September 5, 2018, <https://afric.online/888-visit-to-syria-will-the-refugees-in-europe-return/>

67 Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, “Russia is Using Undercover Racists to Exploit Africa’s Anti-Racist Political Revolt,” *Daily Beast*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/prigozhin-is-using-afric-to-exploit-africas-anti-colonial-political-revolt?ref=author>

68 Nicholas Cobb, “WRF Appoints Mirjam Zwingli as European Representative,” Blog of the WRF, Westminster Russia Forum, December 15, 2018, <http://westminster-russia.org.uk/wrf-appoints-european-representative/>

69 Nic Cobb, “Introducing the CEC Board: Mirjam Zwingli – European relations Director,” CED (blog), April 2, <https://ru.cobbenergy.co/post/manage-your-blog-from-your-live-site>



From top left: Tschapke, Suk, and Arildiipurev Tsevelragchaa, head of foreign cooperation at Mongolia's Ministry of Labor and Social Protection; from bottom left: Hill, Zwingli, and Anand in Zimbabwe in July, 2018 (photo from Tsevelragchaa's Facebook page)

The Company's operations in Africa were supported by the creation of websites and dozens of social media pages, significant numbers of which have been identified as Russian-controlled and deleted by Facebook⁷⁰, but the most significant media support came from preexisting media networks.

In Libya we saw this with the renovation of Jamahiriya TV, and across much of the Francophone countries targeted by influence operations, the biggest cheerleader for Russia and efforts like AFRIC has been Afrique Media TV.

⁷⁰ "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa," Internet Observatory News, Cyber Policy Center, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford, October 30, 2019, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/prigozhin-africa>

Prigozhin TV

Founded in 2011, Afrique Media TV is part of Media Press Africa, a company based in Douala, Cameroon, that also publishes several print editions, including *Courrier Confidentiel* and *International Afrique Media*. Afrique Media TV has partnered with AFRIC since September 2018, when the channel helped organize the Russian front group's 'Islands of Hope' conference in Madagascar. Since then, the outlet has devoted extensive air time to promoting and covering AFRIC events, as well as airing interviews with AFRIC members such as Vaiva Adomaityte⁷¹, British strategist Clifton Ellis, Beninese activist Qemal Affagnon, and Ivorian politician Nathalie Yamb. One of the directors of Afrique Media TV, Kemi Seba, a Franco-Beninese pan-Africanist activist with a history⁷² of anti-Semitism, has taken part in several AFRIC monitoring expeditions, including those in Zimbabwe and Madagascar. In 2017 he

traveled to Russia and met⁷³ with Aleksandr Dugin, a key figure in the post-Soviet manifestation of Eurasianism and a long-standing bridge between Russia and the international far-right. Dugin would go on to write a preface⁷⁴ to Seba's 2019 book *L'Afrique Libre ou la Mort* (*Free Africa or Death*).

Another figure linking Russian influence efforts with Afrique Media TV is Luc Michel, a Belgian far-right activist who founded the European Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE)—which has led pro-Kremlin "observation" missions in numerous ballots, including those in occupied Crimea. Michel has been busily building up a network of media contacts and dodgy outlets in Africa since at least 2014, with many of them simply resharing content from his personal blogs. An astonishingly prolific writer, Michel publishes dozens of pieces per week under a myriad of banners with names like the Euro-Libyan

71 Afrique Media TV, "Pan African Debate," Facebook (video), accessed September 28, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=374928320571111>

72 "Kémi Séba, ex-leader de la Tribu KA et proche de Dieudonné, incarcéré" [Kémi Séba, ex-leader of the KA Tribe and close to Dieudonné, imprisoned], *Le Parisien*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.leparisien.fr/paris-75/videos-le-militant-radical-kemi-seba-ex-leader-de-la-tribu-ka-arrete-a-paris-14-09-2014-4134229.php>

73 Mikhail Gamandiy-Egorov, "Kemi Seba: souverainistes africains et Russie, 'une alliance naturelle'" [Kemi Seba: African sovereigntists and Russia, 'a natural alliance'], *Sputnik* (France edition), December 22, 2017, https://fr.sputniknews.com/points_de_vue/201712221034454553-kemi-seba-souverainistes-africains/

74 Joaquin Flores, "Dugin: Free Africa or Death! Kemi Seba: African Goal of a Multipolar World," *Fort Russ News* (website), May 20, 2019, <https://fort-russ.com/2019/05/dugin-free-africa-or-death-kemi-seba-african-goal-of-a-multipolar-world/>

Action Committees, Movement for European Direct Democracy, New National-European Culture, and European Resistance. His African sites include La Voix de la Guinée Équatoriale, PanAfricom-TV, WebTV-Tchad and Centrafrica News.

Michel has been appearing on Afrique

Media TV since⁷⁵ at least February 2014, turning up on the channel at least once a week, and has also written⁷⁶ for the *International Afrique Media* print publication. His EODE deputy, Fabrice Beaur, is the Russia correspondent for Afrique Media TV and runs several Facebook pages connected to it.



Luc Michel in November, 2017, location unknown (photo from actucameroun.com)

⁷⁵ Luc Michel WebTeam, “#Afrique Media & Lucmiche.net/ Luc Michel on ‘Afrique Media’ TV,” Luc Michel’s Transnational Action (website), February 9, 2014, <http://www.lucmichel.net/2014/02/09/afrique-media-lucmichel-net-luc-michel-sur-afrique-media-tv/>

⁷⁶ Luc Michel WebTeam, “#Dans le dernier no du ‘magazine international Afrique Media’: la grande enquête de Luc Michel sur la destabilisation du Congo Brazzaville” [in the latest issue of the ‘International Afrique Media magazine’: Luc Michel’s big inquiry on the destabilization of Congo Brazzaville], Luc Michel’s Transnational Action (website), February 28, 2018, <http://www.lucmichel.net/2018/02/28/dans-le-dernier-n-du-magazine-international-afrique-media-la-grande-enquete-de-luc-michel-sur-la-destabilisation-du-congo-brazzaville/>

Michel's Euro-Libyan Action Committees page is also prominently featured on the homepage⁷⁷ for Jamahiriya TV.

This suggests that the Kremlin has taken advantage of existing networks run by assets, such as Michel, to develop newer initiatives such as the Prigozhin enterprise in Africa.

According to Tutu Alicante, a human rights lawyer and activist from Equatorial Guinea, Afrique Media TV was founded⁷⁸ with financial backing from Teodoro Obiang Nguemo, the dictator of that country who has built a notoriously kleptocratic and abusive regime. Obiang, who was praised on state radio⁷⁹ in 2003 as being "like God in heaven" with the right "to kill without anyone calling him to account," is apparently very keen to enhance his international image, spending⁸⁰ \$70,000 a month for the services of D.C. lobbying firm Qorvis and \$1 million a year on advice from Lanny Davis, former special counsel to President Bill Clinton. Obi-

ang therefore funds not only Afrique Media TV but a plethora of other media operations targeting the region, including Afrique 24 and Jeune Afrique.

Another outlet that has its offices in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, and lavishes praise on Obiang while also reporting on and promoting every move made by AFRIC is Radio Revolution Panafricaine (or 2RP).

It is unclear how long the Obiang regime continued to fund Afrique Media TV, but, as with Jamahiriya TV, there appears to have been a major injection of cash into the broadcaster in 2019. That year, Agence de Presse Panafricaine reported⁸¹ that unnamed Russians had taken Afrique Media TV's operating costs and agreed to provide training and production assistance. Earlier that year, the channel had embarked on a recruitment drive⁸². The change in production value can be seen on-screen.

77 See, <http://jamahiriya.tv/>

78 Tutu Alicante, "To Catch a Kleptocrat: Lessons Learned from the Biens Mal Acquis Trials in France," Working Paper, National Endowment for Democracy, Washington D.C., June 2019, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/To-Catch-A-Kleptocrat.pdf>

79 "Equatorial Guinea's 'God,'" BBC News Channel, BBC, July 26, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3098007.stm>

80 Ken Silverstein, "Teodorin's World," Foreign Policy, February 21, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/teodorins-world/>

81 Agence de Presse Panafricaine, "Redéploiement russe: L'influence continentale à travers Afrique Média" [Russian deployment: continental influence through Afrique Media], Pan-African News Agency, September 13, 2019, <https://agencedepressepanafricaine.com/redeploiement-russe-linfluence-continentale-a-travers-afrique-media/>

82 "Afrique Media TV is Recruiting Interns," RéseauJeune (website), accessed September 28, 2020, <https://reseaujeune.net/poste/afrique-media-tv-recrute-des-stagiaires/>

In July, Afrique Media TV published⁸³ a vitriolic denunciation of U.S. Congressman Eliot Engel for sponsoring a motion calling for sanctions to be imposed on Prigozhin. The article would have been astonishingly barefaced for a Prigozhin-backed operation by itself, but the Company also showed its hand in other outlets as the exact same text was published by at least three other websites including Radio Revolution Panafricaine⁸⁴. The other two, Kangbi Ndara⁸⁵ and Afrique Panorama⁸⁶, have previously lent support⁸⁷ to other Prigozhin projects such as Radio Lengo Songo, a station in the Central African Re-

public funded by Lobaye Invest, a company set up by the Russians to extract gold and diamonds in the country⁸⁸.

Beyond promoting Russian initiatives and positions, the media and social media efforts linked to the Company tailor their messages depending on the region, often championing one or more current or sought-after clients in the local political ecosystem while bashing opponents or regional rivals. Across the board, however, there are several common themes, most clearly of all, vehement denunciations of the influence of France on its former colonies. In the case of CitoyenTV, another

83 “Engel a beau manœuvrer: il n’arrive pas à gagner, même avec une resolution contre prigojine! [Engel may well maneuver: he can’t win, even with a resolution against Prigozhin!], Afrique Media TV (website), July 10, 2020, <https://afriquemediatv.afrique/engel-a-beau-manoeuvrer-il-n-arrive-pas-a-gagner-meme-avec-une-resolution-contre-prigojine>

84 “Engel a beau manœuvrer: il n’arrive pas à gagner, même avec une resolution contre prigojine! [Engel may well maneuver: he can’t win, even with a resolution against Prigozhin!], Radio Révolution Panafricaine (website), July 10, 2020, <https://www.radiorevolutionpanafricaine.com/single-post/2020/07/10/Engel-a-beau-manoeuvrer-il-narrive-pas-a-gagner-meme-avec-une-resolution-contre-Prigojine->

85 “Engel a beau manœuvrer: il n’arrive pas à gagner, même avec une resolution contre prigojine! [Engel may well maneuver: he can’t win, even with a resolution against Prigozhin!], Kangbi Ndara (website), July 1, 2020, <https://kangbi-ndara.info/engel-a-beau-manoeuvrer-il-narrive-pas-a-gagner-meme-avec-une-resolution-contre-prigojine/>

86 “La resolution contre Prigozhine n’a pas aide le député Engel à attirer les voix des électeurs afro-américains” [Resolution against Prigozhin did not help Congressman Engel attract votes of African American voters], Afrique Panorama (website), June 28, 2020, <https://afriquepanorama.com/2020/06/28/la-resolution-contre-prigozhine-na-pas-aide-le-depute-engel-a-attirer-les-voix-des-electeurs-afro-americaains/>

87 “Lengo Songo appelle ses collègues à s’unir après l’incident avec un journaliste” [Lengo Songo calls on colleagues to unite after incident with reporter], Afrique Panorama (website), June 28, 2019, <https://afriquepanorama.com/2019/06/28/lengo-songo-appelle-ses-collegues-a-sunir-apres-lincident-avec-un-journaliste/>

88 “Putin’s private army”, CNN Special Report, August 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/08/africa/putins-private-army-car-intl/>

site linked to both Michel and Afrique Media TV, this purported anti-colonialist plaint has included embarrassingly hyperbolic praise for Marine Le Pen as a challenger to the Macron government in France.

The other common theme is the embrace of pan-Africanist rhetoric, with African leaders and activists portrayed as essentially opposed to the former colonial powers. Author-

itarian strongmen, denounced in the West for their human rights abuses, are routinely cast heroically, be they Gaddafi, who is bizarrely equated on many of these sites with Nelson Mandela, or Omar al-Bashir, the former Sudanese president who orchestrated a genocide in Darfur. In contrast to France, the U.S., and the UK, Russia is portrayed as a potent partner in mutually beneficial agreements.

Conclusion

What Yevgeny Prigozhin's empire of operatives and trolls may lack in consistency of results, it more than makes up for in ambition. Operatives and agents of influence from the Company have been sent to two dozen African countries to interfere in democratic elections, always by selling an expressly anti-Western, pro-Moscow message. Wagner mercenaries have been deployed to active or semi-stalemated war zones in Ukraine, Syria, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Libya. Their often grisly defeats on the frontlines at the business end of American B-52s or Turkish drones seems not to have affected Prigozhin's bottom line, or the GRU's reliance on these lackluster expendables.

Nor does the oligarch's "troll farm" show any signs of diminished activity in spite of U.S. federal indictments and an extensive write-up in Special Counsel Robert Mueller's report into Russia's 2016 U.S. election interference. Within the last month, Graphika, a New York-based social network mapping and analysis firm, found that Facebook had removed pages and accounts linked to an IRA-generated fake news site called Peace

Data, aimed at appealing to left-wing audiences in the English- and Arabic-speaking worlds⁸⁹. Tropes characteristic of Russian state propaganda—the wickedness of NATO, the moribund state of the European Union, and the duplicity of the Belarusian opposition—were propounded by Peace Data. The profiles of invented editors and journalists, all of them helmed by anonymous Prigozhin employees in St. Petersburg, used AI-generated photos to solicit contributions from real freelance writers. Some fell for the ruse. Jack Delaney wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper that he was approached on Twitter by a self-described "associate editor" of PeaceData to write a weekly column for \$200 or \$250, a rate subsequently reduced to between \$80 and \$150 in email conversation⁹⁰. His first indication that PeaceData wasn't quite the legitimate news outlet it pretended to be was the reposting of one of his articles on GlobalResearch, a fringe website devoted to propagating all manner of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and 9/11. "I've lost sleep because of it," Delaney wrote. "I have been confused, embarrassed, and frankly angry

89 Ben Nimmo et al., IRA Again: Unlucky Thirteen, Graphika, September 2020, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_ira_again_unlucky_thirteen.pdf

90 Charles Davis, "A Twitter DM and the Promise of Money: An American Putin Critic Tells Us How They Became an Unwitting Tool of a Russian State Influence Operation," *Business Insider* (website, US edition), September 1, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/writer-for-peace-data-realizes-site-russian-intelligence-facebook-2020-9>

at myself for letting the potential for a break get the best of my judgment.” Such discomfiture will have only delighted the trolls who duped him.

Disclosure of the Peace Data hoax prompted the usual debate about Prigozhin’s efficacy as purveyor of active measures. After all, few had ever heard of this obscure website before Graphika’s exposé, and the attendant media coverage and its impact on the broader political discourse was negligible. And while Jack Delaney may have lost sleep, few observers of the disinformation ecosystem did. Peace Data closed-up shop almost immediately, denying it was an IRA feint.

As anticlimactic as the results of that intervention were, it still showed remarkable ambition and initiative: more than a nodding acquaintance with the style and tone of on-line leftwing discourse, AI-generated photos, and convincing overtures to desperate American journalists. Taken as proof of concept, PeaceData wasn’t a total loss. And no doubt the IRA won’t stop there.

There is something to be said for Prigozhin’s apparent strategy of oversaturation, particularly as the costs and risks are low but the potential rewards are high. Wagner’s stunningly stupid raid on U.S. Special Forces and their Kurdish proxies in Deir Ez-zor, Syria in 2018 was undertaken because one of Prigozhin’s subsidiaries, EvroPolis, was offered a 25 percent stake in any extractive deals struck with Damascus as a re-

sult of the Russian recapture of gas fields from ISIS. Repeated American warnings to stand down went unheeded, and yet the deaths of possibly hundreds of Wagner fighters meant little to the Russian Defense Ministry, which denied these “volunteers” were there in any official capacity and then downplayed the first major exchange of live fire between Russian and American soldiers as a minor misunderstanding. It meant even less to Prigozhin, whose reported fall from grace in the Kremlin because of that fiasco now looks highly exaggerated. In fact, as his hired guns were being slaughtered in the Syrian desert, his “back office” was already hard at work building the infrastructure of AFRIC, planning Saif al-Islam’s and Haftar’s political careers, and dispatching racist “agents of influence” to South Africa, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe, where all the oligarch’s client-candidates proved successful in winning elections (in Madagascar’s case, a virtual certainty given that Prigozhin contracted with almost everyone running for the presidency).

Low grade operations conducted frequently and simultaneously eventually yield dividends. Even modest ones can be dressed up as major accomplishments for internal Russian consumption, leading to state honors, lucrative domestic contracts and permission for ever-bolder foreign endeavors. “Putin’s chef” is nobody’s idea of a strategic mastermind. But he doesn’t have to be; he’s a savvy enough businessman.

Authors

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