

A stopover in Belarus. Wagner mercenaries in search of a new *modus operandi*

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The analysis of incomplete information suggests that nine vehicle columns with Wagner mercenaries arrived in Belarus between 11 and 19 July. The Belarusian border service did not carry out passport control or inspect the transported cargo. The number of mercenaries is estimated at around 3,000; most of them have been deployed in the town of Asipovichy (Mahilyow oblast) and in the nearby tent camp in the village of Tsel. The trucks that were used to transport those people are on their way back to Russia, where more transports are being prepared. The Wagner forces are most likely moving equipment as well as light arms and ammunition to Belarus from their main base in Molkin, Krasnodar *krai*, which is in the process of being dismantled (it is supposed to be evacuated by 1 August). News channels controlled by the mercenaries have reported that the 'Belarusian contingent' will eventually number around 10,000 (around 15,000 Wagner fighters, including many wounded, have remained in Russia).

On 19 July, the head of the Wagner group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, arrived at the camp near Asipovichy along with the group's commander, Dmitry Utkin. Prigozhin made a statement in which he asserted that the mercenaries' existing operations in Africa would not be curtailed and that his 'company' remained open to cooperation as long as it "does not run counter to Russia's interests". An unspecified number of Wagner fighters will be sent to Africa. Prigozhin admitted that he had sold some of his assets (implicitly: in Russia). He also confirmed that some of his mercenaries would soon start training the Belarusian army and added that "if necessary, we will stand in its (Belarus's) defence". Sergei Chubko, alias 'Pioneer', who has seen combat in Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali and Libya, was appointed commander of the Wagner forces in Belarus.

On 20 July, the Belarusian defence ministry confirmed that a group of mercenaries had been staying at a training ground near Brest to train soldiers from the Special Operations Forces. According to information provided by the National Resistance Centre of Ukraine, Wagner fighters have appeared in the town of Naroulia (Gomel oblast, 50 km from the Ukrainian border), where their quarters are under construction.

Commentary

- The developments surrounding the mercenaries who have been arriving in Belarus suggest that Prigozhin plans to spend the coming months reorganising the troops under his control. Some will be assigned to Belarusian army units to provide combat training.

Their possible presence at training grounds near the borders with Poland and Lithuania (in addition to the one in Brest) will be part of the psychological operation designed to heighten fears in Warsaw and Vilnius about the possible use of Wagner fighters to stage provocations at the border. There are some indications that Wagner units will also be demonstratively deployed in towns near the border with Ukraine, which leaves open the possibility that they could be used as sabotage and reconnaissance groups.

- By demonstrating his independence and monopoly on taking decisions with regard to further plans for the use of his mercenaries, Prigozhin has signalled that he remains outside the control of the government in Minsk. In his words, Belarus is meant to be a stopover for some of his troops before they are flown to Africa, while cooperation with the Belarusian army amounts to voluntary training assistance. The conditions for the presence and use of Wagner fighters are most likely being determined during *ad hoc* talks with officials from the Belarusian defence ministry and KGB. The deployment of most of the mercenaries in a field camp indicates that this is a temporary solution—if their stay is extended, it will be necessary to create infrastructure for the autumn-winter period.
- President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is seeking to turn the presence of Wagner mercenaries to his advantage by assuming responsibility for them and insisting that he will determine the terms of their stay in Belarus on his own and treat it as Vladimir Putin's 'debt'. The issue of financing the mercenaries is very likely to feature on the agenda of the Putin-Lukashenka talks scheduled for 23 July. Cooperation with Prigozhin is a challenge for Lukashenka internally – it cannot be ruled out that Wagner troops will take independent action without consulting the Belarusian government. Therefore, the regime has to reckon with the possibility that it will be necessary to enforce their discipline.