



Wagner Group Arrives in Belarus —Potential Threats to Poland

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More than a dozen convoys with Wagner Group mercenaries have already arrived in Belarus and their numbers in the country are estimated at between 3,000 and 5,000. Officially, the task of the Wagner troops is to train the Belarusian army. However, Alexander Lukashenka's statements suggest that they could be used for border provocations against countries on NATO's Eastern Flank. Poland should strengthen the protection of its eastern border and consider recognising the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation. The country may also seek to develop a common NATO approach to the organisation.

The deployment of the Wagner Group to Belarus was one of the consequences of Yevgeny [Prigozhin's revolt](#). On the night of 23-24 June, Prigozhin led a group of his mercenaries to Moscow in protest of what he believed was bad policy of the Ministry of Defence related to the war in Ukraine and an attempt to disband the Wagner Group and integrate it into the regular armed forces. Prigozhin stopped the march only after receiving security guarantees and agreeing with Lukashenka and Putin that some of the mercenaries would be allowed to leave for Belarus.

What purpose did Lukashenka's provocative statements serve?

On 23 July, during a meeting with Vladimir Putin in Saint Petersburg, Lukashenka said that the Wagner Group mercenaries in Belarus "would very much like to take action against Poland, but he is preventing them from doing so". These words are reminiscent of warnings that Lukashenka made to Poland and others before the crisis on the Belarusian border began. At the time, he emphasised that it was only thanks to the policy of the Belarusian authorities that the border with NATO and EU countries was safe, but that Belarus had stopped protecting it in response to Western sanctions. Lukashenka's statement also corresponds with the words of Putin, who on 21 July, during a meeting of the State Security Council, once again accused Poland of intending to occupy western Ukraine and Belarus.

Putin added that Russia would respond if Poland took aggressive steps against Belarus. The purpose of the statements by both politicians was, among other things, to intimidate the Polish public and to try to influence the Polish authorities to change their policy towards Belarus and Russia to a less confrontational one and to stop supporting Ukraine.

How is the Wagner Group's deployment in Belarus progressing?

The dislocation began in mid-July after the Wagner Group handed over heavy equipment used in Ukraine, including tanks, multi-launch rocket and anti-aircraft missile systems, self-propelled artillery systems, howitzers, and anti-tank guns, to the Russian Defence Ministry. So far, 13 convoys with people and equipment have arrived in Belarus, predominantly buses and trucks, but also an armoured vehicles. According to various estimates, there may already be 3,000 to 5,000 Wagner troops in Belarus, mainly those who fought in Ukraine. Although the Belarusian authorities stressed that there are no former prisoners among them, some of the mercenaries certainly have a criminal past. Their main camps are located in the Mahilioŭ region near Asipovichy and the village of Tsel'. Both camps were prepared for as many as 20,000 people.

PISM SPOTLIGHT

What do the Wagner Group's activities in Belarus look like?

Shortly after the arrival of the first convoys, the mercenaries began training Belarusian operational troops (mainly Special Operations Forces, CBRN defence troops, mechanised troops, engineering troops, and communications personnel) as well as territorial defence troops. Training, mainly in battlefield survival, takes place at, among other places, the Brest training ground near the Polish border. It is not clear what equipment the Wagner troops have at their disposal, but they are trained to use the armament used by the Belarusian armed forces and can easily be equipped with it by the Belarusian authorities if required.

In addition, on 19 July, the company Konkord Management and Consulting, owned by Prigozhin, was registered in the Mahilioŭ region. This will allow him not only to operate legally in Belarus but also to make financial transfers to accounts in the country. Thus, part of Prigozhin's assets may be transferred to Belarus. It is likely that part of the Wagner Group's income from its [activities in Africa](#) will go there as well. The Wagner Group may also continue to support the development of the Belarusian security company Guard Service, whose owners belong to Lukashenka's close acquaintances.

What are the risks for Poland associated with the Wagner Group's presence in Belarus?

The mercenaries in Belarus gives the Belarusian and Russian authorities additional tools for hybrid action against NATO countries, in particular Poland and Lithuania. It can be expected that the Wagner troops will be used for border provocations against Polish uniformed services, including the possible use of arms or attempts to destroy barriers. They may also be used to coordinate and command operations at the border. It also cannot be ruled out that some of the mercenaries will try to infiltrate Poland and other countries mainly on the Eastern Flank (both illegally and, for example, with the use of Belarusian passports) with the task of identifying critical infrastructure facilities. Some of them may also be prepared to carry out acts of sabotage on Polish territory. An increase in the number of migrants

from Africa is also to be expected, and the Wagner Group will be keen to cash in trafficking them to the Belarusian border with Poland and other countries. These activities will increase tensions and have a psychological impact on Polish society in the context of, among other things, the Belarusian-Russian military exercises *Union Shield*, scheduled for the end of September, or the October parliamentary elections in Poland.

What does all this mean for Poland and NATO?

Putin's and Lukashenka's declarations make it clear that both countries will continue their hybrid actions against Poland and other NATO countries. This means that Poland should develop a plan for the long-term strengthening of the protection of the eastern border. This will include additional training of Border Guard officers, police, and soldiers of operational units and the Polish Territorial Defence Forces to respond to new threats, such as the possibility of shelling. This will also involve the retrofitting of border patrol services with appropriate equipment (body armour, helmets, long weapons, armoured cars). It will also be desirable to accelerate the creation of a Border Defence Component within the Territorial Defence Forces to relieve the burden on operational forces.

It may also be necessary to recognise the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation. This would allow the use of the Anti-Terrorist Activities Act, which, among other things, broadens the spectrum of activities that can be undertaken by the relevant security services and authorities against persons suspected of seeking to carry out terrorist activities. In addition, Poland may hold consultations within NATO and propose a common approach by Alliance members to the Wagner Group, chiefly by pointing out that they are being used by Belarus and Russia as a tool of hybrid action that requires a coordinated response from the Alliance, for example, in the form of an increased Allied presence at the border.

At the same time, Poland and NATO should announce that they will use all available instruments to fight the Wagner Group mercenaries if they pose a threat, with Belarus and Russia fully responsible for their actions on the border.