



# The Tangled, Mercenary Network of 'Putin's Chef' Is Starting to Unravel

Candace Rondeaux | Friday, Oct. 4, 2019

Three years ago, Yevgeny Prigozhin barely registered a blip

([https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?](https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=yevgeny%20prigozhin)

<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=yevgeny%20prigozhin>) on Google trends in English or

Russian. Today, the Kremlin-connected businessman better known as “Putin’s chef” is persona non grata in many places around the world, including the United States, where the Treasury Department leveled another round of sanctions against Prigozhin (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm787>) this week for his role in Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections.

Although Prigozhin’s close ties to President Vladimir Putin have long been known to Russian observers, stretching back to their younger days in St. Petersburg in the 1990s, the Kremlin insider was virtually unknown in the United States until recently. Now, Prigozhin ranks as one of the most visible targets of the U.S. response to Russian election interference. The private jets and yachts that Prigozhin has used to shuttle from one warzone business deal to the next are now effectively barred from landing in any port that trades with the United States.

Soon after Treasury officials announced the sanctions, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. will continue to try to box Prigozhin in (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/us/politics/us-russia-sanctions-election-meddling.html>) and monitor the activities of the Internet Research Agency, the St. Petersburg troll farm that Prigozhin, according to a 2018 U.S. indictment, helped finance to wage “information warfare against the United States” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/europe/prigozhin-russia-indictment-mueller.html>),” specifically against Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. The Mueller Report laid out the “active measures” of the Internet Research Agency (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/18/us/politics/mueller-report-document.html#g-page-23>) in painstaking detail, exposing Prigozhin’s role in funding its disinformation campaign through a company he controlled, Concord Management and Consulting.



*Businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin at the Konstantin palace outside St. Petersburg, Russia, Aug. 9, 2016 (AP photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko).*

While cutting off Prigozhin's financial flows and impeding his ease of movement around the world is laudable and necessary, it may not be enough. It might also miss other important targets for sanctions that could be key to placing more pressure on the Kremlin ahead of 2020 to deter further election meddling. Prigozhin uses a web of front companies with similar names to still finance the Internet Research Agency, according to U.S. Treasury officials. Public records indicate that that same network of companies has been linked to shipments of Russian-made weapons to Syria, in violation of international sanctions.

U.S. officials this week suggested that Prigozhin's private jet was registered in 2012 to a company in the Seychelles called Beratex Group Limited, which media outlets had reported earlier this year (<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/02/04/repeated-flights-to-syria-and-africa>). Prigozhin reportedly used the plane to make multiple trips to Syria and to several African countries, including Sudan, Chad and Kenya. In a statement released in response to press queries, Prigozhin denied that he owned or used the plane.

***Prigozhin is having a tough time keeping a lid on his business dealings with a rogue's gallery of African dictators and Middle Eastern strongmen.***

Registries for offshore companies, online merchant marine recruitment services and other publicly available records suggest that there are strong links between Beratex Group Limited and a sprawling network of shell companies and logistics contractors that supports sales and transfers of military weapons, primarily through ports in Ukraine and Russia. Known colloquially as the "Odessa Network" (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566ef8b4d8af107232d5358a/t/56af8a2dd210b86520934e62/1454344757606/The+Odessa+Network.pdf>), it has been implicated in numerous shady shipments of Russian- and Ukrainian-made tanks, anti-missile defense batteries, armored vehicles and other materiel.

Beratex Group Limited appears in the U.K.'s Companies House registry ([https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/officers/MULtmpptLugDSDwwUVe\\_WfIkD8w/appointments](https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/officers/MULtmpptLugDSDwwUVe_WfIkD8w/appointments)), along with several other companies bearing similar names such as Beratex SA, Beratex Limited and Beratex Inter Limited. According to that British registry, Beratex Limited and Beratex Inter Limited were linked to employees of a Seychelles-based service that registers offshore companies, which itself is implicated in massive money-laundering schemes that served Russian mobsters and oligarchs, and an array of organized criminal gangs. Data unearthed as part of an ongoing study I am leading into proxy warfare indicate that several one-time employees of the Moran Security Group (<http://moran-group.org/>), a Russian private military security company with links to the Wagner Group, the private military contractor that Prigozhin ostensibly manages, listed a Seychelles-registered company called Beratex Ltd. as a previous employer.

Prigozhin has other problems to deal with. Fresh public exposure about the activities of the Wagner Group also threatens to upend his crooked business model—and potentially his usefulness to the Kremlin. Bloomberg reported last month that Wagner Group contractors are fighting on the front lines in Libya (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-25/-putin-s-chef-deploys-mercenaries-to-libya-in-latest-adventure>), in support of Gen. Khalifa Haftar and his breakaway Libya National Army, which has been trying to take Tripoli.

But the Wagner Group seems to be struggling in its push to help Haftar capture Tripoli and other key locations in western Libya. Amid reports that forces loyal to Libya's U.N.-backed government raided a Wagner Group base of operations (<https://thedefensepost.com/2019/09/26/libya-pmc-wagner-haftar/>) near the town of Bir Allaq, a video surfaced on YouTube ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7N\\_NQ\\_R85E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7N_NQ_R85E)) depicting Libyan government fighters picking over personal items of a Russian contractor, apparently discovered after Wagner contractors were forced to flee. During fierce clashes with Libyan government troops in early September, Wagner Group fighters reportedly sustained multiple casualties (<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/10/02/a-small-price-to-pay-for-tripoli>) in airstrikes near the strategically important al-Watiya airbase.

Prigozhin is having a tough time keeping a lid on his business dealings with a rogue's gallery of African dictators (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>) and Middle Eastern strongmen (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-25/-putin-s-chef-deploys-mercenaries-to-libya-in-latest-adventure>). So it is not hard to imagine that Putin and the Russian state enterprises that the Wagner Group serves might one day rethink whether keeping Prigozhin around makes good business sense. Even in the unlikely event that U.S. sanctions and the federal investigation into Prigozhin's company and the Internet Research Agency wipe out a good portion of his empire, evidence and history suggest the Kremlin would have no compunction about replacing him. After all, since Putin came to power, Prigozhin is likely just one of many mid- to high-level Kremlin-approved managers who has over the years handled weapons and energy deals around the world.

What all this means for Prigozhin and the Wagner Group in the longer term is far from certain. But it seems that the tangled web he weaves is starting to unravel.

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