

# USE AND UTILITY OF RUSSIA'S PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES

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## New Kid on the Block

In his annual marathon news conference in December 2018, Russian president Vladimir Putin alluded to the activities of Wagner Group,<sup>1</sup> Russia's most prominent private military company (PMC). This was the first time that he had publicly (if indirectly) acknowledged the group's existence, after Russian officials had repeatedly denied it.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite the high profile Wagner in particular but also other Russian PMCs currently enjoy, relatively little can be established with certainty about their real status, funding, ownership or interrelationships. Investigative reports note the absence of any official records about Wagner.

Russia's use of non-state military organisations to provide outsourced expeditionary military forces is currently the focus of intense interest. Internationally, this is because of concern over the potential for abuse of this new element of state power by Russia and the rapid growth in the number of theatres where it has been employed. Since the use of Russian PMCs was reported first in Crimea and east Ukraine, and later more prominently in Syria, the span of their presence has widened considerably, from Libya and a range of African nations to Venezuela. Wagner is also under the spotlight in Russia. There, however, the topic is off-limits for state-controlled or state-affiliated media including major TV networks and some of the most widely read newspapers. This is in large measure because of potential controversies such as allegations of connection to the highest levels of state power and reports of combat casualties unavowed by the government. Consequently, coverage of PMCs within Russia is limited almost exclusively to independent media outlets.

Russia's extensive use of non-state actors to perform a wide range of functions including information warfare, intelligence collection, logistics, subversion, destabilisation and now combat appears set to continue and increase as Russia probes for weaknesses and opportunities and expands the boundaries of permissible action. In these efforts, the use of proxy elements and forces such as Wagner represents the forward edge in below-threshold conflict. This report will therefore seek to summarise what is known not only about Wagner as

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of "Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference", The Russian presidency's official website, 20 December 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59455>.

<sup>2</sup> Putin's mention of Wagner by name notwithstanding, these denials continued to be repeated even afterwards. This was his spokesman Dmitry Peskov's answer to a question from the media the day after Putin's news conference, for example: "Everyone keeps talking about some PMC of someone called Wagner, but the fact is that we have no such provision in the legislation. What did you expect from the president? How can he comment on what does not exist?" See *Песков прокомментировал слова Путина про ЧВК* ("Peskov comments on what Putin said about PMCs"), RIA Novosti, 21 December 2018, <https://ria.ru/20181221/1548391908.html>.

the most widely publicised Russian PMC but also about other comparable non-state entities which Russia could use for military or influence purposes abroad. It will also seek to analyse their utility, including the key characteristics of PMCs that make them attractive for use by Russia, as well as any discernible trends in their current or likely future use.

## **Russian PMCs: Legality**

Private military companies are technically illegal in Russia. Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code outlaws mercenaries and their financing. Moreover, Article 208 outlaws all “armed formations” not stipulated in federal law, and a similar prohibition exists in Article 13 of the Russian Constitution. At the beginning of the 2010s, while temporarily prime minister, Putin backed the concept of legal PMCs in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Since then, attempts have periodically been made to introduce legislation on PMCs but without result. Groups such as Wagner could conceivably argue that as corporate entities, they have nothing in common with armed formations of the kind the existing law was intended to cover. However, they have not been called upon to do so. In this instance as in so many others in Russia, the law can be applied selectively, or not applied at all.

The status of Russian PMCs is also questionable under international law. In 2008, the International Committee of the Red Cross sponsored the Montreux Document, which is designed to govern the “legal obligations and good practices for states related to operations of private military and security companies during armed conflict.” So far, 54 states, including the United States, China and Ukraine, have signed up to the document. Russia has not.<sup>4</sup>

The failure so far to provide a Russian legal framework for the existence and activities of private military companies has been attributed by various sources to more than one potential factor. For instance, it could be a combination of ideological resistance from parts of the politico-military and national security establishment and an inter-agency tug-of-war over the issue of control. As part of this both the FSB security service and the GRU military intelligence agency might desire a stake if not overall control.

Furthermore, the absence of legal regulation aids deniability, which in certain situations could be considered an indispensable attribute or be instrumental as a means for the political leadership to maintain additional leverage through the implicit threat of prosecution. Legal precedent for this has been established.

Yet the ill-defined legal status of Russia's PMCs also has disadvantages. For example, a group of Russian PMC “veterans” are suing the Russian government in the International Criminal

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<sup>3</sup> See *Путин поддержал идею создания в России частных военных компаний* (“Putin backs setting up private military companies in Russia”), RIA Novosti, 11 April 2012, <https://ria.ru/20120411/623227984.html>.

<sup>4</sup> See “Are Valkyries ready to ride in Venezuela?”, EurasiaNet, 4 February 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/events-are-valkyries-ready-to-ride-in-venezuela>.

Court in The Hague over "deliberate" deprivation of rights and thus forfeiture of support without official recognition from the Russian state.<sup>5</sup> They claim that PMC losses number "hundreds" as a result of their participation in conflicts in east Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Sudan, Yemen and other countries in Asia and Africa.

## PMCs Under the Spotlight

Although the focus on Russia's use of PMCs is a relatively recent phenomenon, according to one detailed Russian investigation the development of Russia's PMC capability was initiated by the Russian General Staff in 2010.<sup>6</sup> This followed a meeting at a forum in St Petersburg with South Africa's Eben Barlow, the founder of the Executive Outcomes private military company. Barlow went on to become a consultant to the Russian General Staff.

The Russian military's Syria campaign officially began with the launch of Russian air strikes against anti-government forces on 30 September 2015. Since then, numerous accounts have emerged of Russian PMC involvement in Syria.

As the Russian operations in Syria progressed, "a shadowy organisation known as Wagner, with no offices, not even a brass plaque on a door", was reported to have been involved.<sup>7</sup> A "secretive airlift using civilian planes" had been used to ferry military support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad out of Russia. The number of Russian contractors in action in Syria was put at 2,000-3,000. Reports from Russia, meanwhile, some before the action in Syria but most retrospectively, also described Wagner's prior deployment first to Crimea and then to east Ukraine from early 2014 onwards.

Russian reports on Wagner PMC come from sources not aligned with the state. One, Fontanka, a St Petersburg website, has mounted several high-profile investigations. In one of its earliest investigative reports, from late 2015, Fontanka traced Wagner PMC's origins to an entity it named as the Slavonic Corps (*Slavyansky Korpus*).<sup>8</sup> Several hundred Russian personnel were reportedly active in Syria in 2013. They were led by Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov, two of the "Russian managers" of another PMC, Moran Security Group.

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<sup>5</sup> Elizaveta Mayetnaya, *Бойцы российских ЧВК обратились в международный суд - против организаторов частных военных компаний* ("Russian PMC fighters appeal to international court against private military companies' organisers"), Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty), 19 November 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29608527.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, *Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина* ("Private Army for the President: The Story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Task"), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Rinat Sagdiev, Maria Tsvetkova, Olena Vasina, "Special Report: How a Secret Russian Airlift Helps Syria's Assad", Reuters, 6 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-flights/special-report-how-a-secret-russian-airlift-helps-syrias-assad-idUSKCN1HD18Y>.

<sup>8</sup> Denis Korotkov, «Славянский корпус» возвращается в Сирию ("Slavonic Corps Back in Syria"), Fontanka.ru, 16 October 2015, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2015/10/16/118/>.

In a report from early 2016, Fontanka set out further findings in relation to Wagner PMC's reported operations both in Ukraine and in Syria.<sup>9</sup> For example, the report described the origins of the name: "Wagner" as the callsign of camera-shy founder Dmitry Utkin, whom it described as a "Third Reich" sympathiser who had taken to wearing a Wehrmacht helmet on operations in Luhansk.<sup>10</sup> Fontanka identified Utkin as a reserve Lt-Col who until 2013 had been commander of the 700th Separate *Spetsnaz* Detachment in Pechory, Pskov Region, part of the 2nd Separate *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the Main Intelligence Directorate (*GRU*).<sup>11</sup>

With regard to Wagner's personnel and materiel, the unit was at the time a "battalion tactical group" 600 men strong and equipped with "heavy infantry weapons and armour". More specifically, its arsenal included armoured combat vehicles, man portable air defence systems and mortars, for example. In addition to advanced small arms such as automatic grenade launchers, heavy weapons such as tanks, artillery and anti-tank guided missiles have since been noted. This includes training for the use of these weapons and their actual use when involved in direct combat such as in Ukraine and Syria. T-72 main battle tanks, BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launchers and D-30 122-millimetre howitzers have been identified.<sup>12</sup> In summary, "Wagner is no ordinary private military company. It is a miniature army," a contributor identified as a former Wagner member told Estonian TV in 2017. "We had it all: mortars, howitzers, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers."<sup>13</sup>

Estimates for Wagner PMC's total strength over time, from 2014 onwards, range from around 5,000 to up to 10,000.<sup>14</sup> In January-February 2015, in east Ukraine, more than 200 Wagner PMC contractors fought in the battle of Debaltseve alone, according to Ukraine's SBU security service (*Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrayiny*).<sup>15</sup> It estimated that a total of 5,000 Wagner PMC

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<sup>9</sup> Denis Korotkov, *Они сражались за Пальмиру* ("They fought for Palmyra"), Fontanka.ru, 28 March 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>.

<sup>10</sup> The apparent association with Nazi Germany could provide a significant clue to Wagner employees' sympathies. The connotations of the name, "Wagner" ("Hitler's favourite composer"), are remarked on in James Miller, "Putin's Attack Helicopters and Mercenaries Are Winning the War for Assad", *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/putins-attack-helicopters-and-mercenaries-are-winning-the-war-for-assyad/>. Russia habitually accuses Ukraine's volunteer forces active in the Donbas region of neo-Nazi affiliations. Yet the role of this ideology in Russian entities such as Wagner is largely unexplored.

<sup>11</sup> The acronym *GRU* is from the Russian *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye* or Main Intelligence Directorate. It is now officially referred to simply as *GU*, for *Glavnoye Upravleniye* (Main Directorate).

<sup>12</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>13</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, *Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина* ("Private Army for the President: The Story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Task"), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

<sup>15</sup> Nils Dahlqvist, "Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies", FOI Memo 6653 RUFBS Briefing No. 44 Project No. A19101, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

personnel had been involved in the conflict in east Ukraine (as of late 2017).<sup>16</sup> A separate assessment put the number of Wagner PMC personnel active in Syria at any one time at between 1,500 and 2,500.<sup>17</sup>

## **Wagner: Blanks Filled**

Wagner PMC is referred to in Russian as a “private military company” - "*chastnaya voyennaya kompaniya*" (ChVK) - and thus, for Wagner PMC, "*ChVK Vagnera*". Nevertheless, the exact relationship between the state and such ostensibly non-state (and technically illegal) actors as Wagner PMC is opaque. Wagner's close ties to the GRU and the Ministry of Defence lead many analysts to label Wagner as in effect a GRU-controlled special force.<sup>18</sup>

Administrative and financial control over Wagner PMC is reportedly exercised by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an influential businessman with close ties to Putin (also known as "*Povar Putina*" - “Putin's chef” - in view of the services he has provided, originally as a St Petersburg restaurateur favoured by Putin).<sup>19</sup> Prigozhin, 58, owns several companies reportedly with lucrative contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence. The Russian General Staff's decision to choose Prigozhin to take charge of the PMC project has been attributed to both factors - as much to his contracts with the Ministry of Defence as to his "personal acquaintance" with Putin whilst not being a member of Putin's inner circle.<sup>20</sup>

Prigozhin has also been linked to the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg, also known as a troll "farm" or “factory” in view of its online and social media influence activities. Enough evidence existed for the United States to sanction Prigozhin in connection with the conflict in Ukraine and, in addition to the Internet Research Agency, charge Prigozhin personally and his Concord Management company with interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

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<sup>16</sup> See СБУ установила личности воевавших в Донбассе членов ЧВК Вагнера (“SBU Identifies Wagner PMC Members Who Fought in the Donbas”), *Radio Svoboda* (Radio Liberty), 7 October 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28779635.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Nils Dahlqvist, "Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies", FOI Memo 6653 RUFs Briefing No. 44 Project No. A19101, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

<sup>19</sup> Nataliya Vasilyeva, “Thousands of Russian Private Contractors Fighting in Syria”, Associated Press, 12 December 2017, <https://apnews.com/7f9e63cb14a54dfa9148b6430d89e873>.

<sup>20</sup> Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, *Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина* (“Private Army for the President: The Story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Task”), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

Although Prigozhin has repeatedly denied any connection to Wagner PMC,<sup>21</sup> investigative reports have shown a link between Prigozhin and activities associated with Wagner.<sup>22</sup> Whether Prigozhin is really Wagner PMC's paymaster or merely a frontman, it would perhaps be more appropriate to describe the source of its funding as opaque - or hybrid.<sup>23</sup> In effect Wagner is a quasi-PMC - an outwardly private company "but in reality one supported by the military and thus controlled by the state".<sup>24</sup> The use of front companies unconnected to Prigozhin's businesses further complicates establishing where control of Wagner really lies.<sup>25</sup>

Fontanka's investigations continue to shed light on Wagner's procedures and internal operations. In late 2015, Fontanka obtained "instructions" issued to PMC personnel prior to their deployment to Syria. These required the surrender of passports, prohibited the use of mobile phones and the Internet, and included 10-year non-disclosure agreements.<sup>26</sup> In mid-2017, it obtained Wagner PMC's "personnel documentation", including handwritten questionnaire application forms, copies of passports and photos of applicants. The documents identified the organisation as "Wagner PMC", "Wagner Group", "Wagner Battalion-Tactical Group" or simply "the Company", Fontanka's lead Wagner PMC investigative reporter Denis Korotkov wrote.<sup>27</sup> In February 2018, it discovered a Wagner payroll where payees were identified by a four-digit number. The last number was 3602, implying that this was the number of individuals who were or had been on the payroll.

Word of mouth (advice to call a particular telephone number) and social media appear to be among Wagner PMC's prime recruitment tools.<sup>28</sup> "Social networks number dozens if not hundreds of pieces of evidence which shows that to get work with [Wagner PMC], you have

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<sup>21</sup> Anton Baev, «Как отличить мужчину на улице от "вагнеровца"?» — Евгений Пригожин ответил на вопросы The Bell о своей связи с ЧВК ("How Do You Tell a Man in the Street from a Wagner Contractor?" - Yevgeny Prigozhin Answers Questions from The Bell about his Connection to the PMC"), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/kak-otlichit-muzhchinu-na-ulitse-ot-vagnerovtsa-evgenij-prigozhin-otvetil-na-voprosy-the-bell-o-svoej-svyazi-s-chvk/>.

<sup>22</sup> Ilya Barabanov, Andrey Soshnikov, Anastasia Napalkova, Pavel Aksenov, "Syria, Africa, Ukraine. Where Wagner PMC Recruits Manpower, How It Does It and Where It Pays Tribute to Them", BBC Russian, 23 November 2018, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX\\_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc).

<sup>23</sup> Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Anton Baev and Polina Rusaeva, *Призраки войны: как в Сирии появилась российская частная армия* ("Ghosts of War: How a Russian Private Army Appeared in Syria"), RBK, 25 August 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/25/bac4309a79476d978e850d>.

<sup>24</sup> Niklas Eklund and Jörgen Elfving, "Russian Private Military Companies—Redwater?" The Jamestown Foundation, 22 March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-private-military-companies-redwater/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ilya Barabanov, Andrey Soshnikov, Anastasia Napalkova, Pavel Aksenov, "Syria, Africa, Ukraine. Where Wagner PMC Recruits Manpower, How It Does It and Where It Pays Tribute to Them", BBC Russian, 23 November 2018, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX\\_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc).

<sup>26</sup> Denis Korotkov, *За Башара Асада - без флага, без Родины* ("For Bashar al-Assad - With No Flag, No Motherland"), Fontanka.ru, 22 October 2015, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2015/10/22/144/>.

<sup>27</sup> Denis Korotkov, *Список Вагнера* ("Wagner's List"), Fontanka.ru, 21 August 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

<sup>28</sup> Screenshot of "thematic group" on VKontakte (vk.com, Russia's Facebook equivalent), Fontanka.ru infographic, 29 March 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/infograph.15.html>.

to go to Molkino [see below], head straight for the KPP [entry checkpoint] and ask for Wagner," Fontanka reported.<sup>29</sup>

When examining likely motivation for PMC membership, financial, socioeconomic, ideological and status factors must be considered). In the words of one detailed Wagner expose, "For a former artillery battalion commander, there's a world of difference between being a civilian storeroom clerk and the officer commanding a military unit."<sup>30</sup>

## Integration with Regular Armed Forces

Wagner's access to high-end weaponry (including, as noted above, armoured combat vehicles and man-portable air defence missile systems) is not the only evidence suggesting close integration between it and the armed forces:

- Investigative reports have established that for training, Wagner PMC has used locations owned by the military or shared with them. Multiple reports identify the primary location as Molkino, Krasnodar Territory (south Russia), where the 10th *Spetsnaz* Brigade is also garrisoned.<sup>31</sup> Previously, Wagner PMC reportedly trained at Vesely in Rostov Region (also south Russia; the region has a border with Ukraine).<sup>32</sup>
- Like other *Spetsnaz* formations of this type, the 10th *Spetsnaz* Brigade is subordinate to the GRU.<sup>33</sup> In addition, as noted above, the GRU, via *Spetsnaz*, is Wagner head Dmitry Utkin's former employer. The nature of Wagner PMC's training and some of its equipment, reportedly of the kind that could only be sourced from the special forces,<sup>34</sup> also strongly suggests the GRU's involvement.

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<sup>29</sup> Denis Korotkov, *Список Вагнера* ("Wagner's List"), Fontanka.ru, 21 August 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

<sup>30</sup> Evgeny Berg's interview with Denis Korotkov, "People think it doesn't affect them. But it affects everyone.' Meduza interviews the reporter who blew the lid on Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria", Meduza, 30 August 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/08/30/people-think-it-doesn-t-affect-them-but-it-affects-everyone>.

<sup>31</sup> Denis Korotkov, *Они сражались за Пальмиру* ("They Fought for Palmyra"), Fontanka.ru, 28 March 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>; Niklas Eklund and Jörgen Elfving, "Russian Private Military Companies—Redwater?" The Jamestown Foundation, 22 March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-private-military-companies-redwater/>; and Ilya Barabanov, Andrey Soshnikov, Anastasia Napalkova, Pavel Aksenov, "Syria, Africa, Ukraine. Where Wagner PMC Recruits Manpower, How It Does It and Where It Pays Tribute to Them", BBC Russian, 23 November 2018, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX\\_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc), which contains a detailed map of the Molkino camp.

<sup>32</sup> Denis Korotkov, *Они сражались за Пальмиру* ("They Fought for Palmyra"), Fontanka.ru, 28 March 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Putin's Hydra: Inside Russia's Intelligence Services", European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, May 2016, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR\\_169\\_-\\_PUTINS\\_HYDRA\\_INSIDE\\_THE\\_RUSSIAN\\_INTELLIGENCE\\_SERVICES\\_1513.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_169_-_PUTINS_HYDRA_INSIDE_THE_RUSSIAN_INTELLIGENCE_SERVICES_1513.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Pierre Vaux, "Despite 'Withdrawal' Russians Continue To Fight And Die In Syria", The Interpreter, 23 March 2016, <http://www.interpretermag.com/despite-withdrawal-russians-continue-to-fight-and-die-in-syria/>; see also photographs, 17-18 January 2019, at <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1086087530473312256> and more at <https://twitter.com/ralee85/status/1085958946265939968?s=12>.

- Russia used its military airlift and naval sealift capabilities to transport Wagner materiel to Syria.<sup>35</sup> In view of its intensity, the sealift was dubbed "Syrian Express". Military transport planes were used to evacuate the PMC wounded, for treatment at army hospitals. But Wagner personnel were taken into Syria from Rostov's Platov Airport disguised as civilians.<sup>36</sup>
- Investigative reports into Wagner PMC's deployments in Ukraine and Syria suggest a close relationship between its personnel and other forces. During the conflict in Ukraine, for example, these partner forces included separatist paramilitaries and regular Russian force elements. Subsequently, in Syria, Wagner partnered pro-government forces and other Russian elements on the battlefield. There exists "very close cooperation at all levels: aviation and artillery support, weapons supplies, military hardware, ammunition and the evacuation of the wounded".<sup>37</sup>
- Investigative reports also suggest that the foreign travel passports of Wagner PMC personnel were issued in sequential batches by the same passport office in Moscow that had issued fake identity papers to undercover GRU officers Mishkin/Petrov and Chepiga/Boshirov, the Salisbury poisoning suspects. In combination with other data this "supports the hypothesis that Wagner PMC is indeed a proxy and serves at the command of the Ministry of Defense, and in particular the GRU".<sup>38</sup>
- Wagner PMC is sufficiently recognised as an integral part of the Russian military and security establishment that Wagner head Dmitry Utkin was among those identified in a photograph from a ceremony at which military decorations were presented in the Kremlin in Putin's presence.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Anton Baev and Polina Rusyaeva, *Призраки войны: как в Сирии появилась российская частная армия* ("Ghosts of War: How a Russian Private Army Appeared in Syria"), RBK, 25 August 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/57bac4309a79476d978e850d>.

<sup>36</sup> Ilya Barabanov, Andrey Soshnikov, Anastasia Napalkova, Pavel Aksenov, "Syria, Africa, Ukraine. Where Wagner PMC Recruits Manpower, How It Does It and Where It Pays Tribute to Them", BBC Russian, 23 November 2018, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX\\_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-46291929?fbclid=IwAR1ngyZatWDbtgsFQI9vM72QPN66y4xbMtd1QsbSX_UWRnZmjafDysfwnFc).

<sup>37</sup> Evgeny Berg's interview with Denis Korotkov, "'People think it doesn't affect them. But it affects everyone.' Meduza interviews the reporter who blew the lid on Russian mercenaries fighting in Syria", Meduza, 30 August 2017, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2017/08/30/people-think-it-doesn-t-affect-them-but-it-affects-everyone>.

<sup>38</sup> "Wagner Mercenaries With GRU-issued Passports: Validating SBU's Allegation", Bellingcat, 30 January 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/01/30/wagner-mercenaries-with-gru-issued-passports-validating-sbus-allegation/>.

<sup>39</sup> Aleksandr Gostev and Robert Coalson, "Russia's Paramilitary Mercenaries Emerge from the Shadows", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 16 December 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-paramilitary-mercenaries-emerge-from-the-shadows-syria-ukraine/28180321.html>.



- Investigative reports further suggest that the chain of command over Wagner PMC could include both the GRU and the FSB.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, control could even be exercised by a higher authority still, such as Putin's Presidential Administration.<sup>41</sup>

Yevgeniy Prigozhin continues to deny any connection to or knowledge of Wagner. In an interview in January 2019, he challenged the interviewer: "How do you tell a man in the street from a Wagner operative?"<sup>42</sup> One journalist retorted that it was equally challenging to tell a Wagner operative from a Spetsnaz commando, as the two are in effect interchangeable.<sup>43</sup>

## Other Russian PMCs/PSCs

The picture of Wagner PMC that emerges is of an apparently informal yet sizable, well-funded, well-trained and capable organisation. It commands considerable personnel and materiel resources. It is well-integrated with the Russian Federation's Armed Forces. And its operational and legal opacity renders it ideally suited to use in situations where the use of regular forces is for various reasons undesirable. In many ways, it represents the ultimate solution where Russia needs the use of military force to be outsourced or hybridised, or both.

At least 10 Russian organisations have been described as PMCs (including Wagner). Some are apparently more in accordance with the Western model of a private military company - commercial rather than notionally autonomous but in fact an arm of government. Others, though, are as operationally and organisationally opaque as Wagner:<sup>44</sup>

- *E.N.O.T Corps* (reportedly active in the Balkans).
- *Patriot* (reportedly active exclusively in Africa).

<sup>40</sup> Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Anton Baev and Polina Rusyaeva, *Призраки войны: как в Сирии появилась российская частная армия* ("Ghosts of War: How a Russian Private Army Appeared in Syria"), RBK, 25 August 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/25/57bac4309a79476d978e850d>.

<sup>41</sup> Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, *Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина* ("Private Army for the President: The Story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Task"), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

<sup>42</sup> Anton Baev, «Как отличить мужчину на улице от "вагнеровца"?» — Евгений Пригожин ответил на вопросы The Bell о своей связи с ЧВК ("How do you tell a man in the street from a Wagner operative?" Yevgeny Prigozhin answers The Bell's questions about his links to the [Wagner] PMC"), The Bell, 29 January 2019, <https://thebell.io/kak-otlichit-muzhchinu-na-ulitse-ot-vagnerovtza-evgenij-prigozhin-otvetil-na-voprosy-the-bell-o-svoej-svyazi-s-chvk/>.

<sup>43</sup> Alec Luhn and Dominic Nicholls, "Russian Mercenaries Back Libyan Rebel Leader as Moscow Seeks Influence in Africa", The Telegraph, 3 March 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/russian-mercenaries-back-libyan-rebel-leader-moscow-seeks-influence/>.

<sup>44</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests", part of the "War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad" series, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2019, [https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc\\_cid=df0fce69a9&mc\\_eid=508eef3ce8](https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc_cid=df0fce69a9&mc_eid=508eef3ce8;);

and Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

- *RSB-Group* (covering a wide geography).
- *Orel Anti-Terror*.
- *Center R*.
- *MAR* (reportedly active in the breakaway regions of Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as in Ukraine).
- *Moran Security Group* (past activity includes Syria (via *Slavonic Corps*) but mainly a specialist in the provision of anti-piracy security).<sup>45</sup>
- *Turan* (dubbed a "Muslim battalion").
- *Ferax* (in Kurdistan).

Some of these organisations are said to be more in the mould of private security companies (PSCs) or training providers, not combat units. These include *RSB-Group* and *Moran Security*.<sup>46</sup> Others, notably *Turan*, appear not to actually exist and are an "elaborate hoax", at least according to one investigative report.<sup>47</sup> Yet another subset may well turn out to be proxies for the Kremlin's exercise of what it considers "soft power". This includes the promotion of the Kremlin's "Russian World" concept (*Russkiy Mir*).<sup>48</sup> Others still may have contributed personnel to the same operations that Wagner PMC has been involved in. *E.N.O.T.* is reportedly one of them. Or they may simply be a cover name for Wagner PMC.

Several studies offer a genealogy of Russian PMCs, PSCs and PMSCs (private military and security companies).<sup>49</sup> Overall, however, the deliberate lack of transparency creates opportunities for confusion and obfuscation. It also makes it very hard to establish the truth from open sources.

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<sup>45</sup> Moran Security Group website, <http://moran-group.org/en/index/index>.

<sup>46</sup> RSB-Group website, <http://rsb-group.ru/about>. RSB, the acronym from the Russian *Rossiyskiye Sistemy Bezopasnosti* or Russian Security Systems, describes itself as a private security consultancy.

<sup>47</sup> See "Turan - a New Private Military Company Fighting in Syria or an Elaborate Hoax?", Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT or CITeam), 6 January 2018, <https://citeam.org/turan-pmc/?lang=en>.

<sup>48</sup> In the Balkans, for example, this is done through a "peculiar combination of war veterans (both Serbs and Russians), radical Kremlin-linked bikers, mercenaries (and members of private military companies - PMCs) as well as Orthodox clergy". The aim is to target local youth, including through the setting-up of militarised youth camps. See Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running 'Patriotic' Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part One)", Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 15 Issue: 151, 24 October 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-one/>.

<sup>49</sup> Before Slavonic Corps, Wagner PMC's origins, for example, have been traced to Moran Security Group and, before it, the Anti-Terror family of companies. See Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies - the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>; and Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", Post-Soviet Affairs, 26 March 2019, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security>.

In one of the latest developments, yet another "private military company" reportedly active in Syria has been named. *Vega*, also known as *Vegacy* (*Vega* or *Vegacy* "*Strategic Services Ltd*"), has been linked to individuals from both Ukraine and Russia. It is in Syria apparently to train the pro-Assad Palestinian group *Liwa al-Quds* (Jerusalem Brigade) and "better fits the description of a private military company".<sup>50</sup>

The same lack-of-clarity caveat applies, however. It now appears that one of the sources of information about *Vega* was also behind the reports about *Turan*, now claimed to be a fake. The same claim in relation to *Vega* - a fake - has since been made by Ukraine's SBU security service. It has concluded that the photographs of "*Vega PMC*" instructors in Syria "were faked" and in reality show Wagner operatives.

Various reports offer hints as to the political affiliation of these organisations' personnel or leadership. *E.N.O.T.*, for example, is said to be "notorious for its links to Russian neo-Nazi groups".<sup>51</sup> This assertion echoes the story of Wagner as a *nom de guerre*. Many, as noted above, share a connection to Russia's "special services", such as through their personnel's previous employment. Many share a connection to the conflict in Ukraine, as indicated by the credentials of their leaders or by the reports of broader involvement there. *E.N.O.T.*, *MAR* and *RSB-Group*, for example, have all been linked to the armed insurgency in east Ukraine's Donbas region. *E.N.O.T.* leader Roman Telenkevich also reportedly heads the Russian Union of Donbass Volunteers - another active proxy force.<sup>52</sup>

The Russian PMSC sector includes other companies, for example *Tiger Top Rent Security* and *Redut-Antiterror*. Both have been linked to the *Orel Anti-Terror* family of companies, as have *Moran Security Group*, *Ferax* and *Wagner* itself.<sup>53</sup> The list below, meanwhile, illustrates the extent of their personnel's connections to the Russian security forces:

- *Orel Anti-Terror*: "set up by former Special Forces operatives" from that western Russian city.
- *Moran Security Group*: "established by a mix of former FSB and Russian Navy personnel".

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<sup>50</sup> Ruslan Leviev, "Vega: a new PMC in Syria with ties to Russia and Ukraine", CIT, 28 March 2019, <https://citeam.org/russian-ukrainian-pmc-vega-in-syria/?lang=en>.

<sup>51</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

- *Redut-Antiterror*: "mostly consists of Russian ex-military, in this case especially from the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the Russian Airborne Troops"; and thought to "have especially close relations" with the Russian Ministry of Defence.
- *RSB-Group*: reportedly "set up by a mix of former GRU and FSB officers".
- *E.N.O.T.*: "created by veterans from different Russian special operations forces (SOF) and connected to the SOF veteran organisation *Rezerv* ["Reserve" or "Reservist"]".

## **Wagner: Ukraine and Syria**

As outlined above, Ukraine and Syria were the first theatres of war to see the use of what are, notionally at least, Russia's private military contractors.

In Ukraine, Wagner was reportedly first used in Crimea, in early 2014, in an auxiliary role. Soon afterwards, its operatives' presence was reported in east Ukraine, in direct combat and likely side by side with local and other irregulars and the regular and special forces inserted by Russia. In east Ukraine, Wagner operated primarily within the self-proclaimed "Lugansk People's Republic", where its functions reportedly included an enforcement role against out-of-control insurgent elements.<sup>54</sup>

Wagner's use came to prominence in Syria, where it saw combat as part of the offensive by the pro-government contingent on the ground, which in turn built on the lethality of the Russian air campaign. However, Wagner's role and performance in Syria raised questions and led observers to describe it as a case of success followed by failure.<sup>55</sup> During the retaking of Palmyra, a city of both historic and potentially strategic importance,<sup>56</sup> in early to mid-2016, the operation against Islamic State group (IS) was led by Wagner PMC. That success, however, was followed by a severe setback in early 2018 at Deir ez-Zor, a city on the Euphrates. When a Wagner force deployed in conjunction with Syrian forces to seize an oil and gas facility under joint US-Kurdish control, US airstrikes killed a reported 100 to 200 Wagner personnel.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>55</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>56</sup> James Miller, "Putin's Attack Helicopters and Mercenaries Are Winning the War for Assad", Foreign Policy, 30 March 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/putins-attack-helicopters-and-mercenaries-are-winning-the-war-for-assad/>.

<sup>57</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

Wagner's ill-fated transgression across the Euphrates deconfliction line at Deir ez-Zor was also noteworthy for the inaction of the Russian military command stationed in Syria, before, during and after the incident. Given the level of general cooperation between the Russian military and Wagner, it was remarkable that Russian commanders had failed to halt a four-hour assault by a Wagner unit.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that this reflected a conflict between Prigozhin and the uniformed Russian military. The precise nature of such a conflict is unknown. It could be the Russian military's resentment of Prigozhin, for example if Wagner interfered in the operations. Or it could be antagonism against Prigozhin personally. He has no military background, yet he has enriched himself through his contracts with the Russian military and in Syria. A sudden drying up in 2017 of the weapons and salaries received by Wagner PMC's forces, as well as of Prigozhin's contracts with the military, has also been reported.

Nevertheless, operations in Ukraine and Syria have shown Wagner and other Russian PMCs to be manned in large measure with experienced and skilled service personnel, and to be both willing and able to engage in direct combat, including both defensive and offensive. This is just one of the features that sets them apart from present-day Western PMCs.<sup>59</sup>

And because, both in Ukraine and in Syria, they formed a major part of offensive forces or even spearheaded offensive operations, the incidence of their personnel losses has been disproportionately high.<sup>60</sup> The Wagner "veterans" interviewed by Fontanka put it another way: Wagner, in their words, was used as "cannon fodder" in east Ukraine (and as a crack enabler force in Syria - presumably with a similar outcome).<sup>61</sup>

Another aspect of Wagner PMC's Syrian deployment merits attention - their later re-rolling to the protection of (likely private) commercial interests. By the summer of 2016, after what could be termed Phase 1 of their operations, the majority of Wagner fighters had reportedly been withdrawn from Syria following the battle for Palmyra. Shortly afterwards, however, they returned. This time, it was reportedly at the behest of the Russian Energy Ministry, pursuant to a contract negotiated with a newly registered Russian company. Again, it was an entity thought linked to Prigozhin, known as Evropolis or Evro Polis (as well as the semi-anglicised version of Euro Polis). The contract called for Evro Polis to "liberate oil and gas fields, plants

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<sup>58</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142. 97Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

<sup>59</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies - the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> *Частные военные компании: история и современность. ЧВК России* ("Private Military Companies: History and Present Day. Russian PMCs"), Militaryarms.ru, 13 October 2018, <http://militaryarms.ru/armii-mira/chastnie-voennie-kompanii/>.

<sup>61</sup> Denis Korotkov, Они сражались за Пальмиру ("They fought for Palmyra"), Fontanka.ru, 28 March 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/>.

and other infrastructure captured by enemies of the regime, and guard them". In return, Evrotopolis would be entitled to 25% of their output.<sup>62</sup>

This was a new development - and one that set the trend for subsequent deployments.

## **Russian PMC Deployments**

### Africa

Despite the loss of life suffered by Wagner in Syria, the geography of the Russian PMC phenomenon has continued to expand as Russia's presence grows in other unstable regions. Africa, the target of a more general, diplomatic push by the Kremlin, is a prime example. The presence of Russian PMCs - a "hodgepodge of contract soldiers and political operatives" - has been reported in at least 10 (and possibly as many as 20) African nations.<sup>63</sup> The Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and Libya are the most prominent instances. Angola, Burundi, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe have also been identified among those where Russian private military companies' presence has been detected or is suspected. Other potential locations include Niger and Nigeria. South Africa has also been named. Most have relationships with Russia's military.

Documents published by the Dossier Center, an investigative unit based in London and funded by exiled Russian businessman and Putin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, claim to indicate the scale of Prigozhin-linked operations and Russia's ambition to turn sub-Saharan Africa into a strategic hub. In the documents from December 2018, cooperation between Prigozhin entities and African governments - including military, political and economic ties, security forces training, and media and humanitarian projects - is illustrated country by country as a map. The level of cooperation is marked on a scale of one to five: five is the highest level; one is the lowest. The closest relations are with the CAR, Sudan and Madagascar - all marked as five. Libya, Zimbabwe and South Africa are listed as four, South Sudan at three, and DRC, Chad and Zambia at two. Other documents cite Uganda, Equatorial Guinea and Mali as "countries where we plan to work". Libya and Ethiopia are flagged up as nations "where cooperation is possible". Russia's aims are described as building relations with current rulers, striking military and mineral deals, and grooming a new generation of "leaders" and "agents of influence". The aim is to "strong-arm" the US, the UK and France out of Africa, and counter "pro-Western"

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<sup>62</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov and Aina Rahagalala, "Putin's Notorious 'Chef' Is Now Meddling Across Africa", *Bloomberg*, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa>; and Alec Luhn and Dominic Nicholls, "Russian Mercenaries Back Libyan Rebel Leader as Moscow Seeks Influence in Africa", *The Telegraph*, 3 March 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/russian-mercenaries-back-libyan-rebel-leader-moscow-seeks-influence/>.

uprisings. To date, Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with up to 20 African states.<sup>64</sup>

In both the CAR and Sudan, the purpose of Wagner's presence is reportedly to provide various military services in exchange for natural resources rights to be awarded to companies controlled by Prigozhin. In the CAR, the group's influence "might go even deeper": Valery Zakharov, a Russian national known to have previously worked for Prigozhin, has been national security adviser since 2018.<sup>65</sup> In the CAR, the presence of two other Russian PMCs has been reported - *Sewa Security Services* and *Patriot*. It has not been conclusively established whether they actually exist, "are merely an effort to rebrand Wagner or are a front for GRU forces", but the activities of Russian PMCs in the region are clearly "coordinated with Russian state organs".<sup>66</sup> In Sudan, it is possible that Wagner has been involved in the civil war on the side of its former leader Omar Bashir.<sup>67</sup>

Specifically, in Africa, the following has been reported, with a combination of Russian official, Prigozhin and Wagner activities:

- Central African Republic: the deployment of 170 supposedly civilian trainers alongside five Russian uniformed soldiers to the CAR following an easing of sanctions against the CAR. The official aim is to train the CAR's military and presidential guard. Training took place both in the CAR and in Sudan, according to a UNSC Panel of Experts report. Russians without insignia on their uniforms were also photographed providing security for CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and his retinue. Gold and diamond exploration and extraction contracts with a Prigozhin-linked company or companies were reported, as was a Russian militarised security presence near mineral deposits.<sup>68</sup>
- Sudan: Wagner PMC training Sudanese forces, once again against the backdrop of a gold exploration contract between Sudan's Ministry of Minerals and Russia's M Invest company. M Invest is thought to be linked to Prigozhin. Then Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir confirmed "exchanges of specialists" from Russia to train Sudanese military personnel.

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<sup>64</sup> Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa", The Guardian, 11 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

<sup>65</sup> Nils Dahlvist, "Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies", FOI Memo 6653 RUFs Briefing No. 44 Project No. A19101, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

<sup>66</sup> Nils Dahlvist, "Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies", FOI Memo 6653 RUFs Briefing No. 44 Project No. A19101, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

<sup>67</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 561, January 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/africa-prigozhin-wagner-and-russian-military>.

Throughout 2018, Russian and Sudanese officials, including high-ranking military staff officers, discussed various avenues to expand defence cooperation.<sup>69</sup>

- The DRC, Guinea, Madagascar and Zimbabwe, all mineral-rich economies: contacts and assistance, including political and electoral.<sup>70</sup> In May 2019, Russia also announced the deployment of a specialist team to the DRC to service Russian-made military equipment.<sup>71</sup> Up to 200 Russian PMC operatives have been deployed to Burundi.<sup>72</sup>

Libya is another case where the interests of the Russian military and those of Prigozhin apparently converge. In January 2017, Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar was welcomed aboard the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov off Libya. The Russian warship was en route through the Mediterranean back to Russia after a Syria deployment.<sup>73</sup> In late 2018, Prigozhin attended talks between Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Haftar, who controls most of the eastern part of the oil-rich state. In a familiar pattern, energy deals in return for military services to Haftar's "Libyan National Army" are reportedly at stake. "Hundreds of mercenaries linked to Russian military intelligence" are believed present in Libya.<sup>74</sup> One assessment is that Wagner has been supporting Haftar with 300 personnel in the eastern city of Benghazi and has supplied Haftar's "Libyan National Army" with artillery, tanks, drones and ammunition. The aim could be to secure the deep-water ports of Tobruk and Derna from which the flow of oil to southern Europe could be controlled if Russia took over Libya's energy industry. Drug trafficking and people smuggling are also a concern.<sup>75</sup>

More general Russian activity in the region extends to Egypt, the beneficiary of a 25-billion-US-dollar Russian loan to build its first nuclear power plant. And Russia is in talks with Eritrea

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<sup>69</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 561, January 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/africa-prigozhin-wagner-and-russian-military>.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov and Aina Rahagalala, "Putin's Notorious 'Chef' Is Now Meddling Across Africa", Bloomberg, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa>.

<sup>71</sup> Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa", The Guardian, 11 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

<sup>72</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> "East Libya strongman visits Russian aircraft carrier in Mediterranean: RIA", Reuters, 11 January 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-russia-haftar/east-libya-strongman-visits-russian-aircraft-carrier-in-mediterranean-ria-idUSKBN14V1T2>.

<sup>74</sup> Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov and Aina Rahagalala, "Putin's Notorious 'Chef' Is Now Meddling Across Africa", Bloomberg, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa>.

<sup>75</sup> Alec Luhn and Dominic Nicholls, "Russian Mercenaries Back Libyan Rebel Leader as Moscow Seeks Influence in Africa", The Telegraph, 3 March 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/russian-mercenaries-back-libyan-rebel-leader-moscow-seeks-influence/>.



to establish its first logistics hub on the Red Sea, in the vicinity of the Pentagon's only permanent base in Africa and China's first military facility abroad - both in Djibouti.<sup>76</sup>

And at the first ever Russia-Africa summit in October 2019 in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, to be chaired by Putin and Egypt's president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and attended by 50 African leaders, steps to foster political, economic and cultural cooperation are on the agenda.

## Americas

Beyond the Middle East and Africa, Latin America and the United States itself have been reportedly targeted by activities associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin.

The presence of Russian private military contractors has been reported in Venezuela. In January 2019, an unknown number of Wagner PMC personnel reportedly flew in, possibly via Cuba, to guard Venezuela's beleaguered leader Nicolas Maduro amid the political unrest that gripped that nation.<sup>77</sup> Wagner PMC's total strength in Venezuela was assessed to total up to 1,000.<sup>78</sup>

Venezuela's strong military ties with Russia are exemplified by the visit of two Russian Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela in December 2018. In March 2019, two Russian Ministry of Defence transport aircraft landed at Caracas - an Ilyushin IL-62M Classic long-haul passenger plane and an Antonov AN-124 Condor heavy-lift transport. One of the two aircraft had flown in via Syria. "Dozens of troops and large amounts of equipment" were ferried in.<sup>79</sup> A more specific assessment put the numbers at "100 Russian military personnel (not PMCs) and about 60 civilian support personnel - logistics, communications, doctors - plus about 60 tonnes of various equipment and materials". Senior Russian General Vasily Tonkoshkurov (Ground Forces chief of staff) led the delegation, likely to discuss the opening of a Russian military outpost in Venezuela.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov and Aina Rahagalala, "Putin's Notorious 'Chef' Is Now Meddling Across Africa", Bloomberg, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa>.

<sup>77</sup> Maria Tsvetkova, Anton Zverev, "Exclusive: Kremlin-linked contractors help guard Venezuela's Maduro - sources", Reuters, 25 January 2019, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-venezuela-politics-russia-exclusive/exclusive-kremlin-linked-contractors-help-guard-venezuelas-maduro-sources-idUKKCN1PJ22Q>; and Sergey Sukhankin, "Are Russian Mercenaries Ready to Defend Venezuela's Maduro?", Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 16 Issue: 9, 28 January 2019.

<sup>78</sup> "Are Valkyries ready to ride in Venezuela?", EurasiaNet, 4 February 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/events-are- Valkyries-ready-to-ride-in-venezuela>.

<sup>79</sup> "Venezuela crisis: Russian military planes land near Caracas", BBC, 25 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-47688711>.

<sup>80</sup> A post by the user "El Murid" on the LiveJournal blogging platform, 24 March 2019, [https://el-murid.livejournal.com/4090472.html?utm\\_source=fbsharing&utm\\_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR1m6ooG82vQ1qWi5IhR5QXnn1fVVqotuHTTmEkKeC1eip9zcegX7n6HQDE](https://el-murid.livejournal.com/4090472.html?utm_source=fbsharing&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR1m6ooG82vQ1qWi5IhR5QXnn1fVVqotuHTTmEkKeC1eip9zcegX7n6HQDE).

Meanwhile, in addition to Russian electoral interference and social media influence operations in the United States, an unsubstantiated report from Dossier Centre suggests the US has been the target of further plans to exploit racial tensions and stoke violent unrest. A plot, discussed in communications between Prigozhin's associates, was allegedly designed to radicalise and manipulate African Americans into sabotage operations and work to establish a "pan-African state" in the American South, particularly South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. There is no indication that the plan (if true), which is light on details, was ever put into action, but it exemplifies both the mindset of anti-US and anti-Western circles in Russia, and the Prigozhin organisation's modus operandi. For the latter, it is standard practice to devise elaborate influence schemes and pitch them to the Kremlin to be authorised or rejected, according to Russian intelligence expert Andrei Soldatov.<sup>81</sup>

## Russian PMCs: Risks and Fallout

The risks Russia's PMC operations carry range from those internal to Russia, including the apparent danger to those who seek to expose these activities; to potentially far wider aspects with external ramifications.

Attempts to shed light on Wagner PMC's operations abroad have been linked to several suspicious deaths. In mid-2018, three Russian reporters from investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta were brutally murdered in the CAR in a "well-planned ambush". An organisation funded by Khodorkovsky (now closed) confirmed that Orkhan Dzhemal, Kirill Radchenko and Alexander Rastorguyev had travelled to the CAR to investigate Wagner PMC's CAR activities.<sup>82</sup> In an incident thought linked to his attempt to investigate their murder, Russian dissident Petr Verzilov was apparently poisoned but recovered in a German hospital. In April 2018, Maxim Borodin, a Russian journalist who had also attempted to investigate Wagner, was allegedly assassinated, although it was officially classed as suicide. In another incident, a former GRU officer who had investigated Russia's use of PMCs in Ukraine claimed he had been poisoned.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Engel, Kate Benyon-Tinker and Kennett Werner, "Russian documents reveal desire to sow racial discord - and violence - in the U.S.", NBC News, 20 May 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russian-documents-reveal-desire-sow-racial-discord-violence-u-s-n1008051>; and *Стратегия развития «негроидного расового шовинизма» или пригожинский ответ доктрине Герасимова* ["Development strategy for 'Negroid racial chauvinism' or Prigozhin's answer to the Gerasimov doctrine"], Dossier Center, undated, <https://dossier.center/e-prigozhin/article/prigozhinskij-otvet-doktrine-gerasimova/>.

<sup>82</sup> Tim Lister and Sebastian Shukla, "Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows", CNN, 10 January 2019, [https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2019/01/10/africa/russian-journalists-car-ambush-intl/index.html?\\_\\_twitter\\_impersion=true](https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2019/01/10/africa/russian-journalists-car-ambush-intl/index.html?__twitter_impersion=true).

<sup>83</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing war by other means': The case of Wagner, Russia's premier private military company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>; and Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

The Deir ez-Zor incident, described above, represents a risk of another kind internal to Russia's establishment, as Russia's official (military) and informal PMC actors collide in a power struggle or a conflict motivated otherwise, for example commercial. Other types of risk, however, could entail wider consequences, including international. For example, there is a risk that PMCs could become too independent and uncontrollable, which could ultimately undermine the state's monopoly on the use of force.<sup>84</sup> Since they operate abroad, this risk is predominantly external, although this could also have implications inside Russia.<sup>85</sup>

The fact that the deployment and operation of entities such as Wagner PMC is opaque and shrouded in secrecy could pose the danger of either inaction or overreaction. Russia's international counterparts could either underestimate the significance of a PMC deployment and do nothing to react to it, or overreact to it. Moreover, the autonomy conferred on Russia's PMCs, by what has been described as their "semi-state" status, makes matters worse. Conceivably, this could result in a situation where they act without the proper, governmental authority. This could be either for their own purposes (those of their sponsor) or in anticipation of what they think the government desires.<sup>86</sup>

The pattern of Wagner's employment in Syria - in effect a mix of military and commercial objectives - opens a new potential risk by blurring the distinction between state-supported military activities abroad and the private use of force abroad by an oligarch for commercial purposes. This turns organisations such as Wagner PMC, in its own right or in the guise of another entity, into private armies for hire with the blessing of the Kremlin - potentially across continents. While the PMCs have demonstrated that they can fight for both national and private interest where they coincide, this leaves open the possibility of a complex situation arising if they should later diverge.<sup>87</sup>

The intertwining of official and private interests in PMC activities, with an undertone of illegality or criminality, is a danger of which observers at home and abroad are keenly aware. At home, suggestions of illegality in relation to Russia's foreign dealings of this kind have been common among the Russian critics of the Kremlin on social media.<sup>88</sup> Abroad, US academic Kimberly Marten is an example. In her assessment of Yevgeny Prigozhin's African activities, Marten analyses how "the Russian state has been entangling the Russian military" into Prigozhin's business deals in the CAR, Sudan and Libya. "These deals are shady: arranged through

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<sup>84</sup> Nils Dahlqvist, "Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies", FOI Memo 6653 RUF5 Briefing No. 44 Project No. A19101, January 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

<sup>85</sup> Inside Russia, relevant conflict potential could be considerable if for example a PSC is assigned to protect a site in a project which is faced with significant public opposition - and acts disproportionately to suppress protests. This could arise if local or national discontent were to grow.

<sup>86</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

<sup>87</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>88</sup> "El Murid" describes the activities of the Russian military in Venezuela as assistance to "a fraternal drug-trafficker regime".

opaque firms and involving states under UNSC sanctions, and in the case of Haftar in Libya, a warlord. Meanwhile private military companies remain illegal in Russia".<sup>89</sup>

### **Russian PMCs: Potential Future Use**

According to an authoritative Norwegian study, characteristics of Russian PMCs and their use to date pose specific international security problems. Russian PMCs facilitate:

- (1) limited use of kinetic force where non-attribution is important.
- (2) subversion on behalf of the Russian state without the use of kinetic force.
- (3) either of the above in coordination with regular forces in the initial stages of conflict.
- (4) use as a "smokescreen" for Russian state forces.
- (5) a hostile act by a Russian PMC towards another state on the assumption that this act of aggression will find favour with Russia's authorities.

In addition, the following characteristics exacerbate the challenges:

- (6) Russian PMCs' particularly low threshold for endangering civilian lives.
- (7) Russian PMCs' willingness to serve clients with questionable human rights records.
- (8) Russian PMCs' potential to be hired to augment the capacity of other militaries' adversaries.

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<sup>89</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo 561, January 2019, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/africa-prigozhin-wagner-and-russian-military>. Marten also comments on Prigozhin's past as "a convicted organised criminal from Putin's hometown, who has prospered because of Putin, [and who] is now playing a leading role in Putin's drive to expand Russian influence in Africa".

(9) Russian PMCs' potential to be involved on behalf of the Russian government in conflicts for example outside Europe (or outside NATO territory) where European (NATO) militaries are also involved.

(10) the possibility that actors allied to Europe in non-European conflicts may still hire Russian PMCs to boost their military capabilities.

The study concludes that Russia is "home to a small but potent PMSC industry which can be mobilised to inflict harm on Russia's enemies if called upon".<sup>90</sup>

### **Russian PMCs: Role/Functions**

Russian PMCs occupy a unique place in the theory and practice of Russian military science. Several points can be identified based on an analysis of Russian writers' and military theoreticians' works, which combine to indicate "an understanding of PMCs that pointedly differs from the Western perspective":<sup>91</sup>

- In Russia, PMCs occupy a position on a par with the regular army on the battlefield and increasingly important in conflict, as they take on tasks usually performed by regulars.
- Unlike the regular forces, PMCs are unconstrained by considerations applicable to regular forces and are "free to choose any means to achieve their specific objectives".
- PMCs can be described as an integral part of a "power economy" (*silovya ekonomika*). This is defined as a "state-controlled system of coercion (including a reliance on limited-scale military conflicts, if necessary) aimed at realising economic goals". This implies the "convergence of geopolitical and geostrategic/economic objectives to be attained by PMCs". It allows the state to avoid implication in illegal activities (plausible deniability).

The concept of PMC use as a tool of the state at war has gained popularity among mainstream Russian warfare experts. Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Moscow-based Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), argues that PMC employment was a key factor in Russian success in Syria. It allowed Russia to avoid large-scale ground-forces deployment and to train Syrian forces, as well as to negate adverse publicity over casualties.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>91</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>92</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests", part of the "War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad"

A study by an expert on Russian PMCs identifies the following functions performed by them and Russian irregular forces:<sup>93</sup>

- **Military**

This includes military operations performed by highly mobile groups of forces on the battlefield as well as defensive tasks that primarily include the concept of “control of territory” (as opposed to territorial losses in the Yugoslav, Iraqi or Libyan "scenarios").

- **Geopolitical**

This includes what can be defined as “security export” (*eksport bezopasnosti*). This concept holds that along with the US, China and the EU, Russia has a responsibility to maintain peace and security worldwide. It thus needs to transform itself into the "main supplier of security in the entire Eurasian space" and potentially beyond. In a more practical dimension, this includes an expansion of the Kremlin's influence in politically unstable countries or regions through military or paramilitary support, training local forces, and physical protection for the local leadership and critical infrastructure.

- **Geo-Economic/Strategic**

Geo-economic and geo-strategic functions are linked to the “power economy” concept, as defined above. This is vividly demonstrated in Africa (but also applicable to such "brittle" regions as Syria, Libya, Venezuela, Egypt and Kurdistan).

- **‘Hybrid’**

Rather than hybrid warfare, this presupposes a broad alliance of various ideologically driven forces and proxies including PMCs, Cossacks, veterans' groups (such as the Russian Union of Donbass Volunteers) and even the Russian Orthodox Church. Another manifestation of hybridisation, however, can be added to this list, as outlined in previous passages: This arises at the confluence of national and private interests in Russia's use of PMCs as foreign policy

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series, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2019, [https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc\\_cid=df0fce69a9&mc\\_eid=508eef3ce8](https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc_cid=df0fce69a9&mc_eid=508eef3ce8).

<sup>93</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests", part of the “War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad” series, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2019, [https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc\\_cid=df0fce69a9&mc\\_eid=508eef3ce8](https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc_cid=df0fce69a9&mc_eid=508eef3ce8).

tools, when a nation's (or even a regime's) geopolitical objectives are combined with commercial objectives that serve the narrow interests of an individual (oligarch) or group.

## **Russia's Other Non-State Actors**

### Proxies

Pro-Russian militias and irregular forces are an essential part of the Russian force structure in hybrid-type ground operations. A core component is made up of local collaborators who are either ideologically or financially motivated to take up arms in order to cause internal unrest and prepare the ground for a real or fictional separatist insurgency. These often engage with the local population by rallying mass protests, creating blockades and disruption, and by engaging others in so-called "self-protection units" that stand ready to assist Russian aims. In addition to tactical and operational objectives, proxy groups play a key political and information role by legitimising Russian initiatives to intervene.<sup>94</sup>

Led or directed by Russian military intelligence officers, armed militias are integrated into centralised operational planning and conduct missions alongside regular troops, special forces and other security forces supported by cyber, information and psychological warfare operators. The success of proxy organisations, such as the separatist territorial entities known as the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics in east Ukraine, is directly linked to Russia's capability to utilise vulnerabilities in social, political and economic relationships that already exist.<sup>95</sup> In addition, east Ukraine has been a testing ground for new state-controlled but notionally private initiatives, such as the Chechen Vostok Battalion, deployed in 2014,<sup>96</sup> or a variety of other groups drawn from Cossacks, veterans and volunteers.

### Other Non-State Entities

A further distinctive type of proxy activity in Russian contemporary land operations is the utilisation of non-governmental organisations, criminal groups and commercial enterprises to support the achievement of strategic objectives. These include entities and networks that are in themselves hybrid, such as the Night Wolves organisation (notionally a biker club) and

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<sup>94</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, "Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood", (Chatham House, 2016), p. 36-37, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>.

<sup>95</sup> A.J.C. Selhorst, "Russia's Perception Warfare: The development of Gerasimov's doctrine in Estonia and Georgia and its application in Ukraine", (Militaire Spectator, 2016), p.153, <https://www.militairespectator.nl/sites/default/files/uitgaven/inhoudsopgave/Militaire%20Spectator%204-2016%20Selhorst.pdf>.

<sup>96</sup> Claire Bigg, "Vostok Battalion, A Powerful New Player In Eastern Ukraine", Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 30 May 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/vostok-battalion-a-powerful-new-player-in-eastern-ukraine/25404785.html>.

Cossack groups, both of which function as non-state actors for outsourcing and supporting Russian military and paramilitary tasks.<sup>97</sup>

Organised crime networks provide a further layer of access to specialist skills to carry out operations at arm's length from Russian state entities.<sup>98</sup>

Russia can also call on business and businessmen. Commercial enterprises can provide the link between the state acting covertly and the proxies acting on its behalf, carrying out operational management of proxies by acting as an ad-hoc command structure.<sup>99</sup> Oligarchs can be called on to lend their personal influence and finances to the war effort. Financier Konstantin Malofeev played a crucial role in the seizure of Crimea and destabilisation of the Donbas, and subsequently moved on to become an active agent of Russian influence in the Balkans. Similarly, former Russian Railways head Vladimir Yakunin is a vigorous supporter of Moscow's interests and allies abroad, including efforts to mobilise Russian diasporas against their host nations.

In Russia, the church too should be considered an arm of state power. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) played a key enabling role in the Syrian campaign, providing the Kremlin with a messianic *raison d'être* enabling it to operate from a position of moral-psychological comfort. It helped engage foreign political leaders, international organisations and the main Christian denominations worldwide to legitimise Moscow's policy, and sustain domestic support for the operation and moral, morale and psychological support for the Russian military on the ground. Further engagement of the ROC in future Russian "hybrid" ventures should be expected.

In Ukraine, Russia continues to leverage influence through a network of ROC-associated parishes, pitted against the Kyiv-backed churches now united as the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

## **Conclusions and Outlook**

### Private Military Companies

Russia's private military companies provide an important additional tool for prosecuting hybrid campaigns. In this respect they have three key advantages over conventional military forces

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<sup>97</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, "Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood", (Chatham House, 2016), p. 36-37, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/agents-russian-world-proxy-groups-contested-neighbourhood>.

<sup>98</sup> Mark Galeotti, "The Kremlin's Newest Hybrid Warfare Asset: Gangsters", *Foreign Policy*, June 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/12/how-the-world-of-spies-became-a-gangsters-paradise-russia-cyberattack-hack/>.

<sup>99</sup> Selhorst, "Russia's Perception Warfare; Multiple Authors. Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine", (RAND Corporation, 2017), p. 49.



that are part of the recognised chain of command. First, they are deniable, whether plausibly or implausibly. Second, as in so many areas of Russian business, their notional illegality provides a means by which the state can exert leverage over these entities, by holding their owners and employees at risk of prosecution. Third, they are by their nature expendable: casualties among PMCs are more easily concealed, and will provoke less outcry when detected, than those among regular military forces and especially conscripts.

Notional dissociation from the Russian state is aided by the fact that PMCs are illegal in Russia;<sup>100</sup> in fact the most prominent among them, the Wagner group, is headquartered in Argentina. Yet despite being illegal, PMCs such as Wagner are closely integrated with regular military and intelligence structures.<sup>101</sup> Wagner employees have received regular military decorations for actions in Syria and elsewhere, and Wagner's main training base at Molkino, in Krasnodar Territory in southern Russia, is shared with GRU special forces.

In this way PMCs are ideally suited to operations in Russia's unavowed conflicts, being cheap, expendable, deployable, and deniable even if implausibly. In particular, PMCs provide a means of taking risky opportunities, and the pattern of their use by Russia includes probing actions intended to establish the limits of tolerance by adversaries of Russia's grey-zone operations. Importantly, by using PMCs instead of regular forces for operations below the threshold of open conflict, Russia does not divert its core Ground Forces from their focus on preparations and training for unrestricted high-intensity warfare.

Various counterarguments have been advanced to some of the points set out above and elsewhere in this and other reports. Examples include:

- that while deniability was essential especially in Ukraine and to some extent in Syria, hence the use of Wagner PMC, it is no longer a practicable rationale for their use;<sup>102</sup>
- that the publicity this has attracted might for example even result - or has already resulted - in the closure of the Molkino facility used by Wagner;<sup>103</sup>
- or that the loss of human life by members of the Russian armed forces "does not lead to as much social tension as one might think" provided the death toll does not exceed a few

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<sup>100</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies - the implications for European and Norwegian Security", FFI, September 2018.

<sup>101</sup> Bingham, J. 'Crossing the line', Jane's Intelligence Review. (IHS Markit, 2018), pp. 13-15. Shortened version available at: [https://www.janes.com/images/assets/018/78018/Private\\_companies\\_engage\\_in\\_Russias\\_non-linear\\_warfare.pdf](https://www.janes.com/images/assets/018/78018/Private_companies_engage_in_Russias_non-linear_warfare.pdf).

<sup>102</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", Post-Soviet Affairs, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

<sup>103</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

hundred.<sup>104</sup> This, it is argued, is a level of losses to which Russian society has become hardened after Afghanistan and Chechnya.

Nevertheless, the benefit of deniability in particular will almost certainly continue to apply, for example in the case of Russian PMCs' deployment closer to the United States, such as in Venezuela, Nicaragua or Cuba.

In short, Russia's use of PMCs as a "surreptitious tool for challenging the West" reflects its "growing reliance on non-linear forms of warfare (including the employment of irregular forces)" - arguably given the "conspicuous discrepancy between Russia's ambitions and actual capabilities".<sup>105</sup>

In this context, the following features distinguish Russian PMCs from Western near-equivalents:

- Some if not most of them, and Wagner PMC in particular, are at best "semi-state" actors,<sup>106</sup> outwardly "private" but tightly linked to or even the product of Russia's security services.
- Wagner PMC is sometimes used in the same ways that other states use PMCs, but "corrupt informal networks" tied to the Kremlin have also used it in ways that are not typical of other strong states and that potentially undermine Russian security interests.
- Consequently, Russia's PMCs such as Wagner have both geopolitical and economic functions.<sup>107</sup>
- Russia's PMCs such as Wagner are also highly deployable, and easier to insert into countries of interest than regular Russian troops.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Pavel Luzin, "How the Kremlin Sealed the Deal with Russia's Private Military Contractors", Riddle, 20 February 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/how-the-kremlin-sealed-the-deal-with-russia-s-private-military-contractors/>

<sup>105</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests", part of the "War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad" series, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2019, [https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc\\_cid=df0fce69a9&mc\\_eid=508eef3ce8](https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/?mc_cid=df0fce69a9&mc_eid=508eef3ce8).

<sup>106</sup> Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 26 March 2019, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

<sup>107</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, "'Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East", The Jamestown Foundation, 13 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

<sup>108</sup> "It doesn't cost very much to send a couple of hundred guys to shore up a president," Peter Pham, head of the Washington-based Atlantic Council's Africa Center, told Bloomberg. See Henry Meyer, Ilya Arkhipov and Aina Rahagalala, "Putin's Notorious 'Chef' Is Now Meddling Across Africa", Bloomberg, 20 November 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa>.

- Elements within Russia's PMCs are ideologically motivated, especially those involved in what Russia terms the "near abroad" - from Ukraine to the Balkans - where they integrate well with other Russian or pro-Russia proxies.<sup>109</sup> The Russian state appears ready to take advantage of these natural synergies and sympathies. It would be entirely unsurprising if the Russian-speaking individuals detected inciting violence and agitating for disorder in Paris during the Yellow Jackets protest turned out to have been directed through Russian corporate entities, including private military companies.<sup>110</sup>
- The social utility of PMCs is another factor. A practical tool to pursue military and political objectives, they are also a safety valve. "The Kremlin has become increasingly aware that there are a significant number of people in Russia today who are capable of bearing arms but have been unable to realise themselves and build stable lives," noted Russian military and security expert Pavel Luzin explains.<sup>111</sup>

## Implications

In both declared and undeclared conflict, Russia will continue to make extensive use of non-state actors to perform a wide range of functions including information, intelligence, logistics, subversion, destabilisation and combat activities. There are numerous reasons for this form of outsourcing, such as cost effectiveness, expendability of assets, a degree of deniability where required, access to specialised skillsets which may be under-represented in the regular forces, and the essential principle of ambiguity in the eyes of the adversary. But it also reflects the fact that Russia's core Ground Forces are not undergoing a process of adaptation to wage hybrid warfare; instead, in hybrid conflict they are called on to perform their main task of engaging in high-intensity combat, only alongside a range of other state and non-state organisations and in a confrontation that remains ambiguous and grey.

Furthermore, the choice of hybrid methods as a route to achieving strategic goals may not necessarily be driven by weakness in areas that Russia's adversaries consider fundamental for power generation and force projection. Instead, it may be an active choice based on a valid assessment of adversary vulnerabilities, and where influence is best exerted to achieve objectives at minimal risk of any direct confrontation with peer powers.

One such vulnerability results from differing strategic cultures between the West and Russia or similar powers. These differences include greater willingness by Russia to accept risk, and to accept brief or protracted conflict as a means to further state aims, as evidenced in

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<sup>109</sup> Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies -the implications for European and Norwegian Security", Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), FFI-RAPPORT 18/01300, 11 September 2018, <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/18-01300.pdf>.

<sup>110</sup> Aleksandra Vagner, *Из Донбасса в "желтые жилеты". Россия и протесты во Франции* ("From the Donbas to the "Yellow Vests". Russia and the Protests in France"), Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty), 25 March 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29841027.html>; and the link to the Czech documentary in question, <https://www.voxpot.cz/reportage/francie-zlute-vesty/>.

<sup>111</sup> Pavel Luzin, "How the Kremlin Sealed the Deal with Russia's Private Military Contractors", Riddle, 20 February 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/how-the-kremlin-sealed-the-deal-with-russia-s-private-military-contractors/>.

continuing operations in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>112</sup> Arms-length tools such as proxies and PMCs only enhance Russia's higher acceptance of risk and a lower threshold for the use of force, be it military or non-military.

Russia's embrace of unconventional and notionally non-military entities also means that it does not have to struggle with the problem of unlocking permissions and authorities to take specific offensive or defensive actions before a state of conflict formally exists. This lack of constraint on Russia's organisations and agencies is reinforced still further by two additional factors. First, Russia believes that it is already in conflict with the West as a whole. Second, the moral foundations based in shared values and respect for rule of law which provide the basis for restraint by Russia's adversaries do not constrain Russia to nearly the same extent.

Further expansion in Russian PMCs' operational geography seems likely wherever there are nations with which Russia has military or economic ties or where Russia detects Western attention gaps, both in Africa and elsewhere. Closer to the United States - in addition to Venezuela - Cuba and Nicaragua are potential candidates given their already significant relationships with the Russian defence and intelligence sectors.<sup>113</sup>

### Recommendations

Russia cannot be easily deterred from the use of its grey-zone arsenal, either through the threat of force or sanction. The Montreux Document could be promoted as a diplomatic strategy. "Formal, state-sanctioned efforts will bring the utility of unconventional gray-zone strategies into doubt," one view holds.<sup>114</sup> Russia might eventually sign it "to avoid the castigation caused by having its efforts labeled mercenary and obscure".

NATO has worked to counter other elements in this arsenal through the efforts of its Centres of Excellence for Strategic Communications and for Cooperative Cyber Defence, and in its cooperation with the European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats. The alliance could help European NATO members to address matters better in their own neighbourhood and to increase awareness of the issue.

At the same time there is a strong argument for firm and forceful responses to Russian grey-zone activities. By disguising and disavowing its actions in Crimea, Russia showed it was not willing to risk military escalation. Had Russia been powerful enough to do what it pleased with

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<sup>112</sup> Patrick Wintour and Julian Borger, "Syria faces perpetual war unless Russia extends ceasefire, France warns", The Guardian, 24 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/24/syria-war-unga-france-warning-russia-extend-ceasefire>.

<sup>113</sup> Matt Spetalnick, "Russian deployment in Venezuela includes 'cybersecurity personnel': U.S. official", Reuters, 26 March 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-russians-idUSKCN1R72FX>.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher R. Spearin, "Nontraditional War. Russia's Military and Security Privatization", The US Army War College Quarterly, Parameters, 48(2) Summer 2018, <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3659.pdf>.

immunity, there would have been no need for the "theatrics" of hybrid warfare.<sup>115</sup> Responding to covert aggression with escalation lifts the conflict out of the grey zone and renders it no longer deniable, removing at a stroke several of Russia's key advantages.

The forceful response to the Wagner transgression at Deir ez-Zor provides a prime case study. Yet as it deploys forces in the guise of PMCs like Wagner, Russia invariably seeks to exploit a vacuum or an otherwise permissive environment - a power vacuum such as in Ukraine (Crimea, Donbas) or permissive regimes such as African autocracies. In such situations the administration of counterforce will be challenging and legally questionable.

One avenue for NATO to explore is the example of the United Kingdom, with its plan to re-task its special forces to missions designed specifically to counter Russia's and others' covert or hybrid forces around the world. Drawn up by the Director Special Forces (DSF), the "Special Operations Concept" would move the three main elements of the UK's special forces towards closer cooperation with MI6 and allied intelligence agencies. For example, "an operation might be mounted in a Baltic republic or African country" in order to uncover, pinpoint and disrupt Russian covert activities, in collaboration with local security forces.<sup>116</sup>

It is therefore essential to be able in advance to identify the locations that could be the target of such Russian attempts, in order to be in a position to take preventive or remedial action. Such action should include diplomatic, political and economic efforts and incentives to counter disruptive Russian influence in regions as diverse as Africa, Central Asia and Latin America.

Russia is vulnerable to a range of nonmilitary deterrents, such as multilateral sanctions targeting the Russian economy and limiting Russian income from exports of fossil fuels.

Other, broader, international efforts to mitigate the undesirable effects of such Russian activities could aim to engage China, which is increasingly viewed as the more constructive of the two powers.<sup>117</sup> In these regions, its own political, economic and security interests may well come into contact or even conflict with those of Russia, and could therefore be exploited.

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<sup>115</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, "Stop Calling Every Potential Act of Russian Aggression 'Hybrid Warfare'", International Affairs blog, 24 May 2018, <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/stop-calling-every-potential-act-of-russian-aggression-hybrid-warfare-e980b3b888a9>.

<sup>116</sup> Mark Urban, "UK's special forces set for new Russia mission", BBC, 13 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48624982>. The three main elements of the UK's Special Forces are the Special Air Service (SAS), the Special Boat Service (SBS) and Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR).

<sup>117</sup> James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, "Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses", Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE310.html>.