



# **WAGNER AS TOOL OF RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY**

Lessons from Ukraine





# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Part 1: Yevgeny Prigozhin: the black sheep of the Russian elite</b>	<b>5</b>
Régis Genté, journalist	5
Breaking into the elite	5
The gold mine	6
Access to the body	8
Entrepreneurial logic	8
A disturbing man	10
Conclusion: A black sheep remains a black sheep	11
<b>Part 2: Putin's prisoner</b>	<b>12</b>
Régis Genté, journalist	12
Prigozhin the zek	12
Code of honor	13
Staging	14
Deal with the bosses?	15
Russia's patsan against the judge	16
<b>Part 3: The origins of Wagner in Ukraine in 2014</b>	<b>17</b>
Rodolphe Oberle, Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine 2014-21, Secretary of Eastern Circles	17
Dmitry Utkin	17
Wagner group debuts in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas, 2014	18
The “hit man” of Moscow	20
Wagner ties with the far-right milieu of Russian soldiers of fortune	21
<b>Part 4: Wagner in Ukraine since 2022: lessons on Russian military strategy</b>	<b>23</b>
Hennadiy Maksak, Prism Ukraine	23
The military and political context of Wagner engagement in a full-scale war in 2022	23
Geography of Application of Wagner PMC Units	24
Training and Recruitment of Wagner PMC Personnel	25
Wagner Tactics in Conducting Combat Operations	27
Political and Military Context	30
Medium-term prospects of the Wagner PMC	31
<b>Part 5: Wagner in Africa</b>	<b>34</b>
Yan St-Pierre, Mosecon	34
Wagner’s role in Africa	34
Wagner as part of military operations	35
Wagner’s foreign policy impact	36
Wagner is not the “enemy”	37
<b>Part 6: Wagner business model</b>	<b>39</b>
Anastasiya Shapochkina, Eastern Circles	39
<b>Conclusion: What Russian PMC’s tell us about the future of Russia</b>	<b>43</b>
Anastasiya Shapochkina, Eastern Circles	43
Strategic implications of PMC’s for Russia	45

# Introduction

Wagner has gained increasing media attention in the last months due to its growing role in Russia's war in Ukraine, especially in the frontline battles in the east of the country. How Wagner came about, who is behind it, and how its goals and strategy have evolved since its founding in 2014, are the questions addressed by this report.

The first and second parts explore Yevgeny Prigozhin's ascent on the ladder of the Russian elites, how he remains marginalized, despite the media attention, and what his criminal past is telling us about the role of « prison culture » in Russian higher political stratum. The third part of the report is diving into the origins of Wagner private military company (PMC), from the birthplace of its founder Dmitry Utkin in Ukraine, to the role Wagner played in the first invasion in the east of the country in 2014-16, to the religious and ideological foundations of the PMC. Part 4 analyses Wagner's actions and what they tell us about Russian military strategy in Ukraine since 2022. Part 5 explains the financial and geopolitical rationale behind Wagner's operations in Africa. Part 6 explores Wagner's business model with the Strategyzer « business canvas » analytical framework. The conclusion places Wagner PMC within the environment of other Russian PMC's, fast expanding and multiplying across the globe, and provides scenarios of how the PMC's will impact Russia from inside.

# Part 1: Yevgeny Prigozhin: the black sheep of the Russian elite

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## Régis Genté, journalist

Since mid-2022, the headlines in the media and on social networks have been covering the clash between Yevgeny Prigozhin and high-ranking Russian military officials. From these heated polemics, sometimes with violent consequences on the front, we can conclude that Prigozhin, who presents himself as the founder of the paramilitary group Wagner and other firms that play a role in Russian politics, is extremely powerful. And he is, as evidenced by the right he has obtained to tour dozens of Russian penal colonies to recruit near 50,000 inmates for the Ukrainian front. But his heated polemics with very powerful people also betray a certain fundamental weakness regarding his position within the Russian elite.

Prigozhin has to fight constantly to maintain his position on top. *"Despite his large new-found fame, Prigozhin still acts as a private individual. His relationship with the state is informal, and therefore fragile, and could end without notice"*, writes Tatiana Stanovaya.<sup>1</sup> He owes his position to Putin himself, who saw in him a man capable of leading the quasi-state structures he needed once embarked on this high-risk tug-of-war with the West, starting in 2014. So, if Prigozhin can exist within Russia's ruling circles, it's on condition that he remains a black sheep. He can only exist and survive by operating in the gray zone of politics and geopolitics, and in unfavorable position competing with the regime's "official" players.

His paradoxical position, where power can only be gained through a form of weakness, says a lot about Russia today. A state that cannot exist without a deep state at the crossroads of the criminal world, power structures, the fortunes of the Kremlin's payroll, and an ideology made up of nationalism, imperialism and instrumentalized religiosity. His uncomfortable position doesn't prevent Prigozhin from playing the same game as the other powerful figures in Russia, where in a kind of "political marketplace," to please and serve the regime, everyone has to take initiatives and be creative in order to gain access to the state resources. As a result, Prigozhin constantly finds himself in transactional relations with the heavyweights of the Putin regime, each allying himself or not with the others to defend his interests and positions.

## Breaking into the elite

In order to understand Prigozhin's place in Russia's ruling circles, it is important to look into his origins. Born in 1961 in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg, also a birthplace of Vladimir Putin)

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<sup>1</sup> T. Stanovaya, "Man vs. Myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?" Carnegie Politika, February 13, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89008>.



into a modest family,<sup>2</sup> he failed to complete his higher education at the Chemical and Pharmaceutical Institute and then fell into petty crime. At the end of 1979, the young Prigozhin received a 2.5 years suspended prison sentence for "*theft*". Two years later, he was sentenced to 13 years in prison for "*theft*", "*burglary*", "*swindling*" and "*involvement of a minor in criminal activity*."<sup>3</sup> Although his sentence was shortened, and he was released in 1990, his way of thinking was forged in the prison world that can be felt today in his every move and the manner of speech.

He developed the infamous mentality of Russia's harsh, lawless 1990's. As soon as he was released from prison at the fall of the USSR, Prigozhin set up a small chain of *hot dog* stands in his hometown. Money flowed in. In 1995, he opened his first restaurant, "*La vieille douane*", while investing in the casino business, which may well have been how he met Vladimir Putin.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Prigozhin launched a luxurious restaurant boat, the "*New Island*". Putin became his regular. When Putin became President of the Russian Federation in 2000, he turned Prigozhin into the Kremlin's chef, treating distinguished foreign guests and the regime's top brass.

This is how Prigozhin came to be known as "*Putin's cook*", while at the same time starting to win catering contracts for school canteens and the Ministry of Defense, with his company Concord Catering, founded in 1997. He keeps this nickname, which reflects both his closeness to the Kremlin's master and the distance that fundamentally separates the two, assigning Prigozhin a special but marginal place within Putin's ruling elite.

## The gold mine

Yevgeny Prigozhin's involvement in political affairs came about as a result of the major demonstrations held in Moscow and other major Russian cities during the winter of 2011-2012, both to contest the outcome of the December 4, 2011 parliamentary elections and Putin's return to the presidency.<sup>5</sup> We don't know how the idea came to involve the former convict in issues that are ultimately strategic for the state and Putin's regime. Was the proposal made by

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<sup>2</sup> Between a father who died prematurely and a mother who worked in a hospital, "not in a management position". Cf. Evgeny Vychenkov, "Evgenii Prigozhin: "Ya poshel k Beglovu, on j Medvedevu, tot Putinu" [Yevgeny Prigozhin: "I went to see Beglov, he went to Medvedev, who went to Putin], Gorod 812, February 20, 2018, <https://gorod-812.ru/evgeniy-prigozhin-ya-poshel-k-beglovu-k-medvedevu-tot-k-putinu/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ilya Davlyatchin, "Bournaïa molodost "Kremlenskogo restoratora"" [Stormy youth of the "Kremlin restorer"], Rosbalt, September 21, 2018, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/piter/2018/09/21/1733712.html>.

<sup>4</sup> On Putin, then an aide to the mayor of Saint Petersburg in charge of foreign relations (including trade), exercising informal control over various sectors of the city's grey economy (including casinos), see Yuri Felshtinsky (with Vladimir Pribylovsky), *The Putin corporation*, London, Gibson Square, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Unable to stand for more than two successive terms, Mr. Putin decided in 2008 to respect the constitution and not run for a third term. It was then decided that Dmitri Medvedev would take up residence in the Kremlin. But as Medvedev's presidential term drew to a close, Putin imposed his return to the head of state. This announcement, made in September 2011, did not go down well with many Russians.

the Kremlin? Or was it Prigozhin who offered his services, sensing, as researcher Colin Gérard suggests, *"that there's a market for him"*?<sup>6</sup>

The Kremlin was worried about the demonstrations, in which opposition figure Alexei Navalny has emerged. Prigozhin put his companies at the service of the regime. In April 2012, the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* published an investigation, with supporting documents, proving that Concord Catering development director, Dimitry Koshary, informs his boss *"about upcoming events, gathers compromising information against Putin's political rivals, organizes provocations at rallies and prepares material for the filming of the movie 'Anatomy of a Demonstration'."*<sup>7</sup>

This is where we learn of the existence of *"troll farms"*, companies responsible for disqualifying, parodying and negatively commenting on the media, social networks and online communication platforms of the Kremlin's opponents, to undermine their reputation. From then on, Prigozhin also created fake media, dedicated to defending Putin's regime. These activities were brought together under the banner of the *Internet Research Agency*, or *"Lakhta project"*, the embryo of what was to become the Patriot Group, Prigozhin's media holding company. *"It's not just a tool for Putin's regime. It also serves Prigozhin himself. In Putin's Russia, where there have been no oligarchs for two decades, hardly anyone has the right to have such a powerful weapon as a media group,"* notes a Russian political consultant, speaking on condition of anonymity.

This first "hybrid" experience led *"Prigozhin to seize his chance after the annexation of Crimea. (...) He found a goldmine: if the state is ineffective in solving certain tasks [to be carried out under a false identity], quasi-state tools come to the rescue,"* observes Tatiana Stanovaya.<sup>8</sup> This is how the paramilitary company Wagner was created in 2014. Did Prigozhin come up with the idea? Russian observers of the businessman doubt it, claiming to know that the Wagner group was created by the GRU (Russia's military intelligence service) and entrusted, to conceal the presence of the state, to this *"private"* actor Prigozhin. *"Wagner as a military organization was created and is run by GRU officers, retired and active military personnel,"* writes, citing sources, the anonymous but reliable and well-informed Telegram channel Tcheka-OGPU.<sup>9</sup>

In the wake of his success, the Saint Petersburg businessman expanded his activities. After supporting the Russian army in the Donbas from 2014 onwards, he moved on to Syria and Libya with the Wagner Group (to support Moscow's geopolitical effort to appear as a peacemaker), and from there to other African countries (including the Central African Republic, Sudan or Mali, with the aim of helping Russia weaken the positions of its Western adversaries in the concert of nations<sup>10</sup>), then by means of its troll farms and other *"media"* projects Prigozhin

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Colin Gérard (researcher at the Géode center and the Institut Français de Géopolitique), "Portrait d'Evgueni Prigojine", France Culture, February 20, 2023, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-jeux-internationaux/prigojine-itineraire-d-un-opportuniste-influent-2399046>.

<sup>7</sup> Nikita Girin and Diana Khachatryan, "Anatomia pro testo" [Anatomy of dough], *Novaya Gazeta*, April 9, 2012, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2012/04/08/49159-anatomiya-pro-testo>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Post from March 16, 2023: <https://t.me/vchkogpu/37147>. It also reads, "One of our sources named Wagner's real beneficiaries: the current GRU leadership and Putin's former bodyguard, the governor of the Tula region, Alexei Dyumine." On the same subject, see the Telegram channel Gulagu.net, post of March 7, 2023: <https://t.me/NetGulagu/4554>.

<sup>10</sup> Arnaud Kalika, "Le grand retour de la Russie en Afrique?" IFRI, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 114, April 2019, <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/grand-retour-de-russie-afrique>.

attempted to influence the outcome of the 2016 American elections by supporting the Kremlin's favorite candidate, Donald Trump.

## Access to the body

Prigozhin's power comes essentially from his access to Vladimir Putin. It is characteristic of the autocratic nature of the current Russian regime that the power of personalities in a position to influence the country's politics depends on their access to the head of state. Those closest to Putin, such as his youth friends turned billionaires Guennady Timchenko, the Rotenberg and the Kovalchuk brothers, have a word for it, which has its origins in medieval politico-religious thought: "*dostoup k'telou*" ("*access to the body*", by which we mean the "*body politic*" of the supreme leader).

Yevgeny Prigozhin has some "*access to the body*", but not as much as many others. In an Arte report based on internal documents obtained by hackers, Prigozhin's diary shows that he met Putin just six times between 2012 and the end of 2021. During this period, he had 37 appointments called "Kremlin" and 62 with Dimitry Peskov, the president's spokesman.<sup>11</sup> As a result, explains Tatiana Stanovaya, Prigozhin is not "*autonomous in his relations with Putin. To a large extent, he depends on the mediation of the President's 'friends' and senior officials. For a long time, it was the Kovalchuk brothers who helped him do this. (...) Thanks to the Kovalchuk brothers, Prigozhin was able to pass on information about his initiatives to Putin.*"<sup>12</sup>

As a result, Prigozhin has not been assigned a sector like Igor Sechin, who reigns over Rosneft and Russian oil, or Sergei Chemezov, who oversees the military-industrial complex. Prigozhin, on the other hand, has been given the shadowy domain of informal, hybrid politics, thanks to Putin's tug-of-war with the West. His role is to oversee the activities that the state cannot carry out in the open, and thus has to outsource.

## Entrepreneurial logic

Prigozhin excelled in this task, in Vladimir Putin's eyes, partly because of his ability to take initiative and guess the regime's needs fundamental for its survival. Thus, faced with the multiple setbacks suffered by the Russian army on the Ukrainian front from the end of August 2022 onwards, and with growing fears of total defeat in Moscow, Prigozhin came up with a concrete solution that met the Kremlin's specific needs of the moment: mobilizing hundreds of thousands of men from a population that refused to fight. The idea was to draw on a reserve that no one had thought of: prisoners. Prisoners serving long sentences were a pool of people likely to accept the contract offered by the prisoner: either spend a large part of the rest of their lives behind bars, or take the gamble of risking their lives on the Ukrainian front and being free in six months' time, *if they returned alive*.

Prigozhin acted as an "*entrepreneur*", as required by the Putin regime. Of course, the origins of the Wagner group show that this is only a façade. And we should not imagine a form of

<sup>11</sup> Ksenia Bolchakova and Alexandra Jousset, "Les dossiers de Prigojine," Arte, February 20, 2023, <https://www.arte.tv/fr/videos/113682-001-A/sources/> (cf. after 5'05").

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



entrepreneurship practiced in a liberal environment. Rather, Wagner stimulated competition between members of the ruling elite who accept the regime's rules of the game. In 2020, the advisor to a major figure in Russian politics explained, that *"it's not enough to be a friend of Putin's to be able to do things and get state contracts or whatever. In fact, more often than not, the head of state launches ideas and projects. And it's up to everyone to come up with good initiatives to make them succeed. If their proposals don't hold up, they're rejected."*<sup>13</sup>

In this context, Prigozhin is constantly forging links with other members of the Russian ruling elite. This is made possible by the support he enjoys from Putin. This opens doors for him in the Kremlin, with the head of the presidential administration Anton Vaino, for example, or Sergei Kirienko, in charge of domestic policy within the same administration but also, informally, in the occupied/conquered regions of Ukraine. This brings him into contact with a number of *siloviki*, committed to providing the Wagner group with the means to carry out initiatives endorsed by the Kremlin: from the prison administration service to the FSB, the GRU and the Russian Guard - all entities involved in the war in Ukraine. This also leads to agreements with various ministries, local governors and businessmen.

His pro-war stance, in full support of President Putin, has led many other members of Russia's ruling circles to lean on him to show their support for the head of state. This has been the case with Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who, also for reasons of securing his positions within the elite, needs to be perceived as radical.<sup>14</sup> This has also been the case for people who have taken a hawkish stance since the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, such as State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin. The latter showed his zeal at the beginning of 2023 to get his assembly to adopt the criminalization of the *"discrediting"* of mercenaries (i.e. prisoners who had joined Wagner's ranks) taking part in Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Businessmen such as Igor Sechin, the powerful head of Rosneft, have also lent Prigozhin their financial support.<sup>15</sup>

Like Sechin, certain *"powerful"* members of the Putin regime have an interest in financing Prigozhin's structures. This funding may take the form of direct payments, but more often than not consists of business contracts with no apparent link to Prigozhin's hybrid activities. For example, in 2022, when he had to redouble his efforts to support Putin's war, Russian media reported that *"Prigozhin's catering companies got rich: they received state contracts for a record*

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<sup>13</sup> Interview in Moscow, February 2019. This idea of an elite encouraged to take initiatives to best serve the regime is described by Marlène Laruelle and Kévin Limonier, who speak of "entrepreneurs of influence" about "people who invest their own money or social capital to strengthen their influence (...) in the hope of being rewarded by the Kremlin." "Beyond "hybrid warfare": a digital exploration of Russia's entrepreneurs of influence," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Volume 37, Issue 4, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1060586X.2021.1936409>.

<sup>14</sup> In February 2023, however, he tempered his open support for Prigozhin. Cf. Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Russian offensive campaign assessment, February 18 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-18-2023>. It reads: "Kadyrov appears to have rejected overtures from Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin to join a renewed informational campaign against the Russian MoD, suggesting that this campaign may fail to restore Prigozhin's waning influence. Kadyrov likely responded to the Russian MoD's confirmation of the four military district commanders on February 17, stating that Chechen formations will follow the orders of any commander appointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and that Chechen combat officers have an excellent well-coordinated relationship with the MoD. Kadyrov's endorsement of the Russian MoD follows Prigozhin's attempt to court Kadyrov's support through a publicized visit to a wounded Akhmat Special Forces commander on February 16."

<sup>15</sup> According to various Russian media and social media, the two men met informally and discreetly very early in March 2023 (Telegram channel post "Mojno Obiasnyt" from March 7, 2023 - <https://t.me/mozhemobiasnit/14838>).

amount of nearly 100 billion rubles.<sup>16</sup> ... Between 2011 and 2021, companies associated with "Putin's chef" won tenders for 184.6 billion rubles. ... These companies won almost all tenders for the supply of food in the capital's hospitals and other health department structures. ... According to one of our sources, Prigozhin helped organize the "Sobyanin Regiment". This was a volunteer battalion formed shortly after the start of the war and financed from the city's budget."<sup>17</sup>

This example shows the basis on which the major players in the Russian elite get along, forming alliances of convenience. The mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin funds Prigozhin to serve Putin's ambitions on the Ukrainian front. Sobyanin wants to show Putin that he supports him in perhaps the most important battle of his life, while heading a city whose population is very reluctant to wage war on Kiyv. In this context, Sobyanin was keen to form a battalion, but he needed Prigozhin's support to do so.

## A disturbing man

However the intrusion of "Putin's cook" into the games played by Russia's ruling circles is arousing animosity. The media and experts of Russian internal politics have been talking about it for months. Two types of members of Russia's ruling elite are at loggerheads with Prigozhin: the *siloviki* (power structures) and part of the business community.

Already in Syria after 2016, there were signs that the Wagner group and the Russian Ministry of Defense were at loggerheads. This only worsened with the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Prigozhin and his structures seem to be in perpetual confrontation with part of the Russian military leadership, starting with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov. The same applies to a whole section of the management of the GRU, FSB and other security agencies.

This seems to be due to Prigozhin's position: he has to finance himself and needs equipment, air support, technicians, intelligence from the army, on which his success ultimately depends. But he also needs to show the leader, Vladimir Putin, that he can do better than the army. That he is the one who should be entrusted with certain missions... and therefore to whom resources should be allocated. This was particularly evident during the battle for Soledar, in the east of Ukraine, in late 2022 and early 2023. In this context, Prigozhin tries to rely on senior officers who share his vision, such as General Sergei Surovikin, who led Russian forces on the Ukrainian front from October 2022 to January 2023.

Prigozhin's war-mongering approach, on which he relies heavily to compensate for the weakness of his political position and capture Putin's attention, has led him to extol his own merits (efforts to ensure Russia's victory over Ukraine) and criticize, in particular, the businessmen and "oligarchs" against whom he has called for "Stalinist repression" as they "don't give a damn about war". This earned him staunch animosity from the targeted circles, especially since appealing to the anti-oligarch mood of the Russian population appeared as an attempt to create a political profile on the federal level.

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<sup>16</sup> 92 billion rubles to be precise, or 1.04 billion euros (on 1 May 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Ilya Davlyatchin, "Povar nie dlia vsekh" [Cook not for everyone], Verstka, February 7, 2023, <https://verstka.media/povar-ne-dlia-vseh/>.

## **Conclusion: A black sheep remains a black sheep**

Yevgeny Prigozhin's position within Russia's ruling circles testifies as much to his power as to his weakness. It also says a lot about the Putin regime: a system in fundamental need of a "deep state", which can only advance by concealing part of its activity. Prigozhin meets this need. And he does so in a way typical of how the regime operates: by relying on his "*access to the body*": the autocratic president, even if this is limited compared to other members of the Putin elite, and by acting as an entrepreneur who can take initiatives and make proposals to power in order to serve it.

Prigozhin does this perfectly within Putin's regime, of which he knows all the ins and outs. Does he threaten the regime? Probably not. His intention is not to dethrone Putin, to whom he owes everything and whom all his actions aim to support in his political and geopolitical endeavors. It is rather to exist within this regime, to serve it and help it grow stronger, which in turn allows him, Prigozhin, to prosper.

Prigozhin will certainly remain a black sheep within the ruling circles of Putin's Russia. Statism is a hallmark of Putin's system. Prigozhin the convict cannot go beyond his condition. And it is even on this condition that he can thrive and exist politically in Russia today.

## Part 2: Putin's prisoner

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### Régis Genté, journalist

Only Yevgeny Prigozhin could do that. Walk into prisons and walk out with thousands of inmates on the promise of their release... if they returned alive from the Ukrainian front. Only Prigozhin had the legitimacy to propose this "contract" to the *zeki*<sup>18</sup> ("convict"), having himself been a *zek* between 1981 and 1990 for "theft", "burglary" and "swindling". Russian prisons hold no secrets for the boss of paramilitary company Wagner.

"Prigozhin's greatest talent is identifying the Kremlin's weaknesses and rushing to offer solutions, however controversial, bloody, dirty or illegal they may be. This is why he has become absolutely irreplaceable for Putin," write investigative journalists Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov.<sup>19</sup> The Kremlin's challenge in the summer of 2022 was to mobilize hundreds of thousands of Russians to stem a victorious Ukrainian counter-offensive. But mobilization was unpopular in Russia, as hundreds of thousands of men voted with their feet once it was announced on September 21, 2022). Prigozhin, a former *zek*, had the idea of drawing on a captive reserve: the 430,000 plus inmates of Russian prisons. This was a great service to his mentor, Vladimir Putin.

In offering this solution to Putin, Prigozhin was not only part of the Russian "grammar" of war (in the wake of the famous *Shtrafbats*, the battalions of GULAG inmates created by Stalin to reinforce the front from 1942 onwards<sup>20</sup>), but also part of the "grammar" of the underworld, which he mastered perfectly. It enabled him to send tens of thousands of fighters to the Ukrainian front, but he misinterpreted it, too. The "traditional" underworld code of honor inherited from the Soviet era forbids criminals to collaborate with the state. *Vory v'zakone* ("thieves within the law") strongly criticized Prigozhin for this, seeing him as a representative of the state who merely apes their language and slang. In addition to what they perceive as his lack of legitimacy, Prigozhin was, at least according to rumors, a "*petoukh*" ("rooster") in *zeki* slang, a prisoner of the lowest caste of the underworld, slaves for the *vory*, in every possible way.

### Prigozhin the *zek*

The Russian prison world holds no secrets for Prigozhin, who spent nine years there for petty crime. It's not certain that he belongs to the "traditional" criminal world inherited from the USSR, with its "thieves within the law" (crowned at ceremonies now held in restaurants or kitschy nightclubs) and its strict hierarchy, from *smotriashchi* ("overseer") to "*petoukh*".

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<sup>18</sup> Abbreviation of "zaklioutchoniï" ("detainee"), formed from the prefix "za" ("behind something") and the root "klioutch" ("key"). Literally, it means "behind the key", the equivalent of the French expression "derrière les barreaux" ("behind the bars").

<sup>19</sup> Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, "Prigozhin spechit na pomotch" [Prigozhin rushes to help], Agentura.ru, November 13, 2022, <https://agentura.ru/investigations/prigozhin-spehit-na-pomoshh/>.

<sup>20</sup> Or "Shtrafnoi batalion", created when a wave of panic had swept through the ranks of the Red Army in the face of the Wehrmacht.

But no doubt he wanted, *at the very least*, to be part of this world. From his time in prison, Prigozhin has clearly embodied all the codes of the Russian underworld: slang, mentality, values... His body bears the evidence: a European who worked in his restaurants a few years ago tells us that *"in the back rooms, he would strip down in front of us to put on his maître d' suit, showing off his prison tattoos in the process to instill fear in his teams"*. The tattoos, *"which in fact summarize the mobster's record of service, (...) his complete biography,"*<sup>21</sup> through coded symbols, are the mark of belonging to this underworld.

Nevertheless, *"what's striking about watching the videos in which Prigozhin was filmed recruiting prisoners for Russian penal colonies from September onwards,"*<sup>22</sup> *is that he doesn't talk to the zeki like a zek. He speaks like a man in the street, and his intonations are typical in this sense, with a very poor vocabulary and unfinished sentences. From this point of view, he makes the prisoners he comes to recruit feel that he is one of them,"* notes Alexandre Koupatadze, a specialist in post-Soviet crime who teaches at King's College London. In this sense, like many actors in Russian politics following President Putin, Prigozhin seems to sprinkle his speeches on purpose with a few words here and there from prison slang and the vocabulary of the *gopniki* (*"riff-raff"*), in order to make the people believe that he is just like them.<sup>23</sup>

## Code of honor

The mere fact of recruiting *zeki* to serve alongside the Russian army is already on the order of *"sin"*, in the eyes of the leaders of the Russian underworld, or at least this is how these leaders would like it to look. The reality of this world however, since the mid-20th century, has been one of full collaboration with the country's authorities (police, administration, political powers).<sup>24</sup> *"In fact, Prigozhin constantly plays with the ambiguities between respecting the code of honor and violating it. He constantly refers to this code, while forgetting that he is doing so to serve the Russian state,"* points out Gavin Slade, a criminologist specializing in the former Soviet space and associate professor of sociology at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan.

To fit in with the underworld system, Prigozhin, for example, instituted a *"Wagner code"* within his paramilitary society, combining the thieves' *"code of honor"* with elements of military discipline: *"The first sin is desertion. Nobody gives in, nobody backs down, nobody surrenders. During your training, you'll be told about two grenades that you must carry with you. The second sin is alcohol and drugs. The third is looting. Including sexual contact with women, flora, fauna, men, anyone..."*<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Danzig Baldaev, Sergei Vasiliev, Alexei Plutser-Sarno, "Russian criminal tattoo - Encyclopedia", Limbus Press, Saint Petersburg, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> He had been doing this since the early summer of 2022, but it became public and relayed through videos from September onwards.

<sup>23</sup> Svetlana Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia: From the Streets to the Corridors of Power*", Cornell University Press, Thaca NY, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> The thieves' "law" initially required them to categorically reject any form of cooperation with the authorities. But during the Second World War, this was flouted under Stalin's rule when criminals were offered service in the Red Army in exchange for a reduced sentence. This led to the "War of the Sukas" ("bitches", "snitches") after 1945,

<sup>25</sup> Victoria Roshchyna, "An 'orchestra' of murderers: Who are the Wagner Group mercenaries fighting against Ukraine?" *Ukrainskaya Pravda*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/12/21/7379589/>.



There's also a rule straight from the "morals" of thieves to literally banish homosexuals, in this case those from the lowest caste of the Russian criminal hierarchy, the "roosters". Prigozhin thus declared that he didn't take "roosters" to Wagner, while jokingly recommending the creation of a separate "rooster division", a "howitzer boys' battery."<sup>26</sup> In reality, according to Russian media citing numerous sources, the Wagner group is "accused of having exerted 'pressure' to recruit raped and mistreated prisoners from Russian penal colonies [those of the lower caste, the 'roosters'] to join front-line combat units."<sup>27</sup>

## Staging

Prigozhin touched the heart of the Zek mentality "by playing on the string of the given word, of the contract established between him and the prisoners who agreed to go to the front, in exchange for the annulment of their sentence if they returned alive from the front, based on the trust that his word must inspire", explains Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, political scientist and author of the book "La verticale de la peur: ordre et allégeance en Russie poutinienne" (*The Vertical of Fear: Order and Allegiance in Putin's Russia*).<sup>28</sup>

From the very first video of Prigozhin recruiting from Russian penal colonies in the republic of Mari El, over 600 kilometers east of Moscow, we see Wagner's boss offering a contract that seems perfectly clear to the inmates: full remission of sentence in exchange for six months on the Ukrainian front. "Do you have anyone who can get you out of here, out of prison? There are two ways: Allah and God or in a wooden box. I'll get you out of here alive. But I won't always return you alive. Well, guys, do you have any questions? Or have I explained everything so well that it's super clear? You've got five minutes to think it over," he said on Wednesday, September 14, 2022, in a prison courtyard, wearing a jacket emblazoned with official decorations on his chest, in the midst of hundreds of stunned inmates. "Prigozhin has thus staged what is intended to be a man-to-man contract, but in reality, in prison there are a thousand ways of exerting pressure on an inmate. There is no free choice," insists Gavin Slade.<sup>29</sup>

Six months later, Prigozhin was filmed again with prisoners, this time those he had freed. To prove that he had kept his word. "Patsan skazal, patsan sdela!" ("the guy said, the guy did"). "It's a phrase that's emblematic of the Russian criminal world, where it's all about keeping one's word," says Gilles Favarel-Garrigues. Prigozhin will also be filmed in hospitals with his amputee "boys" and others receiving treatment, prostheses and physical rehabilitation. This is when he takes on the role of a paternalistic boss.

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<sup>26</sup> Answer dated November 16, 2022 from the press office of the Konkord company, owned by Mr. Prigozhin, to a question posed online by the 72.ru media.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Nemtsova, "Now Putin's Sending Prison Rape Victims to Die on the Front Line," Daily Best, October 26, 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/now-putin-is-sending-prison-rape-victims-to-ukraine-to-die-on-the-frontline?ref=scroll>.

<sup>28</sup> Edition La Découverte, Paris, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> Despite the absence of reliable figures, the media and various experts were convinced that Prigozhin had succeeded in convincing 40,000 to 50,000 Russian prisoners to join the Ukrainian front. Researcher Judith Pallot, a professor of human geography, questions these figures. Cf. "Lies, damn lies and statistics - how many prisoners has Wagner really recruited?" Riddle, March 7, 2023, <https://ridl.io/lies-damn-lies-and-statistics-how-many-prisoners-has-wagner-really-recruited/>.

How he's truly keeping his word remains to be proven. On Russian social media, many families complain that they have had no news for months of their loved one who enlisted to Wagner, or that they have learned after much research that he or she has been buried in a "Wagnerist" cemetery hundreds or thousands of kilometers from home. Worse still, mortality rates in their units, as reported by survivors, were extremely high, as the mobilized *zeki* understood at the front that they were being called upon to fight with little training, poorly armed and ill-equipped. As a result, when Wagner's men returned to prison at the end of 2022 for a second mobilization that did not bear Prigozhin's name, very few *zeki* would have accepted the "contract" offered to them this time.<sup>30</sup>

Everyone also heard how, as Prigozhin had indeed warned back in September, that those who ran back or deserted were executed. Somewhat along the lines of Stalin's *Shrafftbat*, according to the principle of "*not a step back*", which means a bullet in the head without further ado. According to Russian human rights activists, dozens of summary executions were carried out by Wagner's men. Even more spectacular executions have been staged, filmed and widely published on social networks. On November 11, for example, Wagner's men laid Yevgeny Nuzhin on the ground, taping his head to a piece of cinder block, before killing him with a sledgehammer to the head.

## Deal with the bosses?

In this world of pretense, the role of the *vory v zakone* is unclear. According to the "code of honor" of these proud characters, it would have been preferable for Prigozhin to ask their permission before recruiting the *zeki* to their penal colony. Since the *vory* are under no obligation to collaborate with the country's authorities, some Telegram channels hinted at a deal between Wagner's boss and the *vory v zakone*.

A *vor* by the name of Sasha Kurara<sup>31</sup> posted a video from a colony, where he is serving a long sentence, encouraging prisoners not to accept the "contract" offered by Wagner. He reminds them of the terrible fate of *zeki* sent to the front in the 1940's and of the sin of "*attacking a normal country*". Then Kurara, flaunting the tattoos on his bare chest, claimed that he was held in the same prison as Prigozhin when the latter was behind bars in the 1980's, and that Prigozhin the "rooster" was, among other things, his (sexual) slave, holding a place in the cell near the toilet. With the crudest of words and images, he encourages the inmates of the prisons where Prigozhin and his lieutenants are recruiting to refuse the deal: "*You, who join the Wagner group, are giving your consent to serve under the flag of a pederast,*" he repeats over and over again.

Relations between Prigozhin and some other *vor v zakone* leave much to be desired, according to the Telegram channel VTchK-OGPU, which is well informed about the prison world. On March 28, the channel reported that "*hopes of spring parole for Zakhary Kalashov, the leader of Russia's criminal community nicknamed Shakro the Younger, are fading. Kalashov was promised parole after supporting the recruitment of Yevgeny Prigozhin (...). Officially, Shakro did not call on the*

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<sup>30</sup> "Oni vozvrachaioutsia. Zakliochonie iz TchVK Wagnera vykhodiat na voliou" [They're coming back. SMP Wagner prisoners are released], Radio Svoboda, January 30, 2023, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/oni-vozvraschayutsa-zaklyuchennye-iz-cvk-wagnera-vyhodyat-na-volyu/32246049.html>.

<sup>31</sup> "Kourara" is a nickname, every *vor v zakone* has a nickname.

[inmates] to cooperate with the PMC,<sup>32</sup> but behind the scenes, he supported the initiative. (...) However, in the summer, the bosses of the thieves' milieu realized that recruiting prisoners (...) made a lot of money, including for the management of the Federal Penitentiary Service: some could receive six to ten million rubles in cash from the PMC for a fictitious entry on the mobilisation lists (...) and thus find themselves freed without having to go to the front (...) with the sole condition of not being noticed outside for six months (...)."<sup>33</sup> The affair would have displeased Shakro, who might not have received his share of the cake...

## Russia's *patsan* against the judge

According to Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, "this whole story is a vivid reminder of the extent to which legal decisions are relative in Russia. Justice is no longer the last resort, and there are superior decisions." For this specialist in Russian police and criminal issues, the story of Alexander Kovtun is emblematic: this leader of the so-called Partisan movement from Primorye, in the Russian Far East, had been sentenced to 25 years in prison for killing a police officers in 2010, but was eventually recruited by Wagner, and killed on the Ukrainian front.

The war in Ukraine has propelled Yevgeny Prigozhin to the forefront of the Russian political scene. This former *zek* turned businessman suddenly found himself authorized to enter all Russian prisons to remove prisoners convicted of serious crimes, in exchange for an amnesty agreed on the basis of a contract concluded in a few minutes in the middle of the prison yard. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov assures us that all this is legal, but that presidential decrees on the subject are classified. This legality is contested by just about every legal expert in the country's human rights organizations.

"This confirms what we knew about the Russian state, in that it has its own relationship with the criminal world. For this state, criminals and prisoners are a resource, not people to be helped," says Gavin Slade. In February 2023, Prigozhin announced that Wagner would no longer be recruiting from prisons. Most likely, in the upper echelons of Russian power structures the military had probably managed to convince Putin not to let Wagner's boss become too powerful. So it was the army that went into the prison colonies to recruit.<sup>34</sup> And all this while, a few months earlier, just before the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's Foreign Minister, the ever-educated Sergei Lavrov, used the prisoners' favorite expression in an interview about the progress of negotiations with the United States on security guarantees: "*the guy said, the guy did.*"<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Private Military Company, or TchVK in Russian (Tchastnaïa Voïennaïa Kompania).

<sup>33</sup> Post from March 28, 2023, <https://t.me/vchkogpu/37403>.

<sup>34</sup> Olga Ivshina, Anastasia Lotareva, Sergey Goryashko and Anastasia Platonova, "Uboinaya sila: kak Mnoborona Rossii verbouet zaklioutchoniikh iz kolonii" [Lethal force: how the Russian Ministry of Defense recruits prisoners in the colonies], BBC Russian service, May 3, 2023, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-65459280?ocid=wsrussian.social.in-app-messaging.telegram..russiantelegram\\_.edit](https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-65459280?ocid=wsrussian.social.in-app-messaging.telegram..russiantelegram_.edit).

<sup>35</sup> "Lavrov napomnil CChA o vajnosti printsipa "npatsan skazal - patsan sdelal"" [Lavrov reminded the US of the importance of "the guy said, the guy did"], Vedomosti, February 18, 2022, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/02/18/910002-patsan-skazal-patsan-sdelal>.

# Part 3: The origins of Wagner in Ukraine in 2014

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## Rodolphe Oberle, Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine 2014-21, Secretary of Eastern Circles

But Wagner did not start with Prigozhin, who was given the leadership of the organization long after its proof of concept as a hybrid war machine in Ukraine, when Russia first invaded the east of the country, following the annexation of the Crimea. Ukraine can be considered the cradle of Wagner, not only for its first minimum value proposition as a hybrid war tool, but also for the personal bond of its first operational commander with the country...

## Dmitry Utkin

The reports diverge on the origins of the founder of Wagner, Russian military intelligence GRU officer Dmitry Valer'evich Utkin. According to Ukrainian Internet sources, he was born on 11 June 1970 in a five-storey apartment building on Shkil'na Street, in Smoline village of Kirovohrad Oblast in central Ukraine, known for its open pit uranium ore mines.<sup>36</sup> His mother Lyudmila raised him alone after an early divorce. Utkin's first wife Tetyana was also a local of Smoline, as was their son, who went to the same school his father did. After several extra-marital affairs, Utkin had in Ukraine at least one more son and a daughter Anna who later joined him in Russia. There are reports on his second spouse in Smoline, Elena Scherbinina, who also embraced a military career in the Russian army. Owing to the uranium ore mines, the village of Smoline had a special direct subordination to Moscow and had many owners of Russian passports even during the years of Ukraine's independence.

As the Russians first invaded Ukraine from the east, in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Dmitry Utkin was already married for a third time to a dentist in Russia, with who they were raising three children. Thus, very recent reports have emerged, claiming that Dmitry Utkin comes from Azbest in Sverdlovsk region of Russia, and boasting aristocratic roots of his grandmother in the Urals.<sup>37</sup>

In Russia, Utkin embarked upon a military career, starting with the Suvorov Military Academy in modern-day Saint Petersburg and reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel after twenty years of service in the Russian army. He served in Chechnya and commanded one of the detachments (a battalion) of a special forces (*spetsnaz*) brigade of the Western Military District in the early 2010's. He then joined a Russian private military company Moran Security Group dedicated to

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<sup>36</sup> Iryna Romaliyskaya, "What Uncle Vova tells him, Dima will do. Ukrainian trace in the fate of the mysterious head of PMC Wagner" ["Что дядя Вова скажет, то Дима и сделает". Украинский след в судьбе таинственного главаря "ЧВК Вагнера"], Censor.net, 25 January 2017, [https://censor.net/ru/resonance/424833/chto\\_dyadya\\_vova\\_skajet\\_to\\_dima\\_i\\_sdelat\\_ukrainskiyi\\_sled\\_v\\_sudbe\\_tainstvennogo\\_glavarya\\_chvk\\_vagnera](https://censor.net/ru/resonance/424833/chto_dyadya_vova_skajet_to_dima_i_sdelat_ukrainskiyi_sled_v_sudbe_tainstvennogo_glavarya_chvk_vagnera).

<sup>37</sup> National Agency of Corruption Prevention of Ukraine, "Persons under sanctions: Dmytro Utkin," <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/sanction-person/174/>.

maritime security and anti-piracy activities. At that time, he was still travelling occasionally to Ukraine in order to visit and support his mother. The persons behind Moran Security Group finally founded *Slavyanskiy Korpus* (Slavonic Corps) private military company (PMC), registered in Hong-Kong but based in Saint Petersburg, to take part in the war in Syria in 2013. Utkin followed them there.

For years the figure of Dmitry Utkin was obscure and without a face. Early press reports even mix him up with Yevgeny Prigozhin.<sup>38</sup> Since early 2014, Dmitry Utkin re-emerges as part of the Wagner Group in Ukraine. He is re-commissioned to Syria within Wagner in 2015-18, but<sup>39</sup> is travelling to the government-controlled Ukraine in the spring 2016 while on. Then Utkin was photographed in December 2016 at a medal ceremony conducted by Vladimir Putin.<sup>40</sup> In 2017, a certain Dmitry Utkin becomes CEO of Concord Group belonging to Prigozhin, but Bellingcat and Fontanka warn that it is most likely a namesake.<sup>41</sup>

## Wagner group debuts in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas, 2014

Between 2014 and 2016, we can distinguish three periods of power change in the occupied by Russia territories of Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine, when Wagner played a role. Each of these periods is dominated by different groups of actors.

The first period, from the spring of 2014 till the peak of armed conflict in the end of that year and through the first quarter of 2015 witnessed the arrival of several power groups from Russia, which partitioned political and business interests in Donbas. First, they included Russian regular army, whose recruits were brought, for military confrontation with their Ukrainian counterparts, stripped of the signs of distinction on their uniforms, documents and often means of communication, when transferred across the border. Second were the hastily hired unprofessional mercenaries, who, in contrast to the regular army, were motivated by the promise of attractive military salaries and a free-for-all *el dorado* associated with war. The good-for-nothings, a jobless and petty criminal element, whether local or imported from Russia, was a characteristic representative of this group. Gangs, organized crime groups and private individuals from the Caucasus, especially Chechnya and Dagestan, were part of the new arrivals. Local criminal leaders complemented the landscape in a region famed for its atrocious crime groups since before the end of the Soviet Union. Private paramilitary groups, including Wagner, completed the picture. The whole was monitored and, albeit not always successfully, controlled, by the special Russian forces, including the now infamous GRU service, and masterminded by the former Kremlin spin doctor Vladislav Surkov.

<sup>38</sup> Ukraine Crisis Media Center, "Who killed Batman?" 27 July 2015, <https://uacrisis.org/fr/29663-francais-qui-a-tue-le-commandant-batman>.

<sup>39</sup> Alexandre Chauvel, "Guerre en Ukraine. Qui est Dimitri Outkine, le fondateur du groupe Wagner, décoré par Poutine ?" FranceLive, 28 March 2022, <https://www.francelive.fr/article/france-live/guerre-en-ukraine-qui-est-dimitri-outkine-le-fondateur-du-groupe-wagner-decore-par-poutine-7311402/>.

<sup>40</sup> Tass, "Peskov confirmed the presence of the head of PMC Wagner at a Kremlin reception" ["Песков подтвердил присутствие командира ЧВК Вагнера на приеме в Кремле"], 15 December 2016, <https://tass.ru/politika/3875744>.

<sup>41</sup> BBC, "The firm of "Putin's chef" is headed by a namesake of PMC Wagner chief" ["Фирму "повара Путина" возглавил тезка командира ЧВК, воюющей в Сирии"], 15 November 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-41994882>.



Little information is available on Wagner's early actions and presence in the east of Ukraine.<sup>42</sup> The group is first spotted in Crimea in March 2014, taking part in the disarmament of Ukrainian units but few testimonies can be found. Their role might have been very marginal. They are not mentioned in the recollection of the events done by the general officers from that time like Viktor Muzhenko.<sup>43</sup> More information is available about Wagner's later intrusion in the east of Ukraine, in Luhansk region. It is there and then that the detachment under Utkin's command finally starts bearing the name of his own call sign "Wagner", and Utkin is seen wearing Third Reich attires and symbols. In September 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in a press communiqué of the Concord Group recognized the birthday of Wagner on 1 May 2014.<sup>44</sup> Its perimeter at the time was of a "battalion tactical group".<sup>45</sup> The first operational base of the group was later set in Khutor Veseliy near Rostov during the spring 2014, later moved to Molkino in Krasnodar region.

**From the operational point of view, main activities of Wagner in Ukraine in this first period can be classified into the following groups:**

**Reconnaissance:** Since Wagner's founding, their employment contract has included a very strict confidentiality clause. Thus, the information about the start of their activities in Ukraine reaches us through anonymous defectors from the group. According to them, Wagner's first operations in Ukraine consisted of the infiltration of two company-sized Russian reconnaissance detachments in the summer of 2014: *Luna* and *Step*.<sup>46</sup> Diversions and acts of war: The Security Service of Ukraine (*Sluzhba Bezpeki Ukrainy*, SBU) identified over 1500 out of 5 000 Wagner combatants in Ukraine in 2014 – 2015.<sup>47</sup> 277 of them were reportedly involved in acts of war on the territory of Ukraine.<sup>48</sup> The SBU thinks that a unit of the group, initially dubbed *Karpaty* and later *Vesna*, was composed of Ukrainian nationals in order to conduct diversions deeper inside the country.

**Military assaults (Luhansk airport and Debaltseve):** One of Wagner's first assignments consisted of, alongside Russian regular army soldiers, surrounding and expelling Ukrainian paratroopers

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<sup>42</sup> Introvert archive, "Dmitry Utkin, Wagner," <https://introvertum.com/foto-putina-i-vagnera-Dmitrya-utkina/>.

<sup>43</sup> Angelica Rudenko, "In 2014, we could not have raised our hand – army general Muzhenko" ["«У 2014 році ми не повинні були піднімати руки» – генерал армії Муженко"], Radio Svoboda, 25 March 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/heneral-muzhenko-pro-okupatsiyu-krymu/31167541.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Vkontakte, Official page of Concord Group, [https://vk.com/concordgroup\\_official](https://vk.com/concordgroup_official).

<sup>45</sup> "Prigozhin confirmed that he created Wagner Group in 2014," ["Пригожин подтвердил, что в 2014 году создал группу Вагнера"], News.ru, 26 September 2022, <https://news.ru/society/prigozhin-podtverdil-cto-v-2014-godu-sozdal-gruppu-vagner/>.

<sup>46</sup> Sergei Khazov-Kassia, "'Meatgrinder' project. A story of three commanders of Wagner PMC," ["Проект "Мясорубка". Рассказывают три командира "ЧВК Вагнера"], Radio Svoboda, 7 March 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Sergei Martynets, "Who was training the mercenaries of Wagner in Donbas" ["Кто готовил наемников "Вагнера" на Донбасс: СБУ опубликовала фото и данные офицеров РФ"], 8 May 2018, <https://ukraine.segodaya.ua/ukraine/kto-gotovil-naemnikov-vagnera-na-Donbas-sbu-opublikovala-foto-i-dannye-oficerov-rf-1136657.html#gallery62613>.

<sup>48</sup> Ivan Zhukovsky, "In Ukraine they found traces of Wagner PMC," ["На Украине нашли следы ЧВК «Вагнер»"], Gazeta.ru, 7 October 2017, <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/10/07/10921622.shtml>.

and infantry from the international airport south of Luhansk city in the summer 2014.<sup>49</sup> Between 60 and 70 Wagner troops are believed to have partaken in that battle, or one detachment out of the three. This same unit is likely to have been involved in the shooting down of Ukraine's Il-76 military transport aircraft shot down a few kilometres to the southeast of the airport on 14 June 2014, in attempts to cut off supplies to the Ukrainian forces in the area. LNR leaders took the responsibility for the plane, but SBU believes that it was Wagner mercenaries who fired the portable SAM at the aircraft, carrying on board 40 paratroopers and 9 crewmembers.<sup>50</sup> Before the centre of gravity of the Wagner Group shifted away from Ukraine towards the Middle East in 2015-16, the mercenaries partook in the battle of Debaltseve, according to Bellingcat videos.<sup>51</sup> It is also reportedly the first engagement where Wagner suffered heavy losses between the end of 2014 and February 2015.

## The “hit man” of Moscow

The second period of Russia's invasion in the east of Ukraine, from the late 2014 till the early 2016, can be described as the « cleaning-up by the FSB of what GRU has accomplished ». As the conflicts have mounted among the Russian *siloviki* services on the ground, this time has been marked by murders and disappearance of several key figures which shaped the first year of conflict there. It is in this context that in 2015, Wagner emerges as the main “hit man” of Moscow in the east of Ukraine, when the PMC partook in the disarmament and elimination of the Russian units and leaders that were not following the guidance of Moscow who had a hard time letting go of the now out of trend “Russian Spring” and “Novorossiia” political projects. The necessity or opportunity to “clean” the political and military scene became more acute in LNR and DNR after their unrecognized elections of November 2014.

Thus, the murder of then leader of Luhansk LNR Aleksandr Bednov (*Batman*) with 6 other people on 01 January 2015 within the first wave of the “clean-up” is attributed to Wagner.<sup>52</sup> After eliminating Batman, Moscow replaced him with a different type of figure in the person of Igor Plotnitskiy. The arrest of the leader of the Russian Special Forces brigade “Odessa” in Krasnodon, Luhansk People's Republic, in January 2015 took place with a personal participation of Utkin. The car explosion of the Cossack Regiment Commander Pavel Dremov on 15 December 2015, following his threats to reveal compromising information on Plotnitskiy, is also

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander Petrov, “One km ahead there was a real war” [“В километре перед нами шла настоящая война»: ополченцы ЛНР рассказали, как «ЧВК Вагнера» штурмовали Луганский аэропорт”] E-vesti, 2 September 2022, <https://e-vesti.ru/ru/v-kilometre-pered-nami-shla-nastoyashhaya-vojna-opolchency-lnr-rasskazali-kak-chvk-vagnera-shturmovali-luganskij-aeroport>.

<sup>50</sup> Mykhailo Zhyrokhov, “Wild geese of Putin: what Wagner is doing in Donbas” [“Дики гуси” Путіна: чим займається ПВК “Вагнера”], Apostrophe, 28 July 2022, <https://apostrophe.ua/ua/article/society/2022-07-28/dikie-gusi-putina-chem-zanimaetsya-chvk-vagnera/47263>.

<sup>51</sup> “New video shows the participation of Wagner PMC in Debaltsevo battle” [“Новое видео показывает участие “ЧВК Вагнера” в битве за Дебальцево”], Ukrainska Pravda, 19 July 2018, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2018/07/19/7186747/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Donbas. Dirt and blood of “brotherly war” [“Донбасс. Грязь и кровь «братской войны”], Rosbalt, 19 January 2016, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2016/01/19/1481267.html>.

attributed to Wagner, as are a suspicious death of Yevgeny Kononov (*Botsman*), eliminations of Ischenko, Mozgovoy and many other “Novorossiia” leaders hard-to-control individuals.<sup>53</sup>

The third period, from 2016-17, has been characterized by an attempt to put a *nomenklatura* face on the power groups controlling the region with the replacement of the top few people. The re-centering of the new and old power-grabbing interests around big assets created a margin for the local population on which to restore the small and medium business activity, albeit kidnappings, expropriation and racketeering have remained a norm on every level of economic life on the occupied territories. The mercenary element has decreased, together with the regular army presence and that by the groups from the Caucasus, as both of them have become a growing liability for Moscow. For Wagner, as the fighting went further away from the city, and the geopolitical focus of the moment switched to Syria from 2015, Wagner group settled in Luhansk inside the Ministry of Emergency Situations compound to recruit and screen candidates for the further deployment in Syria in 2015 and 2016.

## Wagner ties with the far-right milieu of Russian soldiers of fortune

Dmitry Utkin is referred as a *rodnover*.<sup>54</sup> *Rodnovery* are Slavic neo-pagan believers often integrating their traditions with non-Slavic sources like [Hinduism](#) or old Scandinavian cults. His fascination for the aesthetics of the Third Reich and old Germanic and Scandinavian mythology has been widely reported and he bears some tattoos with these references.

When Wagner appeared at the start of the destabilization of the Donbas they were concomitantly moving with a lot of these neo-pagan nationalistic individuals and formations. Many became rather well-known in the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics.”<sup>55</sup> In Donetsk area a battalion of the 1st brigade called itself *Viking* and was commanded by an officer believed to be a *rodnover*. Another company from the Republican Guard was named *Varyag*. Within the 5th brigade *Oplot* the fourth battalion was named *Svarga/Svarozhich* commanded by a certain *Vargan* and contained several neo-pagans.<sup>56</sup> These units were marginalised gradually by late 2014 - early 2015 without apparent involvement of Wagner Group.

In the occupied part of Luhansk, *Rusich* reconnaissance unit, commanded by Aleksey Milchakov, was part of the *Batman* battalion whose leader would later be eliminated reportedly by Wagner with Dmitry Utkin present on the spot. A *Rusich* subunit composed mainly of Saint Petersburg nationalists was disbanded soon after. A reconnaissance company *Ratibor* also part of the

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<sup>53</sup> Iryna Romaliyskaya, Censor.net.

<sup>54</sup> Jayeel Cornelio, François Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen, Linda Woodhead, Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society, Routledge, 2021, [https://books.google.fr/books?id=rBUHEAAAQBAJ&pg=PA403&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.fr/books?id=rBUHEAAAQBAJ&pg=PA403&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false).

<sup>55</sup> Stanislav Donets, “Rodnovery fighters in Donbas: neo-pagans believe in their own gods and draw swastika on their hands” [“Боевики-родноверы на Донбассе: неоязычники верят в собственных богов и рисуют на руках свастику”], 20 March 2015, <https://www.segodnya.ua/regions/donetsk/boeviki-rodnovery-na-Donbase-neoyazychniki-veryat-v-sobstvennyh-bogov-i-risuyut-na-rukah-svastiku-600955.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Vladislav Maltsev, “Varyags of Donbas” [“Варяги Донбасса”], NG, 1 April 2015, [https://www.ng.ru/ng\\_religii/2015-04-01/4\\_Donbas.html](https://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-04-01/4_Donbas.html).

*Batman* battalion, might be linked to a successful early commander of Wagner from the 2013 Syrian period.

From the early period of the invasion in Donbas we see that these ideological currents were not fostered by Moscow and did not restrain Wagner from taking part in the side-lining and repression of his “brothers in faith” but driven by a total dedication to the masters of the Kremlin or their first circle.

## **Part 4: Wagner in Ukraine since 2022: lessons on Russian military strategy<sup>57</sup>**

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Hennadiy Maksak, Prism Ukraine

### **The military and political context of Wagner engagement in a full-scale war in 2022**

The military-political context surrounding the engagement of Wagner in a full-scale war in 2022 differs in several significant aspects from its previous involvement in hostilities on Ukrainian territory.

Firstly, the utilization of Wagner units in a full-scale war was a forced measure imposed by the Kremlin. Initially, the Russian military and political leadership was confident in a swift victory over the Ukrainian army through the sheer size and surprise of the Russian regular troops' offensive. Consequently, there were no plans for extensive re-engagement of Wagner fighters. Subsequent operational misjudgments, significant losses suffered by the Russian army in Ukraine, and the failure to break the psychological resilience of the Ukrainians compelled the Kremlin to reassess its plans and resume the deployment of PMC mercenaries.

Secondly, while the involvement of Yevgeny Prigozhin in the formation and maintenance of the Wagner group was not openly acknowledged during their presence in Ukraine from 2014 to 2015, in 2022 he publicly assumed responsibility not only for their financial backing but also for their political leadership in the east of Ukraine. The participation of Prigozhin-led mercenaries on the battlefield has been shown in Russian mass media and social networks, which contrasts sharply from the earlier hidden format of mercenary combat activities.

Thirdly, during its previous engagement in the war against Ukraine in 2014-2015, the PMC merely served as a disguise for the forces and resources of Russian special services on the occupied Ukrainian territories. Covert management of the Wagner group was entrusted to personnel from the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU). With Yevgeny Prigozhin becoming an "official" leader of Wagner in Ukraine, it becomes challenging to determine the extent of control exerted by Russian military intelligence over the Wagner group. While he cooperates with GRU, Prigozhin enjoys a high level of autonomy in decision-making.

Fourthly, during 2014-2015, the utilization of PMC contractors aligned with Russia's military leadership's overarching plans to seize and maintain control over Ukrainian territories. Since 2022, Prigozhin's objectives extend beyond solely military considerations and encompass political motives. Political expediency compels him to confront and compete with units of the Russian army, thereby provoking strained relations with top military leadership.

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<sup>57</sup> This text has been prepared based on open evidence and expert discussions, conducted by a team of experts from the Russian and Belarusian Studies Program in Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism".



Throughout the full-scale war, there has been a notable increase in the involvement of mercenaries across multiple fronts and an escalation in their intensity on the battlefield. While the Wagner group previously consisted of approximately one thousand mercenaries, the number of individuals having signed contracts with Prigozhin is estimated to be in tens of thousands in 2022-2023. The tactical foundations of PMC's operations are transformed accordingly, as well as the methods and procedures for recruitment and contracting of manpower.

## Geography of Application of Wagner PMC Units

The Kremlin did not systematically employ mercenaries during the initial phase of the full-scale invasion in February 2022. However, small groups consisting of professionals, likely former and current members of special services, accompanied the advancing Russian army assault in various regions. It is known that, without much publicity, PMC fighters were present alongside regular Russian troops in certain areas near Kyiv in March 2022. Specifically, individuals affiliated with the PMC were active in the city of Bucha.<sup>58</sup> The use of PMC mercenaries to carry out specific tasks in the Kherson and Kharkiv regions was also observed.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian army and the resistance of the Ukrainian population thwarted the Kremlin's ambitions for a quick victory. Russia lost its finest elite units of special forces, marines, and paratroopers during unsuccessful attempts to storm the airport in Hostomel near Kyiv and other strategically significant areas. The situation was further complicated by the low level of combat training among Russian conscript soldiers, resulting in catastrophic casualties along the entire Russian-Ukrainian front, which spanned approximately 2,500 kilometers. The Kremlin was compelled to seek alternative means of engaging motivated and trained fighters. Therefore, in the second half of March, units from the Wagner PMC openly participated in combat operations in the Popasna settlement of Luhansk region.<sup>59</sup> The Russian occupiers captured the city in May, and the PMC claimed that it began "successful" assault operations in Popasna.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sean McFate, «The Mercenaries Behind the Bucha Massacre», WSJ, 12 April 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/mercenaries-behind-bucha-massacre-russia-ukraine-putin-attack-terror-brutality-wagner-group-moscow-geneva-convention-war-crimes-atrocities-11649797041>.

<sup>59</sup> «Как ЧВК «Вагнер» вступила в СВО и изменила ее ход» [How PMC "Wagner" joined the SWO and changed its course], Federal News Agency, 19 March 2022, [https://riafan.ru/23947024-kak\\_chvk\\_vagner\\_vstupila\\_v\\_svo\\_i\\_izmenila\\_ee\\_hod](https://riafan.ru/23947024-kak_chvk_vagner_vstupila_v_svo_i_izmenila_ee_hod).

<sup>60</sup> «Первый бой и штурм Попасной: ровно год назад ЧВК «Вагнер» встала на зашхиту Донбаса, [The first battle and the assault on Popasna: exactly a year ago, Wagner PMC stood up for Donbas ], Экономика Segodnya, 19 March 2023, [https://rueconomics.ru/23947596-pervii\\_boi\\_i\\_shturm\\_popasnoi\\_rovno\\_god\\_nazad\\_chvk\\_vagner\\_vstala\\_na\\_zaschitu\\_Donbasa](https://rueconomics.ru/23947596-pervii_boi_i_shturm_popasnoi_rovno_god_nazad_chvk_vagner_vstala_na_zaschitu_Donbasa).

In the summer of 2022, evidence emerged confirming the involvement of Prigozhin's mercenaries in battles on the Svitlodar arc, the seizure of the Vuglehirska Thermal Power Plant in Svitlodarsk in July 2022,<sup>61</sup> and the storming of Siverodonetsk and Lysychansk cities.<sup>62</sup>

However, the most significant and brazen use of PMC contractors has been observed since the autumn of 2022. As Russia failed to make substantial military gains in the war against Ukraine, the Russian military and political leadership set the objective of capturing the cities of Soledar and Bakhmut in Donetsk region. The Wagner PMC became the primary tool for assaulting these cities, where Ukrainian forces had established formidable defensive positions.

Following the capture of Soledar end of January 2023, the major focus for Yevgeny Prigozhin and the PMC was the seizure of Bakhmut. As of May 2023, the main units of the Wagner group are still striving to accomplish this task, but have suffered significant personnel losses. The Ukrainian military reports daily casualties among the mercenaries ranging from 100 to 150 killed.<sup>63</sup>

## Training and Recruitment of Wagner PMC Personnel

To replenish and increase the number of Wagner mercenaries, the group brought to Ukraine mercenaries already under contract in Africa, the Middle East, and militants from the core composition of the Wagner group.<sup>64</sup>

The next step involved lifting certain restrictions on recruitment to address the significant personnel losses suffered by the PMC and the scale of the combat tasks they faced. **One significant change was the removal of the "geographic qualification" for volunteers from occupied Ukrainian territories.** Previously, PMC recruiters had reservations about recruiting residents of occupied Ukrainian territories, such as Crimea or parts of Donetsk and Luhansk, due to security concerns.

The recruitment focus then shifted to **problematic categories within the Russian population, specifically individuals facing financial difficulties and unpaid debts.** These recruitment efforts emerged from the shadow and gained momentum through the establishment of legal recruitment centers and aggressive advertising on social networks. It was not uncommon for

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<sup>61</sup> «Boytsy CHVK «Vagner» rasskazali o boyakh za Uglegorskuyu TES v Svetlodarske», [ Fighters of PMC "Wagner" spoke about the battles for the Uglegorsk TPP in Svetlodarsk], LENTA.RU, 27 July 2022, <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/07/27/vagner/>.

<sup>62</sup> «Stali izvestny detali uchastiya CHVK «Vagner» v boyakh za Severodonetsk», [ Became known the details of the participation of PMC "Wagner" in the battles for Severodonetsk], MK.RU, 11 June 2022, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2022/06/11/stali-izvestny-detali-uchastiya-chvk-vagner-v-boyakh-za-severodoneck.html>.

<sup>63</sup> Oksana Kharkivska «U voroha vzhe kolosal'na nestacha v zhyvii syli: yak okupanty popovnyuyut' vtraty» [The enemy already has a colossal shortage of manpower: how the occupiers replenish losses], 24 channel, 29 March 2023, [https://24tv.ua/vtrati-rosiyan-zsu-rozpovili-yak-okupanti-popovnyuyut-vtrati\\_n2284048](https://24tv.ua/vtrati-rosiyan-zsu-rozpovili-yak-okupanti-popovnyuyut-vtrati_n2284048).

<sup>64</sup> Lilia Yapparova featuring Andrey Pertsev and Alexey Slavin, «Grubo govorya, my nachali vojnu Kak otpravka CHVK Vagnera na front pomogla Prigozhinu naladit' otnosheniya s Putinyom — i chto takoye «sobyaninskiy polk». Rassledovaniye «Meduzy» o nayemnikakh na voyne v Ukraine» [Roughly speaking, we started a war. How sending PMC Wagner to the front helped Prigozhin to improve relations with Putin - and what is a "Sobyaninsky regiment". Meduza's investigation into mercenaries in the war in Ukraine], Meduza, 13 July 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/07/13/grubo-govorya-my-nachali-voynu>.

job candidates to be deceived with promises of rear-area positions or facility guarding, only to find themselves thrust into assaults on well-fortified positions.

In July 2022, reports emerged of Wagner group recruiters seeking individuals willing to join in Russian penal colonies.<sup>65</sup> The rate at which the PMC replenished its ranks with recruits from the criminal underworld was striking. While Ukrainian intelligence estimated around 4,500-5,000 mercenaries in the occupied territories of Ukraine by the end of August 2022, official institutions in Ukraine, Great Britain, and the USA suggested that by the end of December 2022, there were up to 50,000 Wagner Group members in Ukraine. Approximately 10,000 of them were professional contract fighters, while the rest consisted of 40,000 individuals recruited from prisons. It's worth noting that this staggering figure includes not only active personnel, but also casualties suffered by the PMC in Ukraine by that time.<sup>66</sup>

The conditions of involvement in the PMC vary depending on the individuals' training, experience, and category.

- 1) Within the PMC, there is a **distinct "core" group** that consists of veteran contract combatants, ex-servicemen of the Russian special services, military instructors, and specialists in heavy weapons. This group is relatively small compared to the total number of PMC personnel in Ukraine and primarily focuses on planning and management rather than direct assault operations. They may also handle specific tasks related to military intelligence. This category receives the highest pay, with mercenaries earning between \$5,000 and \$10,000 per month.
- 2) The next group consists of **contract rookies who were recruited during extensive campaigns in the summer and fall of 2022**. They have lower levels of training, experience, and previous combat operations or specialized training. These individuals participate in assault operations and other assigned tasks. Contracts for such mercenaries typically provide monthly financial support of \$3,000, while during training, they receive \$1,000.
- 3) The most numerous group is **recruited from prisons**. Such recruits serve as the primary manpower for organizing assault operations, but they are also the least physically and mentally prepared. Their contract is relatively simple: if they survive six months at the front, they are granted amnesty and released. Financial support for this group fluctuates around \$1,500 per month. The conditions endured by convicts in Russian prisons expose them to systematic human rights violations, making them vulnerable and susceptible to recruitment tactics.

According to Ukrainian special services, mercenaries from the Wagner group are better trained compared to mobilized Russian soldiers. *“Even the convicts they recruit from Russian prisons are*

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<sup>65</sup> Yulia Krasnikova «ЧВК «Вagner» verbuyet zaklyuchennykh koloniy Peterburga dlya poyezdki na Donbas «idti v avangarde, pomogat' obnaruzhivat' natsistov» [PMC "Wagner" recruits prisoners of the colonies of Saint Petersburg for a trip to the Donbas "to go in the forefront, to help detect the Nazis"], Vazhnie Istorii, 4 July 2022, <https://storage.googleapis.com/istories/reportages/2022/07/04/chvk-vagner-verbuet-zaklyuchennikh-kolonii-peterburga-dlya-poezdki-na-Donbas-Idti-v-avangarde-pomogat-obnaruzhivat-natsistov/index.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Vladimir Datsenko, «Vagnerovtsy tisyachami umirayut v Ukraine, no ikh stanovitsya vse bol'she. Kak ustroyena samaya mnogochislennaya armiya prestupnikov? Anatomiya ЧВК «Вagner» ot Forbes» [Wagnerites are dying by the thousands in Ukraine, but their number is increasing. How is the largest army of criminals arranged? Anatomy of PMC "Wagner" from Forbes], Forbes Ukraine, 23 January 2023, <https://forbes.ua/ru/war-in-ukraine/vagnerivsi-tisyachami-pomirayut-v-ukraini-ale-ikh-stae-vse-bilshe-yak-vlashtovana-naybilsha-armiya-zlochintiv-anatomiya-pvk-vagner-vid-fobes-27012023-11364>.

*being trained to serve, and that is why the results are a lot better than what normal regular army has. They are our enemy, but we need to admit that they are an enemy you're not ashamed of. Wagner level is incomparably higher than the level of regular troops,"* said Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukraine's defense intelligence agency.<sup>67</sup>

Ukrainian think tanks estimate that Yevgeny Prigozhin had the potential to enrol up to 100,000 prisoners to replenish losses during assault operations. However, due to political reasons and the high number of casualties among prisoners, access to recruitment within prisons was restricted. In early February 2023, Prigozhin publicly announced that he was prohibited from hiring new personnel among the prisoners.

Recently, with challenges arising in recruiting from Russian prisons, recruiters have shifted their focus to **immigrants from Central Asian countries**. These individuals come to Russia for economic and social reasons, seeking employment or naturalization. Prigozhin has made significant efforts to recruit from **sports clubs in Russia**, establishing recruitment points and utilizing controlled media and social networks for advertising. The potential of this channel for replenishing PMC resources currently needs to be assessed.

Prigozhin is resorting to desperate measures to address Wagner personnel crisis. Due to the ban on recruitment among convicts, recruiters are now turning to **psychiatric clinics in Russia to find potential contractors**. There have been reports of **physical violence and intimidation targeting Russian mobilized soldiers** to coerce them into signing contracts with the PMC when they are on the front line. These actions indicate the severe shortage of "cannon fodder" for assault operations in the Bakhmut area. Ukrainian special services have also suppressed recruitment activities of the PMC among **representatives of the criminal world and former prisoners in the territories of Ukraine controlled by the Ukrainian government**.

## Wagner Tactics in Conducting Combat Operations

Prior to the mass recruitment of Russian prisoners, the activities of Wagner group mercenaries primarily aligned with the conventional methods employed by Russian special services in supporting military operations. The PMC groups were assigned various tasks, including:

- **Gathering intelligence in occupied territories and conducting reconnaissance behind enemy lines.** It is noteworthy that the PMC carried out intelligence operations in cities far from the front lines, such as Odesa.<sup>68</sup> Agents associated with the PMC, identified and encountered by Ukrainian counterintelligence, collected information on the locations of critical military and civilian infrastructure, military units, and equipment.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Weiss, James Rushton. «'We will keep killing Russians,' Ukraine's military intelligence chief vows», Yahoo News , May 6, 2023, [https://news.yahoo.com/we-will-keep-killing-russians-ukraines-military-intelligence-chief-vows-232156674.html?guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lc3ByZXNvLnR2Lw&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAKktsEpkNA2Y\\_4ePFuqQ6XPFFUdryyE\\_Nq1jgAFTKXvkinHPeu-L0OruVHuuJJ0Y\\_X4rOKks1KwaRztMa1a0XYRdow2L41IDHel33EkghQSRLhpZrPpaVscUFQgjswp26NGNiTgGc-q0Xk6f4z7LZW4wbYCoa92-QXOIWXsZqe&\\_guc\\_consent\\_skip=1683900405](https://news.yahoo.com/we-will-keep-killing-russians-ukraines-military-intelligence-chief-vows-232156674.html?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lc3ByZXNvLnR2Lw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAKktsEpkNA2Y_4ePFuqQ6XPFFUdryyE_Nq1jgAFTKXvkinHPeu-L0OruVHuuJJ0Y_X4rOKks1KwaRztMa1a0XYRdow2L41IDHel33EkghQSRLhpZrPpaVscUFQgjswp26NGNiTgGc-q0Xk6f4z7LZW4wbYCoa92-QXOIWXsZqe&_guc_consent_skip=1683900405).

<sup>68</sup> «V Odesi SBU zatrymala rosiys'koho ahenta, yakyy pidtrymuvav zv'yazok zi shtabom «Vahnera» ["In Odesa, the SBU detained a Russian agent who was in contact with the headquarters of «Wagner»"], UKRINFORM, 13 December 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-regions/3633224-v-odesi-sbu-zatrymala-rosijskogo-agenta-akij-pidtrimuvav-zvazok-zi-stabom-vahnera.html>.

- **Planning and executing sabotage operations of varying complexity.** In the initial days of the major conflict in February 2022, Ukrainian intelligence received information that specific special groups of Wagner PMC mercenaries were tasked with eliminating top Ukrainian leaders.<sup>69</sup> In July, PMC mercenaries detonated a building housing Ukrainian prisoners of war in the village of Olenivka, resulting in dozens of Ukrainian prisoners of war killed or injured.<sup>70</sup>
- **Clearing the territory captured by Russian regular army units.**
- **Implementing filtration measures among the population in occupied territories** to identify individuals prone to collaboration. Similar actions by individuals associated with the PMC were observed in the occupied city of Kherson.
- **Participating in direct combat operations** in areas requiring reinforcement by experienced fighters.
- **Providing protection, escort, and evacuation services for important military installations, cargo, and individuals** located in occupied territories or within the combat zone.

The majority of the aforementioned activities undertaken by the PMC indicate a specific operational framework closely tied to the objectives of Russian military intelligence. This serves as an additional argument supporting the assertion that the PMC's involvement is aligned with the interests of the State Department of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

### Change of Tactics

The change in strategic calculations by the military and political leadership of Russia, in light of significant combat losses in personnel and equipment of the regular army, led to the **development of new approaches for conducting assault operations against well-fortified defensive positions** of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. In particular, this is when the use by Wagner of untrained prisoners became evident during the assaults on the Soledar and Bakhmut areas.<sup>71</sup>

A typical Wagner **assault team includes 7 to 50 fighters**, depending on the level of combat training. The worse trained the soldiers, the larger the group. Within urban fighting, which dominates the war in Ukraine, assault groups can be further **divided into smaller subgroups, equipped with "light" and heavy weapons** (machine guns, grenade launchers, and mortars). The task of the "light" subgroups is to identify firing points on Ukrainian positions and initiate contact. The leader of the assault group usually moves with one of the heavily armed subgroups.

The tactics involve identifying weak points in the defense of Ukrainian units and organizing breakthroughs. To achieve the element of surprise in attacks on Ukrainian positions, these groups often operate at night. Each assault group is assigned a direction of movement and

<sup>69</sup> Ivan Boyko, «Boyovyky "Vahnera" hotuvaly zamakh na Zelens'koho i Shmyhalya - radnyk ministra oborony» ["Wagner" militants were preparing an assassination attempt on Zelenskyi and Shmygal - adviser to the Minister of Defense], UNIAN, 26 March 2022, <https://www.unian.ua/war/zamah-na-zelenskogo-ta-shmigalya-pidgotovkoyu-zaymalisya-boyoviki-vagnera-radnik-ministra-lubkivskiy-novini-vtorgnennya-rosiji-v-ukrajinu-11759938.html>.

<sup>70</sup> «Terakt v Olenivtsi vchynyl "vahnerivtsi" za vkazivkoyu Pryhozhyna – rozvidka» [The terrorist attack in Olenivka was committed by the "Wagnerites" on the instructions of Prigozhin - intelligence], Ukrainska Pravda, 29 July 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/07/29/7360909/>.

<sup>71</sup> «Na skol'ko khvatit Yevgenya Prigozhina?» [How long will Yevgeny Prigozhin last?], Ukrainian Institute for the Future, 30 March 2023, <https://uifuture.org/publications/na-skolko-hvatyt-evgenyya-prygozhyna/>.



designated places for each of the fighters during the assault. Group leaders monitors the movements of subordinates and direct soldiers to approach Ukrainian positions stealthily. **Navigational maps applications in tablets and unmanned aerial vehicles are used for terrain control.**<sup>72</sup>

A notable feature of the assault operations conducted by small groups, currently employed by Wagner, is **the absence of heavy armored vehicles on the battlefield**, intended to support the assault forces in close combat. Instead, armored vehicles are more commonly used for long-distance shelling of Ukrainian positions. Another characteristic is the **significant dispersion of both armored vehicles and artillery used by the mercenaries.**<sup>73</sup>

An important element of preparation for assault groups is the extensive artillery preparation carried out on Ukrainian positions. After the artillery shelling, the assault groups engage and neutralize identified firing posts of the Ukrainian positions using small arms, mortars, and grenade launchers. The next stage involves direct attempts to storm individual positions, which are carried out by groups in their designated areas. In case of failure, the assault may be repeated several times.

If the assault groups successfully capture the designated positions or objectives, their task transitions to holding and defending them. Defensive positions are constructed and fortified. Artillery is also employed to prevent Ukrainian forces from reclaiming lost positions.<sup>74</sup>

The success of the mercenaries in capturing Soledar and partially capturing Bakhmut can be attributed not so much to the effectiveness of the assault groups but more to **the complete disregard for personnel and the asymmetrically high use of artillery ammunition** on Ukrainian positions. According to testimonies from Ukrainian units engaged in combat with Wagner mercenaries, the PMC can repeatedly carry out assault actions despite the level of casualties.<sup>75</sup> Importantly, as military expert Yuriy Butusov indicates, **"losses do not reduce the combat effectiveness of units, as commanders of units, weapons operators, intelligence and control remain a permanent composition that is not expended in assault actions and retains specialization."**<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Yuriy Butusov, «Taktyka "Vahnera": yak dosyahayut' rezul'tativ zeky z trytyzhnevoyu pidhotovkoyu ta yak yikh b"yut'?» ["Wagner" tactics: how do prisoners achieve results with three weeks of training and how are they beaten?], Censor.NET, 24 November 2022, [https://censor.net/ua/resonance/3382797/taktyka\\_vagnera\\_yak\\_dosyahayut\\_rezultativ\\_zeky\\_z\\_trytyjnevoyu\\_pidgotovkoyu\\_ta\\_yak\\_yih\\_byut](https://censor.net/ua/resonance/3382797/taktyka_vagnera_yak_dosyahayut_rezultativ_zeky_z_trytyjnevoyu_pidgotovkoyu_ta_yak_yih_byut).

<sup>73</sup> «Meduza» podrobno razbirayet taktiku CHVK Vagnera Pochemu nayemniki voyuyut effektivneye, chem rossiyskaya armiya? (Spoiler: odna iz glavnykh prichin v tom, chto oni ispol'zuyut zaklyuchennykh kak pushechnoye myaso) [Meduza analyzes in detail the tactics of PMC Wagner Why are mercenaries fighting more effectively than the Russian army? (Spoiler: one of the main reasons is that they use prisoners as cannon fodder)], Meduza, 16 March 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/03/16/meduza-podrobno-razbiraet-taktiku-chvk-vagnera>.

<sup>74</sup> Tim Lister, Frederik Pleitgen, Victoria Butenko, «Deadly and disposable: Wagner's brutal tactics in Ukraine revealed by intelligence report», CNN, [https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/23/europe/russia-wagner-tactics-report-ukraine-intl/index.html?fbclid=IwAROBtXtBBU\\_qFORb6mYneNwV7knBnoltBd7sjKJTcuFvXnB6-Fj8KBTG\\_QY](https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/23/europe/russia-wagner-tactics-report-ukraine-intl/index.html?fbclid=IwAROBtXtBBU_qFORb6mYneNwV7knBnoltBd7sjKJTcuFvXnB6-Fj8KBTG_QY).

<sup>75</sup> Veronika Prokhorenko, «"Yakyy symbol obraly, tak i pratsuyut'": ZSU pro zitknennya z "vahnerivtsyamy" na fronti (video)» ["Whatever symbol is chosen, that's how they work": the Armed Forces of Ukraine about the clash with the "Wagnerians" at the front (video)], UNIAN, 08 February 2023, <https://www.unian.ua/war/zsu-rozpovili-pro-dosvid-bojiv-s-naymancyami-pvk-vagner-voni-voyuyut-yak-zombi-video-12136995.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Yuriy Butusov, «Taktyka "Vahnera": yak dosyahayut' rezul'tativ zeky z trytyzhnevoyu pidhotovkoyu ta yak yikh b"yut'?» ["Wagner" tactics: how do prisoners achieve results with three weeks of training and how are they beaten?], Censor.NET, 24 November 2022, [https://censor.net/ua/resonance/3382797/taktyka\\_vagnera\\_yak\\_dosyahayut\\_rezultativ\\_zeky\\_z\\_trytyjnevoyu\\_pidgotovkoyu\\_ta\\_yak\\_yih\\_byut](https://censor.net/ua/resonance/3382797/taktyka_vagnera_yak_dosyahayut_rezultativ_zeky_z_trytyjnevoyu_pidgotovkoyu_ta_yak_yih_byut).

The strict rules of Wagner stipulate that assault troops cannot leave their positions and retreat without higher-level command approval, as they can be shot (by their own). Another absolutely inhumane rule prohibits mercenaries from evacuating the wounded from the battlefield until the assault operation is concluded. An unsuccessful attempt to desert or surrender is punishable by death penalty or torture.<sup>77</sup>

## Political and Military Context

Prior to Prigozhin's public appearance as the owner and head of Wagner, the unregistered structure served as a cover for Russian special services to carry out tasks in various parts of the world where Russia sought to increase its influence. However, even with Prigozhin's public emergence, the purely military administration of the structure remained largely unaffected, with control still maintained by individuals close to the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. The Ukrainian intelligence confirms that "*Prigozhin's primary function is media and political, and he does not directly manage combat units or chair the headquarters. His task is primarily financing.*"<sup>78</sup> However, the narrative of Prigozhin funding mercenary activities from his own pocket is an attempt to conceal the fact that the Wagner group militants are supported financially by the state. The estimated monthly expenses of 100 million US dollars for the military industry cannot be solely covered by personal funds. Even if we assume that Prigozhin receives substantial profits from corruption schemes during contract negotiations with the government or from diamond and oil trade, Prigozhin has never been the ultimate beneficiary of the illicit income received by Wagner abroad.

One probable scenario for Prigozhin's involvement with the Wagner group is his role as a mediator between the military units of the PMC and recruited convicts. Given his background and mindset of a person from the criminal world, he lacked the respect and authority among the representatives of the special services and military personnel who form the backbone of the organization. The turning point that strengthened Prigozhin's position was the significant recruitment of Russian prisoners into the ranks of the PMC. This is why he personally participated in the campaign to find volunteers in Russian colonies during the summer and autumn of 2022.

The situation involving the "criminalization" of the Russian offensive contingent in Donbas during the summer and autumn of 2022 was convenient for both the Kremlin and the political leader of the PMC. It allowed the military and political leadership to avoid heavy losses among conscripts and contract soldiers of the regular army in critical front areas where constant assaults on Ukrainian positions took place. On the other hand, Prigozhin had almost exclusive opportunities to reap political benefits if successful operations to seize Ukrainian cities were carried out. The demonstration of offensive successes in certain areas of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions only reinforced his confidence that Putin had given him the authority to build a

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<sup>77</sup> Stanislav Pogorilov, «Yak voyuye PVK "Vahner" v Ukrayini: ZMI otrymaly zvit ukrayins'koyi rozvidky» [How the "Wagner" PMC is fighting in Ukraine: the mass media received a report from Ukrainian intelligence], *Ukrainska Pravda*, 24 January 2023, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-regions/3633224-v-odesi-sbu-zatrymala-rosijskogo-agenta-akij-pidtrimuvav-zvazok-zi-stabom-vagnera.html>.

<sup>78</sup> «Pryhozhyn Does Not Run Wagner Headquarters, His Function Is Media», Website of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (DIU), 29 January 2023, <https://gur.gov.ua/en/content/pryhozhyn-ne-keruie-shtabom-vahnerivtsiv-ioho-funktsiia-mediina.html>.

political career and ensure coherence in the conflict-ridden relationship with the leadership of the General Staff and Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

Prigozhin's political career had solid foundations for growth. Using nationalistic and patriotic slogans, and capitalizing on the decreasing popularity of Russia's top military leadership due to unsuccessful offensives, Yevgeny Prigozhin gained media attention. Through the media outlets under his control and with the Kremlin's indulgence, he even managed to glorify the "musicians" (as the Wagner group was called in Russian media) and create myths about their high effectiveness.

However, the political leader of the PMC made a number of irreparable mistakes that could cost him not only his political influence but also his life. First, Prigozhin overestimated his ability to sideline Valery Gerasimov's and Sergei Shoigu's influence over Putin. By engaging in a personal "battle" with the heads of the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense, Prigozhin significantly discredited the Russian army, displaying critical short-sightedness in pursuit of political PR.

Secondly, Prigozhin exceeded his "political competence" by publicly appealing to world leaders. Prigozhin's actions and statements made the Kremlin question his controllability.

Thirdly, Yevgeny Prigozhin started to flirt with regional authorities, demonstrating his readiness to create his own political projects and regional teams. On one hand, the nationalistic and patriotic image created by Russian media allowed him to launch campaigns for creating territorial defense forces in regions of the Russian Federation bordering Ukraine. Additionally, Prigozhin engaged in a personal confrontation with Alexander Beglov, the governor of Saint Petersburg. This confrontation, along with long-standing business disputes between them, might indicate Prigozhin's preparation of a platform for his political projects as the leader of the Wagner group. The registration of the legal entity Wagner PMC in Saint Petersburg in November 2022 should also be considered in this context.

Fourthly, the PMC's activities became increasingly known not for its battlefield successes, but for the continual emergence of evidence regarding large-scale war crimes committed by mercenaries against Ukrainian prisoners of war and the civilian population. Moreover, numerous instances of inhumane treatment of former prisoners who were part of the PMC's own personnel have come to light.

Fifth, Prigozhin's unpredictable behavior and conflicts prompted other members of Putin's inner circle to establish their own private military companies (such as "Redut", "Fakel", "Patriot") that imitate the tactics and personnel approach of the Wagner Group. This undermined Prigozhin's uniqueness in terms of offering military capabilities in combat operations.

All these factors became relevant as the promised quick victories by Yevgeny Prigozhin to Putin failed to materialize. By the beginning of 2023, with the tacit consent of the Kremlin, restrictions were imposed on his access to human resources (recruitment from Russian prisons was prohibited), information resources (state channels were prohibited from mentioning PMC's successes), and ammunition.

## **Medium-term prospects of the Wagner PMC**

The ongoing advance into the city of Bakhmut is resulting in catastrophic personnel losses for the Wagner group, particularly among former prisoners. According to information from Ukrainian state institutions, as of the beginning of 2023, out of the 38,244 individuals recruited

by the PMC, the Ukrainian army has removed 29,543 from the battlefield (killed, wounded, missing, or surrendered as prisoners). This accounts for 77% of the total number.<sup>79</sup> In the current circumstances, without significant replenishment of manpower and considering the confrontation with Russia's top military leadership, Yevgeny Prigozhin's mercenary team will struggle to sustain active offensive actions.

The public accusations made by the political leader of the PMC regarding the alleged "shell hunger", resulting from a boycott of ammunition requests for artillery and mortars, should also be viewed in this context. While it is possible that the leadership of the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense of Russia are intentionally neglecting the PMC's needs, Ukrainian military experts do not confirm a decrease in air and artillery fire intensity from the Russian side. Instead, Oleksiy Kopytko, adviser to the Minister of Defense of Ukraine, suggests that Prigozhin is attempting to shift responsibility and use the transition to a defensive stance in his own interests: "to jump off, shifting responsibility, and take measures to preserve his influence for instance in Africa."<sup>80</sup>

In the short-term, it can be expected that the part of the PMC operating in Ukraine will remain in a disadvantaged position, given its association with Yevgeny Prigozhin. The military "core" of the Wagner group will likely be preserved, while the manpower massively recruited in 2022 may be deployed in challenging areas without the possibility of replenishment through new waves of recruitment in Russian prisons. Gradually, this human resource may become depleted. There is already information about the potential encirclement of Wagner positions by Ukrainian troops amidst the group's high casualties on the battlefield.

It is safe to say that Yevgeny Prigozhin's standing within the Russian has deteriorated. Putin and his inner circle will likely seek to keep him in a marginalized public role, similar to Igor Girkin (FSB operative and coordinator of Russian special operations during the capture of Donbas territories in 2014-2015).

Due to Prigozhin's political populism and audacity, Russian intelligence risks losing its cover-up label of Wagner PMC, for conducting special operations and maintaining its presence abroad. Currently, the company has become the subject of close scrutiny from major foreign actors such as the USA, EU, and France, who have imposed sanctions, designated Wagner Groups as a transnational criminal or terrorist organization, and initiated efforts to seize financial assets and apprehend individuals associated with the PMC.

The presence of criminal elements within the ranks of the PMC has further discredited Wagner, as they have been linked to the commission of war crimes and inhumane treatment of their own personnel.

While the PMC previously maintained a stable level of cooperation with the Russian military, relations have now become strained and lacking in trust. As a result, the heads of the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the Russian Federation have deliberately limited the military capabilities and disrupted offensive operations involving the PMC.

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<sup>79</sup> Twitter account of Mykhailo Podolyak, Advisor to the Chief of the Office of the President of Ukraine, 15 January 2023, [https://twitter.com/Podolyak\\_M/status/1614660000395235330](https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1614660000395235330).

<sup>80</sup> «"Ne mozhna viryty Pryhozhynu". Na Bankoviy i u Reznikova vidreahuvaly na zayavy vatazhka Hrupy Vahnera» ["You can't trust Prigozhin." Bankova and Reznikov responded to the statements of the leader of the Wagner Group], LIGA.net, 5 March 2023, <https://news.liga.net/ua/politics/news/nelzya-verit-na-bankovoy-i-u-reznikova-otregirovali-na-isteriku-prigozhina-po-bahmutu>.

Successful tactics involving the use of prisoners in assault actions may be adopted by other PMCs that have emerged based on the model of the Wagner PMC. This development is not limited to Russia's intervention in Ukraine alone. Russia recognizes the growing significance of countries in the Global South for maintaining geopolitical confrontation with Western nations. In this context, PMCs, serving as a cover for the activities of Russian special services abroad, are expected to develop and expand their presence. It is also worth considering the possibility that the "projects" carried out by Wagner PMC in Africa and the Middle East may gradually transition to other pseudo-private companies that have not faced international sanctions or persecution by foreign governments.

## Part 5: Wagner in Africa

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Yan St-Pierre, Mosecon

While Russia's escalation of its invasion of Ukraine put a spotlight on the military activities of the Wagner group there, the latter's work in Africa had long been neglected. In fact, until the group expanded its activities into Mali, European interest was very limited, despite NGO reports about the organization's crimes in Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique and Libya. Ironically, the UN's Security Council enabled Wagner's presence and development in Africa in 2018, by granting Russia not one but two exemptions to the arms embargo imposed on CAR, an exemption that China was refused in the same year.<sup>81</sup>

Following the *coup d'Etat* in Mali in August 2020, which catalyzed the degradation of the relationship between the African country and France, Wagner rapidly expanded its influence in the country and set the conditions to do the same in other countries like Burkina Faso. Thus, Wagner went from being perceived as a negligible actor to a serious troublemaker and flag-bearer of Russian interests and policies in Africa. Rapidly growing European and American concerns led to the European Union imposing sanctions on the group in December 2021<sup>82</sup> and the U.S. Congress to enact the *Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act* in April 2022.<sup>83</sup>

For all the attention policy makers were now giving to Wagner's activities in Africa, these remain misunderstood and marred by over-simplification. This misunderstanding hinders the development of effective policies and strategies, because it doesn't take into account the developments that motivate Wagner's presence there, its impact and perhaps most importantly its *legitimacy* there. It also drives the simultaneously under- and overstated narrative around the group, which impacts the security and foreign policy assessments about Wagner.

Here, we will look both at the group's evolution as an actor in Africa and assess its presence on the continent through the local lens.

### Wagner's role in Africa

Though a private military company, Wagner's presence in Africa has primarily been about securing assets, and then protecting those assets, rather than being a security actor there. Since 2016 and across the continent, the Wagner group acquired mining rights, land, companies or infrastructure among others, that would create an apparatus, which generates income, launders

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<sup>81</sup>Y. St-Pierre, "Don't believe the Hype: The Wagner Group's Presence in Mali," 22 January 2022, <https://www.mosecon.com/dont-believe-the-hype-the-wagner-groups-presence-in-mali/>.

<sup>82</sup>Council of the European Union, "EU imposes restrictive measures against the Wagner Group," 13 December 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/12/13/eu-imposes-restrictive-measures-against-the-wagner-group/>.

<sup>83</sup>United States Congress, "Text - H.R.7311 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act," 28 April 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7311/text>.



money and if necessary, allows for the circumvention of sanctions.<sup>84</sup> Here, one of the misconceptions regarding the group's activities is that it uses its presence to create fronts for its illegal activities, when in fact it acquires existing assets that are both legitimate and legal and with a history of real and legal activities, even if not profitable. For example, some reported cases out of Tanzania, Uganda, Mozambique and Mali<sup>85</sup> suggest that entities linked to Wagner acquire "dead" assets, as in being paid with mines that have been empty for years and which generate financial losses.

The acquisition of assets also requires the securing of these assets, legal or not. When Russian entities and actors acquire assets in Africa, especially mining sites, the private security for the site will be partly managed by Wagner.<sup>86</sup> Site protection has been the main business of the group since it began expanding into the African market, which allows it to be in-country without being deployed as a military unit. This fuels the debate about Wagner's presence in a country, for example Burkina Faso, where the group is not officially deployed as a security outfit fighting terrorism but has a presence there to protect Russian mining assets. It is this type of situation that led to the statement President Nana Akufo-Addo made in December 2022 that Wagner was present in south-west Burkina Faso, close to the Ghanaian border following the acquisition of a mining site by Russian entities.<sup>87</sup> Though technically true, Wagner's presence there is different than the deployments in CAR or Mali for example.

Another area where Wagner's activities can blur lines is when it illegally seizes assets through simple military operations, for example when mining areas are invaded and seized by Wagner personnel.<sup>88</sup> This type of operation had an impact on Chinese activities in Africa, as it was on the one hand the target of these attacks leading to a loss of assets in Africa, and on the other hand it created a need for China to increase its own PMC presence on the African continent in 2021 and 2022.<sup>89</sup> The latter also led to a shift in China's PMC policy, whereas rather than outsourcing to western companies as they had previously done, they now used Chinese companies like the Frontier Services Group, that employs Chinese nationals.<sup>90</sup>

## Wagner as part of military operations

The focus on asset acquisition however should not dismiss the fact that Wagner has been involved in security operations in Mozambique, Libya, CAR and Mali. While operational success in Libya is debatable, the Wagner-led security operations in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique from September to December 2019 were a clear failure: Casualties on the group's side and no impact on the development of terrorist entities, especially on the burgeoning

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<sup>84</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 17 March 2022.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 18 November 2021.

<sup>87</sup>"Burkina Faso summons Ghana envoy over president's claim on Wagner," Al-Jazeera, 16 December 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/16/burkina-faso-summons-ghanaian-ambassador-over-wagner-allegations>.

<sup>88</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 4 March 2022.

<sup>89</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 18 November 2021. Op. Cit.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

“Islamic State Central African Province”. This failure led to a complete withdrawal of Wagner as a fighting force in Mozambique, but it remains present through its security guard contracts. For Wagner, the lessons from Mozambique, notably about the difficulties of “jungle warfare”, would impact its other operations in Africa.

Militarily, the Wagner Group’s impact has been negative and civilians have borne the brunt of this impact. Technically, the group likes to use explosive devices that are in fact built in a similar fashion to the IEDs built by terrorists in the Sahel, and with a similar effect as well. This tactic and those devices imported from the group’s experiences in Libya lead to a blurring of the lines when trying to determine the source of the bomb.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, the use of such mines also increases the danger for civilians, especially in areas rife with IEDs like the tri-border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

This threat to civilians is in addition to the abuses and mass killing of civilians or the killing of local soldiers and have been cataloged by human rights organizations in CAR, Mali, Libya and Sudan.<sup>92</sup> Such accusations as well as the group’s poor record in security operations have led to many assessments suggesting that Wagner security operations in Africa are actually a catalyst for insecurity rather than mitigating it.<sup>93</sup>

## Wagner’s foreign policy impact

Research on the group has recently shown that it is a cog in a much broader structure that shapes Russian interest and policies in Africa. This structure involves politics, cultural diplomacy, organized crime, business and security.<sup>94</sup> However, Wagner’s impact on the international dynamics at play in Africa, especially in West Africa, is more subtle and about disruption. For example, once Wagner personnel were deployed to Mali in December 2021, this affected the cooperation between the international actors working in Mali, like the MINUSMA, Barkhane and Takuba and EUT missions. Concerned both with information and operation security, these actors reduced their cooperation with the Malian military (FAMA) and the government to a minimum, wary that sensitive information could be passed on to Russia. For the same reasons, Wagner’s presence disrupted the functioning of joint international patrols with the FAMA, which in turn granted terrorists linked to the JNIM (Al Qaida) or ISWAP a larger margin of maneuver to carry out their attacks and expand their presence in Mali.

Wagner’s disruptive impact also helps cement the propaganda, narrative and psychological warfare occurring in West Africa, where Western countries and Russia invested significant resources to paint the other as the villain and garner popular support. In this case, Wagner can do the “ground work”, complementing the disinformation and propaganda work of GRU units

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<sup>91</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 21 January 2022.

<sup>92</sup>United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, “CAR: Experts alarmed by government’s use of “Russian trainers,” close contacts with UN peacekeepers,” 31 March 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/03/car-experts-alarmed-governments-use-russian-trainers-close-contacts-un?LangID=E&NewsID=26961>.

<sup>93</sup>Y. St-Pierre, “Don’t believe the Hype: The Wagner Group’s Presence in Mali,” Op. Cit.

<sup>94</sup>J. Stanyard, T. Vircoulon, J. Rademeyer, “The Grey Zone: Russia’s military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa,” Global Initiative against transnational organized crime, February 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/>.

deployed to Mali for example.<sup>95</sup> Hence, in a context where French and Western policy in the Sahel was ineffective, Wagner's presence exploited these weaknesses, allowing Russia to strengthen its influence in the region.

Wagner group's influence in Africa is much less a product of its actions than its timing. Frustration with Western countries, especially France, is ripe; Russia still benefits from great historical ties and a better reputation in African countries stemming from the Soviet era; and as the political dynamics change on the African continent, the region's leaders and communities look to other partners, providing a legitimacy to Wagner's presence that is still not clearly understood in Western foreign policy circles.

## Wagner is not the “enemy”

Since March 2022, many media, security and foreign policy analysts have expressed surprise at the “lack of enthusiasm” from African states in condemning the expanded invasion of Ukraine by Russia. In trying to explain this, analysts and policy makers too often resort to external factors, such as money, disinformation or blackmail, suggesting that Africans leaders' lack of support for Ukraine is not a product of their own understanding but of greed and power.

Such an analysis dismisses the genuine resentment that many Africans have, especially West Africans, for their former colonial oppressors, like France or the United Kingdom. This dislike and distrust also applies to “hegemons” like the United States, which are perceived as arrogant actors looking to dictate terms to Africans. This is in contrast to Russia, which during its Soviet history used a narrative of defender of the oppressed, promoted equality amongst peoples, presented itself as a brotherly figure and supported pan-Africanism rhetoric. Combined with the narrative surrounding key liberation figures – both rooted in myth and fact – such as the “African Che Guevara” Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso or Patrice Lumumba, who led the independence movement in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Russia benefits from a much better standing across the continent than its western counterparts.

Additionally, Russia benefits at the political level from the “no strings attached” approach to its foreign policy support. Where the EU or the U.S. will link their support to conditions, such as security sector reform, rule of law or human rights, or refuse to deliver weapons, Russia seals deals without such requirements and will happily turn a blind eye to issues like corruption. This approach has been particularly devastating for Ukraine since March 2022, as Africans see the “no limits” support given to Ukraine by western countries as a validation of the West's “double standard” when it comes to military or humanitarian support.

Those factors, combined with some of the significant economic factors mentioned above, create a positive environment for Russian entities to be deployed into Africa and benefit from a degree of welcome that is refused to others. Hence, the Russian disinformation and mobilization campaigns in Africa are less about inciting resentment or creating good conditions for the expansion of Wagner's activities and influence but more about fanning the flames, both positively and negatively, of fires that were already there. Consequently, despite serious

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<sup>95</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 17 March 2022. *Op. Cit.*

accusations of human rights abuses, racism and incompetence, Wagner is still able to benefit from positive views of Russia that many Africans have, either formally or informally.<sup>96</sup>

This does not mean however that Wagner gets a free pass. Africans make their own decisions, have their own issues and have made it clear that they are no one's puppets.<sup>97</sup> The cooperation between Wagner units and local military where the group is active is not smooth and is plagued by internal fighting and abuses and accusations that Wagner is sending African troops first into battle as a way to limit its own casualties.<sup>98</sup> Hence, for many African policy makers and community leaders, Wagner is described as “having a troublesome side,” but it is neither the problem nor the enemy western actors want to make it.

The Wagner group's activities in Africa are a legitimate concern for all who could be affected by them, both in the short and long term. The abuses are real, as are the power plays involving the group. Those activities are also a cog in a much wider and complex structure of political, financial, strategic and security interests, whose dynamics are subordinated to international geostrategic and geopolitical interests, of which Africa is a key battleground. But above all, the issue of Wagner's presence in Africa is about areas of interest, perception and narrative, as the history of the West's reaction to Wagner's presence in Africa has shown. The narrative also underlines how political analysis continues to display African decision makers as passive and guided by external actors rather than deciding for themselves. This creates conditions in which Wagner can operate successfully and Russian influence and propaganda can grow.

In their most recent Africa strategies, France and Germany argue the importance of “equal partnerships” with African states and resetting relationships. The Wagner issue could be a first step to this reset: Rather than telling African states that Wagner, and by extension Russia, are bad and expect alignment, they should ask African decision makers why they are interested in working with Wagner, listen to the arguments and respond accordingly. If Wagner's influence in Africa is to be curtailed, it will be because Africans themselves choose to do so.

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<sup>96</sup>Agence France-Presse, “Selon une enquête d'opinion, plus de neuf Maliens sur dix ont confiance en la Russie pour aider leur pays,” *Le Monde*, 4 May 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/04/selon-une-enquete-d-opinion-plus-de-neuf-maliens-sur-dix-ont-confiance-en-la-russie-pour-aider-leur-pays\\_6172044\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/04/selon-une-enquete-d-opinion-plus-de-neuf-maliens-sur-dix-ont-confiance-en-la-russie-pour-aider-leur-pays_6172044_3212.html).

<sup>97</sup>Agence France-Presse, “Au Burkina Faso, le ministre de la défense dénonce une « coalition internationale » contre son pays,” *Le Monde*, 4 May 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/04/au-burkina-faso-le-ministre-de-la-defense-denonce-une-coalition-internationale-contre-son-pays\\_6172030\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/04/au-burkina-faso-le-ministre-de-la-defense-denonce-une-coalition-internationale-contre-son-pays_6172030_3212.html).

<sup>98</sup>MOSECON Briefing, 25 January 2022.

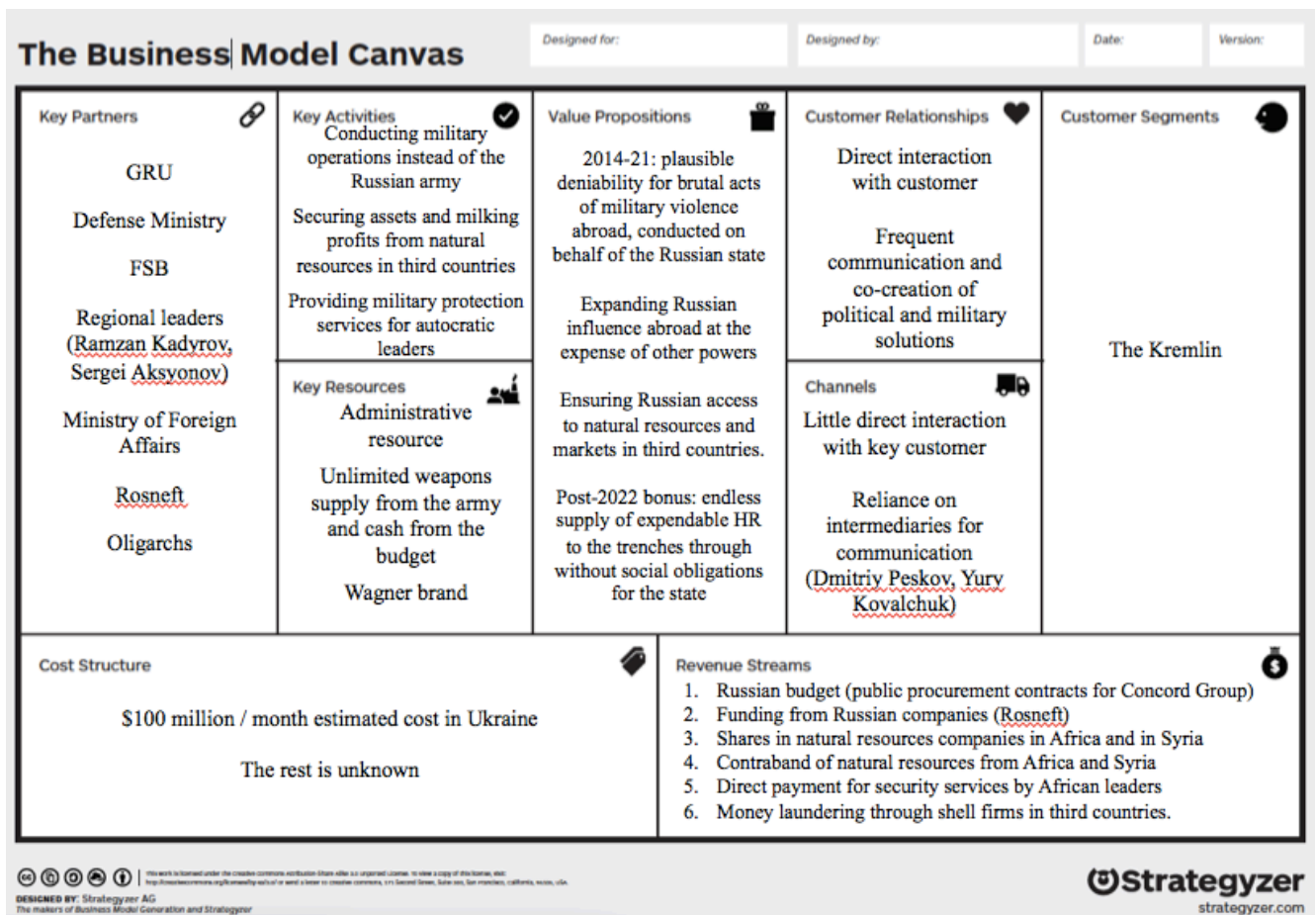
# Part 6: Wagner business model

## Anastasiya Shapochkina, Eastern Circles

In addition to its geopolitical and military role, Wagner is above all a business, whose capacity to exist, develop and attract new followers depends to a large extent on its ability to generate cash flow. If one day that crucial ability of Wagner to generate vast amounts of cash is impaired, we'll have nothing to talk about.

To understand Wagner as a business, we'll use the methodology widely applied in business analyses and developed by Swiss company Strategyzer, and in particular Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur: business model canvas. It provides a standardized framework for analyzing any business through 9 essential elements: 1) customer segment, 2) value proposition, 3) key activities, 4) communication, distribution and sales channels, 5) customer relationships, 6) cost structure, 7) revenue streams, 8) key resources, 9) key partners.

Using the business model canvas, a graphic summary of Wagner's business model would look like this:



Here is a more detailed interpretation:

- 1) Any business model will depend on the **customer segment**, which “defines the different groups of people or organizations an enterprise aims to reach and serve.”<sup>99</sup> For Wagner, the main customer is the Kremlin. All other smaller customer segments (African dictators, Bashar Al Assad, even its founders in GRU, for each of which a different business model can be drawn) are directly dependent on the will of the Kremlin for Wagner’s services, and Wagner is accountable to the Kremlin alone. This is a niche market, albeit not without an element of fierce competition.
- 2) The heart of a business model is **value proposition**, which is “a distinct mix of elements catering to the customer segment’s needs.”<sup>100</sup> Wagner’s value proposition to the Kremlin has evolved over the last 9 years. In early years of the PMC founding in 2014, its main value proposition was plausible deniability for brutal acts of military violence abroad, conducted on behalf of the Russian state, to increase the Kremlin’s influence and/or access to resources and markets.<sup>101</sup> When the Kremlin raised the level of violence from a “hybrid war” to the level of a mass conventional war, Wagner’s value proposition has evolved to offer military jobs nobody wanted to do at lower cost than the regular army and at reduced responsibility for the Russian state (if it does not work, Wagner can be blamed for military defeat). In Africa and the Middle East Wagner offers expanding Russian influence abroad at the expense of other powers.<sup>102</sup> Wagner bonus offer in Ukraine, compared to the Ministry of Defense value proposition, was endless supply of expendable, cheap-to-free HR (those who get killed fast do not get paid) to the trenches through without any social obligations by the state.
- 3) **Key activities** of Wagner are conducting military operations instead of the Russian army, securing assets and milking profits from natural resources in third countries, and providing military protection services for autocratic leaders.
- 4) **The channels of communication, distribution and sales** provide an interface with the customer, raise awareness, deliver the value proposition, and help the customer evaluate it. Although the Kremlin is the main customer of Wagner, it does not mean that Prigozhin has direct “access to the body,” or the customer: Vladimir Putin, as explained in the first part of this report. Instead, Prigozhin relies on intermediaries for a large part his communication channels: be it Putin’s press secretary Dmitry Peskov or Putin-made oligarchs Kovalchuk brothers.<sup>103</sup> In parallel, especially in the moments of despair with the Russian Defense Ministry over supplies interruption, and to boost the value of Wagner brand and his own image, Prigozhin uses Telegram, YouTube and other social media for

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander Osterwalder and Yves Pigneur, *Business Model Generation*, Wiley, 2010.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Stronski, Paul, “Implausible Deniability: Russia’s Private Military Companies”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 06/2020, *Implausible Deniability: Russia’s Private Military Companies - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>102</sup> Klein, Margarete, “Private military companies – a growing instrument in Russia’s foreign and security policy toolbox”, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 06/2019, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Strategic-Analysis-17-2019.pdf>.

<sup>103</sup> Tatiana Stanovaya, “Man vs Myth: is Russia’s Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?” *Carnegie Politika*, 13 February 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89008>.



direct communication. And albeit the rumor has it that Putin does not use the Internet, some of the content of his social media post was sure to elicit sharing with “the boss” by his competitors in the couloirs of power.

- 5) **Customer relationship** in a business model is a way the company structures the overall relationship with the customer, beyond pure communication. They shape overall customer experience and can vary from personal interaction to a mobile app business. In this range, Wagner is definitely on the direct customer interaction side, staying beside the customer before, during and after the sale of its services, communicating its worth at every step, and co-creating customized solutions with the Kremlin to any of its geopolitical objectives, depending on geography and target market.
- 6) **The cost structure** of Wagner is unknown, but its costliest component – weapons and military equipment – is offset by the Kremlin, which facilitates the supplies of equipment by the army, so from the Russian budget. Ukrainian sources (see Part 4 above) estimate the non-equipment operational expenses in Ukraine to be in the range of \$100 million per month, which should vary depending on the number of survivors whose salaries have to be paid or whose families are eligible for compensation. This should be amply covered with all of the revenue streams Wagner receives to generate earnings for its chiefs.
- 7) **Revenue streams** are the cash Wagner generates from each customer segment. They should be greater than costs to generate earnings. Here it is important to mention not only the Kremlin, but other sub-segments of customers, dependent on the Kremlin’s will to include them in Wagner’s business model, but important each in their own right for generating different revenue streams for the PMC. The Kremlin is the main source of funding for Wagner. First, Prigozhin has received numerous state contracts given to Concord Group, such as food contracts for the Russian army, prisons, schools, and hospitals (see Part 1). Second, Wagner receives shares in African natural resource companies it helps “secure” and in the form of payments for the military services to third country leaders, from personal security, to military operations, to the training of troops.<sup>104</sup> Third, Wagner helps itself through the contraband of natural resources from third countries and money laundering, including to avoid sanctions, which can be also considered yet another bonus value proposition to the Russian elites (see Part 5 of the report). Fourth, it receives financial income from big business, like Rosneft.<sup>105</sup>
- 8) **Key resources** refer to “the most important assets required to make a business model work. They can be physical, financial, intellectual or human... owned, leased or acquired from other partners.” Wagner’s key resource is unlimited administrative resource, which allows it to access various recruitment points, thrive in the environment where PMC’s are illegal,<sup>106</sup> and receive unlimited weapons and military equipment supplies from the army, no matter how bad the relationships with the military official. Wagner’s key military resource is unlimited military equipment and ammunition supplies directly from the

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<sup>104</sup> Adrien Le Gal, “Le groupe Wagner, fer de lance des opérations russes d’influence en Afrique subsaharienne”, Ecole De Guerre Economique, Janvier 2022, <https://www.egc.fr/infoguerre/le-groupe-wagner-fer-de-lance-des-operations-russes-dinfluence-en-afrique-subsaharienne>.

<sup>105</sup> Telegram chain “Mozhem ob’yasnit”, “Yevgeny Prigozhin has obtained the support of Igor Sechin” [“Евгений Пригожин заручился поддержкой Игоря Сечина”], March 7, 2023, <https://t.me/mozhemobyasnit/14838>.

<sup>106</sup> Article 208 "Organization of an illegal armed formation" and Article 359 "Mercenary" of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

Russian army. Its no less important resource is the diplomatic support of the Russian MFA, which facilitate Wagner's value proposition to customers in Africa and Syria.

Wagner's business model is at the same time capital-intensive and, as it needs long and continuous supplies of ammunition and large supplies of mercenaries. Wagner's key resource to attract potential hires is its brand, crucial for attracting a wide array of voluntary recruits, which has aroused waves of enthusiastic support swelling the ranks of the PMC especially after explicit videos of extreme violence, which have become Wagner's signature communication element, together with Nazi and pagan symbols. Wagner brand is also important for outside communication as a fear mongering mechanism, as it has inspired awe and apprehension across the world, in sharp contrast with awe and stupefaction inspired by the Russian regular army.

9) **Key partners:** But this heavy-set business model design, which could have undermined the profitability of any business-only enterprise, is not a problem for Wagner, thanks especially to its key partners. The most important partner is Wagner's founder GRU, especially for supply of key HR which constitute the PMC's "core". Wagner's other key partners are the Ministry of Defense for endless supply of ammunition and weapons, and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for diplomatic support abroad facilitating market penetration in Africa. FSB, upon the Kremlin orders, can open (and close) doors to Russian prisons as recruitment base. Rosneft and potential other corporate sponsors provide financial support, while regional leaders provide political and military support, such as Sergei Aksyonov, head of the occupied and annexed Crimea.<sup>107</sup> The paradox of Wagner's business partners is that some of them are also Wagner competitors, and sometimes hateful enemies (Sergei Shoigu, Valery Gerasimov or Sergei Lavrov). But the magic power of Wagner's key customer segment, the Kremlin, makes them all work together in, albeit imperfect, harmony.

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<sup>107</sup> Kyiv Post, "Mercenary Unit Formed by Kremlin's "Head of Crimea," 27 March 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/14948>.

# Conclusion: What Russian PMC's tell us about the future of Russia

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## Anastasiya Shapochkina, Eastern Circles

When the media hype dust around Prigozhin settles, the most important lesson about Wagner, to help us shape our understanding of modern Russia and its foreign policy strategy, is that Wagner is but one among dozens in a network of Russian PMC's expanding around the globe.<sup>108</sup> These PMC's can be put into four categories, depending on their patrons, while allowing at times for one and the same PMC's gain patronage of several power groups below:

- 1) PMC's founded and essentially controlled by **security agencies**: GRU, FSB, SVR, or more recently Russian Defense Ministry, whose very own PMC "Patriot", under the personal patronage of Sergei Shoigu, has been specializing in providing first-person security to African leaders, and has been recently operating near Vuhledar, in Ukraine.<sup>109</sup> Wagner belongs to this group due to its uninterrupted links to GRU and its veterans. It is this link, and the fact that the Kremlin is Wagner's main client, which explain why the Russian Ministry of Defense has remained the main military arms supplier to Wagner in Ukraine, despite the mediatized conflict within the Russian military elites and between Shoigu and Gerasimov on the one hand and Prigozhin on the other. Any obscene rhetoric by Prigozhin should be understood in the light of this uninterrupted connection, as well as in the context of Russian legal framework, which has never allowed the existence of any PMC *per se*. Thus, Wagner and its chieftains remain beholden to the system, and the system remains beholden to them.
- 2) PMC's linked to government officials. Thus, Russia's PM Mikhail Mishustin is reportedly behind Gazprom Neft PMC, or rather PSC, or Private Security Company, which is a form of validation and legalization of Gazprom PMC, which has emerged from the company security service apparatus and was placed under the patronage of the PM.<sup>110</sup> Other Russian elected and appointed officials controlling PMC's include (but are not limited to) Sergei Aksyonov, governor of the occupied Crimea ("Convoy" PMC),<sup>111</sup> Vice Prime

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<sup>108</sup> Catrina Doxsee, "Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies," CSIS, September 2022, [ts220915\\_Doxsee.pdf](#).

<sup>109</sup> Sukhankin, Sergei, "The "Privatization of Force" Presses on in Russia (Part Two)," Jamestown, February 2023, The 'Privatization of Force' Presses on in Russia (Part Two) - Jamestown; Sukhankin, Sergei, "Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa" Jamestown, 08/2018, Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa? - Jamestown.

<sup>110</sup> Sukhankin, Sergei, "The "Privatization of Force" Presses on in Russia (Part One)," Jamestown, February 2023, The 'Privatization of Force' Presses on in Russia (Part One) - Jamestown.

<sup>111</sup> Kyiv Post, "Mercenary Unit Formed by Kremlin's "Head of Crimea," 27 March 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/14948>.

Minister and head of Minpromtorg Denis Manturov, the mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobyanin, and the infamous president of Chechnya Ramsan Kadyrov (PMC “Akhmat”)<sup>112</sup>.

- 3) PMC’s stemming from the companies linked to the Kremlin: Gazprom Neft, Rosneft (Igor Sechin) and Almaz-Antei are some of the most recognizable examples of this group (“Potok,” “Fakel”).<sup>113</sup> While the original purpose of these PMC’s was related to the security provision for strategic infrastructure,<sup>114</sup> their meaning and purpose transform with the evolving geopolitical landscape and the internal political elite rivalry within Russia.<sup>115</sup>
- 4) PMC’s driven by ideology and tied to political groups in Russia, such as “ENOT” and “Rusich,” which are linked to the extreme right, Russian Nazi circles, which have been historically linked to the Russian government (see Part 3).

These categories of patrons may intertwine, and even merge, but they help understand the types of influence groups behind the main PMC’s.

The main characteristics of the people composing the PMC’s vary from professional military and security services men, to industry security personnel, to criminals, to army recruits, to citizens of Russia and to migrants to Russia without any previous military experience who engage in PMC’s for money, to ideologically charged political radicals, whose motivations go beyond pure military compensation.

**The example of Wagner and other Russian PMC’s point to at least five key objectives of using them by the Russian state. First is maximizing profits for the Russian elites and potentially for the Russian state, which is especially true about the PMC’s operating in Africa and Syria, where their activities are paid directly in shares of the natural resources companies they are called to secure. The profit maximization takes place also in the form of avoiding sanctions through money laundering in third countries. These same countries and activities serve a second objective of PMC operation, which is securing Russian business interest abroad. This happens both through the special services provision to the leaders of African countries or in Syria, in exchange for which Russia is granted access to legal control of natural resources in those countries. A third *raison d’être* of Russian PMC’s is projecting power abroad, as private mercenaries supplement and replace professional Russian army for conquest (Syria, Ukraine). Fourth, PMC’s help maximizing personal and institutional weight of the Russian elites in the context of increasing internal competition for power and resources. Fifth, they supply cannon fodder in Russian wars, which is the case in Ukraine and Syria.** The applications of PMC’s

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<sup>112</sup> Ellie Cook, Newsweek, “Prigozhin and Kadyrov Setting Russian Military up to Fail: ISW,” 7 May 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/yevgeny-prigozhin-ramzan-kadyrov-russia-bakhmut-ukraine-wagner-group-1798867>.

<sup>113</sup> Filip Ryjka, “Russian contractors in the service of the Kremlin,” Warsaw Institute, August 2019, RUSSIAN-„CONTRACTORS”-IN-THE-SERVICE-OF-THE-KREMLIN-Warsaw-Institute-1.pdf.

<sup>114</sup> Kimberly Marten, “The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia’s Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses,” Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment, United States House of Representatives, Hearing on Exposing and Demanding Accountability for Kremlin Crimes Abroad, 7 July 2020, [www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110854/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-MartenK-20200707.pdf](http://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110854/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-MartenK-20200707.pdf).

<sup>115</sup> Seth Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, Joe Moye, “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies,” CSIS, July 2021, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721\\_Jones\\_Russia%27s\\_Corporate\\_Soldiers.pdf?VersionId=7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721_Jones_Russia%27s_Corporate_Soldiers.pdf?VersionId=7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586).

evolve with their growing importance, from their original use in covert operations in the so-called “hybrid wars” to the increasing use at home as a mobilization tool for war-fighting in Ukraine.

## Strategic implications of PMC’s for Russia

Despite the straightforward links between the PMC’s and the Russian state, **a first and most important strategic implication of the growing number and reach of PMC’s is the loss of state monopoly on violence.** Subcontracting violence for conducting military operations abroad, the Kremlin has effectively created a time bomb for the applications of violence at home, once the opportunity presents itself. This opportunity should not necessarily come under a guise of a *coup d’Etat*, but can take form of a simple spike in crime and the eventual militarization of society, facilitated by the state. This risk is even more pronounced as the new Russian warlords can be endlessly multiplied, are not subject to a social contract, nor elections. While some of them can be easily removed by their patrons in the Kremlin, on others the Kremlin depends for the realization of its own military objectives abroad (Wagner with Prigozhin and other leaders) or for ethnic security stability inside Russia (Kadyrov in Chechnya).

**The second strategic implication of Russian PMC’s is an expanding “arms race” within the Russian ruling elites.** The repercussions of this development may be numerous and far-reaching, but at the bare minimum it will result in a spike in crime inside Russia, which can last for years, as PMC members return from their deployments abroad, well-armed and having all the “breaks” removed by their experience. Precedents of Russian modern history in the aftermath of WWI, the civil war and the revolution, WWII, the war in Afghanistan, and the first and second Chechen Wars have all ended in skyrocketing violent crime levels in Russia proper. Numbers in this report suggesting that 80% of recent Wagner recruits, in tens of thousands, are prisoners sentenced for heavy crimes also confirm this hypothesis. General economic downward trend in multiple industries, due to sanctions, mobilization and prioritization of the military sector at the expense of others, contribute to the creation of favorable conditions for sprawling crime.

**Third, after Putin’s inevitable departure (for any reason, including natural death), the stage is set for the transition of power.** While cases of a *coup d’Etat* overturning a cruel authoritarian leader are rare in Russian history, so are the cases of a peaceful transition of power. The next one, whether it happens in 2024 or later, promises not to be an exception.

**Fourth, the empowerment of PMC’s and their respective figure-heads leads to “privatization of geopolitics.”**<sup>116</sup> The main consequence of this development is power-amassing by individuals outside of the habitual political spectrum. Their rise in Russia is limited only by the relative greater strength of their patrons. Once the patrons are removed or reshuffled, their positions may be enhanced. While their personalities attract occasional interest of Western media and authorities, their relative influence within the Russian elite system and how it may evolve in the future remain obscure to most of Western decision-makers.

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<sup>116</sup> Marc Galleoti, “Moscow’s mercenaries reveal the privatisation of Russian geopolitics,” OpenDemocracy, August 2017, Moscow’s mercenaries reveal the privatisation of Russian geopolitics | openDemocracy.







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