

Putin's Private Army: How Wagner Group Supports Russian Strategy

By Patrick Wouters | 8 Nov 2022

Key Issues

- The Russian Wagner group provides the Kremlin with an opaque and ruthless instrument to expand strategic political influence across failing or failed autocratic regimes and an occult way to secure troves of cash, oil, gold, or diamonds.
- The Kremlin's dark hand avoids any form of accountability for the involvement of its "official" army as well as "plausible deniability", since it operates extrajudicially without regard for human rights or the laws of war.
- The brazen use of the Wagner group as a tailored murder weapon poses intractable challenges for the international community, its criminal prosecutors, and its democratically controlled militaries.
- When not kept in check, private military companies – Western, Russian, or Chinese – constitute a very significant security threat, and an underexposed one, given that they are barely studied at war colleges and civilian universities, superficially surveyed by the intelligence community, scarcely addressed in operational planning, and poorly regulated.

It is often said that allegiance to the king's flag or to his treasury has made the difference between patriots and mercenaries for centuries. It is also the critical distinction the Geneva Conventions tried to codify with the aim of granting "combatant immunity" to prisoners of war, while mercenaries – defined as foreign fighters not part of a regular army, hired to undertake military operations – would be excluded from any legal protection.

The services Wagner Group provides to Putin range from close protection, intelligence gathering, and resource management (for commodities such as gas, petrol, gold, and diamonds, usually obtained as collateral from corrupt regimes lacking hard currency) to the simple provision of lethal force for so-called "stabilisation and peacekeeping operations". It has

also diversified into spreading disinformation through troll farms and the more subtle art of influencing elections or referenda.

Reliance on private military actors is certainly not new: even the Swiss-guard-close-protection-detail of the pope, which took root in 1506, can be considered as an early private security service. Since the Middle Ages, paramilitaries led by warlords and mercenaries were employed by warring parties and sometimes by legitimate governments. During the World Wars, private companies were used for logistics and transportation purposes only. Vietnam saw the first application of civilian technical specialists as maintainers of sophisticated weapon systems. The first massive application of private corporations was seen during the Gulf War, as they were routinely embedded in

support and maintenance arrangements. It can also be argued that military operations in Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq could not have been conducted without the help of contractors.

The early days of Russian secret cohorts

As highlighted in a Center for Strategic and International Studies study, General Nikolay Makarov, then chief of the general staff, publicly declared in 2009 that Russian private military companies (PMCs) were needed for “delicate missions abroad”. This analysis was supported in 2012 by Mr Putin in the Duma, notwithstanding the legal and regulatory ban on PMCs in Russian law (which persists to this day). Putin argued at the time that PMCs could provide “protection of important facilities, as well as training for foreign military personnel abroad”, while consciously omitting that plausible deniability

of force to private corporations should, in essence, be ascribed to Western governments, and, in doing so, they have forsaken the monopoly on the legitimate use of force that states have enjoyed in the Westphalian world order. As the lucrative contracts related to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq that were awarded to companies such as Halliburton and the infamous Blackwater came to an end, private contractors broadened their focus on the arc of instability ranging from the Middle East to Africa. The award of very significant service contracts to Halliburton and other PMCs by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld during the Afghanistan and Iraqi operations was repeatedly investigated, whereas operatives of the prominent PMC Blackwater, headed by Eric Prince, were convicted for the murder of 17 Iraqi civilians, but later pardoned by President Trump. However, as Sean McFate notes in his study of modern mercenarism, several new trends have surfaced



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constituted a bonus. The CEO of the Kremlin even lauded the work of Russian PMCs in 2018, saying “they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world”. That said, his remarks included an interesting but very explicit caveat: as long as these business interests were pursued outside Russia’s borders. Unspoken considerations in the back of Putin’s mendacious mind undoubtedly included the fact that this kind of proxy forces – as subcontractors to his security services (FSB), GRU, or other state organs) – can provide occult strategic influence; can operate extrajudicially without regard for human rights or the laws of war; and need not be tallied in the official statistics. And so it went with the little green men of the Wagner Group in the Donbass and Crimea in 2014 and in 2022.

The international scene for private contractors

The origins of contemporary outsourcing of the use

since that period. Besides resurgent proliferation and resilience of the industry to legal and regulatory challenges following the globalisation of its business environment, so-called “market indigenisation” has been setting in: major corporations – usually British (e.g. ArmorGroup) or American (e.g. DynCorp, Aegis, Triple Canopy) – are subcontracting to local warlords and “conflict entrepreneurs”, while providing institutional knowhow and administrative (read: billing) support in the background. This tendency can be explained by the fact that most states – with the notable exception of Russia – have subscribed to the [Montreux Document](#). Adherence to the principles of the document entails the moral, if not legally binding, obligation for states to keep the PMCs, which have their headquarters under their jurisdiction, in line with international law, in particular international humanitarian law and human rights law. Furthermore, most big players in the industry adhere to the self-regulatory “[International Code](#)

[of Conduct](#)”, which serves as the governance and oversight mechanism for private security service providers, by arranging certification, monitoring, and complaint mechanisms. Hence, delegating and subcontracting to local “hired guns”, who fit better in the societal tissue than GI-Joe-like mercenaries makes both tactically and operationally good sense, when diluting public perception, complicating accountability, and preserving deniability are at stake. It goes without saying that the Wagner Group has NOT subscribed to the International Code of Conduct.

Wagner: Putin’s Private Military Company of choice

Dmitry Utkin, a veteran of both Chechen wars, is widely recognised as the founder of Wagner. He participated in Russian operations against Ukraine in 2014 with a fanatic appearance, wearing tattoos and SS insignia on several occasions. Having served in the GRU, where he commanded a platoon of Spetsnaz, Utkin joined the Moran security group and went on to found the infamous Wagner Group in 2014, with a less-than-subtle reference to his former call sign. There is a veil of mystery though regarding whether he acted as his own man or as a front man for Yevgeny Prigozhin, and – as alleged by the Bellingcat Investigation Team – impelled by the Russian military establishment. Prigozhin finally admitted, after years of denial, to being directly involved in creating the network of mercenary services, which he affectionately described in a statement as “the foundation of Russian patriotism”.

Having been granted major contracts to feed and support Putin’s official army and meanwhile elevated to the ranks of Putin’s oligarchs, Prigozhin and his “executive officer” Dmitry Utkin modelled the Wagner Group after its notorious prototype Blackwater to provide a proxy army for Putin as a secret tool to seek hybrid and dark outcomes – a.k.a. war crimes – in sovereign countries without being held accountable. And to make a lot of money while doing so.

Wagner in Belarus

According to the official version of the Belarusian KGB, a Wagner group contingent of 200 mercenaries was dispatched to Minsk in July 2020 to destabilise

the political situation before the presidential elections on August 9, 2020. President Lukashenko had previously accused both Russia and the West of trying to undermine his regime by inciting mass riots. Among the Wagner operatives were well-trained fighters from Russia and the Donbass region, which had obviously served in previous operations. As some of their personal belongings indicated, half of the mercenaries came from the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics and some of the evidence collected on the detainees reportedly pointed to earlier assignments in Syria, Libya, and Sudan.

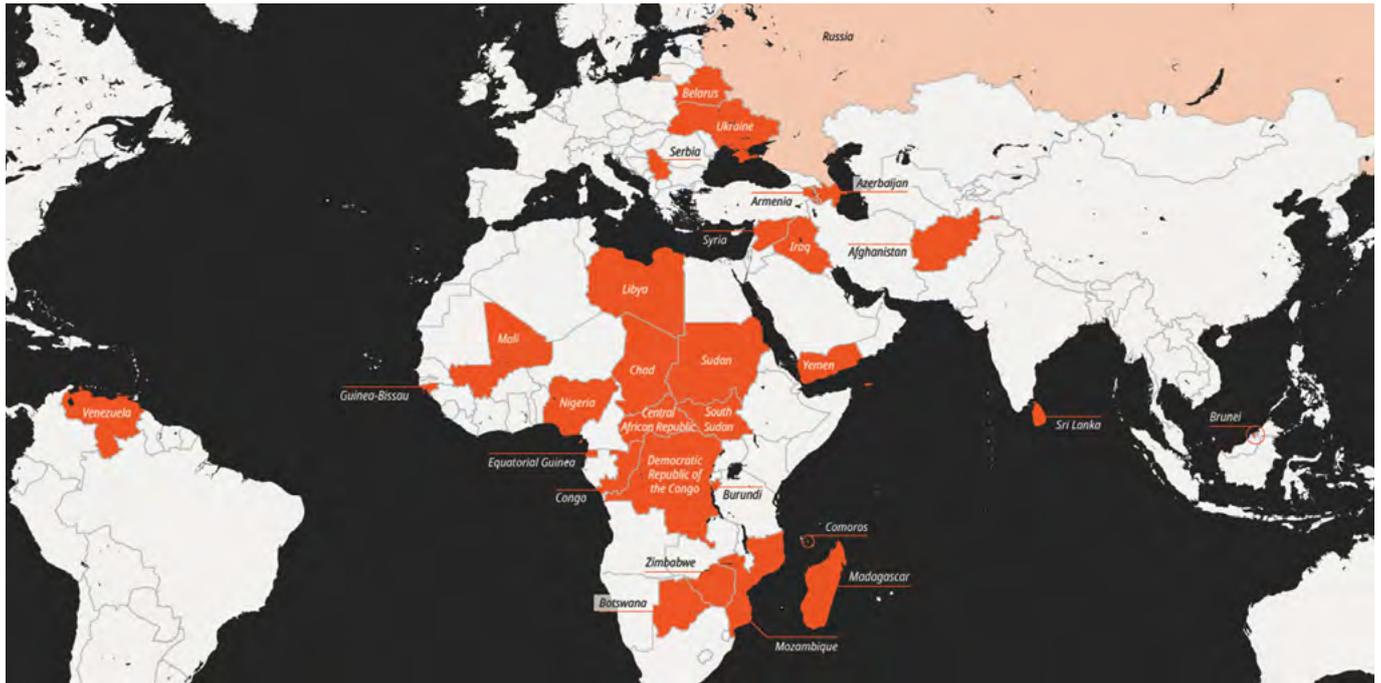
These arrests led to the odd occurrence that Belarus authorities contacted the Ukrainian embassy to ascertain whether the Donbass-based mercenaries had committed crimes in Ukraine. The fact that 33 of the Wagner operatives in Lukashenko’s custody were released after Mr Putin took a personal interest in their fate provides yet another piece of circumstantial evidence that the PMC is linked to the Kremlin.

Wagner goes Global

The apprehension for popular unrest and American meddling that could unseat Putin’s partners in crime would subsequently trigger lethal support by Wagner proxy soldiers to protect Venezuela’s President Maduro from his own army. The activities of the Wagner group later expanded to protecting the illegal gold mining operations of the Maduro regime, as evidenced by the scrutiny in the UK House of Commons in April 2022.

Besides Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Sudan also had their share of Wagner “support” at the behest of Putin: the former after President Nyusi met Putin in 2019 and mentioned rich gas fields as collateral; the latter when Omar al-Bashir tried to hold on to power in the face of popular protests after promising lucrative mining concessions for gold and uranium as well as a military port facility on the Red Sea Coast to Putin.

In the United States, the Internet Research Agency, a Prigozhin-led troll farm which is – according to research of the Brookings Institution – “state-linked” to Wagner, was indicted by Special Prosecutor Mueller’s investigation for malicious interference in



Russian PMC activity across the world (Source: CSIS Transnational Threats Projects)

the run-up to the 2016 election through the identity theft of American citizens.

Back to (2014) basics: Wagner in Ukraine (2022)

Reports abound of “little green men” operating alongside official Russian Federation armed forces, both during the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and in the run-up to the “special military operation” of 2022.

According to multiple sources, it is alleged Wagner Group mercenaries were involved in so-called “false flag” operations in the Donbass region, which were apparently set up to give Russia a pretext for attacking eastern Ukraine. Western governments had been referring to Russian disinformation campaigns and suspect car explosions that were used by leaders of the Donetsk People’s Republic to call for local residents to take up arms to protect their families. Other examples of false flag operations with a purported Wagner signature were direct attacks on Russian separatists.

After the launch of the “special military operation”, three Wagner Group mercenaries were alleged by Ukrainian prosecutors to have committed war crimes in the village of Motyzhyn near Kyiv in April, alongside

regular Russian troops. According to the same BBC reporting, the prosecutors indicated these war crimes included murder and torture, while German intelligence sources suspect Wagner mercenaries may also have been involved in the killing of civilians in Bucha during the withdrawal of Russian forces from around Kyiv.

Wagner units are considered by all actors in the theatre and foreign observers to be informal and unofficial parts of the Russian army, for which no casualties are reported. Detailed analysis reveals the circumstances in which Russian Federation combat forces in several instances:

- stalled because Wagner servicemen refused to engage the Ukrainian forces;
- provided artillery support for Wagner infantry operations; or
- served as “operational reserve” for an eventual breakthrough of Ukrainian lines.

But perhaps even more disturbing are the reports that more than 400 Russian mercenaries had been deployed to Kyiv “with orders from the Kremlin to assassinate President Zelensky and his government and prepare the ground for Moscow to take control”.

Five weeks before the launch of the “special military

operation”, the Wagner Group had allegedly flown in a detachment of mercenaries from Africa on a mission to decapitate Zelensky’s government in return for a handsome financial bonus.

Another source of escalation is the possibility that US PMCs might be contracted by the Biden Administration to provide technical expertise and spare parts to keep sophisticated equipment such as HIMARS, M777 artillery, and drones operational. It is generally accepted that even the US military must rely on PMCs to maintain, and in some cases operate, their complex weapon systems in the field, a task nearly impossible for the Ukrainian military, given their shallow experience with Western equipment and the long logistic lines through Poland.

The full extent of Wagner’s involvement in Russia’s “special military operation” and the intimidation of voters for Putin’s sham referenda in the Southeastern provinces of Ukraine has not been documented yet, but further investigation will undoubtedly uncover more details in the coming years.

One of the more remarkable episodes that would merit further investigation by the International Criminal Court is the fate of the Russian convicts recruited personally by Prigozhin to serve as Wagner augmentees, indicating a critical shortage of combat infantry troops, as evidenced by the partial mobilisation decreed by the Kremlin on 20 September 2022. While stating that “God and Allah can get you out of prison” in a leaked video clip, he went on to brag that he can take volunteers out of prison alive in exchange for serving six months in his cohort. So much for the rule of law in Putin’s Russia.

Wagner: Music for Hitler, a murder weapon for Putin

Invoking the historic truism that millions of ordinary Russians were killed in the struggle against Nazi Germany during the Second World War, Putin has referred many times very publicly to Ukraine as a fascist country and even justified his “special military operation” as a crusade against allegedly widespread Neo-Nazi ideology in Ukraine. The *cri de guerre* “to fight fascism” was widely used to recruit Russian volunteers for his official AND his private

army to fight in the Donbass against the “Ukrainian fascists”. Recognising the lineage of leading Wagner operatives as Dmitry Utkin, the irony will not be lost on many that the very mercenaries who went to fight in Donbass, Syria, and Libya associate themselves unashamedly with Nazi symbolism and ideology, in line with Hitler’s association with Wagner’s musical compositions.

The brazen use of private military companies as a tailored murder weapon and the ways in which Putin has used the Wagner Group to enrich himself and his friend-oligarchs through mafia-like extortion practices, however, dwarfs the classic moral and political objections on deniability and accountability that had so far been raised in governmental, academic, and military circles. With a blatant disregard for the rule of law, the Wagner leadership set out to murder Ukraine’s President Zelensky, influence US and Belarusian (amongst other) elections, recruit convicted prisoners in return for freedom after six months of “freelance mercenarism” and intimidate voters in sham referenda to prepare illegal annexations.

In his seminal work on the early days of private military companies – which he called “Corporate Warriors” – Peter Warren Singer had foreshadowed as much. At the time, he concluded: “the marketplace of violence presents a number of potential changes upon international security, affecting both the possible means and outcomes of conflict”. Arguably, PMCs – Western, Russian, or Chinese for that matter – constitute a very significant security threat, today and in the future, and may even be mutually interactive with resurgent great power competition. This should give impetus to an urgent remodelling of national and multilateral defence policy to keep them in check, an exercise at which the UN has failed to this date and which neither the EU nor NATO have even contemplated. The observation that they are barely studied at war colleges and civilian universities, superficially surveyed by the intelligence community, scarcely addressed in [NATO](#) and [EU](#)-led operational planning (i.e. solely for unarmed logistic support to own operations and not as an opposing force) and poorly regulated by national parliaments is rather disconcerting, therefore.



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