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The Wagner Group as a Tool of Russian Hybrid Warfare

Abstract: Unrest, conflicts, and wars in various parts of the world have created huge political and business opportunities for private military companies. They can gather intelligence, provide security for rich and powerful political actors, and provide mercenaries to interest groups worldwide. Private Russian military forces with close ties to President Vladimir Putin are used in war zones and continue expanding their presence in many regions worldwide. The Wagner Group is the most famous Russian mercenary unit. It gained notoriety mainly by supporting Russian forces in the conflict in Ukraine in 2014. At that time, it also provided one of the services that the authorities in the Kremlin particularly appreciate in their actions, and that is the lack of attribution for conducting armed conflicts, thanks to which mercenaries play the role of separatist fighters. Since then, the organisation has been deployed in many countries, including Syria, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Venezuela, always to covertly support representatives of regimes favoured by Putin. Like all other mercenary units in Russia, the Wagner Group does not officially exist, because Russian law does not allow mercenary activities. The article has two main objectives: first, to present an analysis of the activities of the Wagner Group, using the currently available information; second, to prove that the concept of hybrid warfare could best explain the Kremlin's use of Russian mercenaries.

Keywords: *Russia, Wagner Group, private military companies, hybrid warfare*

Introduction

Over the past decade, Putin's Russia has sought to restore its position on the world stage by projecting power in the Middle East and Africa, thus referring to the policy of the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. The Kremlin sees this as Russia's right to assert its subjectivity and role in the world. As a result, the Kremlin began to create the so-called private military companies (PMCs) to help rebuild the country's international position.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the incursion of the so-called Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine highlight Moscow's increased use of PMCs to realise its regional goals. The most famous Russian PMC is the Wagner Group, which first appeared in Crimea in 2014 and has since been in the vanguard of Russian foreign policy in Africa, the Middle East, and the disputed areas of eastern Ukraine. Although Russian mercenaries have attracted considerable attention from researchers and the media over the past few years, there is still little systematic research in this area.

This article highlights some of the implications that Russia's use of mercenaries could have for the security of Western countries. The article aims to analyse the definition of hybrid war based on the most famous PMC – the Wagner Group. The paper also ponders on the specific political and financial conditions that shape the functioning of Russian mercenaries.

The paper's starting point is the perception of hybrid actions as a specific tool of power, understood in a realistic perspective, and the still dominant Robert Dahl's interpretation, which conceptualises power as the ability to force someone to do something they would not do otherwise (Dahl, 1957). It is an important imperative for Russian policymakers and officials, which cannot be overlooked when analysing the motivation for using the mercenaries' services. The Kremlin has long recognised that non-state actors can diversify the means available to advance all the Kremlin's interests, while providing a credible opportunity to deny their actions.

The analysis is also intended to provide an answer to the question: why did the Russian state so often use the Wagner Group to achieve its military and geopolitical goals, while not legalising its existence – it is the question about Russian motives for hiring Wagner (and similar groups) without legalising them. The analysis of Russian motives is important for researchers in political and security sciences and for decision-makers who want to understand the decisions of the Kremlin authorities. The actual role of the Russian state in the area of the use of PMCs is often unclear.

The Wagner Group – The PMC's Nature and Specificity

The Wagner Group is a secret paramilitary organisation that can be defined as a secret tool of Kremlin policy or a mercenary organisation, or a PMC (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 59). It is also treated as a profit-making venture. It is an extensive scheme of entities operating under the cover of charter, commercial, customs, storage points, and entities dealing with air transport in leasing, constituting the logistical basis for the Russian military-industrial complex and energy. The best way to explain how Russian mercenaries conduct operations with the authorities' support is to compare this phenomenon to an organised crime cartel (Bennetts, 2018). In the case of Russia, security agencies, such as the FSB, GRU, and other state bodies under the Kremlin's control, are involved in almost every aspect of this type of operation. Vladimir Putin and the heads of state-owned companies appointed by him,

such as Gazprom, the largest gas producer in Russia, StroyTransGaz, the country's largest energy engineering company, or Rostec, the Russian state-owned arms company, profit from Russian mercenary operations (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 29).

Mercenaries have gained Putin's favour through their operations on every battlefield he has deployed to over the past decade, including conflicts in Libya, Mali, Syria, and the Central African Republic. In the context of the current war in Ukraine, it can be concluded that it is likely that Russia's ability to profit from the illegal provision of embargoed goods and services through quotas of contract mercenaries will only support the Putin regime and prolong the ongoing conflict, and thus, the instability and disruption of global markets and supply chains (Šćepanović, 2023).

The Wagner Group emerged during Russia's first attack on Ukraine in 2014, when its members fought alongside pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region. Most organisations gathering Russian mercenaries were created as a result of the exodus of military personnel after the collapse of the USSR and are closely linked to powerful interests in Moscow. The Kremlin's internal activities, including the competition between intelligence services, the army, and oligarchs for resources and influence, created ideal conditions for creating and developing many mercenaries and PMCs.

The organisation is funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and close associate of Putin. He was called "Putin's cook" because his catering company organised elaborate state banquets for Putin. The organisation's name comes from the initiative of Dmitry Utkin, a retired Russian military officer. Utkin is said to have chosen Wagner to honour a composer who was Hitler's favourite (Kim, 2022).

Prigozhin was imprisoned in a Soviet prison in his youth. According to the court records in Leningrad, he was convicted of being a professional burglar and carrying out a street robbery. He served nearly 10 years in prison (Wood, 2022). After his release, he opened a hot dog stand in St. Petersburg. From this humble start, it developed into restaurants that attracted the city's elite. After Putin became president in 2000, he began bringing high-ranking guests to Prigozhin's premises. His long-term presence in Putin's inner circle earned him the nickname "Putin's Chef". Soon, more contracts for feeding the army appeared. This profile makes Prigozhin different from other Russian oligarchs who made their fortune thanks to the privatisation of the state in the 1990s. Later, he was entrusted with more serious missions, including leading a mercenary group that became Wagner and an online "troll farm", the Internet Research Agency, which was accused by Robert Mueller, the special counsel, of interfering in the US presidential election in 2016 (Marten, 2019a, p.192).

Its first commander is believed to have been Dmitry Utkin, a former GRU (Russian military intelligence) special forces officer who fought for Bashar al-Assad's government in the Syrian civil war before appearing in Luhansk in 2014. His "call sign" was the word Wagner, most likely in honour of Hitler's favourite composer. Researchers citing direct witnesses claim that Utkin also wore a Wehrmacht-style helmet and had a series of Nazi-themed tattoos (The Economist, 2022).

In 2016, Putin awarded Utkin military honours at a banquet in the Kremlin. The United States sanctioned Utkin for his activities with Wagner a year later. Washington's blacklist also includes Prigozhin, who in 2018 was accused by the US government of financing a Russian troll factory whose members interfered in the 2016 presidential election (Chifu & Frunzeti, 2020). The EU also targeted Prigozhin in April 2022 in connection with the invasion of Ukraine (Harding, 2020, p. 153).

The research difficulty in analysing this organisation is that there is no officially registered "Wagner Group", which also results in no legal terms defining this organisation, its statute, or political and legal personality.

Since many of its leaders and soldiers, consisting of current and former Russian intelligence forces who perform tasks according to the objectives of Russian foreign policy, the Wagner Group can be defined as a hidden operational force operating under Moscow's supervision rather than a private contract armed forces.

The Wagner Group is not a legitimate, registered entity but a watchword for combining military, business, political, and disinformation units controlled by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moreover, private military contractors are illegal in Russia, which indicates the level of Kremlin's consent to the activities of this group. Prigozhin is also seen as close to Putin, given the number of professionally produced movies, commercials, and other media materials that promote Wagner's activities and are financed by Prigozhin (MacFarquhar, 2018).

Mercenaries have become a popular tool of Russia's war over the past eight years. Moscow uses mercenaries because they give the Kremlin a credible way to distance itself from their activities and circumvent laws governing conscription, soldiers' rights, and wages (McFate, 2022). They also organise Chechen battalions and other "volunteer" units, many of which were created outside the law governing conscription contracts. Like Russia's regular military, the Wagner Group was forced to lower its standards to replenish its ranks. The mercenary group draws from unconventional sources, including convicts promised freedom in exchange for fighting in Ukraine (Atlamazoglou, 2022). Since many young Russians and women refuse to fight in Ukraine, Russia encourages prisoners and other aggrieved civilians to join by granting them a special salary and veteran status immediately upon arrival (Arkin, 2022). It is believed that about 10,000 men have served in Wagner since its creation and that most of them are former Russian soldiers with combat experience. Not all of the Wagner Group are Russian citizens, but observers say most are residents of the former Soviet Union. Wagner's mercenaries often use passports issued by a special office linked to the Ministry of Defence. Interestingly, the same administrative entity issued passports to two men who tried to assassinate Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018 (The Economist, 2022).

Attribution Problem

The Wagner Group's value for the Kremlin is that organisations of this type can be used to carry out illegal activities without being formally part of the Russian armed forces. The Kremlin takes advantage of the lack of direct connection with the actions of mercenaries. Thus, it is difficult to attribute responsibility for the Wagner Group's actions to the Russian regime. The regime foresaw such a situation and secured itself in a decree signed by Putin in 2018, under which the group's activities became state secrets. In other words, it is illegal for Russians to talk about an organisation still formally banned by law. Instead, Russian military agents who train, equip, and fight alongside local forces from Mali to Sudan as part of military contingents are contracted by intermediary organisations under the guise of companies providing logistics and supply services to the Russian Ministry of Defence (Øsetensen & Bukkvoll, 2018, p. 14).

Thus, according to Russian law, the Wagner Group is illegal, which allows Russia to downplay its victims on the battlefield and distance itself from the atrocities committed by mercenaries. As Amy Mackinnon, chair of the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries, notes, "their structure allows for credible denial and the creation of distance between the Russian state and the group" (Mackinnon, 2021). A similar opinion was expressed by Jeremy Fleming, director of the British electronic surveillance agency, who notes that the "task of mercenaries is to limit Russian military losses in official statistics" (Fleming, 2022).

Using mercenaries instead of its own troops allows Russia to downplay information about casualties. It also removes the layer of responsibility: unlike soldiers, mercenaries are very difficult to identify. Moreover, in cases of human rights violations and war crimes, it is almost impossible to hold mercenaries accountable.

It is also no coincidence that there are plenty of misleading narratives about who the Russian mercenaries are, what they do, who they work for, and why. It is because the Wagner Group, in some part, is an instrument of psychological warfare and an irrefusable surrogate force for planned missions that the Kremlin wants to keep secret and can be denied. From a strategic perspective, their covert operations – real and imagined – are crucial for shaping Russia's strategy for managing the risk of escalation of the conflict. Russian mercenaries conduct reconnaissance operations deep behind enemy lines. They provide intelligence, military training, logistical support, infrastructure protection, and proxy militia, and conduct military missions in key hotspots worldwide. Their area of operation is global and covers every part of the world where Kremlin-controlled companies from the fossil fuels, mining, and arms industries have concluded agreements with local authorities (Marten, 2019a).

First of all, however, the Wagner Group's goal is to conceal the real links between Russia's military-industrial complex, state-owned energy and mining companies, and Kremlin-backed military contingents supporting Vladimir Putin's broader geopolitical goals. This camouflage provides Russia with political cover for military operations, which often violate international laws and norms regarding the conduct of war. The myth of the Wagner Group

simultaneously helps the Kremlin avoid responsibility for war crimes while confusing the minds of Russia's rivals about how to respond to Russian aggression. The resulting confusion also hampers investigations by international UN bodies, which have been working for several years to identify a complex network of shell companies and transport service providers in the shadow economy that make it easier for Russian mercenaries to carry out missions abroad. But Wagner's commitment to Russian interests has become evident in Ukraine, where his fighters, wearing the white-skulled emblem, are among the Russian forces attacking Ukraine (Petesch & Imray, 2022a).

Hybrid Warfare as a Tool of Russian Policy

The Wagner Group's actions reflect the assumptions of hybrid warfare. They pose a threat and create instability in many regions of the world (O'Leary, 2021, p. 8). Western policymakers have long expressed opinions that Wagner is being used as a proxy army outside the country and acts on behalf of the Russian leader to support his imperialist ambitions (Barnes & Brown, 2022). An example is the African continent, which has become a theatre of hybrid activities. Countries undergoing democratic transition or in conflict are particularly vulnerable to such threats. Implementing discreet, confidential sets of actions in peace and war is becoming increasingly common. Although one should be aware that hidden and informal activities are nothing new and have been used for a long time in the area of competition between states to maintain a dominant position on the international arena. However, using new technologies in competition between states gives many new opportunities to conduct hidden activities.

An important tool of hybrid warfare is a cyberattack. While some breaches target computer systems and are designed to extort cash, such as ransomware attacks, others undermine trust in governments (Parens, 2022). A recent Interpol report notes a sharp increase in attacks on critical infrastructure – including banks, ports, hospitals, and government ministries. Interpol lists Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, and Mozambique as targeted countries.

This type of event occurred in 2021, when South Africa's main port operator became the target of a cyberattack. The consequences were felt across the region as supply chains were paralysed for several weeks. The links between the presence of Russian forces and the occurrence of cyber incidents are most often confirmed, but it is also important that hybrid threats often combine virtual and real tools. Hybrid threats may seem distant given the continent's urgent humanitarian needs, but the consequences for vulnerable groups are real and policymakers ignore them at their own peril (Deep, 2015).

In February 2022, the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) revealed a carefully coordinated online campaign targeting the Mali government. The aim of these actions, supported by Russia, was to fuel anti-Western sentiment and discredit the democratic norms of the state by “mobilising public support for the government of interim President Assimi Goita and the Malian military” after the May 2021 coup (Parens, 2022).

It started with an avalanche of Facebook posts when the French government prepared to announce its troop withdrawal from Mali, where it has been involved in counter-terrorism operations for nine years.

The posts promoted the Malian military junta, which seized power in a *coup d'état*. They also openly supported the arrival of the Wagner Group, which was described by the Mali authorities as “Russian instructors”.

Such tactics can be particularly detrimental to the stability of the political system, especially in regions where checks and balances are weak. It is because providing Russia with access to some mineral resources in the Sahel is Wagner’s main goal, not achieving peace for Mali (Hauer, 2018).

With the help of propaganda and cyber operations, Russia pursues an aggressive policy towards Poland and the Baltic states, has transformed Belarus into a puppet state and a front in the war with Ukraine, influences Georgia through the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, uses energy blackmail against Moldova and other countries, installs “peacekeeping” forces, exploits tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ultimately ending the conflict on Putin’s terms. Russia exerts political and military pressure on Bosnia, Kosovo, Moldova, Macedonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, and Montenegro and has repeatedly violated Baltic airspace with Russian warplanes. Putin seeks to overturn the West’s pro-democracy agenda whenever such an initiative comes up. House Intelligence Committee’s member Mike Turner argues that thanks to Russia’s]’ advantage in Kaliningrad, Syria, and Crimea, Russia has created “an area of access and refusal even greater than that of the Warsaw Pact during the Soviet era” (Pierce, 2022).

The authorities in the Kremlin certainly know how refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria can disrupt the continent’s politics, fuelling right-wing anti-European and populist movements. Its most spectacular effect is Brexit.

Since 2021, Belarusian authorities have been bringing back thousands of migrants, including Kurds from Iraq, and have tried to push them across the border into Poland. The European Union condemned it as a “hybrid attack”. Analysts in “The Daily” wondered whether one of Putin’s secondary priorities is to undermine Poland and other neighbouring countries of Ukraine as members of the EU (Knox & Anders, 2022).

The case of Russia is significant for defining hybrid conflict. Several key actions describing this phenomenon can be identified based on past events. These include the use of mercenary groups, as illustrated by the example of Syria, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mali, Uganda, Nigeria, South Africa, and Mozambique, Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries; the use of the “Night Wolves Motorcycle Gang” to conduct information operations; interference in electoral processes in Europe and America; funding foreign political parties, such as Maduro’s repressive regime in Venezuela; energy blackmail; disinformation campaigns in cyberspace aimed at discrediting governments or inciting violence (Noorman, 2020).

The Wagner Group as a Means of Political Pressure

In order to fully illustrate the political conditions within which the Wagner Group operates, it is worth noting the unique combination of Russian mercenary culture with radical, anti-Western authoritarian militant movements aimed at inciting ethnic and racial violence outside Russia.

Wagner agents are believed to be involved in more than 20 countries and have played a key role in most major world conflicts, such as the Syrian civil war. When discussing the use and importance of mercenaries for political stability, it is worth noting a link between democracy and security. History shows that strong democracies tend to be more stable and less prone to conflict – and weak, corrupt governments with little international legitimacy are more vulnerable to extremist movements and external interference. It also applies to the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, which exploits instability to plunder resources and commit abuses with impunity, as is evident in Mali and the Central African Republic.

Vladimir Putin treats the Wagner Group's actions as a way to restore a sense of Russian power and glory after what he sees as the humiliation of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the limitation of Russia's global influence in the 90s. The Kremlin seeks to attract any state the US and its allies have neglected or marginalised, while exploiting persistent historical fears of US and Western imperialism among many nations (Øsetensen & Bukkvoll, 2022, p. 14).

The Kremlin has found common ground with right-wing authoritarian regimes worldwide that fear democracy, and with more traditional left-wing populist leaders who are suspicious towards global US leadership, including Latin America (Marten, 2019a). The Soviet Union attracted poorer, postcolonial regions because communism seemed to offer an alternative model for rapid economic growth to new states emerging from old Western empires. Currently, Putin tries to create a new ideological identity for Russia, largely centred on a homophobic, anti-feminist version of nationalist Orthodox Christianity that portrays Western liberal values as degenerate. This way, ideologues associated with his regime gained influence over authoritarian movements abroad (Cumming-Bruce, 2018). The partner for the Kremlin authorities often is an autocratic leader who acts without checks and balances in the country, which is not accidental. Without legitimacy and popularity, these leaders are sending a clear message to Moscow about the possibility of expanding its influence quickly and cheaply.

Isolated authoritarian leaders benefit from cooperation with Russian mercenaries, mostly in the form of strengthening the regime's security, access to weapons, and almost immediate income from the extraction of natural resources. The Wagner Group often receives financial compensation and remuneration through access to natural resources by the host regime. Moreover, the relatively small number of irregular forces that Moscow deploys in these situations (usually counted in hundreds or several thousand) usually is insufficient to change the security environment in African countries facing rebellion. However, these

forces are sufficient to help keep the regime in power – the main means by which Moscow can use its strategic interests.

Therefore, deploying Russian mercenaries is part of a broader initiative to keep Moscow's ally in power. Moreover, the experiences of Libya, the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan show that once Russia has gained a foothold, it uses disinformation campaigns to intimidate opposition circles and marginalise Western actors to strengthen Russian influence (Alami, 2018). The Kremlin amplifies anti-Western narratives by supporting friendly political leaders and mining valuable resources that have helped Russia resist Western sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine.

An explanation for Moscow's support is that many countries across the continent are still ruled by parties that the USSR helped in their struggle for liberation from colonial or white supremacist rule. Political leaders in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique remember how Soviet weapons, cash, and advisers helped win freedom (Burke, 2022a). Moscow has sought to highlight this history since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, repeatedly reiterating that Russia "has never colonised" any African country and is on the side of Africans against Western neo-imperialists.

This statement allows us to understand the South African government, which refused to condemn Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine, arguing that there were faults on both sides and that NATO expansion was one of the causes of the war (Burke, 2022b). The explanation may be that many South Africans, especially among the ruling party, remember how Moscow offered support to dozens of liberation movements during the Cold War, while many American politicians saw the apartheid regime as a bulwark against communism.

Africa and the Middle East as an Area of Russian Mercenaries' Operations

In recent years, Russia has deployed mercenary troops in at least six African countries, making the continent one of the most active regions of Russian influence worldwide. With weak governance, abundant natural resources, and a legacy of colonialism, Africa provides Russia with an easy and attractive space in which the Russian regime can deploy its armed forces to pursue its geostrategic interests at a limited financial and political cost.

Wagner fighters were active in Mali, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Libya wars. They ally with militia leaders and commanders, who can pay for their services in cash or lucrative concessions to mine valuable minerals such as gold, diamonds, and uranium. But the Wagner Group follows a more complex logic than a simple arrangement: military power for profit. Operating through an extensive network of shell companies, it has become synonymous with a wide spectrum of Kremlin-backed operations in more than a dozen African countries. Wagner interferes in politics, supports autocrats, organises digital propaganda campaigns, and produces action films set in Africa. It is an unofficial tool of the

Russian government – a cheap and deniable way for Vladimir Putin to expand his influence on a continent where sympathy for Russia remains relatively high (Walsh, 2022).

Wagner gained significant footholds for Russia in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Mali. According to experts, Wagner's role in these countries goes far beyond a covert story about providing security services. The Wagner Group began supplying hundreds of fighters in 2021 to support the Malian military and has since been accused by human rights groups and local residents of involvement in massacres of civilians. Their deployment was a key factor that prompted France, Mali's former colonial power and traditional ally, to withdraw its military forces from the country.

The Russian government has admitted that Wagner's mercenaries are in Mali, but the Malian government has described them as instructors of the Russian military, not a PMC (Petesch & Imray, 2022b).

According to analysts, Russia's plan for Africa, from Libya in the north to Mozambique in the south, is simple. The Kremlin seeks alliances with regimes or juntas rejected by the West or confronts uprisings and internal challenges of their governments (Duursma & Masuhr, 2022, pp. 407–423).

The Wagner Group built bridgeheads in Libya, Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. In Mali, Wagner's soldiers fill the void left by the rise of France's former colonial power. In Sudan, Russia's offer of economic alliance earned it the promise of a naval base in the Red Sea. In the Central African Republic, Wagner fighters protect the country's gold and diamond mines. In return, Putin receives diplomatic allies and their resources.

Wagner's most significant operations are taking place in Africa, where many regimes – including Mali, Madagascar, and the Central African Republic – have recruited the group. Wagner's troops fought on the side of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and General Khalifa Haftar in Libya – in both cases for Russian interests (Braw, 2022). While Wagner's men officially serve as government advisors, they also unofficially help those regimes stay in power.

The military dependence of African regimes on Wagner helped the organisation expand into purely commercial activities. At this point, it is worth using the example that before the protests overthrew Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir in 2019, he granted concessions for gold mining to the Wagner Group, which also operates through many other companies.

Moscow remains Africa's largest arms supplier, increasing exports by 23% in 2018–2022. The Kremlin's willingness to sell weapons to authoritarian leaders and militants without end-user deals fuels militarisation and escalates conflict and instability across Africa (Bangura, 2022).

Although Wagner's mercenaries were sent on missions that served Russia's geopolitical interests, the organisation also made much money. In most places where Wagner operates, such as Mali or the Central African Republic, it is paid by the local government. Additional sources of income are remuneration for control of gold or diamond mines granted to Wagner or companies associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin. According to journalists, the Wagner Group earns about \$10 million a month in Mali alone. Moreover, Russian mercenaries obtained

the right to mine gold in Sudan, diamonds and gold in the Central African Republic, and chromium in Madagascar (The Economist, 2022).

UN investigators noted that the operations of Russian mercenaries in the Central African Republic are mainly concentrated in regions where Prigozhin's companies mined diamonds. According to witnesses, in 2022, Russian military contractors carried out deadly raids on gold mines in the east of the country, apparently aimed solely at looting gold (Barnes & Brown, 2022). In Libya, thousands of Wagner fighters remain stationed at four bases near oil fields. In Sudan, Wagner obtained concessions to mine gold and unsuccessfully tried to save the country's autocratic leader, President Omar al-Bashir, who was overthrown in April 2019. Now Wagner's main Sudanese partner is General Mohamed Hamdan, a powerful paramilitary commander who flew to Moscow on the eve of the war in Ukraine for meetings with senior Russian officials (Walsh, 2022). Western intelligence agencies have seen an intensification of flights that supposedly carried precious metals from Sudan to Russia since at least 2022. Sudan also made a big deal by offering Russia a port on Africa's east coast for 25 years (Burke, 2022a).

Russian ties across the continent have been strengthened through investments in mining, financial loans, and the sale of agricultural equipment and nuclear technology. Rosatom, a Russian state-owned corporation engaged in the military and civilian use of nuclear energy, has sought to expand in Africa in recent years. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia was the largest arms exporter to sub-Saharan Africa in 2016–2020, supplying nearly one-third of total arms imports to sub-Saharan Africa, compared with a quarter in 2011–2015 (Narayanan, 2019).

Governments that use Wagner's military services cannot deny this organisation or its affiliated companies trade opportunities. This dynamic poses a high risk to other companies that Wagner may be interested in. As a result, local governments can take action to withdraw companies unrelated to Russia's interests by seizing assets, revoking concessions, punishing, fabricating environmental violations, or blocking currency transfers (Braw, 2022).

Wagner represents Russia and its strategic interests in Africa, but it is also a profitable company eager to expand into other lucrative sectors. Therefore, it should not be surprising that this type of military-business model is duplicated in other authoritarian countries on the African continent. Wagner's mercenaries offer military training, security, crowd control services, and advice on manipulating election results. The price includes friendly relations with Russia in exchange for mining rights for companies associated with Prigozhin (Marten, 2019a, pp. 196–197).

Thanks to the presence of its mercenaries in Africa, Russia gains economic and political strength. Analysts emphasise the significant role of mercenaries in building bridgeheads, especially in conflict-affected regions. In their opinion, it is primarily due to Putin's attitude of seeking to restore Russia's imperial glory and preventive actions against China's expansionary economic policy (Øsetensen & Bukkvoll, 2022, p. 3). This strategy was signalled at the summit of African leaders in Sochi in 2019, when the Russian president described the continent as

a place of “significant opportunities” for the Kremlin. Russia has become the largest supplier of arms in Africa. But Putin also uses historical and political factors. Russia tries to shape African countries’ policies through social media and political influence campaigns. In the Central African Republic, Prigozhina’s companies sponsored a beauty contest, funded a radio station, and last year, released a movie called “Touriste” that glorified Wagner’s mercenaries’ actions in the country (Walsh, 2022).

Russia also wages an ideological war against the West, using Wagner to undermine Western ideas of democracy and turn countries back to Moscow. An illustration of this phenomenon is the situation in which many African countries have reluctantly joined the Western condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When the UN voted on a resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine, 17 of the 35 countries that abstained – almost a half – represented the African continent (Petesch & Imray, 2022a). Some have distanced themselves because of persistent Cold War sympathies, but many others have distanced themselves because of frustration with what they see as a Western disregard for Africa. Lavrov praised what he called the “independent path” taken by African countries, refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia and “undisguised attempts by the US and its European satellites to gain the upper hand and impose a unipolar world order” (Burke, 2022a).

The erection of the Monument in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic, in 2021 says much about the attitude of local authorities. It depicts Russian soldiers standing side by side to protect a woman and her children. Russia is portrayed as the country’s saviour. Moreover, pro-Russian marches supporting the war in Ukraine and criticising its former security partner, France, are not unusual in this world region (Marten, 2019b, p. 5). Such support from African countries is Russia’s strategic success.

In West Africa, Russia takes advantage of a rising tide of anti-French sentiment in countries such as Mali, where the arrival of Wagner operators led to the departure of French soldiers and diplomats this year. A military coup in Burkina Faso was greeted by demonstrators waving Russian flags. While in Cameroon, officials signed a defence agreement with Russia in April 2022, opening up opportunities for deploying Russian mercenaries (Abdallatif, 2022).

It is worth looking at Russia’s strategic goals in Africa to better understand how Moscow uses Wagner. Russia’s main goal on this continent is to gain influence in the strategic territory along the southern coast of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. It includes establishing access to seaports and airports. Such infrastructure allows Russia to flow military, intelligence, and mercenary forces, materials and illegal gains, and increase its influence over the regime’s host. If Russia established a naval presence in the region, it could monitor and disrupt global maritime transport (including Western maritime traffic) through the isthmuses of the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait between Yemen and Djibouti. It is worth noting that more than 30% of global container traffic is based on these corridors. Therefore, the geopolitical benefits of such a presence are large (Mackinnon, 2020).

Another strategic goal of Russia in Africa is to displace Western influence. Such conduct strengthens Russia's position as a great power whose interests must be considered in every region of the world. This goal has become more important in connection with Russia's further invasion of Ukraine, as Moscow seeks to avoid international isolation and demonstrate that it remains a significant player on the international stage.

Russia's imperial projects go far beyond Ukraine and Europe. In the Middle East, Russia seeks to destabilise arms sales, deploy paramilitary groups and sectarian conflicts, and establish permanent military bases. In this case, Syria deserves special attention when considering what to do next in Ukraine. Russia, along with Iran and Hezbollah, supported the Syrian dictator by using air force, militias, and many weapons and methods to oppress, terrorise, and massacre Syrians. In 2015, Putin intervened on Assad's side in the country's civil war. In Syria, the paramilitary group protected Russian and Syrian military facilities and participated in some fights, such as Assad's campaign to retake the city of Palmyra.

Wagner's forces were there also part of the deadliest US–Russian confrontation since the 2018 Cold War, when US troops and their allies near Syria's Deir al-Zour responded to an attack by fighters loyal to Assad with a counterattack that killed about 100 people, including Russian mercenaries (Berger, 2022).

The Syrian venture put Russia in the strongest position in the Middle East since the Cold War and allowed Russia to test hundreds of new weapons. Russia has negotiated a 49-year "lease" of the Latakia air base, where it deploys highly advanced aircraft and surface-to-air missiles that potentially threaten Turkey, Israel, Jordan, and NATO operations. Moreover, the Kremlin has positioned itself as a "peace broker" in the Syrian conflict (Pierce, 2022). One can argue that Syria and Ukraine are Russian testing grounds for the West's involvement in defending democratic values, protecting innocents from Russian hostility, and reacting rapidly to crimes against humanity.

Conclusions

The Wagner Group's presence in the conflict in Ukraine is not surprising. For years, Ukraine has accused a private military organisation of involvement in the fighting in Luhansk and Donetsk. An important moment in the existence of the Wagner Group was the seizure of Crimea in 2014, accompanied by clandestine military aid provided by the authorities in the Kremlin for separatists in the Donbas. Russian soldiers in uniforms without insignia – called "little green men" appeared in a double role, i.e., as auxiliary forces and private contractors. They prepared the ground for the Kremlin's quick and effective takeover of power by controlling critical infrastructure and killing separatist leaders who did not want to submit to Moscow's control.

The Wagner Group has a bloody reputation. The EU has accused it of executions, torture, looting, intimidating civilians, and general destabilising activities in Libya, Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mozambique, and, most recently, Ukraine.

Russia strengthens and rebuilds itself as a global power on different terms and by different means than during the Cold War. The first instrument it uses in this endeavour is PMCs. Putin's Russia, with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov as frontmen, has created the most lucrative military services export industry in recent years. Groups of Russian mercenaries have become cheap tools for restoring Russia's status as a superpower. Hence, it is understandable that they are often used to save costs, avoid military casualties of conscripts, and for reasons of credible denial. In this way, they have become a tool for Russia to conduct policy on an international scale.

The analysis shows how the Wagner Group, as a non-state entity, uses elements of hybrid warfare to gain a relative advantage over adversaries with better resources. As can be seen, these initiatives include: disinformation campaigns, including propaganda initiatives, money laundering and creating front companies/fake NGOs to support malicious activities in kinetic and digital spaces, the use of piracy, kidnapping for ransom, cybercrime and other forms of transnational organised crime to raise funds for illegal operations, and the propagation of one's own ideology online to recruit new members. Policymakers should find this study useful because it can warn them against the challenges they face in trying to understand "Russian" military action abroad.

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