

## Strategic priorities for the Russian PMC WAGNER: geopolitics, propaganda and mercenary business

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*The activities of a Private Military Company (PMC) traditionally involve 3 other parties: the Contracting State (which enters into a contract with the PMC and defines the mission), the Territorial State (where the PMC will operate) and the Home State (which has the PMC headquarters under its jurisdiction). While Western Contracting States generally recognise the [Montreux Document](#) (which reaffirms the international legal obligations of States) and Western PMCs observe the self-regulatory ‘[International Code of Conduct](#)’ (which serves as the governance and oversight mechanism), Russian PMCs operate in absence of any regulatory provision or national legal framework. De facto, this means that Russian PMCs determine their own ends, ways and means, which do not necessarily coincide with the strategic priorities of the Kremlin or any other contracting party.*

A case in point is the strategic use that the Kremlin has made of the Wagner group since 2014 in Ukraine, mostly in synergy with the Russian Federation Armed Forces; until its leader - Yevgeny Prigozhin - started pursuing his own stratagems. Over the years, the business model of the Wagner group has taken a global dimension and has become versatile and adaptive to the circumstances. As will be analysed in the second section, the result is that its strategic priorities might significantly diverge from those of its patron, be it the Kremlin or customers abroad. In the first case, this loss of control inevitably increases tensions with the military and even sparked the emergence of new players in the Russian security ecosystem. For African

regimes, loss of control of their natural resources and recurring violations of human rights by Wagner mercenaries is often the outcome. For good measure, though, the future of the Wagner group and its high-profile leader will largely depend on the success of the counter-strategies developed by Western governments and the outcome of the special military operation in Ukraine, as will be argued in the last section.

### **1. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR THE WAGNER GROUP: POWER - INFLUENCE - RESOURCES**

What is Putin’s strategy for the use of Russian Private Military Companies, if any? Western intelligence experts and even Russian analysts assert that Putin is known to keep his cards very close to his chest on all strategic matters, even for his closest circle trying to read his mind<sup>1</sup>. Hence, the short answer is that we can merely speculate on his objectives, priorities and intentions regarding the part that Russian PMCs play in the Kremlin’s overall Grand Strategy. But what we do know is that senior leadership of the Presidential Administration, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Protective Service (FSO), the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and the Ministry of Defence were engaged in intensive negotiations with Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin on the operationalisation of the PMC WAGNER Group and their first appearance as little green men in Ukraine.

Since 2014, the Wagner group and the conglomerate it is a part of – Concord Management and Consulting – have been catering for much more than food and logistics for the Russian Federation Armed Forces.

Even though Russian law to date does not provide a legislative frame for PMCs, both military and civilian leaders have been implying that they were needed for “delicate missions abroad”<sup>2</sup> or that they could provide “protection of important facilities, as well as training for foreign military personnel abroad”. In 2018, Putin even justified<sup>3</sup> the activities of Russian PMCs, saying “they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world”.

Prigozhin’s business network of vaguely linked entities<sup>4</sup> was sanctioned by the [United States](#)<sup>5</sup>, the [EU](#)<sup>6</sup>, and the [UK](#). The US State Department went so far as to incriminate Prigozhin - and by association the Kremlin - publicly in May 2022 in a statement: “*Although Russian officials systematically refute linkages to the Wagner Group, the Russian government is well aware of or has used the Wagner Group and other Prigozhin-owned entities as proxies to disperse disinformation and carry out covert, armed operations abroad, including in Mali<sup>7</sup>, the Central African Republic, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine.*” The widespread geopolitical diversification gambit exposed by these allegations provides revealing clues to analyse the strategic uses that the Kremlin and its executive agencies see in PMCs such as the Wagner group:

- acting in close coordination with the official Russian Federation Armed Forces, they can provide expeditionary firepower and logistics as and where required; can operate extra-judicially without regard for human rights or the laws of war; and need not be tallied in the official statistics;
- acting as subcontractors for the FSB, GRU, or other state organs, they can provide the Kremlin with intelligence collection, occult strategic influence and political engineering<sup>8</sup>;
- acting as ‘private contractors’, they can secure (by any means, legal or other) financial or material resources that the Russian Federation would otherwise not be able or willing (to be seen) to procure, such as natural resources or sanctioned weapon systems.

It should be noted that the strategic priorities of the Russian political and military leadership may gradually diverge from those of the PMCs involved, most markedly Prigozhin’s priorities for the Wagner Group. While vague references to contractual arrangements with lower levels of command have been documented<sup>9</sup>, the opaque nature of decision-making processes at the higher levels of the Russian government makes it very difficult to establish who is in effect tasking, funding and controlling the actions of Russian PMCs. It is safe to assume however, that Prigozhin – while technically acting as a ‘private’ person and NOT as a protagonist of official state affairs<sup>10</sup> – is allowed an unsettled degree of liberty as long as his actions broadly align with the interests of the Russian state. That said, for the Kremlin and its agents, the order of priority is clearly geared towards furthering its **power** in the first place, followed by **influence** with access to **resources** in the background. The ways in which these priorities are pursued by their proxies will be explained in the next section.

## 2. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF THE WAGNER GROUP: RESOURCES - POWER - INFLUENCE

The business model of the Wagner group operating abroad is most efficiently aimed at quick financial gains, sometimes under the form of ‘contributions-in-kind’, such as diamonds, gold or oil. The modus operandi has essentially been applied across the African continent and the Middle East, often the locus of unstable regimes in need of protection against foreign or domestic opponents. And even when the main effort is pitched towards expanding Russian power projection and influence, Prigozhin always seems to find a way to **maximise profit** from Wagner’s engagement in poor or underdeveloped countries, as the following analysis shows:

- in the Central African Republic (CAR), since arriving in 2017 – supposedly to defend the government against rebels – the Wagner Group tried to establish control over the flow of gold and diamonds, to which the group was initially promised concessions instead of cash payments for its services;
- in MALI, according to the head of the US Africa

Command<sup>11</sup>, the Malian transitional government was paying Wagner \$10 million a month, most probably by trading gold and gemstones for lack of hard cash;

- in MOZAMBIQUE, Wagner stepped in to support President Nyusi after he met President Putin in 2019 and offered rich gas fields as collateral<sup>12</sup>;
- in MADAGASCAR, the sitting president called in the Russians “to resist attempts by international institutions to interfere” in the 2019 elections, but eventually Prigozhin switched candidates and was able to keep control (until this day) of chromium mining operations when President Rajoelina took office<sup>13</sup>;
- in SUDAN, 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<sup>14</sup>. The fact that these concessions were simply carried over to Lt Gen. Hamdan, the military commander who took the reins from al-Bashir, provided continuity in a stream of revenue leading to an appreciable boost to the Kremlin’s \$130Bn gold reserves<sup>15</sup>;
- in SYRIA, Wagner is engaged in seizing oil and gas fields and protecting them on behalf of the Assad regime. The mercenaries reportedly earned a share of the production proceeds from the oil fields they reclaim;
- in LIBYA, according to the analysis of the Carnegie Endowment<sup>16</sup>, the Kremlin has pursued different lines of effort in Libya’s civil war, some at cross-purposes. Arguably, though, in so doing it has kept all options open: maintaining its engagement with the UN-recognized GNA<sup>17</sup>, backing Haftar’s LNA with support from the Wagner group and grooming the late Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam as a potential contender to run the country;
- in VENEZUELA, lethal support was provided by Wagner proxy soldiers to protect President Maduro from his own army. The activities of the Wagner group later expanded to protecting illegal gold mining operations of the Maduro regime<sup>18</sup>.

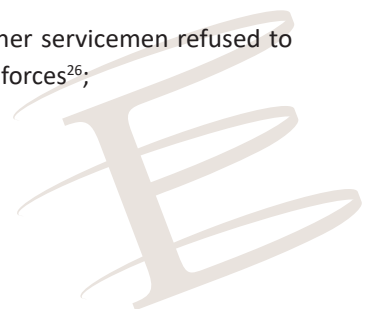
In other circumstances, though, sources of funding for the involvement of one of Prigozhin’s companies appear to be unclear, but strictly in line with the interests of the Kremlin (or any oligarch acting on its behalf) and aimed at **influence peddling and political engineering**:

- in BELARUS, according to the official version of the Belarusian KGB<sup>19</sup>, a Wagner group contingent of 200 mercenaries was dispatched to Minsk in July 2020 to destabilise the political situation before the presidential elections in August 2020;
- in the UNITED STATES, the Internet Research Agency, a Prigozhin-led troll farm which is ‘state-linked’ to Wagner<sup>20</sup>, was indicted by Special Prosecutor Mueller’s investigation<sup>21</sup> for malicious interference in the run-up to the 2016 election through the identity theft of American citizens<sup>22</sup>;
- in UKRAINE, the intimidation of voters for sham referenda<sup>23</sup> in the South-Eastern provinces of Ukraine provided a clear example of electoral meddling under the guise of ‘balloting protection’.

Arguably though, the main motive for Wagner’s presence in Ukraine is **power projection** in conjunction with the official Russian army. During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, ‘little green men’ operating alongside the official Russian Federation Armed Forces were ubiquitous. In the run-up to the ‘special military operation’ of 2022, however, a more covert approach was adopted for the so-called ‘false flag’ operations<sup>24</sup> involving Wagner mercenaries in the Donbass region. Apparently set up to give Russia a pretext for attacking eastern Ukraine, suspect car explosions<sup>25</sup> were used by leaders of the Donetsk People’s Republic to entice local residents to take up arms to protect their families.

Wagner units are considered by all actors 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<sup>26</sup>;



- provided artillery support for Wagner Infantry operations<sup>27</sup>; or
- served as ‘operational reserve’ for an eventual breakthrough of Ukrainian lines<sup>28</sup>.

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 remove President Zelensky and his government from power and prepare the ground for Moscow to take control.

During the ‘special military operation’, no less than three separate Wagner Battle Groups made significant contributions to capturing terrain after the retreat of the Ukrainian army to avoid encirclement. But as the events and the tensions with the Russian military hierarchy on the seizure of the area around Soledar showed, Prigozhin rarely let his primary strategic objective out of sight as he manoeuvred Wagner to take control of salt and gypsum from mines near the city of Bakhmut.

Witness to Wagner’s third strategic objective of countering political goodwill for Western governments while **expanding Russian influence** is the creation of so-called ‘Russia houses’ in the wake of Wagner’s military assistance. Le Monde characterised it as follows<sup>29</sup>: *“the group is known for its opportunistic approach and closely follows the interests of Russian diplomacy.”* As an example of synergistic strategies between Russian diplomatic efforts and military assistance, Russian support for *“increased regional integration, built on democratic principles, equitable and sustainable development [...] as well as peace and security”* (all stated objectives<sup>30</sup> of the Southern African Development Community) were revealed in July 2018, when a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the SADC and the Russian government. The agreement set the stage for support in the field of Military-Technical Cooperation, a perfect substrate for the meddling of Wagner-like PMCs.

Despite Wagner’s dreadful track record with respect to all facets of human security, its strategies to build a sphere of positive influence seem to be working quite

well in countries with weak governance and a lingering perception of Western neo-colonialism.

A striking tally of their effect was revealed in a recent poll conducted by The Economist<sup>31</sup> among the Malian population. Public opinion designated Russia with more than 75% as *“the most reliable security partner to fight against terrorism”* in their country, while France, the US, the UK and China were credited for only slices of the remaining quarter. Wider polling of public opinions across Africa revealed a similarly beneficial impact of Russian propaganda.

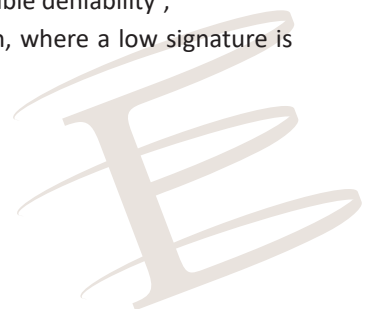
This obviously proves the point that Russia adroitly derives significant positive influence and political goodwill from their purported investments in ‘local security’, notwithstanding the dire reputation of the Wagner group. It can even be argued that the perception of African leaders has ostensibly been skewed far beyond political opinion on local security, resulting in meaningful abstentions in the UN vote to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

### 3. DERIVING STRATEGIC PRIORITIES TO COUNTER THE WAGNER GROUP

Essential for the development of strategic priorities to counter the WAGNER Group are the structural elements that can be derived along the three previously identified main axes, i.e. power projection, propaganda and resource exploitation. Thorough documentation, evidence gathering and exhaustive analysis of their strategic and operational use are key to the ability of Governmental and International organisations (including the military) as well as NGOs, to understand and effectively counter PMCs.

Along those lines, the operational use of Wagner-like PMCs for **power projection** can be broken down as follows:

- covert ‘false flag’ operations to gain the initiative while retaining ‘plausible deniability’;
- intelligence collection, where a low signature is essential;



- projection of ‘storm troops’, i.e. expandible infantry to provide a breakthrough where a stalemate on the battlefield occurs, while avoiding public accountability inherent to soldiers wounded or killed-in-action;
- provision of ‘military-technical assistance and capacity building’ in areas where weak governance fails to ensure democratic control of indigenous armed forces;
- armed protection for failing regimes;
- discrete (and deniable) removal of opposing military or civilian leadership.

**Political engineering and the wielding of soft power** obviously require a more subtle set of strategies, but Prigozhin’s ‘influencers’ have developed them along the following lines:

- targeting of social media platforms with incendiary messages to stoke discord on issues around social unrest, religion, race and other hot political topics;
- intimidation through armed presence at polling, registration and electoral stations;
- deployment of Wagner operatives ahead of an election, under the guise of media managers, lawyers, translators and a ‘counterpropaganda technologist’<sup>32</sup>;
- opening of ‘friendship and cooperation centres’ (a.k.a. Russia Houses) with the mission to focus on public diplomacy; to strengthen and develop friendly relations with Russia through ‘soft power’; to provide informational confrontation with anti-Russian liberals who are working against Moscow; (for an example, see the Wagner statement on the Russia House in Serbia<sup>33</sup>)
- facilitation of future diplomatic relationships and proactively spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation incriminating Western governments, NGOs and companies.

Prigozhin’s **business strategy**, on the other hand, is rather straightforward: maximise profit in return for martial services. And in the case the customer cannot readily provide cash, arrangements for guaranteed access to

natural resources, including precious or rare earths, are on offer.

In sum, through a truly globalised business venture, 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, shoring up the cash-strapped Russian kleptocracy in the process.

Yet, notwithstanding this apparent win-win arrangement, the question of the prospects for Prigozhin’s personal and corporate future has become relevant in light of the dire situation Russia finds itself in, most notably in Ukraine, and the friction he seems to have raised both with the Defence and Foreign Affairs Ministries. Several options are possible at this juncture, with – arguably - the following seen to be most pertinent:

- Wagner is key to attaining Putin’s objectives in Ukraine, proves itself to be an indispensable complement to Russia’s official army and can expand its activities;
- the Russian military hierarchy side-lines Wagner on the Ukrainian stage (e.g. by constraining its access to munitions and recruiting of convicts), relegating it to its profitable operations abroad, thus losing much of its relevance relating to military battle-hardened power projection;
- a political standoff takes shape, where Putin loses confidence in Prigozhin’s efficiency or loyalty or both.

Manifestly, the entente cordiale between Prigozhin and Putin allows the Wagner Group to auto-finance itself from the spoils it gathers abroad, as evidenced by the new glass-fronted ‘technical centre and administrative headquarters’ in the suburbs of St Petersburg. And one can’t help but notice the difference between the sprawling business opportunities offered to Prigozhin and the unfortunate fatal injuries or terminal illnesses that befall rancorous oligarchs.



It is clear, however, that Prigozhin is walking on a tightrope with his selective - but very public - critique of Russian General officers, including the Defence Minister Shoigu, as evidenced by the tensions around the capture of the Soledar area and the ensuing shuffles in the command chain involving Generals Surovikin and Gerasimov. Prigozhin's statements that "*Wagner is the only effective part of the Russian military*" combined with his repeated allegations of incompetence and ineffectiveness of the official Russian army are sure to backfire with the rank and file. A precursor sign of the frustration around the loss of strategic control of the Wagner group was the sudden emergence of a new 'security entity' created by a subsidiary of the state-owned Gazprom following a decree signed by the Russian Prime Minister on 4 Feb 2023.

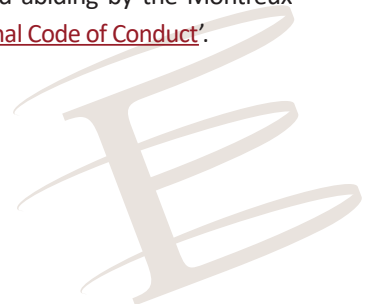
Even so, as long as Putin sees the Wagner Group as a way to avoid any form of accountability to the Duma (supposedly representing the Russian people) for the heavy losses of his official army, it is likely that Prigozhin will be given a free hand at a strictly 'tactical level'. And while the Kremlin's dark hand comes with a most welcomed amount of 'plausible deniability' on the international and diplomatic front, this does not imply that the decision-making process for Wagner's actions is coordinated at the strategic level with the Kremlin. Nevertheless, through a symbiotic relationship with the lower levels of command, the Wagner leadership has built ties with rogue regimes and as - showcased by the Iranian connection<sup>34</sup> - it can act as a conduit for acquiring modern technology, such as long-range drones while circumnavigating Western sanctions.

Given that some have started asking the question, however, whether the boss of the Wagner group could potentially replace Putin<sup>35</sup>, Prigozhin might be well advised to read up on the Icarus syndrome in Greek mythology and align his strategic priorities more closely with those of Russian political and military leadership.

As to the corporate future of the Wagner group, strategic priorities for a **counter-strategy** against Wagner-like PMCs should:

- seek to establish and enforce well-coordinated international sanctions to counter the flow of financial and natural resources to corporate entities and indirectly to the Russian state;
- develop tailored tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) to counter the asymmetric power projection challenges posed by Wagner-like PMCs;
- block the procurement of sophisticated weapons systems for direct use by Wagner or redirected to other Russian entities, thus circumventing targeted sanctions;
- disseminate promptly corroborated intelligence concerning false-flag and covert operations, while protecting their source;
- support local as well as international legal action against illegal extortion practices and violations of International Humanitarian Law;
- document and curtail Wagner's efforts at political engineering and electoral meddling by systematically developing a counter-narrative in governmental, academic and diplomatic circles.

As long as the motive for undemocratic regimes to hire Russian PMCs is "*to resist attempts by international institutions to interfere*", governmental and non-governmental organisations of Western lineage as well as international organisations will undoubtedly face an uphill battle to present alternatives to 'security support' offered by other autocratic chieftains. But the fact that Russian propaganda can hold sway with public opinion in so many societies across the globe should (re-) invigorate the same organisations to earn goodwill in the pursuit of Western values, such as good governance, durable economic development and the provision of human security, especially in the regions where Wagner has operated as of late. As evidenced by the examples of Russian power projection mentioned above, it can be argued that Wagner has merely filled the void left by the retreat of Western GOs and the UN (most recently, the French from Mali). But if one accepts the conclusion that Western non-interventionism has run its course versus Russian interventionism by proxy, the only viable recourse would involve private actors funded by Western governments and abiding by the Montreux document and the 'International Code of Conduct'.



While the versatile portfolio of the Wagner group makes a one-fits-all-solution impracticable, both the EU<sup>36</sup> and the US<sup>37</sup> have most certainly made considerable headway in countering the stratagems of Wagner by treating the group and the corporation it is a part of as a terrorist entity. Given the track record of the Wagner Group in a vast number of countries, geographically spread across several continents and the meddling faculty it provides over ungoverned spaces and regimes struggling for survival, the task at hand is, however, truly daunting.

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## Endnotes

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The EU Parliament subsequently called on the Council to include the Russian paramilitary organisation ‘the Wagner Group’ and other Russian-funded as well as Chechnyan armed groups, militias and proxies, on the [EU’s terrorist list](#)
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