

WAGNER GROUP UNCHAINED IN UKRAINE

Military, political and human rights impact of the Wagner Group
since the large-scale invasion in 2022

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Shock Monitor is created to document and study the evolution of Private War and its world-wide impact on human rights. Through the documentation, systematisation and analysis of incidents involving PMSCs and private contractors, it studies not only the development of the industry but also the incidents and related legal cases, perpetrator accountability and remedy for the victims.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- › The use of Wagner Group in Ukraine, but also worldwide, enabled Putin and his entourage to project their power, grow their geopolitical relationships and obtain valuable assets such as Crimea. The strategic use of these grey-zone forces delivered key political and military dividends to the Kremlin, despite the huge losses Wagner faced in Ukraine.
- › In Ukraine, Wagner Group conducted combat operations, engaged in intelligence activities and gave training and advisory support to Russian regular forces using highly advanced equipment and military machinery. Because of their cruel and aggressive tactics, Wagner Group showed more effectiveness on the battlefield than the Russian regular army, especially when using convicts as 'cannon fodder'.
- › Wagner's predatory recruitment strategy was intertwined with its communication strategy to attract patriotic volunteers through a subculture based on a celebration of death and crime, values of social conservatism and orthodox beliefs, and nationalist and supremacist claims. Wagner's brand was part of the ultra-nationalist ideological movement promoted by the new media elite in Russia.
- › Wagner's symbolic victories and military tactics on the battlefield, and the ultra-nationalist messages, intended to increase public support for the war in Ukraine. This in a context of general apathy and confusion about the objectives of the so-called 'Special Operation' which has led to thousands of Russians fleeing Russia since the beginning of the large-scale invasion.
- › The military and media power of Prigozhin translated into political power and ambitions, resulting in direct threats to Russia's domestic political stability. In the first instance, the Prigozhin-Shoigu conflict was beneficial to Putin, but Wagner's posterior mutiny weakened the authority and legitimacy of Putin at home and overseas, demonstrating the challenges of strengthening power via the agency of proxy actors.
- › The potential disappearance of Wagner Group will not prevent the use of other proxies in the war in Ukraine and the proliferation of the Russian PMSC industry. However, this evolution may entail more control from the Kremlin.
- › Wagner contributed to the severity of the situation in Ukraine by increasing deadliness, escalating conflict and causing a fragmentation of non-state armed actors. Evidence demonstrates the responsibility of Wagner's operatives in war crimes in Ukraine. However, difficulties to distinguish them from Russian regular forces, and the lack of specific legal mechanisms to regulate PMSCs, may hinder their prosecution and accountability.

Recommendations to international organisms, national governments and human rights NGOs:

- 1.** To strengthen national regulatory frameworks to control PMSCs including robust licensing, oversight and redress mechanisms.
- 2.** To create a comprehensive international legally binding instrument to regulate PMSC activity.
- 3.** To designate Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation and armed group funded by the Russian Federation.
- 4.** To advance international criminal prosecutions, applying universal jurisdiction principles.
- 5.** To enhance monitoring and specific reporting mechanisms on PMSC activity and its impact on human rights, raising awareness among the general public and within conflict-affected communities, especially those related to women and children's human rights violations.
- 6.** To engage in advocacy actions to promote national and international regulations to control PMSCs.



I. INTRODUCTION



Private Military and Security Companies (PMSC) are again in the spotlight, which proves that the modern phenomenon of the privatisation of warfare, far from being controlled, is more alive and unleashed than ever before. In 2007 the massacre of Nisour Square drew international attention to the activities of the US PMSC Blackwater during the invasion of Iraq.¹ Seven years later, private contractors from Wagner Group supported the Russian special forces in invading Ukraine and seizing the territory of Crimea. As the conflict in Ukraine escalated, Wagner Group increased their military activities, capabilities and operatives with symbolic victories in Soledar and Bakhmut, but also their involvement in cases of war crimes.

Russian PMSCs have evolved during the 21st century to become one of the most fundamental instruments of the Russian hybrid warfare strategy. Russia has created a military instrument to engage in armed conflicts and fragile states with the capacity for plausible deniability. The number of countries where Russian PMSCs operated around the globe increased from 4 countries in 2015 to 27 in 2021.² Besides that, Russian PMSCs have been known to operate in the grey zone of national and international law, technically lying outside the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, but with links to political elites and oligarchs.

Unlike modern western PMSCs, Wagner Group born as a clandestine entity under the subordination of the Kremlin that has been a strategic tool for Putin and his entourage to project their power and defend their interests abroad, externalising the burden of warfare and lowering escalatory risks. The large-scale invasion of Ukraine was a turning point for the privatisation of warfare in general and the role of Wagner Group in particular. The atrocities committed by Wagner in Ukraine, its capacity to promote the culture of war through a sophisticated political and ideological communication strategy, its predatory recruitment strategy including convicts and its military power to stand up against the Kremlin, crystallise the potential threats that modern PMSCs pose to the defence of human rights and justice, the prevention of armed conflicts and the democratisation of the international system.

RESEARCH'S OBJECTIVES

The main goal of this research is to analyse the role of Wagner Group and its impact on conflict severity and the human rights situation during the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in the period between February 2022 and June 2023. With this purpose, the research team has attempted to answer the following key questions: 1) How did the military tactics, procedures and governance structure of Wagner Group exacerbate conflict severity in

1 On September 16, 2007 a convoy of Blackwater opened fire on unarmed civilians in Nisour Square in Baghdad (Iraq) killing 17 people and injuring 20 more. In 2014 a US court convicted four Blackwater personnel for these murders.

2 Jones, S. G., Doxsee, C., Katz, B., McQueen, E., & Moye, J. (2021). Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies. [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies). <http://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.

Ukraine?; 2) Which causes explain the increasing role of Wagner during the research period, including major challenges for the parties in conflict?; 3) what is Wagner's human rights impact and which factors have contributed to the impunity of these abuses?

Accordingly, the report is structured in three main chapters, each one analysing the Wagner Group from a different perspective. The first chapter examines Wagner's military tactics in the battlefield as well as other aspects related to its structure, recruitment and training processes, amongst others. The second chapter identifies five major factors that may explain the increased use of Wagner by the Kremlin. This analysis focuses on internal political dynamics in Russia in relation to the phenomenon of the privatisation of warfare and the influence of Wagner in domestic politics. The third chapter maps the most severe human rights abuses, factors that contribute to conflict severity and these abuses, and legal mechanisms to make these corporate bodies accountable. The report ends with a conclusion section which includes key recommendations for international organisations, national public authorities and the civil society sector.

METHODOLOGY

The research has undertaken a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to the privatisation of warfare in Russia and the Wagner Group, including monitoring of social media and traditional mass media in Ukraine, Russia and globally. Additionally, in April 2023 the research team conducted a fieldwork in Ukraine and interviewed key representatives of public institutions, military experts and high ranking soldiers, academics, political experts, representatives of human rights organisations, journalists, and civilians affected directly or indirectly by Wagner's activities in the country. The qualitative data has been systematised in secure databases to maintain the testimonies and some key informants under anonymity. Moreover, the findings and recommendations provided in this document have been analysed by the Shock Monitor research team, a group with more than 13 years of experience in the domain of the privatisation of warfare. First, analysing the impact of PMSCs in the armed conflict theatres in Iraq, Afghanistan, Occupied Palestine, Colombia, among others. Second, translating these findings into specific policy proposals trying to control this phenomenon and prevent the human rights impact of the PMSC industry³.

3 Shock Monitor is an initiative empowered by Novact Institute. The observatory analyses the evolution of the PMSC industry, the type of impact it has on human rights, and the clients that hire the services of these armed groups. More information can be accessed through this link: <http://shockmonitor.org>. Moreover, specific publications about the privatisation of warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan and other armed contexts can be found here: <http://shockmonitor.org/our-work>

II. THE EVOLUTION OF PRIVATISATION OF WARFARE IN UKRAINE SINCE 2014



During the Cold War, the logic of nuclear deterrence forced the United States and the Soviet Union to explore other ‘unconventional warfare’ strategies to project their power, while lowering escalatory risks. Covert operations and the use of proxies in armed conflicts were commonly used by these superpowers to influence the political agendas of other states and to undermine the power of their main adversaries.⁴ With the end of the Cold War, the military and defence structures created by the US and the Soviet Union became useless, which generated a large military surplus, both in terms of weaponry and manpower. Military surpluses were regrouped and managed by the military-industrial complex, leading to the creation of Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) in the globalised and neoliberal international context.⁵ According to Candence Rondeaux: “Russia’s PMSCs are products of post-Soviet privatisation of Russia’s military-industrial complex and reconsolidation of the security state under Putin. Their structures reflect the culture and hierarchy of Russian security services but also have been shaped by the country’s disjointed phases of military modernization.”⁶

War by proxy is a fundamental aspect of the hybrid warfare strategy of Russia. Over the past decade, Russia has leaned heavily on PMSCs as an effective and low cost foreign policy

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tool.⁷ Technically illegal according to Russian criminal law,⁸ PMSCs in Russia are depending on the state’s interest in their continued operation as they rely on the Russian state’s willingness to protect them. This logic of ambiguity regarding their legal status makes the Russian state not only tolerate their existence but, in many cases, actively instrumentalize PMSCs as proxy actors in covert operations.⁹ Russian PMSCs, such as Moran Group, Slavonic

Corps, Vegacy Strategic Services, MAR, E.N.O.T and the Wagner Group are intimately connected with Putin and his entourage to achieve their political and economic objectives

4 Johnson, L., & Daugherty, W. (2010). The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence 37 Covert Action: Strengths and Weaknesses: 610.

5 Torroja, H. (2017), Public International Law and Human Rights Violations by Private Military and Security Companies. Springer. Switzerland.

6 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Decoding the Wagner Group: Analysing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare.

7 Doxsee, C. (September 15, 2022). Putin’s Proxies: Examining Russia’s Use of Private Military Companies. [www.csis.org. https://www.csis.org/analysis/putins-proxies-examining-russias-use-private-military-companies](https://www.csis.org/analysis/putins-proxies-examining-russias-use-private-military-companies).

8 PMSCs are technically illegal under Article 359 of the 1996 Russian Criminal Code, which states: “Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of four to eight years”.

9 Center for Strategic and International Studies. (September 21, 2020). Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State | The Post-Soviet Post | CSIS. [www.csis.org. http://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state](http://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state).

overseas.¹⁰ Thus, Russian PMSCs are a growing feature of the Kremlin's military and foreign policy principles and have become agents of a Russian proxy warfare strategy.¹¹

Russian PMSCs have developed their own characteristics and services according to their main clients. A PMSC can be defined in three distinct ways:

- A regular private military and security company comparable to those existing in many other countries, open to selling their services to any state or non-state client, without having clear preferences for any specific type of contractor.
- A private military and security company that has adopted the Russian state and its subordinates as their only client.
- Structures created clandestinely by the Russian Federation and whose activities would be permanently subordinated to the command-and-control system of some Russian state agency (Ministry of Defence, intelligence services, etc.). These companies operate *de facto* as semi-state enterprises.

The Wagner Group should be considered in the third category because it shared an exclusive and unique relation with the Russian state. It could operate independently in conflict situations, as occurred in Africa but could also operate, if required, alongside the Russian armed forces as was happening in the Ukraine. In this situation, The Wagner group was highly dependent on the state for logistic and operational support. Moreover, due to the nature of their work and the lack of international binding instruments, PMSCs, and specifically Wagner Group, have been involved in severe human rights violations and breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in the war in Ukraine.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WAGNER GROUP

Wagner Group has become the most prominent PMSC in the Russian hybrid warfare strategy. The Wagner Group first became publicly visible during Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the war in eastern Ukraine. Between February and March of 2014, the so-called 'little green men' seized the territory and the government of Crimea, in parallel nonviolent anti-Maidan protests emerged in different locations in eastern Ukraine which rapidly evolved into the formation of armed separatist groups. Moreover, along the border of Ukraine, Russia installed military bases to supply weapons and military equipment to the separatist groups.¹² Private contractors from Wagner Group were deployed in both regions to support the Russian special forces and the so-called 'separatist' groups to achieve their military objectives. Throughout the

10 Katz, B., Jones, S. G., Doxsee, C., & Harrington, N. (2020, September). Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies. <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.

11 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Decoding the Wagner Group. Op. Cit.

12 Czuperski, M., Herbst, J., Higgins, E., Polyakova, A., & Wilson, D. (2015). Putin's War in Ukraine Hiding in Plain Sight. Atlantic Council.

campaigns in Ukraine in 2014, first Crimea and then Donbas, Moscow denied involvement of their regular army in the invasion of a sovereign state and employed proxies to obviate the stigma and the political consequences as well as the liability under international law attached

In 2014, Moscow denied involvement of their regular army in the invasion of a sovereign state as Ukraine and employed proxies to obviate the stigma and the political consequences, as well as the liability under international law attached to a conventional armed invasion.

to a conventional armed invasion. According to key informants, Wagner Group was born as something secret and completely confidential.¹³

Economic profit is a major driver of Wagner Group's operations worldwide. According to some authors, Wagner did not originate as a state-established force but rather as a commercial enterprise initiated by ultra-nationalists who were determined to engage in combat operations¹⁴. During this process, these non-state armed actors came to the realisation that Putin and his entourage were willing to financially support proxy agents to influence other political actors and/or protect economic interests abroad. The Wagner Group stands out because of the detailed reporting available about their involvement in so many significant

events for Russian geopolitics: Ukraine, Nigeria, Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, Mali, Venezuela, and Madagascar.¹⁵ These activities have been extremely profitable for Wagner Group. Some reports state that the Russian PMSC has generated \$250 million through an economic structure which includes oil, gas and mining companies.¹⁶ Throughout these international operations, Wagner Group's operatives gained significant military experience. Furthermore, other historic Russian PMSCs such as Moran Security Group and Slavonic Corps, with activities registered in Syria before 2014, provided private contractors to Wagner Group to intervene in Crimea and Donbas.¹⁷ The idea of a group of military experienced personnel with prior combat experience appeared to be the perfect solution for Putin's plans in Ukraine¹⁸.

13 Ukrainian Soldier (April 01, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

14 Written evidence submitted by Professor Galeotti, Mark. May 2022, committees.parliament.uk/written-evidence/108294/pdf

15 Kimberly, Marten (2019) Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142

16 The Financial Times. (February 21, 2023). Wagner leader generated \$250mn from sanctioned empire. [Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/98e478b5-c0d4-48a3-bcf7-e334a4ea0aca](https://www.ft.com/content/98e478b5-c0d4-48a3-bcf7-e334a4ea0aca)

17 Saini, F. (February 8, 2022). Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure. *Brookings*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

18 OSCE. (June 17, 2020) Presentation by the Representative of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine Major General Vadym Skibitskyi on "Private Military Companies and Their Role in Modern Regional Conflicts".

Wagner Group is also considered to have been a Russian state apparatus to project their power overseas. Another accepted idea is that Wagner Group was a product of the Russian Military Intelligence Service (GRU) inner circle, an affirmation that could explain the seemingly close relations between Wagner Group commanders and Russian regular forces on the battlefield¹⁹. During the period from 2014 to 2015, Ukrainian intelligence intercepted several phone conversations between GRU Colonel and Major General Evgeny Nikiforov with Dmitry Utkin, where the latter was reporting on the military developments in Ukraine.²⁰ Dmitry Utkin was the first Wagner Group military leader although some sources claim he was just used as a public face to provide the group with a leader and conceal the relationship between the PMSC and the Kremlin²¹. Utkin was a veteran of both Chechen wars and served in the GRU until 2013. Then, he joined the Russian PMSC Moran Security Group²² and later participated in the failed operation of Slavonic Corps²³ in Syria. These conversations indicated that Utkin was subordinated both to the GRU and to the Russian military command.

During the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Wagner was spotlighted due to its increasing role in the war. On February 23, 2022, one day before Putin announced the start of a “Special Operation” in Ukraine, several messages appeared on the Twitter account of the Reverse Side of The Medal (RSOTM), a communication group linked to Wagner Group, suggesting that this PMSC had been informed in advance about the start of a military intervention and its commanders had been preparing to take part in it²⁴. In a similar vein as in 2014, Wagner Group’s operatives were deployed in Ukraine supporting Russian regular forces. But their engagement in combat operations began in March 2022, especially when the Russian army was unable to achieve their military objectives, and their casualties were increasing in the battles of Kyiv, Chernihiv and Sumy.²⁵ Key informants interviewed during field research af-

19 Eastern Circles. “Wagner as Tool of Russian Geopolitical Strategy: Lessons from Ukraine.” easterncircles.com, easterncircles.com/en-wagner-russian-tool-geopolitical-strategy. Accessed June 3, 2023.

20 Rácz, András. (September 21, 2020) “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State.” www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state. Accessed May 29, 2023.

21 Bellingcat Investigation Team. (August 14, 2020). “*Putin Chef’s Kisses of Death: Russia’s Shadow Army’s State-Run Structure Exposed.*” Bellingcat. www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/. Accessed May 29, 2023.

22 Fontanka. (March 29, 2016) “Они сражались за Пальмиру (фото).” Fontanka.ru - новости Санкт-Петербурга. www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/. Accessed April 30, 2023.

23 Slavonic Corps is a private military set up in Hong Kong in 2013 by two employees of Moran Security Group, a Russian PMSC specialised in vessel protection by providing armed anti-piracy guards and intelligence for Russian oil tankers, port facilities, and off-shore rigs. The only known deployment of Slavonic Corps was in Syria where they ended up losing a battle against Al-Qaeda militants. After that the company was disbanded.

24 The Soufan Center. (April 4, 2022) “Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, and Mercenaries: Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine.” The Soufan Center. <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/foreign-fighters-volunteers-and-mercenaries-non-state-actors-and-narratives-in-ukraine/>. Accessed 04 June, 2023.

25 Ber, Jakub. (April 28, 2023) “*From Popasna to Bakhmut. The Wagner Group in the Russia-Ukraine War.*” OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-04-28/popasna-to-bakhmut-wagner-group-russia-ukraine-war Accessed 05 June, 2023.

firmed that Wagner Group was not a very important protagonist in the first phase of the war, and that they increased their activities, military capacity and perceived legitimacy once the Russian regular army had shown its ineffectiveness.²⁶ In this framework, in September 2022 Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch with close ties to Vladimir Putin, admitted to being the founder of the Wagner Group.²⁷ Prigozhin, also known as *Putin's chef* because he ran a lucrative catering business that served the Kremlin before getting into the private security business, has long been used as a Russian proxy to help Moscow achieve its national security objectives through his various companies²⁸. Prigozhin's connection with the Wagner Group first became public knowledge in 2016, when the investigative journalist Dennis Korotkov exposed it.²⁹ After serving a ten-year sentence for his involvement with organised crime, Prigozhin began a career as a businessman running a hot dog stall in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s. In a few years he managed to create his own chain of restaurants and a network of catering companies that would allow him to amass a fortune, in addition to establishing relations with the Russian political elite. In the early 90's Prigozhin began to make money from his catering companies coinciding with the period in which Vladimir Putin worked in the St. Petersburg City Hall, in charge of licensing commercial establishments.

WAGNER'S COMMAND AND CONTROL STRUCTURE

Despite the public spotlight on Wagner, its governance and military structure is not well documented.³⁰ During our field research, key informants agreed that Wagner was a very hierarchical organisation, with a central command structure and several units.³¹ In the framework of the National Command Center for the Defense of Russia in the war in Ukraine, Prigozhin directly controlled Wagner's operatives. The General Command requested military support or action from Prigozhin, who had the last word. According to Mark Galeotti, an expert in Russian security and international politics, this chain of command was less effective but reduced friction between Russian military groups.³²

26 Various informants (April 4-16, 2023) Personal communications (personal interviews).

27 Sauer, P. (September 26, 2022). Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>.

28 Prigozhin owns a group of subsidiaries companies under the main company Concord Management and Consulting.

29 Colás, Xavier. (August 5, 2018) "Los Mercenarios de Wagner No Están Sujetos a Ninguna Ley." *EL MUNDO*. www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/08/06/5b6723e5fdea39688b45e3.html Accessed 1 June, 2023.

30 Kleksiy Hetman, military expert. (April 04, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

31 Ukrainian soldier (April 01, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

32 Galeotti, M. (November 16, 2022). FY23 SCSS#2, November 15, 2022: "Militaries, Mercenaries, Militias and Morale and the Ukraine War." In *Moscow's Shadows*. <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2022/11/16/fy23-sc2-15-november-2022-militaries-mercenaries-militias-and-morale-and-the-ukraine-war/>.



Image: Russian Military Chain of command in Ukraine in 2022. Source: Mark Galeotti (2022). <https://in-moscowshadows.wordpress.com/2022/11/16/fy23-sc2-15-november-2022-militaries-mercenaries-militias-and-morale-and-the-ukraine-war/>

Besides that, the Wagner Group copied the military structures of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), combating in small groups and divided in different rows.³³ Concretely, under the Command Unit, the following subunits are identified:

- › Combat Units: These were the contractors who already had military experience, they were well trained and were sent to conflicts around the world to conduct the group's activities. During certain phases of the war, combat units included also recruited prisoners to support Wagner special forces.
- › Logistics Units: These units were responsible for providing logistical support to the Combat Units, including transportation, supply, and maintenance of equipment.
- › Intelligence Units: These units were responsible for providing intelligence and operational support to the Combat Units including reconnaissance, surveillance, and other tasks.

Ukrainian soldiers that fought Wagner Group in Bakhmut affirmed that their combat units were organised in four sub-groups:³⁴

- › The first group primarily comprised individuals who were less prepared, including those who had been recruited from prisons, individuals with health issues

33 Olekseyi Hetman, military expert. (April 03, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

34 Alex, Ukrainian Soldier. (April 03, 2023) Personal communication (personal interview).

and those lacking military experience. They were essentially seen as *cannon fodder*³⁵.

- › In contrast, the second group possessed a similar level of expertise as the first group and served as a supply and support unit, providing necessary resources and materials. These units engaged in foot-based attacks and employed armoured vehicles, aiming to secure positions and protect the flanks.
- › The third group consisted of more professionalised individuals with military backgrounds or at least some battlefield experience. Their role entailed leading both the first and second groups towards Ukrainian positions.
- › Lastly, the fourth group formed the core of the Wagner Group professionals. This group consisted of experienced commanders and individuals with extensive military backgrounds. They held decision-making authority and supervised the battlefield advancements. It is worth noting that they typically refrained from direct engagement in combat. Many members of this group were former Spetsnaz (Special Military Unit) operatives who had gained military and combat experience in previous conflicts involving Russia, such as Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Venezuela, etc.

MILITARY SERVICES, TACTICS AND LOCATIONS IN UKRAINE

Before the mass recruitment of Russian prisoners and the expansion of the contracting of inexperienced personnel, the Wagner Group personnel were primarily assigned with methods that are employed by the Russian special forces. Some of the tasks included³⁶:

- › Gathering intelligence in occupied territories and conducting reconnaissance behind enemy lines³⁷.
- › Planning and executing sabotage operations³⁸.
- › Implementing filtration measures among the population in Occupied Territories to identify individuals prone to collaboration.

35 Sauer, Pjotr. (January 17, 2023) "Former Wagner Group Commander Who Fled to Norway Feared for His Life." *The Guardian*. www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/17/former-wagner-group-commander-who-fled-norway-feared-life-russia. Accessed May 15, 2023.

36 Eastern Circles. "Wagner as Tool of Russian Geopolitical Strategy: Lessons from Ukraine." *Eastern-circles.com*, easterncircles.com/en-wagner-russian-tool-geopolitical-strategy. Accessed June 3, 2023.

37 Militarnyi. (December 13, 2022) "In Odessa, an Artillery Spotter Who Was Scouting the Locations of Coastal Defense Was Detained." *Militarnyi*. <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/in-odesa-an-artillery-spotter-who-was-scouting-the-locations-of-coastal-defense-was-detained/>. Accessed June 5, 2023.

38 Ukrainska Pravda. (July 29, 2022) "The Terrorist Attack in Olenivka Was Committed by the Wagner Group under Prigozhin's Leadership Directorate of Intelligence." *Ukrainska Pravda*. www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/07/29/7360909. Accessed June 9, 2023.

- › Participating in direct combat operations (Soledar, Bakhmut, etc).
- › Providing protection, escort and evacuation services for important military installations, cargo and individuals located in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

As the conflict gradually evolved, their services expanded to:

- › Logistical activities in support of military and security forces.
- › Tactical support to state armed forces and non-state armed actors: training and equipping of troops, protection of convoys and personnel, demining work, assistance in the use of weapons and weapons systems, attacks on infrastructure.
- › Propaganda and disinformation campaigns: development and dissemination of distorted or false messages, narratives and information of a political nature aimed at key audiences with the goal of polarising society. They achieved this goal by creating Telegram Channels where they spread misinformation³⁹.
- › Participation in regular and irregular military operations or support for such operations: assistance to forces undertaking combat developing surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) tasks, providing cover fire, anti-aircraft support, etc.; conducting special and clandestine operations, including targeted assassinations and bombings; kidnappings, sabotage, subversive activities; direct participation in combat of various scales, contributing infantry personnel (possibly including mechanised infantry) and gunners, driving vehicles or tanks.

The participation of Wagner Group in the invasion of Ukraine created a difference in the battlefield as some of their operations (Soledar and Bakhmut) have been the only successes, while being mainly symbolic victories, of Russian operations throughout the war⁴⁰. A key factor

to be taken into account in order to understand the military capacity of Wagner Group, and therefore their effectiveness compared to the Russian regular army, is the experience of their assault forces. The core group of Wagner consisted of experienced commanders and soldiers, who had successfully fought in countries ranging from Syria to the Central

The core group of Wagner consisted of experienced commanders and soldiers, who had successfully fought in countries ranging from Syria to the Central African Republic. These units developed specific tactics to attack the Ukrainian army using a variety of offensive strategies such as sending their own personnel to almost certain death.

39 Detektor Media (April 15, 2023). Personal communication (online interview).

40 Ukrainian soldier (April 01, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

African Republic. These units developed specific tactics to attack the Ukrainian army using a variety of offensive strategies such as sending their own personnel to almost certain death⁴¹. This distinction between the very experienced personnel with military background and the convicts and personnel without any military expertise is crucial to understanding Wagner's tactics on the battlefield. Besides that, according to Kyrylo Bonanova, chief of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence in Ukraine, the Wagner Group trained its core personnel much more thoroughly than the Russian armed forces. This gave them a competitive advantage over the majority of other Russian soldiers⁴².

The tactics of Wagner Group shifted as the war evolved. According to journalist Yuriy Butusov⁴³, the tactics during this first phase of the war in Ukraine were led firstly by units composed of mobilised residents of the Donbas, who spotted Ukrainian firing points and minefields while incurring huge losses. The soldiers of the regular army attacked in the second wave, and the Wagner Group attacked the weakened defenders only as the third wave. At the beginning of May 2022, the city of Popasna was captured. After this first phase of the war and once the Wagner Group had gained more independence, the contractors were able to develop and apply their tactics on their own. According to an Intel Ukrainian report,⁴⁴ the Wagner Group deployed its forces in mobile groups of about a dozen or fewer members, using Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPG), mortars, automatic grenade launchers and exploiting real-time drone intelligence to expose Ukrainian locations. After this exposure the shelling of Ukrainian positions started. The use of assault squads instead of battalion tactical groups was a key element of the Wagner Group tactics.

The assault squads tried to approach Ukrainian positions unnoticed mainly by moving at night with night vision lenses (only used by the professional contractors) or taking cover on the ground and were accompanied by a reconnaissance drone which studied Ukrainian positions in detail.⁴⁵ Usually these assault squads were formed by most expendable personnel, so once one assault squad was lost, Wagner's commanders sent a new one to the

41 Paton Walsh, Nick, et al. (February 14, 2023) "Exclusive: Russian Convicts Say Defense Ministry Is Sending Them from Jail to Fight as 'Cannon Fodder' in Ukraine." CNN. edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russian-army-prisoners-conscripts-ukraine-intl/index.html. Accessed April 26, 2023.

42 Espresso TV. (May 7, 2023) "Буданов розповів, чому ПВК Вагнера воює ефективніше армії РФ." Espresso TV. espresso.tv/budanov-rozpoviv-chomu-pvk-vagnera-voyue-efektivnishe-regulyarnoi-armii-uf. Accessed 4 June, 2023.

43 Butusov Plus. (April 20, 2022). Youtube Channel. www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Sz3lEm3z-MY&ab_channel=%D0%91%D1%83%D1%82%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%9F%D0%B%D1%8E%D1%81.

44 Lister, Tim, et al. (2023, January 24) "Russia's Wagner's Brutal Tactics in Ukraine Revealed by Intel Intelligence Report." CNN. amp.cnn.com/cnn/2023/01/23/europe/russia-wagner-tactics-report-ukraine-intl/index.html. Accessed 7 June, 2023.

45 "The Cannon Fodder" (March 22, 2023) *Advantage Why Wagner Group Is More Effective on the Battlefield than the Russian Military.* Meduza. meduza.io/en/feature/2023/03/22/the-cannon-fodder-advantage. Accessed May 11, 2023.

frontline⁴⁶. In this regard, Wagner demonstrated more resilience than the Russian military; if an attack failed, as they were using expendable resources, they could mount it again. Another characteristic element of Wagner tactics is that their operatives rarely used armoured vehicles in close combat, but relied on advancing on foot, in multiple small assault units⁴⁷. Wagner's commanders also used less armoured vehicles and more assault infantry than the regular army, especially when this latter consisted of convicted contractors.

Given their availability and flexibility to adapt to the flow of the war, Wagner Group operatives were seen in different locations throughout Ukraine and the occupied territories of Donbas. There is evidence that they fought in the Soledar and Bakhmut offensives⁴⁸, and appeared in the city of Kadiivka in the Russian-occupied Luhansk region where they established their headquarters.⁴⁹ According to Tetiana Pechonchyk, Head of the Board of the Human Rights Center Zmina, the Wagner Group was also seen in Kozacha Lopan, in the Kharkiv Region where locals were tortured in the basement of the railway station.⁵⁰

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WAGNER'S PREDATORY RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

Before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Wagner Group was a relatively small organisation, consisting of up to 8,000 contractors, deployed in countries like Sudan, Libya, and Mozambique.⁵¹ At the beginning of its existence, it was very hard to be recruited by Wagner. The process was very strict and there were 4 main criteria to be able to be chosen: 1) being

46 Clark, Robert. (May 22, 2023) "Wagner's Psychotic Tactics Give Putin the Edge." The Telegraph. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/05/22/wagners-psychotic-tactics-give-putin-the-edge/ . Accessed June 17, 2023.

47 Meduza. (February 14, 2023) "The State of Russia's Offensive Wagner Group's Tactics near Bakhmut, Destroyed Russian Tanks by Vuhledar, and Other Updates to Meduza's Interactive Combat Map." Meduza. meduza.io/en/feature/2023/02/15/the-state-of-russia-s-offensive . Accessed June 2, 2023.

48 Beaumont, Peter. (January 10, 2023) "Russia's Wagner Group Fighting "Heavy, Bloody Battles" for Control of Soledar." The Guardian. www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/russia-wagner-group-fighting-heavy-bloody-battles-control-soledar .

49 Euromaidan Press. (December 11, 2022) "HIMARS Destroyed Base of Russian Wagner Mercenaries in Luhansk Oblast's Occupied Kadiivka." Euromaidan Press. euromaidanpress.com/2022/12/11/himars-destroyed-a-base-of-russian-wagner-mercenaries-in-the-occupied-part-of-donbas/?swcfpc=1. Accessed 1 June, 2023.

50 Key Informant. Tetiana Pechonchyk, member of Coalition 5am. (April 04, 2023).

51 Rai, Arpan. (April 21, 2022) "Nearly 3,000 of Russia's Notorious Wagner Mercenaries Killed in the War, UK MPs Told." The Independent. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-wagner-3000-troops-killed-ukraine-b2062198.html. Accessed April 29, 2023.

physically fit; 2) rather young, not more than 40 years old; 3) no criminal past; 4) with some military background⁵². At the dawn of 2022, the Wagner Group mainly targeted men between the ages of 24 and 50, while candidates between 22 and 24 and over 50 years of age were considered on a case-by-case basis and depending on their prior military experience.⁵³

In 2022, the organisation rapidly grew to around 50,000 men, 40,000 of them being recruited in Russian prisons. In many cases, Prigozhin personally recruited prisoners.

The escalation of the conflict in the east meant that Wagner's recruitment process intensified. In the summer of 2022, the organisation rapidly grew to around 50,000 men,⁵⁴ 40,000 of them being recruited in Russian prisons⁵⁵ in the St. Petersburg area, the Urals, Siberia, the Far East of Russia, and even the Arctic Circle, most of whom were charged with murder, robbery, extortion, theft, and organised crime activities.⁵⁶ In many cases, the Wagner Group's chief Yevgeny

Prigozhin personally recruited prisoners.⁵⁷ In exchange for six months of service in Ukraine, he promised them sentence reductions or pardons, registration as "war veterans", monthly salaries of 100 thousand rubles (or approximately 1200 dollars), and a payment of 5 million rubles (or almost 60 thousand dollars) to their families in case of being killed.⁵⁸ According to Mykhaylo Podoliak, as of January 2023, 77% of recruited convicts were either killed, injured, or captured by Ukrainian forces.⁵⁹ Taking this into consideration, an Ukrainian military expert stated: "there has not been an evolution but a degradation of the Wagner's personnel".⁶⁰

52 Alexander Kovalenko, military expert. (April 3, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

53 Roschchyna, Victoria. (December 21, 2022) "An "Orchestra" of Murderers: Who Are the Wagner Group Mercenaries Fighting against Ukraine?" *Ukrainska Pravda*. www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/12/21/7379589. Accessed April 26, 2023.

54 The Brussels Times. (February 20, 2023) "Wagner Group Has 50,000 Troops in Ukraine, UK Claims." www.brusselstimes.com/356054/wagner-group-has-50000-troops-in-ukraine-uk-claims. Accessed April 28, 2023.

55 Sotnikov, D. (November 2, 2022) "Will Putin really pardon thousands of prisoners?" *Deutsche Welle*. www.dw.com/en/will-putin-really-pardon-thousands-of-prisoners/a-64645566.

56 Reuters. (February 9, 2023) "Russia's Wagner Mercenaries Halt Prisoner Recruitment Campaign - Prigozhin." *Reuters*. www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-wagner-mercenaries-halt-prisoner-recruitment-campaign-founder-prigozhin-2023-02-09/.

57 NBC News. (September 16, 2022) "Video Appears To Show Putin Ally Recruiting Convicts To Fight In Ukraine". *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHFuD4irXto>.

58 The New Voice. (March 18, 2023) "Cemeteries of Russian troops killed in Ukraine found near Irkutsk". *The New Voice*. <https://english.nv.ua/nation/cemeteries-of-russian-troops-killed-in-ukraine-found-near-irkutsk-50318521.html>; Orlova, A. (March 25, 2023) "Russia's Mobilization: How Kremlin Conscripts Men Via Electronic Summons and Use of Facial Recognition to Track Down "Draft Dodgers." *Kyiv Post*. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/16269>.

59 The Kyiv Independent. (January 15, 2023) "Podolyak: Nearly 80% of Russian prisoners recruited by Wagner Group killed, injured, captured by Ukraine". *The Kyiv Independent*. kyivindependent.com/podolyak-nearly-80-of-russian-prisoners-recruited-by-wagner-group-killed-injured-captured-by-ukraine/.

60 Alexander Kovalenko, military expert. (April 3, 2023). Personal communication (personal interview).

In February 2023, Prigozhin announced that the Wagner Group had completely stopped headhunting contractors from prisons, and said there were three reasons for this. First, he claimed that the “excessively high effectiveness of task performance” of his operatives “put a certain number of authorised persons in an uncomfortable position”.⁶¹ Second, he argued that the fact that the “Wagner Group use[d] convicts not as convicts, but as equal fighters caused irritation of the tightly-knit elite”.⁶² Third, Prigozhin claimed that “a certain number of pro-war functionaries decided that if they recruited convicts, they would be able to become as famous as the Wagner Group”.⁶³ The Russian authorities did not respond to Prigozhin’s allegations. At the same time, several sources, including British intelligence, claimed that the Wagner Group was banned from recruiting inmates due to the escalation of the internal conflict between Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defence.⁶⁴ From March 2023 onward, the organisation expanded its preferred age range and, according to its website, began recruiting men as young as 21 and as old as 60. The ideal candidates had to be physically fit and neither consume alcohol nor do drugs.⁶⁵

Throughout the war, the Wagner Group has been actively using flashy ads across numerous online platforms, including Telegram, WhatsApp, Viber, and VKontakte, to recruit new members. According to the OSINT investigation by Molfar, since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the number of subscribers to Wagner’s various Telegram accounts increased by between 2% and 250%.⁶⁶ In this regard, the organisation not only posted job openings in various languages, but also promoted its brand by presenting the Wagner Group as the “winning team”, whose ideology was “the struggle for justice”.⁶⁷ One of the most notorious examples of the Wagner Group’s digital recruitment campaign was the Pornhub case. In March 2023, the company published a series of ads on the world’s biggest pornography website, in which it urged the Russian male viewers to “stop masturbating” and join the “coolest private army in the world”.⁶⁸ The company also used various Russian job search websites, like Avito, JobVK, and GorodRabot, to recruit new combat-

61 Pohorilov, S. (February 14, 2023) “Wagner Group Head explains why he was ousted from recruiting convicts”, *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/02/14/7389277/> .

62 See footnote 59.

63 See footnote 59.

64 Palyvoda, N. (February 11, 2023). “British intelligence explains why Wagner group stopped recruiting prisoners in Russian colonies”. *Mind*. February 11, 2023, <https://mind.ua/en/news/20253330-british-intelligence-explains-why-wagner-group-stopped-recruiting-prisoners-in-russian-colonies> .

65 See footnote 62.

66 Molfar. (March 28, 2023) “Prigozhin continues to develop the PMC Wagner. He invests in promotions and the brand as in a real company”. <https://www.molfar.global/en-blog/development-of-wagner-pmc> .

67 Kurmanaev, A. (March 14, 2023) “Russia’s Mercenary Chief Prepares Ground for a Political Advance”. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-bakhmut.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share> .

68 Holovan, M. (March 15, 2023) “Терористична організація “Група Вагнера” через Pornhub шукає охочих воювати” (The terrorist organization “Wagner Group” is looking for fighters through Pornhub). *LIGA*. <https://news.liga.net/ua/world/news/terroristicheskaya-organizatsiya-gruppa-vagnera-cherez-pornhub-ischut-jelayuschih-voevat-video> .

ants, doctors, mechanics, and even IT specialists.⁶⁹ Many job postings mentioned monthly salaries of 240 thousand rubles (or approximately 4 thousand dollars), which are higher than the payments that Russian regular army receive.⁷⁰

Although in the context of the war in Ukraine, the Wagnerites mostly focused on recruiting Russians, they also continued their promotional campaigns in countries like Serbia and Afghanistan. For example, in Serbia they spread online ads calling on young men (mostly with right-wing nationalist views) to join the Wagner Group in its struggle against Ukraine. At the same time, Prigozhin's company was allegedly directly targeting Afghan veterans of the elite National Army Commando Corps, who, according to the magazine *Foreign Policy*, "were abandoned by the United States and Western allies when the country fell to the Taliban last year" and, therefore, needed extra money to support their families.⁷¹ Several sources claimed that the Afghan Commandos were targeted by Wagner Group as potential recruits in Iran,⁷² where allegedly the Iranian government's representatives had been enlisting former Afghan soldiers to be deployed in the war in Ukraine. The Belarusian analyst Ihar Tyshkevych also indicated that the Wagner Group was actively recruiting citizens of Belarus, Moldova, and the Central Asian republics, although with poor results.⁷³

In the beginning of March 2023, the Wagner Group announced the opening of recruitment centres in a number of cities including Moscow, and then published a list of 58 of those in 42 cities across Russia.⁷⁴ According to the investigative group Nordsint, as of April 2023, the Wagner Group had "at least 146 recruiters in gyms, including martial arts clubs, MMA gym's and other sports clubs, 25 regional representatives, four general recruiting accounts [...], and at least two mobile recruiters".⁷⁵ As evidenced by several videos published on Twitter, such "recruitment centres" were usually made up of two representatives who sat behind plain wooden desks and helped the applicants fill out the necessary documents.⁷⁶

69 Molfar (2023). Op. Cit.

70 Al Jazeera. (December 12, 2022) "Ukraine says it killed Wagner mercenaries, who are they?" Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/12/ukraine-says-it-has-killed-wagner-mercenaries-who-are-they>.

71 O'Donnell, L. (October 25, 2022) "Russia's Recruiting Afghan Commandos". *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/25/afghanistan-russia-ukraine-military-recruitment-putin-taliban/>.

72 Syed Fazl -e- Haider. (January 12, 2023) "Why Is Russia Recruiting Former Afghan Soldiers for Its War against Ukraine?" *Jamestown*. jamestown.org/program/why-is-russia-recruiting-former-afghan-soldiers-for-its-war-against-ukraine/. Accessed 20 May, 2023.

73 Malysheva, T. (January 14, 2023) "Prigozhin's "Wagnerivtsi": features and weaknesses: an expert's comment". NRCU., <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=100490>.

74 Yevgeny Prigozhin's Press Service. (March 2, 2023) "Prigozhin's Address". Telegram. https://t.me/concordgroup_official/542.

75 Nordsint. (April 27, 2023) "Wagner Group's Recent Recruitment Activities Raise Serious Questions About its Capabilities". Nordsint. nordsint.org/2023/04/27/wagner-groups-recent-recruitment-activities-raises-serious-questions-about-its-capabilities/.

76 Margolin, J. (March 21, 2023) "Prigozhin visiting the Torpeda MMA club in Ryazan". Twitter. https://twitter.com/Jack_Mrgln/status/1638263214797463553.

In addition to an elaborate digital campaign, the Wagner Group also used more conventional advertising methods, such as billboards, banners, bus adverts, and flyers, to attract new members. In this regard, there are photos of billboards in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, showing three heavily armed men in uniform and containing a phrase “the W orchestra awaits you” (the word ‘orchestra’ is a reference to Richard Wagner who allegedly was one of Adolf Hitler’s favourite composers).⁷⁷ Moreover, Moscow residents saw Wagner banners saying “Join the winning team” in six locations across the city.⁷⁸ Similar ads saying ‘Join the winning team! Together we will win’ also appeared on buses in the Russian cities of Ufa and Novosibirsk, as well as in the occupied city of Simferopol in Crimea.⁷⁹

According to British intelligence, masked Wagner Group representatives gave ‘career talks’ or ‘career guidance lessons’ at Russian high schools as part of their recruitment campaign.⁸⁰ Among other things, the Wagnerites distributed questionnaires entitled ‘application of a young warrior’ to collect the contact details of interested people.⁸¹ They also promoted the Wagner Group’s ‘youth club’ called ‘The Little Wagnerite’. In one of its reports, the Institute for the Study of War presumed that by targeting high school students, the PMSC “likely aims to recruit more impressionable recruits [...] and instil in them Prigozhin’s extremist ideological brand of Russian ultranationalism”.⁸²

The Wagner Group has long been promoting its ‘heroic’ brand image through propagandist action movies, documentaries, and even cartoons, most of which reproduced the classic Hollywood ‘success formula’ with their charismatic characters, epic plots, glorious music, and dashing special effects.⁸³ For instance, in the action movie ‘Tourist’, the Wagnerites, deployed to the CAR, were presented as reluctant warriors, who protected the “country in need” from rebels and corrupt politicians. Similarly, the movie ‘Granite’ portrayed a Russian military instructor as a martyr, who sacrificed his life to save the people of Mozambique from terrorists. A more recent movie, called ‘Best in Hell’, depicted the

77 Gimalova, R., and Akhmedova, Y. (July 20, 2022) “*The “W” orchestra awaits you Russian journalists identify mercenary recruiters thanks to Wagner Group billboards in the regions*”. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/07/21/the-w-orchestra-awaits-you> .

78 Вести Подмосковья. (April 3, 2023) “Реклама ЧВК “Вагнер” появилась на шести билбордах в Москве.” Рамблер/новости, Wagner PMC Advertising Appeared on Six Billboards in Moscow. news.rambler.ru/army/50495076-reklama-chvk-vagner-poyavilas-na-shesti-bilbordah-v-moskve/ . Accessed 1 May 2023.

79 Blaznova, O. (April 11, 2023) “*Wagner Advertising Appeared on Ufa Buses*”. UFA1RU. <https://ufa1.ru/text/gorod/2023/04/11/72209612/>.

80 The UK Ministry of Defence. (2023, March 13) “*Wagner recruiters gave career talks in Moscow high schools*” Twitter. <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1635161720799780864?s=20> .

81 Panella, C. (March 13, 2023) “*Masked Wagner mercenaries are giving career talks at Russian high schools, UK intel says*”. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/masked-wagner-mercenar-ies-career-talks-russian-high-schools-uk-intel-2023-3> .

82 Bailey, R., Hird, K., Barros, G., Wolkov, N., Howard, A., & Kagan, F. (March 11, 2023) Institute for the Study of War. <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-11-2023> .

83 Bulos, N. (April 25, 2023) “*Welcome to the Wagner-verse, where action films serve up propaganda for Russia’s notorious mercenary army*”. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-04-25/russia-wagner-military-contractor-propaganda-campaign> .

Wagnerites as righteous patriots, who signed “a contract with the[ir] motherland” and, by doing so, proved their readiness to die for the ‘cause’, which clearly was the occupation of the eastern Ukrainian territories.⁸⁴ In 2019, in close cooperation with Prigozhin’s company, the CAR-based company Lobaye Invest also produced an animated children’s movie ‘Lion and Bear’, in which the Bear (representing Wagnerites and Russia) saved the Elephant (namely, the CAR) from Hyenas (meant as rebels) and then helped the Elephant rebuild the destroyed land.⁸⁵

Last but not least, the Wagner Group has also been using music platforms, such as YouTube Music and SoundCloud, to recruit new personnel and promote their ideology to audiences in Russia and abroad.⁸⁶ In this regard, the company released various songs and music videos that glorified Wagnerites, some accused of rape, torture, and murder in Ukraine and beyond. One of the promotional videos published on YouTube featured a rock ballad written by Russian nationalist singer Vika Tsyganova, containing images of dancing men in balaclavas, chanting the lyrics ‘War is our element, come on, Russia, get up [...], come on, Wagner, play’.⁸⁷

TRAINING FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS

Before deploying their personnel abroad Wagner Group conducted training sessions at two camps attached to the location of the 10th Special Mission Brigade of GRU Spetsnaz in Mol’kino, Krasnodar region, Russia⁸⁸. According to an investigative report published by the Russian journal Znak in 2018, the first base checkpoint was controlled by GRU personnel⁸⁹. Besides the main base, the facilities included headquarters, barracks, airborne training and obstacle courses, weapons and munitions storage, and other military facilities, as well as the six-acre Wagner facility located north of the main base. This Wagner base included approximately nine permanent structures of varying size⁹⁰. The fact that the Wagner Group shared a base with a special operations military unit implies strong ties between the two organisations. In November 2022, Prigozhin confirmed that Wagner Group was going to

84 See footnote 83.

85 Clover, C. W. and J. (June 17, 2023) YouTube hosted Wagner group’s rap songs. The Times. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wagner-group-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda-big-tech-j5ncgjbvd.

86 The Wagner Group. (March, 2023) Russian PMC Wagner War Song [Soundcloud]. <https://soundcloud.com/oaslime/wagner-russian-pmc-wagner-war>.

87 Портфель Генштаба (October 12, 2022) V Kontakte. https://vk.com/wall-206639135_588952?lang=en.

88 Katz, Brian Katz, et al. (CSIS) (September 1, 2020) “Moscow’s Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies.” russianpmcs.csis.org/.

89 Information Agency. (March 6, 2018) “Journalists Sneak into Russian PMC Wagner’s Boot Camp.” www.unian.info. www.unian.info/world/10032011-journalists-sneak-into-russian-pmc-wagner-s-boot-camp.html Accessed 1 May, 2023.

90 Doxsee, Catrina. (September 15, 2022) “Putin’s Proxies: Examining Russia’s Use of Private Military Companies.” www.csis.org. www.csis.org/analysis/putins-proxies-examining-russias-use-private-military-companies.

open two more training facilities for its personnel in Russia's Kursk and Belgorod regions⁹¹. Another training camp for convicts who joined Wagner was believed to be located in a detention facility in the Rostov region⁹².

According to Vlad Voloshyn, an army correspondent⁹³ at the various training camps, recruits were trained for two weeks in which they received their first classes in the use of firearms, tactical and engineering training, tactical medicine and topography. After this two-week training period, the recruits were sent to Wagner's training centres, where they were divided into groups according to their military experience, their ability to use weaponry and their health status, especially important the last one for convict recruits: individuals with HIV were forced to wear a red wristband and if they had hepatitis a white wristband⁹⁴. After this classification, the convicts were distributed among the assault squads of Wagner Group.

The military equipment used by Wagner was composed of 152mm artillery alongside 82mm and 120mm mortars, Schmel-type flamethrowers and Lancet kamikaze drones⁹⁵. Some attacks were supported by air strikes. Wagner used 82mm and 120mm mortars as well as AGS⁹⁶ grenade launchers. Besides that, Wagner Group also used drones, especially to monitor the movement of assault groups and the situation at the attack site.

WAGNER'S CASUALTIES

The number of Wagner operatives killed in combat remains unclear. Wagner's sources affirm that at least half of their personnel died during the siege of Bakhmut and Soledar⁹⁷. However, the real number is undisclosed as it could pose a financial threat to Prigozhin's

91 Roscoe, Matthew. (November 6, 2022) "Wagner Group to Build Militia Training Centres in Russia's Kursk and Belgorod Regions." Euro Weekly News. euroweeklynews.com/2022/11/06/wagner-kursk-and-belgorod-regions-russia/ Accessed May 2, 2023.

92 UN News. (March 10, 2023) "Rights Experts "Deeply Disturbed" by Russian Wagner Group Recruitment of Prisoners | UN News." [News.un.org. news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134447](https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134447) .

93 Army Inform. (March 2, 2023) "Чому "вагнерівці" стали важливим компонентом російської воєнної кампанії." Why the Wagnerites became an important component of the Russian military campaign. [armyinform.com.ua. armyinform.com.ua/2023/03/02/chomu-vagnerivczi-staly-vazhlyvym-komponentom-rosijskoyi-voyennoyi-kampaniyi/](https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/03/02/chomu-vagnerivczi-staly-vazhlyvym-komponentom-rosijskoyi-voyennoyi-kampaniyi/) Accessed 05 May, 2023.

94 Pohorilov, Stanislav. (October 25, 2022) "Wagner Group Recruits Large Number of Prisoners with HIV and Hepatitis, Marking Them with Wristbands." Ukrainska Pravda. www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/10/25/7373389/ Accessed 2 June, 2023.

95 VK Platform. "Video of a Wagner Group attack using Lancet drones". vk.com/wall-206639135_602466?lang=en .

96 The AGS-30 Atlant is a Russian automatic grenade launcher currently in production in Russia and in service with the Russian armed forces and the Wagner Group.

97 E, Cook, D, Brennan. (July 20, 2023) "Wagner commander reveals numbers of mercenaries killed in Ukraine". *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/wagner-group-death-toll-casualty-count-ukraine-belarus-yevgeny-prigozhin-1814203>.

fortune. In theory, in addition to commuting their sentence, in case of death, a relative of a Wagner operative contracted from jail should receive a cash payment up to five million rubles.⁹⁸ Many of the Wagner operatives' relatives have not been informed of their death while fighting in Ukraine so the promised payouts are not being delivered.

However, at the end of May 2023, Prigozhin himself stated in an interview that “throughout the entire operation, I recruited 50,000 prisoners, of which about 20% died. Exactly

Prigozhin affirmed that at least 10,000 Wagner's contracted from prisons and other correctional facilities and 10.000 Wagner professional contractors have died on the Bakhmut battlefield.

the same number died as those who signed up through a contract”.⁹⁹ In this statement Prigozhin affirmed that at least 10,000 Wagner's contracted from prisons and other correctional facilities and 10.000 Wagner professional contractors have died on the Bakhmut battlefield. The number shared by Prigozhin might be not so far from reality. The US National Security Council spokesman claimed that as many as 30,000 Wagner mercenaries have been killed during the war¹⁰⁰. According to Media Zona, a Russian investigative media outlet that is counting and naming official casualties, as per June 16th Russian losses (regular army and Wagner Group) were up to 25,526.¹⁰¹ An-

other way to get closer to the real Russian casualties numbers is by counting the Order of Courage serial numbers issued by the Russian state as InformNapalm explains.¹⁰²

Given the large number of dead Wagner operatives some specific Wagner cemeteries have been built. Most of their graves were colourfully adorned and marked by a wooden cross, with the heaped earth covered by green spruce branches and two wreaths: one in the colours of the Russian tricolour and the other in the red-and-yellow colons of the Wagner emblem¹⁰³. The known Wagner cemeteries are located in the

98 Krasno, Andrei. (March 12, 2023) “No Body, No Payment”: Wagner Mercenary Deaths Being Hidden from Families Back in Russia.” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. www.rferl.org/a/russia-wagner-mercenary-deaths-hidden-compensation-ukraine/32313434.html Accessed June 03, 2023.

99 The Moscow Times. (May 24, 2023) “Prigozhin Says 20K Wagner Fighters Killed in Battle for Bakhmut.” *The Moscow Times*. www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/05/24/prigozhin-says-20k-wagner-fighters-killed-in-battle-for-bakhmut-a81259 . Accessed May 29, 2023.

100 Chatterjee (2023). Op. Cit.

101 Mediazona. “Russian Casualties in Ukraine. Mediazona Count, Updated.” Mediazona, en.zona.media/article/2022/05/11/casualties_eng Accessed June 16, 2023.

102 Inform Napalm. (June 5, 2023) “OSINT Analysis: Counting Russian Losses by Order of Courage Serial Numbers.” InformNapalm.org (English). informnapalm.org/en/counting-russian-losses-by-order-of-courage-serial-numbers/ Accessed June 02, 2023.

103 Tubridy, Mack. (April 30, 2023) “7 Known “Wagner Cemeteries” in Russia and Occupied Ukraine.” *The Moscow Times*. www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/04/30/7-known-wagner-cemeteries-in-russia-and-occupied-ukraine-a80931. Accessed 24 May, 2023.

Krasnodar Region (Bakinskaya, this having the largest number of graves due to its proximity to the battlefield), Novosibirsk (Novosibirsk Region), Irkutsk (Irkutsk region), Beryozovsky (Sverdlovsk region), Nikolayevka (Samara region), Mavrino (Moscow region) and Kirovka, (Luhansk, Ukraine). The fact that Wagner Operatives who had died on the battlefield, and who were once convicted to long jail sentences, were buried in their places of birth also caused controversy among residents.¹⁰⁴

THE WAY AHEAD: PROLIFERATION OF RUSSIAN PMSCs

Wagner Group is not the only PMSC present in Ukraine¹⁰⁵. The Russian PMSC industry has bloomed during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On April 21, 2023, “Call Sign Bruce,” the Telegram channel of Russia’s Federal News Agency, broadcasted an interview with Prigozhin in which he complained about other private military companies involved in the war in Ukraine: “People with money think it’s an amazing idea, establishing their own PMSC. That’s how they started to multiply. Gazprom has Stream, Andrei Bokarev has Redoubt, the animals are going in two by two”.¹⁰⁶ Prigozhin claimed that other PMSCs on the battlefield, where Wagner Group was advancing and having some success, were not very useful as they often had to abandon their positions due their poor training and equipment.

According to several sources, under the control of the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu, there is a private military company called Patriot¹⁰⁷, created back in 2018 allegedly as a product of a conflict between Shoigu and Prigozhin.¹⁰⁸ The company is believed to have obtained contracts with the Russian military to engage in Ukraine. Another Russian PMSC that appeared in Ukraine was Redut (also known as Redoubt) under the influence of the deputy head of the GRU, General Vladimir Alekseev, who appointed one of his associates to lead the new organisation. The armed group’s headquarters was believed to be located in the town of Kubinka, outside Moscow, on land abutting the base of the 45th Airborne Brigade.¹⁰⁹ Although Redut had ambitious goals, especially for the initial days of

104 Sibreal. (February 10, 2023) “Из кого героев лепят? Из убийц?” Жители забайкальского поселка против торжественных похорон вагнеровца.” Сибирь.Реалии, “Who are the heroes molded from? Of the killers?” Residents of the Trans-Baikal village against the solemn funeral of the “Wagnerian”. www.sibreal.org/a/zhiteli-zabaykalskogo-poselka-protiv-torzhestvennyh-pohoron-vagnerovtsa/32263820.html. Accessed 4 June 2023.

105 Krutov, Mark, and Sergei Dobrynin. (May 23, 2023) “Who’s Who among Russia’s Mercenary Companies.” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. www.rferl.org/a/russia-other-mercenary-companies-ukraine/32424520.html.

106 Focht, Elizaveta, and Iliia Varabanov. (May 16, 2023) “Поток” под Бахмутом. Что известно о ЧВК, связанных с “Газпромом.” BBC News Русская служба. www.bbc.com/russian/features-65602020.

107 Varfolomeeva, Anna, and Justen Charters. (April 15, 2023) “Shedding Light on Russian PMC Patriot Just Sanctioned by the US.” Strike Source. strikesource.com/2023/04/15/shedding-light-on-russian-PMC-patriot-just-sanctioned-by-the-us/ Accessed May 28, 2023.

108 “Конфликт в окружении Путина, или зачем Кремлю ЧВК от Шойгу.” (July 12, 2018) Charter97.org. charter97.org/ru/news/2018/7/12/297210/ Accessed May 28, 2023.

109 Meduza. (July 14, 2022) “A Mercenaries’ War How Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Led to a “Secret Mobilization” That Allowed Oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin to Win Back Putin’s Favor.” Meduza. meduza.io/en/feature/2022/07/14/a-mercenaries-war. Accessed June 03, 2023.



Recruitment banner in Russia. Source: Wikipedia Commons

the invasion of Ukraine, their participation in the conflict resulted in catastrophic losses, allegedly losing up to 90% of its forces.¹¹⁰

An investigation by BBC Russian News¹¹¹ found that new PMSCs appeared in Ukraine and were probably linked to Russia's state oil and gas company Gazprom, concretely Potok, Fakel and Plamya. There is evidence posted in a video message by Potok personnel in which several men in uniform complain about the poor supply of weapons and threats received from Wagner Group to maintain their positions in Bakhmut¹¹². The mercenaries also complained that the leadership of Gazprom allegedly promised them a contract with the Ministry of Defense, but were instead sent to Ukraine under the command of the PMSC Redut¹¹³ Moreover, according to Mark Galeotti the most relevant PMSC was Con-

110 The Insider. (May 12, 2023) "Best of Enemies: Wagner Chief Prigozhin's Feud with Defense Minister to Blow up in His Face." The Insider. theinsider.ru/en/politics/261697. Accessed 04 June, 2023.

111 Russian, BBC News. (May 19, 2023) "Ukraine War: What Do We Know about Gazprom's Private Army." The Best of BBC News Russian - in English. bbcrussian.substack.com/p/ukraine-war-gasproms-private-army. Accessed 05 June 2023.

112 Kyiv Post. (April 26, 2023) Gazprom's PMC mercenaries complained that Wagner threatened reprisals against them. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/16300>

113 Focht, Elizaveta, and Iliia Varabanov. (May 16, 2023) "Поток" под Бахмуткой. Что известно о ЧВК, связанных с "Газпромом." BBC News Русская служба. www.bbc.com/russian/features-65602020.

voy, created by Sergey Aksyonov, President of Crimea, and Ramzan Kadyrov, President of Chechnya.¹¹⁴

As seen previously, Wagner Group had serious competitors as other PMSCs were trying to gain legitimacy and power on the Ukrainian battlefield. According to Olekseyi Hetman, the proliferation of PMSCs is happening because: “political and military elites understand that they will not win this war. At some point, Russia will fail and everyone in the political and military elite circle is trying to get ready for when that happens. There will be a fight for power, and everyone will need their own private security”.¹¹⁵ This scenario, as well as the factor of economic benefits, could explain the appearance of several Russian PMSCs during the invasion of Ukraine.

114 Galeotti, M. [@MarkGaleotti] (July, 2023) Finally, there are what one could call territorial mercs, such as Convoy, established by Crimean head Sergei Aksenov, and, of course, Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechens. They have a powerful potential or actual local role, to be sure, but limited power projection potential 10/ [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MarkGaleotti/status/1675127720844328962>.

115 Olekseyi Hetman, military expert. (April 03, 2023). Personal communication (Personal interview)

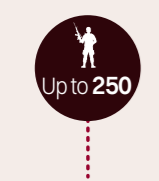
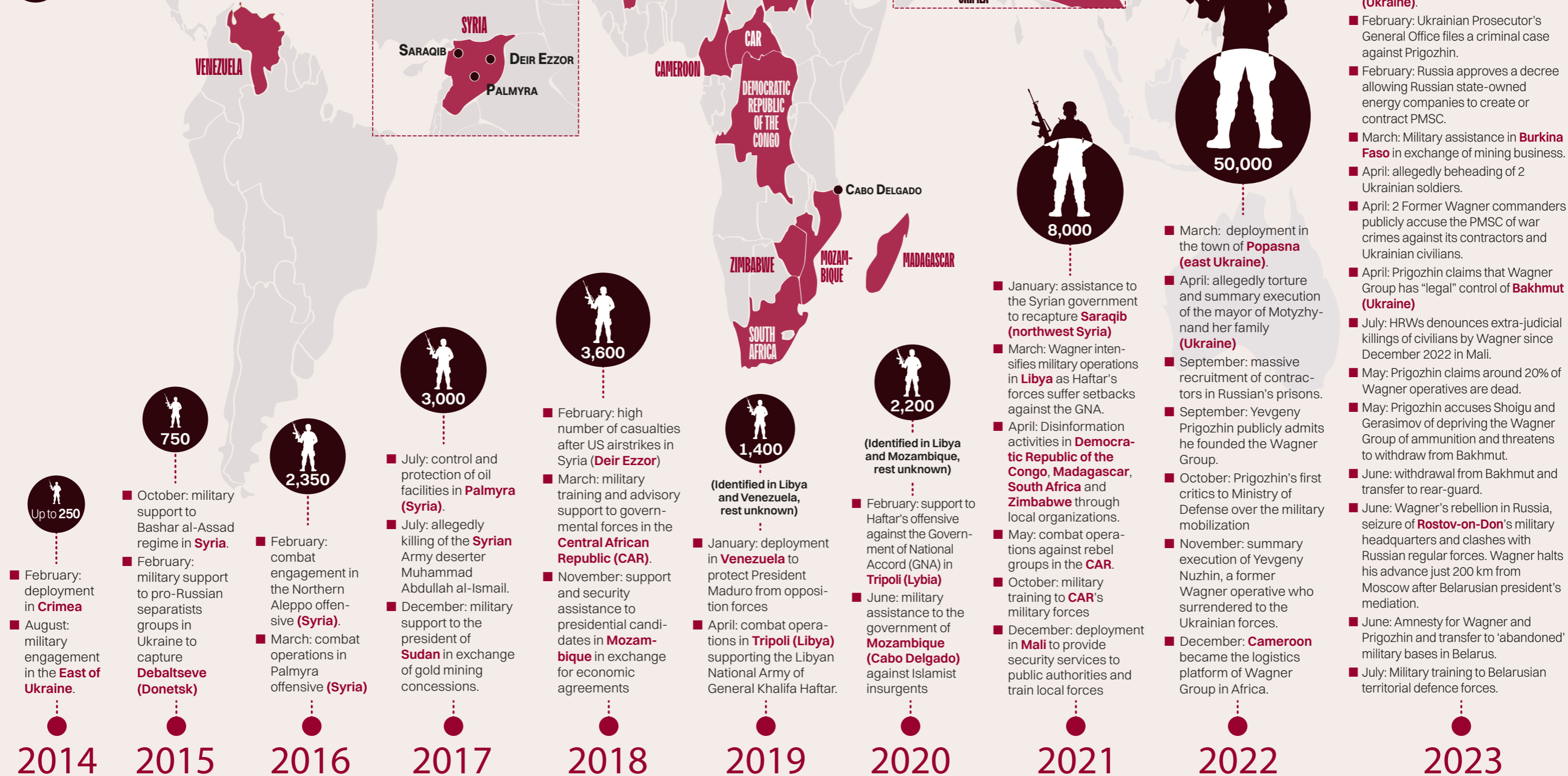
WAGNER GROUP UNCHAINED IN UKRAINE

Military, political and human rights impact of the Wagner Group since the large-scale invasion in 2022

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN THE EVOLUTION OF THE WAGNER GROUP SINCE 2014



NUMBER OF CONTRACTORS





III. POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC FACTORS BEHIND THE USE OF WAGNER

At the end of September 2022, Prigozhin admitted for the first time that he created Wagner Group in 2014 to defend the interest of Russia in Syria, Ukraine and other Arab, African and Latin American countries.¹¹⁶ That month, the chief of Wagner was recorded in a video recruiting inmates in a penal colony 300 km south of Moscow¹¹⁷ with the offer of a presidential pardon and a monthly salary of 100,000 rubles (1,000 euros). These public activities were a turning point for Wagner who until then had concealed its military operations and its relations with the Russian government. After these public announcements, the Kremlin referred to Prigozhin as a person that was making a “great contribution” to the war in Ukraine.¹¹⁸ This chapter intends to identify the key factors that explain the growing use of the PMSC Wagner Group during the large-scale invasion in Ukraine, including the political motivations of this newly unconcealed strategy.

WAGNER GROUP AS AN INSTRUMENT IN THE RUSSIAN GRAND MILITARY STRATEGY

Private Military and Security Companies, as any other non-state armed actor, can be used as proxies by powerful states to intervene in intra- and inter-state conflicts to achieve their national objectives while lowering the risk of retaliation. Andrew Mumford argues that during the Cold War the risk of nuclear war forced the US and USSR to find alternative strategies to project their power without escalatory risks.¹¹⁹ Since then, states have embraced proxy warfare strategies by systematically using human and technological surrogates to undermine the power of their adversaries and externalise the burden of armed conflicts.¹²⁰ In 2014, the rapid and surprise deployment of Wagner Group operatives among the so-called ‘little green men’ provided a tactical advantage in the seizure of the territories of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk.¹²¹ Despite the evidence of the military engagement of Russia in these events,¹²² the Kremlin officially denied their involvement and dissociated themselves from these military actors. Thus, in the first phase of the war, Wagner Group was a useful instrument in the chaos-inducing strategy of Putin to seize Ukrainian territories, maintaining plausible deniability of the military involvement of Russia in Ukraine.

116 Sauer, P. (September 26, 2022). Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>.

117 Triebert, C. (September 16, 2022). Video Reveals How Russian Mercenaries Recruit Inmates for Ukraine War. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/europe/russia-wagner-ukraine-video.html>.

118 Фохт, Є., Івшина, О., & Чурманова, К. (January 28, 2023). Путін і ПВК “Вагнер”. Як у Росії працює масове вербування в’язнів на війну з Україною. *BBC News Україна*. <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-64430928>.

119 Mumford, A. (2013). *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge. Polity Press).

120 Krieg, A., & Rickli, J. M. (2018). *Surrogate warfare: the art of war in the 21st century?*.

121 Rondeaux, C. (2019). *Decoding the Wagner Group: Analysing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare*.

122 Czuperski, M., Herbst, J., Higgins, E., Polyakova, A., & Wilson, D. (2015). *Hiding in Plain Sight*. Op. Cit.

The evolution of the Russian PMSC industry reveals a complex network of power and influence which serves the Kremlin's economic and political interests. According to Candace Rondeaux, Russian PMSC operations support state-owned companies to project the power of Moscow abroad, a strategy that was also used during the Soviet period.¹²³

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For example, Moran Security Group provided anti-piracy security services to Neova Holdings Ltd and the Russian energy company Novaem Group to protect their global activities.¹²⁴ At that time Wagner Group was part of Concord, a holding company partially owned by Prigozhin, which provided security services to Russian extractive companies in Africa.¹²⁵ Another example is the PMSC Vegacy Strategic Services Ltd, which combined the protection of energy facilities in Syria with training activities to the pro-regime militia Liwa Al-Quds.¹²⁶ Putin used these com-

plex networks to project his power in line with Primakov's doctrine¹²⁷ which states that Russia should preserve its supremacy in the post-soviet space and prevent the expansion of NATO by any means.¹²⁸

These hidden and complex networks have reinforced Russia's proxy warfare strategy. The narrative of Wagner Group as a 'ghost army' attempted to justify the alleged unilaterality of Prigozhin. Santa Clara Business Law Chronicle reported that the Wagner Group's power hierarchy was "far from transparent", therefore, it was hard to establish "whether [it] is an autonomous entity or merely [...] operated by Putin".¹²⁹ However, Oleksandr Kovalenko, a Ukrainian military analyst, argued that the power that the Kremlin exerted over Wagner was reflected in the "three monopolies" awarded to Prigozhin: a military monopoly in Bakhmut, a monopoly to recruit prisoners, and a monopoly on receiving heavy weapons.¹³⁰ Despite this, the Kremlin persisted in systematically disassociating itself from the activities of Wagner and other Russian PMSCs. Dmytro Peskov, Kremlin

123 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit. p.6.

124 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit. p.42.

125 For more information see the investigative project: All Eyes on Wagner <https://alleyesonwagner.org/>.

126 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit. p.54.

127 Yevgueni Maksimovich Primakov was the Foreign Minister (1996-98) and President of the Russian Federation (1989-90). In the 90s he formulated a doctrine with significant influence over the foreign and defence policies of Russia.

128 Rumer, E. (June 5, 2019). The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254>.

129 Weeks, R., Cowan, J., & Duehring, K. (April 27, 2023). Wagner and Its Convoluting Legal Status. SCBC. <https://www.scbc-law.org/post/wagner-and-its-convoluted-legal-status>.

130 Oleksander Kovalenko (April 7, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

press secretary, insisted that the concept of PMSC did not exist in Russian legislation and thus, the government did not have any information about these groups.¹³¹ In this line, the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation prohibits the creation of and participation in any form of armed organisation within the territory, while also considering mercenaries as foreign combatants who are fighting against the Russian interest in territories outside Russia. Russian tribunals have condemned and accused nationals of mercenary activities for fighting against the Syrian government or the so-called DPR and LPR.¹³² However, Rondeaux affirms that this prohibition is a mere 'technicality' used as a tool to punish individuals who break the code of silence on covert operations.¹³³

The large-scale invasion created a new scenario for Wagner and the PMSC industry. In May 2022, despite several Russian mass media, including Russian 1, RIA Novosti and TASS, reporting about the activities of Wagner, the Kremlin continued to deny its relation with PMSCs. But, on January 13, 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defence publicly confirmed the participation of Wagner operations in the assault on Soledar, acknowledging the direct engagement of private contractors in combat operations.¹³⁴ Some months before, Prigozhin inaugurated the Wagner Group Center in St Petersburg under a joint stock company registration. According to the Moscow Times, "in its registration documents, [Wagner Center] described its activities as including business and management consulting, publishing, media, scientific development, and the leasing of ships and aeroplanes".¹³⁵ In this line, parallel regulations were created to facilitate the contracting of Wagner by Russian public agencies. In February 2023, Russian prime minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a regulation allowing energy companies to create, or contract the services of, private security organisations.¹³⁶ This allowed Russian public security and military agencies to acquire the services of PMSCs through contractual arrangements with state-owned energy companies.

Kremlin press secretary had insisted that the concept of PMSC did not exist in Russian legislation and thus, the government did not have any information about these groups.

131 Harding, L. (2020): *Shadow State: Murder, Mayhem and Russia's Remaking of the West*. London: Guardian Faber.

132 Фохт, Е., Івшина, О., & Чурманова, К. (January 28, 2023). Op. Cit.

133 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit. p.57.

134 See footnote 130.

135 Times, T. M. (January 17, 2023). *Wagner Group Becomes Legal Entity in Russia* - BBC. The Moscow Times. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/17/wagner-group-becomes-legal-entity-in-russia-bbc-a79967>.

136 Law, T. (February 11, 2023). *The Mystery of Gazprom's New "Private Military Company."* Time. <https://time.com/6254708/gazprom-private-military-wagner-group-russia/>.

The public engagement of Wagner in combat operations in Ukraine created a new framework to understand Russian proxy warfare strategy. On the one hand, **Wagner's communication campaign and Prigozhin's fierce criticism of the MoD made the existence of direct relations between the Kremlin and Prigozhin obvious**, which limited Putin's capacity for plausible deniability. **By contrast, the Russian government still maintained the narrative that PMSCs were illegal in Russia** and therefore Wagner Group was publicly perceived as a ghost army that acted independently from the Russian authorities and Russian people.¹³⁷ In this sense, Nazar Zabolotnyy explained that Vladimir Putin became president in 2001 during the second Chechen war and knew the consequences of public dissent to war, which is why he relied on the Wagner Group to avoid public outrage for large-scale mobilisation and deaths among the regular army.¹³⁸

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By contrast, the Russian government still maintained the narrative that PMSCs were illegal in Russia and therefore Wagner Group was publicly perceived as a ghost army that acted independently from the Russian authorities and Russian people.¹³⁷ In this sense, Nazar Zabolotnyy explained that Vladimir Putin became president in 2001 during the second Chechen war and knew the consequences of public dissent to war, which is why he relied on the Wagner Group to avoid public outrage for large-scale mobilisation and deaths among the regular army.¹³⁸

In this regard, the Center for Strategic and International Studies indicated that supporting PMSCs like Prigozhin's could be cheaper than maintaining a regular army or paying compensation to soldiers or their families in the event of injury or death.¹³⁹ It also enabled Russia to "hide personnel losses from the [...] public [as they] do not count in the official Russian Ministry of Defence reports of how many servicemen have died or been injured".¹⁴⁰ Another high-ranking military official affirmed that the support of Russian society to Putin's war would decrease because of the death of regular army members and added: "nobody asks about Wagner and their deaths".¹⁴¹ Indeed, due to the 'alegal' status of Wagner Group, they did not need to publicly report their losses. Therefore, Putin's investment in the communication campaign of Wagner should be understood as a continuation of the hybrid warfare strategy where PMSCs play a key role in pursuing national objectives globally. The reality is that the use of proxies is, and will remain, a critical element in the Russian grand strategy.¹⁴²

137 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit. p.59 .

138 Sauer, P., & Roth, A. (September 24, 2022). Expect dissent to rise as Putin's call-up brings Ukraine war home to Russians. The Observer. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/24/putins-call-up-brings-ukraine-war-home-to-russians> .

139 Rácz, A. (September 21, 2020). Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State. www.csis.org. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.

140 Nazar Zabolotnyy (April 7, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

141 Ukrainian military commander (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

142 Rondeaux, C. (2019). Op. Cit.

THE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF WAGNER GROUP ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Russia was not ready for a long term conflict with Ukraine. The Kremlin was confident it would seize Kyiv in a matter of days through a large-scale invasion from the north, east and south of Ukraine. But by the end of 2022, Russia had suffered significant military defeats in the battles for Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson that resulted in the withdrawal of troops and the liberation of those territories. These defeats unveiled acute operational misjudgements, massive losses within regular forces and the incapacity to break the resilience of the Ukrainian people.¹⁴³ Ultra-nationalist sectors within the Russian society strongly criticised these military decisions and demanded a change of strategy and new wave of military mobilisation.¹⁴⁴ In September 2022, Putin declared a partial mobilisation of 300,000 reservists¹⁴⁵ and in October appointed Sergey Surovikin as commander of the Joint Task Force in the 'Special military operation'. With the appointment of Surovikin, **Wagner Group gained more relevance and was equipped with heavy weapons and military machinery to increase their capacity to engage in combat operations.**

Wagner Group achieved symbolic victories in the battlefield. According to the political analyst Mykola Davydiuk, unlike the Russian regular army Wagner delivered results and was able to provide emotional and symbolic victories.¹⁴⁶ The first important victory of Wagner Group was the gaining of control of Soledar in January 2023, a success that Prigozhin announced widely on social media.¹⁴⁷ In May, Prigozhin also announced the seizure of Bakhmut but also the loss of 20,000 of his operatives.¹⁴⁸ The military tactics of Wagner are considered a key factor to understanding their victories. During the first phase of the war, 1,000 Wagner operatives with a high level of military experience were deployed in the Donbass region and Crimea to undertake a disruption operation to help seize these territories. In the full-scale war, the engagement of Wagner increased and with it their combat units in Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ **Among the 50,000 operatives deployed in Ukraine, around 10,000 had extensive experience fighting in Syria, Libya, CAR and other African countries.** These soldiers led successful special operations to sabotage critical infrastructures in several Ukrainian locations.¹⁵⁰ In combat operations the inmates recruited by Prigozhin were used as 'can-

143 Maksak, H. (June 16, 2023). Wagner as tool of Russian geopolitical strategy: lessons from Ukraine. Easterncircles.com. <https://easterncircles.com/en-wagner-russian-tool-geopolitical-strategy>.

144 Aljazeera. (November 1, 2022). In Russia, patriotic critics speak out on Ukraine war failures. [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/1/the-rise-of-the-patriotic-critic-in-russia). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/11/1/the-rise-of-the-patriotic-critic-in-russia>.

145 Sauer, P. (September 21, 2022). Op. Cit.

146 Mykola Davydiuk (April 3, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

147 Walker, S., Beaumont, P., & Sabbagh, D. (January 10, 2023). Head of Russia's Wagner group says his troops have taken control of Soledar. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/head-of-wagner-group-says-his-troops-have-taken-control-of-soledar>.

148 Aljazeera. (May 28, 2023). Wagner chief says 20,000 of its troops killed in Bakhmut battle. [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/25/wagner-chief-says-20000-of-its-troops-killed-in-bakhmut-battle). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/25/wagner-chief-says-20000-of-its-troops-killed-in-bakhmut-battle>.

149 Maksak, H. (June 16, 2023). Op. Cit.

150 Ukrainian soldier (April 1, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

non fodder' to identify Ukrainian positions, and later the special assault troops were sent in. Ukrainian soldiers interviewed during field research affirmed that these special troops moved in the battleground in a very effective manner and that they had great difficulty targeting them.¹⁵¹ Moreover, according to Ukrainian military experts and soldiers, Wagner was better equipped than the regular army and had their own artillery, helicopters and reconnaissance drones.¹⁵²

The alegal status of Wagner in Russia, combined with the complex corporate structure in which it was framed, makes it difficult to bring anyone to account for the commission of war crimes and other atrocities in armed conflict contexts.

Moreover, according to Ukrainian military experts and soldiers, Wagner was better equipped than the regular army and had their own artillery, helicopters and reconnaissance drones.¹⁵²

Another key explanation of the increasing use of Wagner group is that they perform duties considered 'dirty war'. The use of convicts as 'cannon fodder' in the battleground, the beheading of POWs¹⁵³ to inject fear into and demoralise the Ukrainian army and prevent further military mobilisation¹⁵⁴, together with the mistreatment of private contractors by their commanders, were systematic practices of Wagner Group. These situations occurred because PMSCs operate without

proper state oversight and accountability. According to the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries, "international law does not contain any provisions which address the outsourcing of state functions to PMSCs".¹⁵⁵ **PMSCs are not bound by the Geneva Conventions and contractors have not generally been sentenced for war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide.** Likewise, the alegal status of Wagner in Russia, combined with the complex corporate structure in which it was framed, makes it difficult to bring anyone to account for the commission of war crimes and other atrocities in armed conflict contexts.¹⁵⁶

151 Ibidem.

152 Ukrainian soldier (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

153 Sauer, P. (April 18, 2023). Op. Cit.

154 Faulconbridge, G. (June 5, 2023). Russia says it thwarted major Ukrainian offensive, Kyiv says Moscow spreads lies. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-says-its-forces-thwarted-major-ukrainian-offensive-2023-06-04/>.

155 Mquirmi, N. (2022). Navigating in a Grey Zone: Regulating PMSCs. https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2022-04/PB_27-22_Mquirmi.pdf.

156 Lebedev, F., & Light, F. (March 16, 2023) Wagner's convicts tell of horrors of Ukraine war. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-wagner/>.

WAGNER GROUP AS A FUNCTIONAL TOOL TO INCREASE THE RUSSIAN ARMY'S MOTIVATION AND MILITARY RECRUITMENT

The liberation of Kherson in November 2022 was interpreted as a major military defeat by Russian public opinion. Some sources considered that the reasons for this defeat were a combination of, on the one hand, the 'poor performance' of the Russian army due to the lack of command and control of units and, on other hand, the total resistance of Ukrainians and the support they received from the West including the provision of new weapons systems such as the multiple launch rocket system HIMARS.¹⁵⁷ In the Ukrainian's fierce struggle against the Russian invasion it is crucial to highlight the nonviolent civil resistance that was organised across the country and which included physical interposition to Russian military convoys and tanks in northern regions of Ukraine, systematic protests in the urban areas against the invaders in southern regions, or the non-cooperation actions from the public education and health sectors in Kherson and Zaporizhia.¹⁵⁸ **These factors demoralised the Russian regular army soldiers that did not understand what the military and political goals of the so-called 'Special Operation in Ukraine' were.**¹⁵⁹ According to a military expert, Russian combatants were not expecting this fierce resistance, so their motivation decreased gradually.¹⁶⁰

In the Ukrainian's fierce struggle against the Russian invasion it is crucial to highlight the nonviolent civil resistance that was organised across the country.

Russia aspired to reach Kyiv in a matter of days and expected to receive key support from various sectors of the Ukrainian population. By contrast, the resistance to Russia's invasion, even in regions traditionally more exposed to Russian propaganda, was fierce. This contradicted the initial narrative of the Kremlin based on the idea that the objective of the 'Special Operation' was to liberate the Ukrainian people from 'the fascist regime in Kyiv'.¹⁶¹

Wagner Group provided a new impetus on the battlefield which motivated the Russian regular army. According to Maria Kucherenko and Anton Muraveinyk, experts belonging to the foundation Come Back Alive, Wagner's operatives were more motivated than the

157 Gatopoulos, A. (August 24, 2022). Six months of war in Ukraine: Five key military takeaways. [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/8/24/six-months-of-war-in-ukraine-five-key-military-takeaways). <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/8/24/six-months-of-war-in-ukraine-five-key-military-takeaways>.

158 Daza, F. (2022). Ukrainian Nonviolent Civil Resistance in the Face of War. Novact and ICIP.

159 Ukrainian military commander (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

160 Ukrainian military commander (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

161 Putin, V. (February 24, 2022). Address by the President of the Russian Federation. President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

Russian regular army.¹⁶² For the analyst Nazar Zabolotny, the Russian army lacked highly-qualified officers, soldiers joined the army due to the lack of economic opportunities.¹⁶³ This would seem to be supported by the investigations conducted by Bellingcat described the profile of several Russian soldiers that fought in Ukraine, revealing their poor economic background.¹⁶⁴ **Some Ukrainian soldiers interviewed during our field research affirmed that the engagement of Wagner operatives on the Eastern flank increased the competition with the Russian regular forces leading to more effectiveness.**¹⁶⁵ In principle, this situation could have been limited to those areas where Wagner personnel were operating, but through their communication campaign Wagner group was able to disseminate their combat tactics and progress in the battlefield with the aim of increasing Russian public support for the war and motivation among the regular army.

Wagner personnel's motivation ranged from financial interest, ideological aspects and/or, in the case of the contracted prisoners, the promise of freedom. In the summer of 2023, Prigozhin began recruiting Russian prisoners to fight in the Donbas region of Ukraine promising a pardon from Putin after six months of military engagement, and a monthly salary. Between August 2022 and January 2023, Prigozhin allegedly managed to recruit up to 50,000 prisoners,¹⁶⁶ 10,000 out of the 20,000 deployed had died in Bakhmut as of May 2023.¹⁶⁷ Despite the huge risks, many inmates joined the Wagner Group¹⁶⁸ as it was their only chance of freedom and an opportunity to support their families financially. According to Gennady, a prisoner turned soldier from the Bryansk region: "If I survive, I survive, there'll be a change in my life, and I'll also get some money".¹⁶⁹ In contrast, professional soldiers in the Wagner Group are told to be primarily motivated by profit. After all, PMSCs are "profit-motivated, expeditionary groups that make a business of the conduct of war"¹⁷⁰. According

162 Maria Kucherenko and Anton Muraveinyk (April 6, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

163 Nazar Zabolotnyy (April 7, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

164 Czuperski, M., Herbst, J., Higgins, E., Polyakova, A., & Wilson, D. (2015). Putin's War in Ukraine. Hiding in Plain Sight.

165 Ukrainian soldier (April 1, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

166 Pallot, J. (March 7, 2023). Lies, damn lies and statistics — how many prisoners has Wagner really recruited? Riddle Russia. <https://ridl.io/lies-damn-lies-and-statistics-how-many-prisoners-has-wagner-really-recruited/>.

167 DW. (May 24, 2023). Ukraine updates: Wagner Group reports 10,000 prisoner deaths - DW - 05/24/2023. Dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-updates-wagner-group-reports-10000-prisoner-deaths/a-65714776>.

168 Lebedev, F., & Light, F. (March 16, 2023). Op. Cit.

169 Koroleva, A. (August 18, 2022). "Prigozhin says right away 80% will not be coming back". How inmates are recruited into Wagner PMC to fight in Ukraine. The Insider. <https://theins.ru/en/confession/254206>.

170 Schroeder, E., Wilde, G., Sherman, J., & Herr, Trey. (2022, July 25). Hackers, Hoodies, and Helmets: Technology and the Changing Face of Russian Private Military Contractors. Atlantic Council. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/technology-change-and-the-changing-face-of-russian-private-military-contractors/>.

to Pravda, Wagner Group mercenaries earned between \$1450 and \$3480 monthly.¹⁷¹ A part of the Wagner Group soldiers were also motivated by ideology: “We have a contract. A contract with the company. A contract with our family. With our conscience”, and “We know we’re going to hell. But we’ll be the best in hell”.¹⁷² Since the group began its operations in 2014, Prigozhin has been investing a great deal of his time and money in building Wagner’s brand nationally¹⁷³ and globally.¹⁷⁴ In this regard, he used targeted ads, bot factories, propaganda movies and TV recruitment ads to promote the group’s image. In one of his videos, Prigozhin vaguely said that the Wagner Group’s ideology was the “struggle for justice”.¹⁷⁵ Many Wagner soldiers, especially those who joined the group prior to the 2022 invasion, seems to support Nazi ideology as well as ultra-nationalist and white supremacist movements in Russia and abroad.¹⁷⁶

Many Wagner soldiers, especially those who joined the group prior to the 2022 invasion, seems to support Nazi ideology as well as ultra-nationalist and white supremacist movements in Russia and abroad.

Putin’s promotion of Wagner at military and communicative level was a strategy to attract public support and facilitate the military mobilisation. Since the beginning of the large-scale invasion, the Kremlin’s war narrative changed very often, from the denazification of Ukraine to fighting against NATO’s troops in Ukraine, especially after significant defeats on the battlefield.¹⁷⁷ In this context, important sectors of Russian society did not understand what the objectives of the war were, a phenomenon that was reflected in the anti-war demonstrations¹⁷⁸ in Moscow and other cities of Russia and especially the massive migra-

171 Roshchyna, V. (2022, December 21). An “orchestra” of murderers: Who are the Wagner Group mercenaries fighting against Ukraine? *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/12/21/7379589/>.

172 A quote from the propagandist movie “Best in Hell”

173 Webber, L. (February 7, 2023). Inside the Wagner Group’s propaganda machine. *UnHerd*. <https://unherd.com/thepost/inside-the-wagner-groups-propaganda-machine/>

174 Bulos, N. (April 25, 2023). Welcome to the Wagner-verse, where action films serve up propaganda for Russia’s notorious mercenary army. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-04-25/russia-wagner-military-contractor-propaganda-campaign>

175 Kurmanaev, A. (March 14, 2023). Russia’s Mercenary Chief Prepares Ground for a Political Advance. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-bakhmut.html>

176 Castner, B. (June 1, 2022). The White Power Mercenaries Fighting For The Lost Cause Around the World. *Time*. <https://time.com/6180611/white-power-mercenaries-fighting-the-lost-cause/>.

177 Vadym Miskyi (April 15, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

178 Tenisheva, A. (February 3, 2023). “I Couldn’t Stay Silent”: Anti-War “Flower Protests” Spread to 60 Cities Across Russia. *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/03/i-couldnt-stay-silent-anti-war-flower-protests-spread-to-60-cities-across-russia-a80129>.

tion of Russian citizens to other countries to avoid the military mobilisation. During the last year, at least one million Russians have fled the country.¹⁷⁹ Putin was eager for a new narrative based on real facts on the ground to motivate citizens around the defence of Russia's interests in Ukraine. Wagner's symbolic victories on the battlefield and the patriotic messages from Prigozhin helped serve this purpose, but also contributed to the consolidation of the Wagner group's brand and its recruitment system.

WAGNER GROUP AS AN IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT TO CAPTURE FAR-RIGHT POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SUPPORT

The public profile of Wagner group grew in parallel with their symbolic victories on the battleground. From the moment Prigozhin admitted he was the founder of Wagner group, he became very active in the public domain with frequent videos on social media channels describing the progress of his operatives on the battlefield, criticising the military strategies of the Russian army, claiming that his soldiers defended the true patriotic values and national interest of Russia. His provocative style was very effective at drawing the attention of public opinion and the support of political leaders in Russia. From the beginning of the Russian's invasion of Ukraine, the number of subscribers to one of Wagner's Telegram channels increased by more than 250%,¹⁸⁰ reaching 400,000 subscribers in March 2023.¹⁸¹ In October 2022, a national survey indicated that approximately 64% of responders had heard that the PMSC Wagner was operating in Ukraine and considered it acceptable to use private contractors on the side of Russia.¹⁸² In February 2023, another survey showed that 41% supported the role of Wagner in Ukraine.¹⁸³ These figures revealed that the atrocities committed by private contractors did not affect the Russian public support for Wagner's operations, a situation that can be explained by the systematic Russian propaganda and Wagner's communication strategy.

The popularity of Wagner group inside Russia, especially among younger people, fuelled the recruitment process. Billboards advertising Wagner appeared in the main Russian cities, at the end of 2022 Prigozhin opened a tech centre in St Petersburg under the name of Wagner Group Center and in the beginning of 2023 he announced the establishment

179 Etkind, A. (March 31, 2023). The people's desertion: why Russians are leaving the country. OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-demographics-depopulation-rate-abortion/>.

180 Kurmanaev, A. (March 14, 2023). Russia's Mercenary Chief Prepares Ground for a Political Advance. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-bakhmut.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>.

181 Molfar. (April 28, 2023). Prigozhin continues to develop the PMC Wagner. He invests in promotions and the brand as in a real company. www.molfar.global. <https://www.molfar.global/en-blog/development-of-wagner-pmc>.

182 Levada Center. (October 24, 2022). Participation of PMCs in the Ukrainian conflict. <https://www.levada.ru/En/2022/10/24/Participation-of-Pmcs-In-The-Ukrainian-Conflict/>. <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/10/24/participation-of-pmcs-in-the-ukrainian-conflict/>.

183 For more information see Russian Field: <https://russianfield.com/>.

of 42 recruitment centres across Russia, including the inauguration of Little Wagnerite, a patriotic youth club where pro-war exhibitions were held.¹⁸⁴ According to the investigative community Molfar, this group was first created on the social platform VKontakte under the name of Wagnerianok Youth Club with the aim of organising patriotic events celebrating Russia's heritage and promoting political discussions with speakers who promoted 'true Russian values' and training activities including preparation of youth for military service.¹⁸⁵

Behind this expansion there was a sophisticated and effective communication strategy to promote Wagner's brand through Prigozhin's media factory. The communication apparatus of Wagner group was interrelated with Prigozhin's 'media factory', composed of the RIA Fan Agency, network of websites and contracted military bloggers, amongst others.¹⁸⁶ Wagner group used mostly digital and social media, such as Telegram channels and VKontakte, to disseminate information about jobs and training opportunities, military blogs and posts and direct messages from Prigozhin.¹⁸⁷ Vacancies and other ads were also posted on websites such as Avito, JobVK, GorodRabot and even Pornhub. It is estimated that these websites received 2.6 million views in 2022.¹⁸⁸ Practical information was combined with patriotic values and a powerful anti-elite narrative to reach younger, tech-savvy Russian war supporters. The penetration of war narratives was also reinforced by Prigozhin's film industry. The film 'Touriste' produced by Aurum Films, showed Wagner's contractors fighting against rebel groups and saving the Central African Republic from corrupt politicians.¹⁸⁹ The film 'The Best in Hell', with a war game style, showed the successful combat operations of Wagner's personnel in Mariupol, Ukraine.¹⁹⁰ The glorification of Wagner attempted to increase its popularity and attract the interest of youngsters to the PMSC network, ideally ending in military recruitment. In addition, Wagner group's public relations branch, the Foundation for the Protection of National Values, produced several short documentaries in which Maxim Shugaley, an intelligence analyst who worked in Libya for Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, talks about the negative influence and neocolonialist strategies of Western powers in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁹¹ According to Vadym Denysenko, director of the Ukrainian Institute for Future (IfF), Wagner's communication campaign was creative and effective in targeting a broad sector of Russian society.¹⁹² The Institute for Future is intensively analysing do-

184 Molfar. (March 17, 2023). Wagnerianok Youth Club: teenage branch of the Wagner PMC. Wwww.molfar.global. <https://www.molfar.global/en-blog/wagners-youth-club>.

185 See footnote 181.

186 For more information see CivilM+: <https://civilmplus.org/en/actors/federal-news-agency-fan/>.

187 Molfar. (April 28, 2023). Op. Cit.

188 See footnote 179.

189 The film can be watched in this Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSsMOJCT6PE>.

190 The film can be watched here: <https://www.bilibili.tv/en/video/2043750237>.

191 Laruelle, M., & Sanz, K. (June 28, 2022). The Wagnerverse: Pop culture and the heroization of Russian mercenaries. Russiapost.info. <https://russiapost.info/politics/wagnerverse>.

192 Vadym Denysenko (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

mestic affairs in Russia and in one of their reports, “Kremlin Towers Who will Share Putin’s Legacy?”, indicates that Prigozhin was also intending to build his own media empire through the creation of the ‘Patriot’ media group, a communication platform aligned with the ideological positions of the Russian Imperial Movement.¹⁹³

The Wagner group’s branding was a strategy of the Kremlin to gain popular support by developing narratives rooted in imperialism and the defence of nationhood, while distracting the attention from military inoperancy and political corruption.¹⁹⁴ According to Molfar, Wagner’s communication campaign crystallised Putin’s interest in capturing the ultra-nationalist movement¹⁹⁵, which he perceived as a political threat. The far-right movement evolved in Russia during the Chechen War in 2000 and within the criminal subculture group called AUE (Prisoners’ Criminal Unity in Russian), that emerged in 2015.¹⁹⁶ In this sense, **Wagner’s brand combined a subculture of crime with ultra-orthodox conservative principles and values of strict hierarchy,¹⁹⁷ which was reflected in the use of symbols from criminal gangs, death cults and the Nazi regime.¹⁹⁸** This ideological framework was heavily influenced by the political philosopher and founder of the National Bolshevik Party, Aleksandr Dugin, considered in Russia as the ‘spiritual-guide’ of the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹⁹ Prigozhin, as an ex-convict, was portrayed as the ‘Pajan’ (cell leader) who was awarding medals to soldiers that show bravery in the battlefield,²⁰⁰ who was visiting the frontline to accompany his soldiers²⁰¹ and a leader who provided victories in Ukraine, in contrast with the Russian Ministry of Defense. With this profile, Prigozhin was well-positioned to lead a generation rooted in hyper-masculinity roles, anti-establishment values and a modern cultural code in Russia based on an aesthetics of death and trendy crime.²⁰² In this context, **Prigozhin’s mission in Ukraine seemed to be much more about political and ideological interest than business.²⁰³** The symbol-

193 Ukrainian Institute for the Future. (2023, May 26). Kremlin Towers. Who will share Putin’s legacy? | Український інститут майбутнього. P.54 <https://Uifuture.org/Publications/Kremlin-Towers-Who-Will-Share-Putins-Legacy/>.

194 Rondeaux, C. (February 13, 2023). Chasing the Wagner Group: Why It’s So Hard to Get a Handle on Putin’s Ghost Army. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/wagner-group-putin-ghost-army/>.

195 Molfar. (April 28, 2023). Op. Cit.

196 Ukrainian military expert (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

197 Isabella, T. (May 12, 2022). Perspective | The far-right mystical writer who helped shape Putin’s view of Russia. Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/05/12/dugin-russia-ukraine-putin/>.

198 Castner, B. (June 1, 2022). The White Power Mercenaries Fighting For The Lost Cause Around the World. Time. <https://time.com/6180611/white-power-mercenaries-fighting-the-lost-cause/>.

199 Ukrainian military expert (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

200 Molfar. (April 28, 2023). Op. Cit.

201 Webber, L. (February 7, 2023). Op. Cit.

202 Maria Kucherenko and Anton Muraveinyk (April 6, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview]; Ukrainian military expert (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

203 Maksak, H. (June 16, 2023). P.21. Op. Cit.

ogy and narrative used by Wagner contributed to this endeavour. Wagner's messages included anti-colonial narrative, defence of 'true' Russian values, historical revisionism and celebration of soviet victories and the 'cult of the fallen' which accelerated the urgency to fight while promoting other heroic values.²⁰⁴

The far-right ideological movement was also represented by a new media elite led by pro-war ultra-nationalist bloggers who established a profitable synergy between the Wagner group, Russian oligarchs and the Kremlin. Russian military bloggers set social media ablaze with hate speech narratives and the myth of Novorossiia, a Russian imperialist project which claims the territories of south-eastern Ukraine,²⁰⁵ while criticising the failures and ineffectiveness of the Russian military.²⁰⁶ The massive audience these bloggers had in the digital realm was translated into power in the political arena. Putin was sensitive to the ultra-nationalist sectors as was demonstrated in the narratives he used during the large scale invasion.²⁰⁷ For instance, one of the most prominent Wagner's bloggers, Maksim Fomin, co-moderator of the social media account Reverse Side of The Medal (RSOTM), demanded in May the military mobilisation of reservists, a decision that was taken in September 2022.²⁰⁸ Grey Zone, another key Telegram channel run by an anonymous administrator, promoted the military tactics of Wagner and also the strict code of conduct, including the execution by sledgehammer of Yevyeny Nuzhin, a private contractor that had surrendered to the Ukrainian Army.

The Wagner group's branding was a strategy of the Kremlin to gain popular support by developing narratives rooted in imperialism and the defence of nationhood, while distracting the attention from military inoperancy and political corruption.

204 Maria Kucherenko and Anton Muraveinyk (April 6, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

205 The myth of Novorossiia or New Russia is an attempt to justify the DNR and LNR political projects which is based on the idea that Russia should reclaim the territories of the Ukrainian southern-eastern flank and liberate the Ukrainian people. For information see: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/donbasprop-aganda>

206 Dalton, B. (February 14, 2023). A Field Guide to Wagner Group Bloggers: Russia's New Mercenary Media Elite. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/wagner-group-bloggers-field-guide/>.

207 Child, D. (August 23, 2022). Who is Russian ultranationalist Alexander Dugin? [www.aljazeera.com. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/23/who-is-russian-ultranationalist-alexander-dugin](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/23/who-is-russian-ultranationalist-alexander-dugin).

208 See footnote 204.

Apart from glorifying soldiers of fortune, these military bloggers were financial gears for Wagner Group and other paramilitary organisations such as the Task Force Rusich. According to Ben Dalton's investigations, Yevgeny Rasskazov, the administrator of Topaz Speaks's Telegram channel, made frequent appeals for people to give donations to these military groups.²⁰⁹ Therefore, the new generation of ultra-nationalist bloggers was a key component of Prigozhin's communicative strategy because they acted as recruitment and financing motors for the military campaign.²¹⁰ Furthermore, this online network hid an operative connection between Wagner Group and two armed white supremacist organisations: the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and the abovementioned Task Force Rusich. The RIM was a far-right and white supremacist armed group created in 2002 in Russia that had provided training and exported combatants to fight in Ukraine from 2014 onwards,²¹¹ while Rusich was another paramilitary group that engaged in combat in Ukraine.²¹² Although Wagner, RIM and Rusich had different organisational structures, evidence demonstrates that Wagner recruited people from the other two organisations. According to the analysts Rondeaux and Dalton, all three groups shared ideological values, had strong ties in the digital realm and seemed to be under the control of the Russian security agencies.²¹³

WAGNER AS AN AID TO PUTIN'S INTERNAL BALANCING ACT

The military defeats of Russia in Ukraine were difficult for significant sectors of Russian society to accept. Dissenting voices emerged from nationalist groups that demanded a change of strategy. The appointment of Sergey Surovikin as commander of the 'Special Military Operation in Ukraine' in October 2022 was an institutional reaction to this situation and a political victory for Ramzan Kadirov, President of the Republic of Chechnya, Prigozhin and other leaders of ultranationalist groups. The role of Wagner on the battlefield increased significantly and key results were obtained. In parallel, the Kremlin invested in Prigozhin's aggressive communication campaign, especially targeting the new ultranationalist media elite. This strategy was beneficial for Putin in terms of increasing support for the war and contributing to the recruitment process.

209 See footnote 204.

210 Team, C. (July 29, 2022). How Pro-Russian Groups Are Using Crypto Donations to Fund the War in Ukraine. Chainalysis. <https://blog.chainalysis.com/reports/pro-russian-crypto-donations-war-in-ukraine/>.

211 University, S., Stanford, & Complaints, C. 94305 C. (February 1, 2021). MMP: Russian Imperial Movement. Cisac.fsi.stanford.edu. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>.

212 Townsend, M. (December 11, 2022). Neo-Nazi Russian militia appeals for intelligence on Nato member States. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/11/neo-nazi-russian-militia-appeals-for-intelligence-on-nato-member-states>.

213 Rondeaux, C., & Dalton, B. (February 22, 2023). Putin's Stealth Mobilization: Russian Irregulars and the Wagner Group's Shadow Command Structure. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/putin-mobilization-wagner-group/>.

However, according to the Institute for Studies of War, the long term support of these far-right groups could be in question if the total victory in Ukraine is achieved at the expense of Russia's global position and internal stability.²¹⁴ In January 2023, Surovikin was replaced by Gerasimov and from then on the autonomy of Prigozhin reduced gradually.²¹⁵ In February 2023, Prigozhin began to disseminate videos in cyberspace in which he almost explicitly accused the Ministry of Defence of "high treason" that had led to his men "dying *en masse*".²¹⁶ In response, the generals banned Prigozhin from recruiting prisoners to the Wagner Group and allegedly stopped the supply of ammunition to his units in Bakhmut. As a result, according to leaked US intelligence documents, in February 2023 Prigozhin had a meeting with Putin in which he asked the president to restore his monopoly on the recruitment of inmates and facilitate the recruitment of foreign fighters.²¹⁷ Contrary to Prigozhin's expectations, the leaked FSB intercepts indicate that Putin supported his generals and recommended the chief of Wagner to discuss his concerns with Shoigu and Gerasimov.²¹⁸ Therefore, when Prigozhin's rhetoric became a threat to the internal power system, Putin counterbalanced the situation and reinforced the position of his military leadership. In light of this new situation, in June 2023, Prigozhin announced that 99% of his troops had retreated from Bakhmut²¹⁹ and some days later Putin announced that all armed volunteers and groups fighting in Ukraine would have to sign contracts with the Russian MoD.²²⁰ Prigozhin rejected this decision and embarked on a public tour with Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer who had been convicted in 2011 in the US but exchanged for an American prisoner in 2022.²²¹

The rebellion of Wagner revealed the internal conflicts in Russian politics and the weaknesses of Putin. On June 23, Prigozhin announced a 'march for justice' to stop the 'evil' within Russia's military leadership. The next day, Wagner operatives seized the Russian

214 Institute for the Study of the War. (October 18, 2022). Institute for the Study of War. Institute for the Study of War. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/putin-track-disappoint-multiple-competing-factions-russia>.

215 Dettmer, J. (February 22, 2023). Russia's military chiefs go to war ... with each other. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/yevgeny-prigozhins-ramzan-kadryov-feud-with-russia-top-brass-boils-over/>

216 The Moscow Times. Times, T. M. (February 21, 2023). Wagner Head Accuses Russia's Defense Ministry of Treason. *The Moscow Times*. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/21/wagner-head-accuses-russias-defense-ministry-of-treason-a80295>.

217 Ilyushina, M. (May 5, 2023). Leaked U.S. files show deep rift between Russian military and Wagner chief. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/05/wagner-russia-ukraine-discord-leak/?fbclid=IwAR1WnbSNzO71dHwe_7J5L5CezZm0TbIZnfTIRxP4NkoX9ZyzYs6tq6WcJnQ.

218 See footnote 216.

219 Tsurkan, K. (June 2, 2023). *Prigozhin accuses Russian Defense Ministry of placing mines along Wagner exit routes from Bakhmut*. *The Kyiv Independent*. <https://kyivindependent.com/prigozhin-says-russian-defense-ministry-laid-mines/>.

220 Sauer, P., & Roth, A. (June 14, 2023). Putin sides with military chiefs over placing Wagner under direct control. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/14/vladimir-putin-sides-with-military-chiefs-placing-wagner-under-direct-control>.

221 Seddon, M. (June 14, 2023). Vladimir Putin sides with Russia's military in clash with Wagner. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/b9d91a08-0f89-4986-855b-42232c5291a6>.

army headquarters in Rostov-on-Don and advanced to Moscow. The Kremlin reacted by reinforcing security in Moscow and building obstacles in the main access points to the capital, while offering amnesty to the private contractors if they laid down their weapons. The mediation of the President of Belarus de-escalated the tension and Prigozhin stopped the rebellion and had pulled his troops out of Rostov by the end of the day. The agreement

The rebellion of Wagner revealed the internal conflicts in Russian politics and the weaknesses of Putin.

included the transfer of around 25,000 of Wagners' private contractors to an abandoned military base in Belarus without any criminal charges in Russia, including Prigozhin.²²² According to Mark Galeotti, **this crisis weakened Putin in terms of authority and support from the sectors of the military and National Guard** (in charge of internal security in Russia).²²³ In the aftermath of the rebellion the silence over Wagner in the Russian public opinion could

not hide the ongoing political clashes within the Russian political and military elite. For example, the Russian general Surovikin was interrogated (and subsequently released) over his alleged knowledge of the rebellion plan.²²⁴ However, after the mutiny Wagner continued recruiting and training their personnel in a new military base in Belarus²²⁵ and private contractors returned to Ukraine.²²⁶ Even so, the autonomy and capacity of Wagner was drastically reduced. The next period will show if Wagner is able to maintain its activity in Ukraine or will disappear from this war.

Wagner Group has contributed to increasing factionalism in Russia. According to Russian journalists Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan: "for Putin, Wagner has [...] become a crucial means to rein in the military, which he has long viewed as a potential threat to his rule, [as it refused] the usual forms of government and public oversight".²²⁷ Rob Lee, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in the United States, also notes that "Putin likes to use

222 For more information about the events, see: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/24/timeline-how-wagner-groups-revolt-against-russia-unfolded>.

223 Galeotti, M. (June 27, 2023). Mark Galeotti on Vladimir Putin's self-inflicted wounds. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2023/06/27/mark-galeotti-on-vladimir-putins-self-inflicted-wounds>.

224 Roshchina, O. (June 29, 2023). Russian General Surovikin was interrogated and released – Russian media. *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/29/7409165/>.

225 Koettl, C., Mellen, R., & Khavin, D. (June 28, 2023). Satellite images show rapid construction at a deserted military base in Belarus. Is it Wagner's new home? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/world/europe/belarus-military-base-wagner-photos.html>.

226 Sauer, P. (June 26, 2023). Wagner fighters said to be returning to Ukraine bases as recruitment continues. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/26/wagner-fighters-said-to-be-returning-to-ukraine-bases-as-recruitment-continues>.

227 Soldatov, A., & Borogan, I. (May 12, 2023). *Why Putin Needs Wagner*. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/why-putin-needs-wagne>.



Prigozhin during the withdrawal of troops from Rostov-on-Don on June 24th 2023. Source: Reuters

competing factions as a way to maintain power”.²²⁸ This explains why the Russian president did not intervene in the internal conflict between Prigozhin and the generals (in particular, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov) as long as it remained behind closed doors and did not directly challenge his undisputed authority. The expert Zabolotnyy affirms that the majority of national leaders are preparing themselves for the escalation of political rivalries by developing their own small armies.²²⁹ The reinforcement of Wagner by Putin during 2022 may have responded to this situation. In this line, the political analyst Davydiuk argues that Wagner was also an instrument of Putin to threaten oligarchs who were disloyal to him. However, **Prigozhin’s popularity and his clashes with other strongmen, including his violation of ‘rule of silence’, increased political instability within the regime.** Davydiuk adds that Putin is ready to demolish Prigozhin’s project as soon

228 Ilyushina, M. (May 5, 2023). Leaked U.S. files show deep rift between Russian military and Wagner chief. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/05/wagner-russia-ukraine-discord-leak/?fbclid=IwAR1WnbSNzO71dHwe_7J5L5CezZm0TbIZnfTIRxP4NkoX9ZyzYs6tq6WcJnQ.

229 Nazar Zabolotnyy (April 7, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

as the war ends.²³⁰ Nonetheless, Prigozhin built key alliances with Sergey Aksyonov, Head of the Republic of Crimea; Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic; and Igor Sechin, CEO of Rosneft, amongst others,²³¹ although during Wagner's mutiny Kadyrov claimed he intended to stop Wagner. Only time will tell if these or other allies support Wagner's operations in Ukraine or if their support to Prigozhin was situational.

Likewise, the political ambitions of Prigozhin meant making a number of enemies that could jeopardise the future of Wagner group. In April 2023, Vladlen Tatarsky, the prominent military blogger, was killed in a bomb-attack in a central café in St Petersburg, just some metres away from the Old Customs House, Prigozhin's first restaurant.²³² The attack probably reflected the tensions between Prigozhin and other political figures in Russia. Indeed, the popularity of Wagner's chief increased in Russia through an intense and provocative communication campaign which caused conflict with the top military leadership.²³³ These conflicts are better understood through an awareness of the political ambitions of Prigozhin. For example, at the end of 2022 Prigozhin accused the mayor of St Petersburg, Alexander Blegov, of corruption and not being patriotic enough. By attacking Blegov, Prigozhin showed his interest in taking over the government of the city, but at the same time he broke one of the golden rules of the Russian political system, which is based on the notion that internal political conflicts must be resolved behind closed doors. Prigozhin lost this local political battle, revealing that his power is situational and depends on the desires and interests of Putin and the vertical power structure in Russia.²³⁴ According to Meduza journalist Lilia Iapparova, Prigozhin has established relations with the political party 'Just Russia' which can be understood as a survival strategy.²³⁵ Other key informants considered that a potential scenario was that Prigozhin could be appointed governor or elected in the Duma, without threatening Putin's power.²³⁶ However, in the light of recent developments, any political appointment of Prigozhin seems a very remote option, but still the popularity of the chief of Wagner could be instrumentalized by other political actors such as ultra-nationalists to demand a political change in the Kremlin.

Wagner's disappearance in Ukraine will not prevent the use of other Russian PMSCs in the war. After Wagner's withdrawal from Bakhmut, their continued activity in Ukraine depended on, among other factors, their capacity to increase the recruitment of personnel. The enlistment of prisoners was banned by Putin after the conflict with the Russian

230 Mykola Davydiuk (April 3, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview],

231 Maksak, H. (June 16, 2023). Op. Cit.

232 Sauer, P. (April 3, 2023). Russian pro-war military blogger killed in blast at St Petersburg cafe. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/02/russian-pro-war-military-blogger-killed-blast-st-petersburg-vladlen-tatarsky>.

233 Ukrainian Institute for the Future. (May 26, 2023). Op. Cit.

234 Mukhin, A. (December 6, 2022). Prigozhin vs. Petersburg Governor: What a Feud Reveals About Russia's Power Vertical. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88572>.

235 Lilia Iapparova (April 25, 2023). Personal communication [online interview].

236 Sergey Sukhankin (April 21, 2023). Personal communication [online interview].

military leadership,²³⁷ so Wagner focused on the recruitment of young people in marginalised communities, but this process also required maintaining Prigozhin's communication campaign which also depended on the desires of Putin. In this line, British intelligence reported that the Kremlin wanted to replace Wagner group with another PMSC, but at the time of writing this report there is no other PMSC with the same capabilities.²³⁸ Redut, another PMSC with close ties with the Russian Minister of Defense, has already conducted activities in the Donbas region,²³⁹ while Ukrainian intelligence informs that the oil giant Gazprom is creating a new PMSC through the new decree that allows the creation of PMSCs by state-owned energy businesses to protect their operations and facilities.²⁴⁰ Other oligarchs, such as Gennadiy Timchenko, have already contracted the services of other Russian PMSCs to protect energy infrastructures in Syria²⁴¹, and political strongmen in Russia such as Kadyrov are maintaining their own PMSCs to defend their interests. Overall, despite the fact that PMSCs are not legal in Russia, the regime will rely on private contractors as proxies in their hybrid warfare strategy, and as instruments to counterbalance domestic conflicts. At the international level, the pressure over Russian PMSCs is increasing, as an example the US has designated Wagner Group as a 'transnational criminal organisation'²⁴² and the EU and its Member States are following a similar path.²⁴³

237 Kurmanayev, A. (March 14, 2023). Russia's Mercenary Chief Prepares Ground for a Political Advance. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-bakhmut.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share>.

238 Ukrainska Pravda. (April 4, 2023). Russian leadership seeks alternative to Wagner Group - UK Intelligence. *Ukrainska Pravda*. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/04/4/7396320/>.

239 Ziener, M.; King, L.. (October 5, 2022). In the Ukraine war, a shadowy key player emerges: Russia's private army of mercenaries. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-10-05/in-the-ukraine-war-a-shadowy-key-player-emerges-russias-private-army>.

240 Law, T. (February 11, 2023). Op. Cit.

241 Dickinson, P. (April 4, 2023). Russia's Wagner Group is a feature not a bug of the Putin regime. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-wagner-group-is-a-feature-not-a-bug-of-the-putin-regime/>

242 For more information see: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>.

243 Le Monde, & AFP. (May 10, 2023). French Parliament calls on EU to list Wagner as "terrorist group." *Le Monde.fr*. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2023/05/10/french-parliament-calls-on-eu-to-list-wagner-as-terrorist-group_6026136_5.html.



IV. IMPACT OF THE USE OF PMSCs IN UKRAINE

While regular army forces are subject to strict international rules and scrutiny, PMSCs, given their unclear status and nature, can more easily disregard human rights and commit grave human rights violations or abuses without fearing consequences. Faced with this challenge, Shock Monitor has been analysing the impact on human rights of the privatisation of warfare since 2011. In this process, our research team has identified and systematised Russian PMSCs' activities, countries of operation and human rights abuses such as torture, extra-judicial executions, rapes, amongst others.²⁴⁴ Some of these behaviours have been observed in Ukraine since 2014. In this line, this chapter specifically analyses the most relevant human rights abuses since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2022. Concretely, the section focuses on the reasons why PMSCs', and in particular Wagner's, way of operating in Ukraine has led to severe human rights violations, along with how and why the veil of impunity covers their unlawful actions. Moreover, the chapter looks at the most recurrent documented violations with a view to understanding who the people at risk are and where further preventive measures need to be taken. However, before diving into the topic, a short legal framework will be presented.

THE LEGAL PUZZLE

The war in Ukraine is undisputedly an international armed conflict, therefore International Humanitarian Law (IHL) contained in the Four Geneva Conventions of 1949, its first Additional Protocol²⁴⁵ of 1977 and the Hague Conventions of 1907, as well as customary international humanitarian law, should be applied. This includes the Nuremberg Principles of individual criminal accountability in the framework of the international criminal law and the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court over crimes of aggression, crimes against humanity, breaches of the Geneva Convention and genocide. International human rights law also applies as it remains in effect in times of war, even though in some cases it might be superseded by humanitarian law as *lex specialis*²⁴⁶. These sets of rules protect civilians and aim to minimise harm to them during armed conflicts by defining means and methods of conducting war (*jus in bello*). In general, they establish that attacks should always respect the principles of discrimination (between civilians and combatants), proportionality and precaution. Although IHL recognizes the possibility of civilian casualties, it prohibits direct attack on civilians (anyone who is not a combatant)²⁴⁷ and civilian objects, such as critical

244 For more information please see: <http://shockmonitor.org/>.

245 Only Ukraine is part of the Additional Protocol I, Russia withdrew in 2019.

246 Human Rights Watch. (February 23, 2022). *Russia, Ukraine & International Law: On Occupation, Armed Conflict and Human Rights*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/23/russia-ukraine-international-law-occupation-armed-conflict-and-human-rights>

247 Persons with the right to directly participate in the hostilities, such as members of the army. A civilian may lose its status if taking direct part in the hostilities.

infrastructure. Only military objectives²⁴⁸ may be lawfully targeted. Similarly, IHL prohibits indiscriminate attacks, such as area bombardment or using anti-personnel landmines that are not accurate enough to make the distinction between combatants and civilians.

In addition to this, Ukraine and Russia are both parties to other treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)²⁴⁹, even though Russia was excluded from this last instrument in September 2022.²⁵⁰ These treaties guarantee, specify and broaden fundamental rights that are already protected under international humanitarian law. Although some treaties allow the restriction of some liberties in times of conflict, certain fundamental rights should always be respected (right to life, right to be secure from torture and ill-treatment, right to a fair trial), which is also specified by Article 75 of Protocol I prohibiting “violence to the life, health or physical or mental well-being of persons”; “outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment, enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault”; “the taking of hostages; “collective punishments”; and “threats to commit any of the foregoing acts”.²⁵¹

In an international armed conflict, people may be detained for reasons of security, but not for punishment, as per the third and the fourth Geneva Conventions. Members of the armed forces are entitled to Prisoner of War (POW) status, which provides them with some guarantees. Prisoners of war “must at all times be humanely treated” and “protected” (no physical or mental torture, no summary executions), “measures of reprisal (against them) are prohibited” (article 13 of the Third Geneva Convention) and minimum conditions of internment should be respected. Civilians, if taking part in hostilities, may be detained and should then be treated as POWs. **Mercenaries, however, “shall not have the right to be a prisoner of war”.**²⁵²

To understand how this legal framework applies to the war in Ukraine and human rights violations committed by PMSCs, and in particular by Wagner, it is necessary to detail how IHL treats mercenaries, paramilitaries and private contractors in international armed conflicts. A mercenary, as defined by Article 47 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, is a person who participates in hostilities, motivated by personal gains, who has been specially recruited locally or abroad, who is not a member of the armed forces of a party to

248 Combatants and “objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture or neutralisation, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offer a definite military advantage”.

249 The Russian Federation was expelled from the Council, so from September 16, 2022 onwards, the ECHR no longer has the jurisdiction over human rights abuses committed after that date.

250 See: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/russia-ceases-to-be-a-party-to-the-european-convention-of-human-rights-on-16-september-2022>.

251 Article 75, Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), June 8, 1977.

252 Article 47(1), Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), June 8, 1977.

the conflict, and who has not been sent by a state that is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces. Being a mercenary is not a specific crime under IHL, but it is under the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries²⁵³ and other regional instruments such as the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa. A mercenary is not considered a legitimate combatant nor can be entitled to POW status, he/she is considered a civilian and can be targeted only when taking part in hostilities.

In contrast, a paramilitary organisation falls under the definition of an armed force as it is an “organised group placed under a command that is responsible for the conduct of its subordinates”²⁵⁴ and that fights for one of the parties to the conflict. Members of paramilitaries are therefore considered as combatants and have the same guarantees. Paramilitaries can eventually be incorporated into the official army forces through a formal act. Although some Wagner operatives fighting in Ukraine are from Syria, Afghanistan, Serbia or other former Soviet Republics (as seen in chapter II), the majority of them are Russian citizens²⁵⁵. Foreign combatants operating through Wagner could be considered mercenaries according to international law. However, as Koval and Slobodyanuk, experts from the Ukrainian human rights organisation Truth Hounds affirms: “Russian operatives combating in international armed conflicts, where Russia is not a party to the conflict, can be also considered mercenaries”.²⁵⁶ According to them, the rest of Wagner operatives in Ukraine²⁵⁷ cannot be considered mercenaries. For the international lawyer Jordi Palou Loverdos they can, however, be considered paramilitary groups because they are coordinated and receive military equipment to attack Ukrainian enclaves according to Russia’s overall military strategy and thus should be investigated as combatants according to the Geneva Conventions.²⁵⁸ **For now, legally, they can be treated as private contractors, this is to say, employees of private military and security companies (PMSCs) employed in war zones and other risky areas to perform a wide variety of specialized services, including combat operations.**

Private contractors in international armed conflicts are treated as civilians, unless they can be considered as part of the armed forces and therefore combatants. In this sense, the lack of proper identification of private contractor operatives, and the resulting difficulty of distinguishing them from the Russian army, complicates accountability as will be described in the following sections. Civilians can become legitimate targets if they participate directly

253 Ratified by Ukraine, but not by Russia.

254 Rule 4. Definition of Armed Forces- International customary law.

255 In the future, as people from other countries receive Russian citizenship to be enrolled in the Russian army, if afterwards working for Wagner, legally they will not qualify as mercenaries. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/central-asians-fight-ukraine-eyeing-russian-citizenship#:~:text=Central%20Asians%20Fight%20in%20Ukraine%20Eyeing%20Russian%20Citizenship,the%20town%20of%20Izium%2C%20in%20Ukraine%27s%20Kharkiv%20region>

256 Dmytro Koval and Maryna Slobodyanuk, (April 15, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

257 Wagner operatives fighting outside of Ukraine in countries where Russia is not formally party to an armed conflict, can, however, be considered mercenaries.

258 Jordi Palou-Loverdos, (July 5, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

in hostilities by committing acts of war²⁵⁹. They can be detained and prosecuted for this participation. Thus, Wagner Group, as a corporate body, can be “held financially liable for

Wagner Group, as a corporate body, can be “held financially liable for damages deriving from their actions at country level” and its personnel can be prosecuted for their individual criminal responsibility if they commit war crimes and crimes against humanity.

damages deriving from their actions at country level”²⁶⁰ and its personnel can be prosecuted for their individual criminal responsibility if they commit war crimes and crimes against humanity. War crimes, as defined by article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, include wilful killing, mutilation, cruel treatment, torture and deportation, while crimes against humanity imply systematic and generalized attacks on civilians as is defined in article 5 of the Rome Statute. As for the responsibility of the contracting state, this can only be triggered if it is proven “that the hiring state specifically ordered a conduct that gave rise to a violation of international humanitarian law or international human rights law”²⁶¹. For that it would be necessary to prove the provision of military equipment and the execution of

a military order given by the Russian Federation.

CONFLICT SEVERITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Private Military and Security Companies exacerbate conflict severity by increasing the conflict’s fragmentation and escalation. The PMSC industry provides security and military services which may imply the use of force, and thus a potential impact on human rights and conflict severity, especially if the rules of engagement are not clearly defined and aligned with the IHL and international law of human rights. According to the scholars Lees and Petersohn, PMSCs seem to be an endogenous actor in severe conflicts due to their capacity to be deployed at short-notice and when the situation is escalating.²⁶² According to the observatory Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Ukraine is a highly severe conflict due to the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the level of repression in occupied territories and the massive hardship inflicted on the Ukrainian people by constant

259 Only acts aiming at harming the enemy’s forces.

260 *Private Military Companies*. (n.d.). *The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law*.

<https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/private-military-companies/>

261 Doctors without borders. (n.d.). *Private Military Companies*. *The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law*. <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/private-military-companies/>.

262 Lees, N., & Petersohn, U. (2021). To Escalate, or Not to Escalate? Private Military and Security Companies and Conflict Severity. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2021.1935700>.

shellings and attacks on critical infrastructure.²⁶³ In this context, the unidentifiable Wagner Group operatives participated in deadly combat operations in Soledar and Bakhmut, escalating the conflict and targeting civilians.

Wagner's combat operations and military tactics disregarded the principles of wartime conduct and international criminal law. Its tactics were reckless and high-risk, entailing not only the killing of civilians, but also heavy losses among their personnel. Wagner did not officially report their losses, which reinforced its opacity and limited its accountability and exposure to public scrutiny. Moreover, due to the capacity to recruit convicts,²⁶⁴ it used tactics with a very high cost in terms of human lives.²⁶⁵ Convicts in particular were employed as an expendable resource and were sent on the most dangerous missions, especially in the first wave of a tactical attack²⁶⁶. As some Ukrainian soldiers²⁶⁷ and journalists observed,²⁶⁸ Wagner often operated with assault teams which stormed Ukrainian trenches: although this was effective, it was also deadly as the operatives entered into close and direct contact with the Ukrainians. As one former Wagner operative captured by the Ukrainians told CNN: In an assault near Bilohorivka, out of 90 people in his group, "60 died in the first assault, killed by mortar fire"²⁶⁹. Furthermore, according to a Ukrainian report of December 2022 quoted by CNN, wounded fighters were left on the battlefield while the focus remained on winning. "Assault infantry are not allowed to carry the wounded off the battlefield on their own, as their main task is to continue the assault until the goal is achieved. If the assault fails, retreat is also allowed only at night."²⁷⁰

Inhuman practices can be identified along the governance structure and internal procedures of Wagner. Questionable practices have been identified from the recruitment process to the final deployment in the battlefield. Wagner's operatives experienced brutal vi-

263 Gurcov, N. (March 1, 2023). War in Ukraine: One Year On, Nowhere Safe. ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2023/03/01/war-in-ukraine-one-year-on-nowhere-safe/#s6>.

264 At least until February, 2023.

265 Meduza, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/03/22/the-cannon-fodder-advantage>.

266 Lister, T., Pleitgen, F., & Butenko, V. (January 24, 2023). *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>.

267 Tatarigami (@Tatarigami_UA) (February 22, 2023). *You don't hear as much about the advancement of regular Russian brigades, but you see reports about Wagner advancing* [Tweet]. Twitter https://twitter.com/Tatarigami_UA/status/1628289157461078018.

268 Meduza. (March 22, 2023). The "cannon fodder" advantage *Why Wagner Group is more effective on the battlefield than the Russian military*. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/03/22/the-cannon-fodder-advantage>.

269 Lister, T., & Pleitgen, F. (February 12, 2023). "Just to survive": Wagner fighters recount the horrors of battle in eastern Ukraine. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/12/europe/wagner-convicts-eastern-ukraine-pleitgen-intl/index.html>

270 Lister, T., Pleitgen, F., & Butenko, V. (January 24, 2023). *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>.



Wagner's plot at the Chervyshev cemetery. Tyumen, Russia. Source: Wikipedia Commons.

olence in the training phases, where cases of inhuman treatment have been reported.²⁷¹ Behind these patterns there was a culture of violence built around a hierarchical and centralised structure with very strict and violent norms of conduct, similar to the codes of criminal gangs. Indeed, Wagner's founder was in prison for 13 years and his extensive knowledge of, and ties with, the criminal world are reflected in the origin of Wagner and the design and promotion of its brand.

Deadly tactics and criminal code of conduct

Another reason for PMSCs success and proliferation is the impunity they benefit from. It is now indisputable that Wagner Group committed human rights violations in Ukraine: not only do the victim's testimonies prove it, but also videos and accounts shared by the operatives themselves show it. In November 2022, the footage of the execution by sledgehammer of Yevgeny Nuzhin, a former Wagner operative who had defected to Ukraine, was

²⁷¹ See paragraph Human rights abuses and violation of labour rights against PMSCs personnel .

posted on the Wagner-linked Telegram channel ‘Grey Zone’²⁷². Although it represents a clear violation of the right to life, no serious consequences followed: no punishment nor investigation, only the human rights activist Osechkin said he planned to “request Russia’s authorities to launch a criminal case”.²⁷³

Impunity is possible because PMSCs’ role in armed conflicts is not clearly framed by international and domestic laws. They act in a grey zone between being a private company and mercenaries. When operating outside of the country where they are based it is not clear which laws can apply to PMSCs, which results in a lack of accountability. In addition, in the case of Wagner, because of the special relationship between Putin and Prigozhin, the company acted without fearing repercussions from the Russian government. Prigozhin’s symbolic success in Ukraine, on top of other previous successes in other theatres, gained Putin’s trust in his methods. As Dmitri Oreshkin, a Russian political scientist, observes in the *New York Times*, Prigozhin had earned himself “political carte blanche” and he was “given everything, permission to break the law, to take people from prisons without asking anyone’s permission, to kill those people if (he doesn’t) like them for discipline”²⁷⁴.

In this context, unidentifiable Wagner operatives targeted civilians and allegedly participated in war crimes. Human rights violations by Wagner personnel were reported in most of the places²⁷⁵ where they participated in the conflict, thereby confirming their presence and their role in those areas. Holding the PMSCs personnel accountable for their crimes is harder as the victims are not able to distinguish them from the Russian army’s soldiers, so it is almost impossible to prove their responsibility in committing human rights violations. With Wagner, this confusion is exacerbated by the fact that they operate jointly with the Russian army.

WAGNER’S IMPACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN UKRAINE

Human rights abuses against civilians

Wagner personnel were merciless against Ukrainian civilians. From the accounts of former operatives, it appears that their objective was to kill everyone with no regard for international humanitarian and human rights law. In April 2023, two Russians, Alexey Savichev and Azmat Uldarov, who claimed to be former Wagner commanders, came forward in a recorded interview about the crimes they had committed in Ukraine. Although this has not

272 Sauer, P. (November 14, 2022). *Family “horrified” by video of sledgehammer killing of Wagner Group defector*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/family-expresses-horror-at-video-of-killing-of-russian-wagner-group-defector>.

273 See footnote 269.

274 Hopkins, V. (May 24, 2023). *The Wagner group forecasts disaster if Russia does not move into total war footing*. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/24/world/europe/wagner-group-prigozhin-russia.html>

275 As will be shown in the paragraph “PMSCs’ impact on human rights in Ukraine”.

been independently verified, Gulagu.net published supporting documents to prove that they fought in Ukraine and CNN disseminated documents certifying that they obtained presidential pardon in August and September respectively, of 2022.²⁷⁶ Their accounts confirm the alleged cruelty of Wagner. In the aforementioned video Savichev said, for example, that they were ordered to search the houses “to make sure that there wasn’t a single living person left inside.”²⁷⁷

Evidence demonstrates the responsibility of Wagner’s operatives in war atrocities. In the area near Kyiv some sources²⁷⁸ reported that Wagner was also involved in the system-

In the area near Kyiv some sources reported that Wagner was also involved in the systematic torture and killing of civilians.

atic torture and killing of civilians²⁷⁹. The most relevant case in this oblast was the killing of the mayor of Motyzhyn²⁸⁰, Olga Sukhenko, and her family. Three members of Wagner and five Russian soldiers tortured and killed them: the mayor’s son was shot in the leg to extort information from him and killed in front of his family, then the mayor and her husband were beaten up and killed. Moreover, some have denounced Wagner’s and other PMSCs’ involvement in Bucha’s massacre, forced displace-

ment and mass rapes²⁸¹. Although there is no hard evidence of their participation, some people we interviewed and other sources²⁸² strongly suspect their involvement²⁸³, with the Prosecutor General’s office of Ukraine investigating it.

Among Wagner’s victims, some were also children and teenagers, although Prigozhin denied it. In the same video where Savichev recounts his crimes, Uldarov, the other Wagner

276 Dean, S., & Pennington, J. (April 18, 2023). Two Russians claiming to be former Wagner commanders admit killing children and civilians in Ukraine. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/17/europe/wagner-commanders-russia-kill-children-intl-hnk/index.html>.

277 See footnote 273.

278 The Dossier Centre. (2023). Prigozhin, The Wagner Group and the need for a terrorist designation. Report delivered by the organisation to the EU Parliament’s group U4U: “Wagner: towards an addition to the EU terrorist list?” on May 25, 2023.

279 Graham-Harrison, E., Koshiw, I., & Tondo, L. (April 30, 2022). *How the barbaric lessons learned in Syria came to haunt one small Ukrainian village*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/30/how-the-barbaric-lessons-learned-in-syria-came-to-haunt-one-small-ukrainian-village>.

280 Srinivas, A. S. (March 13, 2023). *Wagner under IHL. OSINT for Ukraine*. <https://www.osintforukraine.com/wagner-and-ihl>

281 Tondo, L & Koshiw, I. (April 25, 2022). *Evidence some Ukrainians women raped before being killed, says doctors*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/evidence-ukraine-women-raped-before-being-killed-say-doctors-russia-war>

282 The Dossier Centre. (2023). Prigozhin, The Wagner Group and the need for a terrorist designation. Op. Cit.

283 In one of our field interviews, some reported the presence of Kdyrov’s PMSC in Bucha. Viktor Oliinyk and Yuri (March 31, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

commander, admits to killing a young girl who took shelter with others in a basement in Bakhmut, “She was screaming, she was a little kid, she was five or six and I shot her, a kill shot. I wasn’t allowed to let anyone out, you understand?”²⁸⁴, he says. In the same video, they both declare that they were given orders to kill anyone ‘in their way’ indiscriminately, especially in the battles of Soledar and Bakhmut²⁸⁵ where victory was crucial to Russia’s strategy. As seen, children and teenagers, if they accidentally found themselves in the way of Wagner’s personnel, were treated the same as adult civilians. However, in some cases, they became specific targets to eliminate: for example, Savichev recounts that he was ordered to “kill any men who were 15 years or older”²⁸⁶, probably to reduce the number of future Ukrainian army recruits. As for the accusation of Russia abducting children from Ukraine for which the ICC issued arrest warrants on March 17, 2023, for Putin and for Maria Lvova-Belova, the Presidential Commissioner for Children’s Rights, evidence obtained did not confirm the involvement of the Wagner Group²⁸⁷. However, in the process of deportation of civilians, Wagner Group undertook misinformation activities through Telegram channels offering local residents shelter, food and transportation to gain their trust and obtain information of the position of Ukrainian troops. According to a Ukrainian soldier who fought Wagner in Bakhmut and its surroundings, some local villagers were waiting for Wagner to save them because they saw this information on Telegram channels.²⁸⁸

Human rights abuses against Ukrainian soldiers

So far, the largest number of victims of Wagner’s crimes and human rights violations seem to have been the prisoners of war, who are generally killed on the spot rather than being captured. As Savichev recounts to Gulagu.net, the orders were “not to take any prisoners, to shoot them on the spot”²⁸⁹. So, for example, when fighting near Soledar in autumn 2022, he says that they killed 20 Ukrainians they had surrounded by “spraying them with bullets”. If not shot at immediately or brutally killed, prisoners of war endured torture by Wagner personnel and/or were eventually executed. Savichev, for example, describes an episode of him and other Wagner operatives killing “several dozen” injured Ukrainian POWs by “tossing grenades” into the ditch where they were held near the city Bakhmut in January²⁹⁰.

284 Sauer, P. (April 18, 2023). Wagner mercenary admits “tossing grenades” at injured Ukrainian PoWs. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/18/wagner-mercenary-admits-tossing-grenades-at-injured-ukrainian-pows>.

285 Dean, S., & Pennington, J. (April 18, 2023). *Two Russians claiming to be former Wagner commanders admit killing children and civilians in Ukraine*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/17/europe/wagner-commanders-russia-kill-children-intl-hnk/index.html>.

286 See footnote 281

287 Olga Reshytylova (April 6, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

288 Ukrainian soldier (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

289 Sauer, P. (April 18, 2023). *Wagner mercenary admits “tossing grenades” at injured Ukrainian PoWs*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/18/wagner-mercenary-admits-tossing-grenades-at-injured-ukrainian-pows>.

290 See footnote 285.

The mistreatment and the summary killings of prisoners of war is not new for Wagner. It is a common pattern that was already observed in other countries where it was active, that is to say in Syria, Libya, Sudan, CAR and in Mali.²⁹¹ A video allegedly recorded in Syria in 2017, for example, shows “several men in military-style clothing beating a prisoner with a sledgehammer, then beheading him, amputating his arms with a sapper’s trowel and setting his body on fire using gasoline or another accelerant”.²⁹² One of the men was identified by the Novaya Gazeta newspaper as Stanislas D., a member of Wagner, and the victim is reported to be Mohammad Taha al Ismail Abdallah of Deir ez-Zor, whom the contractors accused of deserting from the Syrian army”.

Besides mistreating and killing POWs, sometimes Wagner operatives also disrespected the dead bodies of Ukrainian soldiers by mutilating them, beheading them or selling them to their families. Videos²⁹³ have emerged of dead Ukrainian soldiers with their heads and hands cut off supposedly by Wagner operatives. A soldier we interviewed also testified to seeing beheaded Ukrainian soldiers. As some testimonies we collected show, Wagner personnel sometimes tried to sell dead bodies to the families of the victims or ask for something in exchange: there was one case, for example, where the body of an Ukrainian soldier was offered to his family in exchange for a car.²⁹⁴

Human rights abuses and violation of labour rights against Wagner’s personnel

PMSCs operatives themselves were also victims of human rights violations. Given their unofficial status, they “do not have the same rights or guarantees as an official representative of the armed forces”, Marat Gabidullin, former Wagner operative in Syria, told Al Jazeera²⁹⁵. The lack of officiality and supervision led in particular to violations of their labour rights with cases of inhuman treatment, torture, coercion and summary killings. Wagner operatives and in particular, recruited prisoners, were subjected to various types of mistreatment. The core reason for this is that they were seen as ‘cannon fodder’ and sent to the front lines, whereas people who were necessary to Wagner effectiveness, such as the weapons operators²⁹⁶, were kept away from the front lines. Following this logic, recruited prisoners

291 For more information see the investigations conducted by All Eyes on Wagner: <https://alleyesonwagner.org>.

292 Roth, A. (November 21, 2019). *Man who filmed beheading of Syrian identified as Russian mercenary*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/21/man-filmed-killing-torture-syrian-identified-russian-mercenary-wagner>.

293 Camut, N., & Melkozerova, V. (April 12, 2023). *Russian soldiers are “beasts,” Zelenskyy says over beheading video*. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-vladimir-putin-volodymyr-zelenskyy-ukraine-war-soldiers-are-beasts-execution-video/>.

294 Viktor Oliinyk (March 31, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

295 Vorobyov, N. (August 10, 2022). *Shrouded in secrecy for years, Russia’s Wagner Group opens up*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/10/wagner-private-group-now-an-extension-of-russias-military>.

296 Eastern Circles. (2023). *Wagner as a tool of Russian geopolitical strategy: lessons from Ukraine*. In Eastern Circles (p. 27). <https://easterncircles.com/en-wagner-russian-tool-geopolitical-strategy>.

were the least valuable resources, therefore the most expendable, that is why they were generally sent to the battlefield with little or no training.

Mistreatment of Wagner fighters happened at all stages of their enrolment. During the recruitment process, threats or intimidation were used to pressurise inmates to join the armed group. UN experts on the subject declared: “in some cases, while recruiters were visiting facilities, detainees were reportedly denied communication with their families and lawyers, which could amount to, or expose them to, enforced disappearance”²⁹⁷. During the training and on the battlefield, besides the danger they constantly faced because of their activity, their physical and mental integrity were also threatened by the company itself. Episodes of torture and summary executions have been reported. As Alexey Savichev, a former Wagner fighter, recounts, he witnessed “multiple summary killings of other Wagner fighters accused by their commanders of disobeying orders or of breaking the ‘code of conduct’, including the consumption of alcohol”²⁹⁸. Disobeying Wagner’s strict orders and rules was, indeed, cause for immediate execution. Ukrainian intelligence confirms this as well: “Assault groups do not withdraw without a command. Unauthorised withdrawal of a team or without being wounded is punishable by execution on the spot.”²⁹⁹ As a captured Wagner fighter told CNN, when a fighter refused to follow orders and run forward in an assault, “he was taken 50 metres away from the base, he was digging his own grave and then was shot.”³⁰⁰ Similar claims were also made by Andrei Medvedev³⁰¹, former Wagner fighter who was seeking asylum in Norway. Following this logic, betrayal and desertion were the most severely and cruelly punished infractions with often exemplary executions to discourage other fighters from doing the same. Videos, such as the one of the sledgehammer execution in November 2022, or executions in front of other soldiers, contributed to creating a climate of terror, resulting in dire psychological conditions for Wagner recruits. On the battlefield, injured operatives were provided with inadequate care or none at all, as was reported by Ukrainian intelligence.³⁰² Dead bodies were left behind so they would not be counted as casualties

297 United Nations. (March 10, 2023). *Russian Federation: UN experts alarmed by recruitment of prisoners by “Wagner Group.”* OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/russian-federation-un-experts-alarmed-recruitment-prisoners-wagner-group>.

298 Sauer, P. (April 18, 2023). *Wagner mercenary admits “tossing grenades” at injured Ukrainian PoWs.* *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/18/wagner-mercenary-admits-tossing-grenades-at-injured-ukrainian-pows>.

299 Lister, T., Pleitgen, F., & Butenko, V. (January 24, 2023). *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>.

300 Lister, T., & Pleitgen, F. (February 12, 2023). *“Just to survive”: Wagner fighters recount the horrors of battle in eastern Ukraine.* CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/12/europe/wagner-convicts-eastern-ukraine-pleitgen-intl/index.html>.

301 Darwish, M., Krebs, K., & John, T. (January 31, 2023). *Former Wagner commander describes brutality and incompetence on the frontline.* CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/30/europe/wagner-norway-andrei-medvedev-ukraine-intl/index.html>.

302 Lister, T., Pleitgen, F., & Butenko, V. (January 24, 2023). *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>.

in the official statistics, not only denying their families the right to know, but also denying them the right to a proper burial and leaving them vulnerable to potential ill-treatment by other soldiers. Moreover, a Ukrainian soldier who captured some Wagner operatives in the east region of Ukraine informed that the convicts were under the effects of drug consumption and after hours under detention they observed withdrawal symptoms such as tachycardia, blank stares, sweating and dryness around the mouth.³⁰³

Even without reasons for being punished, Wagner personnel lived and fought with little regard towards their human rights and their physical and mental integrity. A key problem of the lack of post-traumatic recovery programs for Wagner's operatives is the potential continuation of criminal acts. Ivan Rossomakhin, before working for Wagner, was sentenced to 14 years in a penal colony³⁰⁴ and when he returned to his home village of Novy Burets he allegedly killed an elderly woman.³⁰⁵ A similar case was reported in Tskhinvali, in the Russian-backed region of South Ossetia, where Georgiy Siukayev, a convicted murderer recruited by Wagner, was arrested for killing a local man.³⁰⁶ Finally, according to our key informants, delays in payment were common,³⁰⁷ thereby violating one of the most basic labour rights as defined by the International Labour Organization 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, but also by the Russian Constitution and the Russian Labor Code³⁰⁸. In the event of death, Wagner personnel were told that their families would receive “a pay-out of five million rubles”, but Andrei Medvedev, a former Wagner operative, alleges that in reality most of the dead were instead declared missing. Prigozhin refutes this statement.

ACCOUNTABILITY: A TRIPLE PERSPECTIVE

According to the IHL, contracting parties of the IV Geneva Conventions are under the obligation to investigate and bring to court persons alleged to have committed “wilful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, including biological experiments, wilfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, unlawful deportation or transfer or unlawful confinement of a protected person, compelling a protected person to serve in the forces of a

303 Ukrainian soldier (April 4, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

304 Mediazona. (March 30, 2023). Осужденный за убийство житель Кировской области завербовался в “ЧВК Вагнера”, вернулся в родное село и через неделю снова убил человека. Медиазона. <https://zona.media/news/2023/03/30/wolverine>.

305 Meduza. (March 30, 2023). *Wagner Group mercenary suspected of murdering senior while on leave in Russia*. Meduza. <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/03/30/wagner-group-mercenary-suspected-of-murdering-senior-while-on-leave-in-russia>.

306 Sauer, P. (April 22, 2023). “Murder, alcohol and prostitutes”: Wagner convicts pardoned by Putin return to terrorise home towns. *The Observer*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/22/alcohol-and-prostitutes-wagner-convicts-pardoned-by-putin-return-to-terrorise-home-towns>.

307 Ukrainian soldier (April 2, 2023). Personal communication [personal interview].

308 Increased penalties for salary payment delays in Russia. (2016, October 28). Lexology. <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=c3f10958-c47c-4efb-bd54-68b33ab13a69>.

hostile power, or wilfully depriving a protected person of the rights of fair and regular trial prescribed in the present convention, taking of hostages and extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly”.³⁰⁹ In this line, the EU’s proposal to create a special tribunal to investigate and prosecute the crime of aggression on the part of Russia against Ukraine is aligned with this responsibility and demands that states advance the principles of universal jurisdiction in their national regulatory frameworks. The ICC has also initiated investigations and issued warrants for Vladimir Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children’s Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation, for alleged war crimes in Ukraine.³¹⁰ Similarly, apart from sanctions that have been adopted by the US and the EU and other countries³¹¹, the US has designated Wagner as a “transnational criminal organisation”³¹², while France has been pushing the EU to designate it as a terrorist group³¹³ so that it can be prosecuted on charges of terrorism.

Wagner operatives can be held accountable for their individual criminal responsibility. For this reason, in February 2023, the Ukrainian Prosecutor’s General Office filed a criminal case against “the head of the private military company ‘Wagner’. As Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin added on Facebook: “ the head of this group is directly responsible for thousands of war crimes” and “he openly admits his role in the war against Ukraine and, with the Kremlin’s permission, resolves staff issues by recruiting tens of thousands of prisoners”.³¹⁴ Moreover, the Prosecutor’s General Office also initiated various investigations into the alleged war crimes of former Wagner operatives.³¹⁵ Ukraine has also submitted allegations of genocide occurred during the war to the International Court of Justice in 2023.³¹⁶ After Wagner’s mutiny at the end of June 2023 and Putin’s comments about the Russian government financing Wagner for almost 86 bn roubles in the same

309 ICRC. IV Geneva Conventions. Art.147 <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-147>.

310 See: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-vladimir-vladimirovich-putin-and>

311 Such as Switzerland.

312 US Department of the Treasury. (January 26, 2023). Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization. U.S. Department of the Treasury. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>.

313 Guardian staff and agencies. (May 10, 2023). *UK poised to label Wagner group terrorists as France urges EU to act. The Guardian.* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/10/wagner-should-be-labelled-terrorist-group-france-tells-eu>.

314 Reuters. (February 3, 2023). *Ukraine unveils criminal case against Wagner boss.* Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-unveils-criminal-case-against-wagner-boss-2023-02-03/>.

315 ОФІС ГЕНЕРАЛЬНОГО ПРОКУРОРА. (April 17, 2023). *The Prosecutor General’s Office is verifying information about the commission of crimes by the commanders and members of the so-called “Wagner” PMC.* Gp.gov.ua. <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/ofis-genprokurora-pereviryaje-informaciyu-shhodo-vcinennya-zlociniv-komandirami-ta-ucasnikami-tak-zvanoyi-pvk-vagner>.

316 See: <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/182>.

year,³¹⁷ some international law practitioners think that this admission, although not automatically making Putin or Russia responsible for Wagner crimes, constitutes fundamental evidence to establish a direct link between Putin and the private company. As Dapo Akande told *The Guardian*: “funding is, in and of itself, not sufficient to say that somebody’s responsible for an international crime ... [but] it makes it more difficult to say ‘these things have nothing to do with us.’”³¹⁸

Meanwhile, Russia has not prosecuted Wagner operatives for their crimes in Ukraine. Besides the fact that prisoners have been pardoned for participating in the war as Wagner personnel, in some cases charges of disorderly conduct have been dropped after seeing the medals won in the conflict.³¹⁹ Therefore, Russia generally does not prosecute Wagner operatives for their crimes, and even sees them as heroes.³²⁰ Wagner’s mutiny illustrated the popularity that Prigozhin and his private contractors have in the country, as well as unwillingness of Putin to prosecute them even if their criminal activities target their own government. The only case where a Wagner operative might face consequences in Russia is if they defected to Ukraine or if they fled the Wagner group.

Although the international community and Ukraine’s efforts to hold PMSCs accountable for their human rights abuses and violations, a general climate of impunity continues to reign. Many factors are contributing to it and opposing them might help prosecute the operatives who are guilty of war crimes and human rights violations and abuses. Firstly, the collection of evidence constitutes a great obstacle. It is indeed hard to prove that human rights violations have occurred, and even harder to prove that PMSCs were responsible for them. This is due to the difficulty for human rights organisations to access the battlefields and collect evidence, but it is also due to the lack of proper identification for PMSC operatives. This lack of identification is further exploited by Russian soldiers who pretend to be Wagner members to cover their crimes, making it even more difficult to attribute human rights violations to PMSCs. Secondly, the sharing of videos of explicit human rights abuses and violations on social media such as Telegram channels affiliated to Wagner, and the lack of proper response to them, contribute to impunity. They convey the message that even with proof, PMSCs are untouchable as no serious investigations follow the publication of these videos.

317 Graham-Harrison, E. (July 1, 2023). *Putin’s claim that Russia funds Wagner group may make it easier to try him for war crimes*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/01/putin-claim-that-russia-funds-wagner-group-may-make-it-easier-to-try-him-for-war-crimes> .

318 See footnote 317.

319 Sauer, P. (April 22, 2023). *Murder, “alcohol and prostitutes”: Wagner convicts pardoned by Putin return to terrorise home towns*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/22/alcohol-and-prostitutes-wagner-convicts-pardoned-by-putin-return-to-terrorise-home-towns> .

320 According to Gulagu.net, Kitaev, a Wagner commander who participated in the murder of the Syrian prisoner in 2017. <https://t.me/NetGulagu/5184> .



V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

War by proxy is a part of the hybrid warfare strategy of Russia to advance its imperialist project in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow's use of PMSCs increased to project its power overseas and to maintain its internal political stability, because PMSCs augment the State's ability for plausible deniability, externalise the burden of warfare and lower escalatory risks. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 through Special Assault Forces and private contractors provided Putin with substantial political dividends and strategic assets in and around the Black Sea. Nonetheless, the rebellion of Wagner's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 demonstrated the danger of backing proxies, which have their own agenda, and the direct consequences to internal politics.

The role of Wagner in the large-scale invasion of Ukraine increased when Russia suffered major military defeats. Russian nationalist sectors demanded a change in the military strategy of Russia and the reaction of Putin was the appointment of General Surovikin as commander of the Joint Task Force in the 'Special Military Operation' in October 2022. From the beginning of his new mandate, Surovikin relied more on Wagner Group, who by that time had built a private army of 50,000 operatives, the majority of whom were ex-convicts. The military tactics of Wagner were brutal, high-risk and reckless to their personnel. The recruited convicts were sent to the battlefield to uncover the Ukrainian positions, in some cases without weapons and under the effects of drugs. The number of Wagner's special forces was more reduced and were mainly made up by ex-Spetsnaz (Special Military Unit) soldiers who had previously gained military and combat experience in past conflicts involving Russia, such as Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya, Venezuela, and other international armed conflicts. Even though the majority of Wagner's members were Russians, the field research has confirmed the presence of nationals from Afghanistan, Syria, Serbia and other former Soviet Republics. Wagner's special forces were organized in small assault units that penetrated the Ukrainian lines with the support of reconnaissance drones. These operations, flexible and adaptable to the flow of war, were also supported by artillery, helicopters and other military machinery. These tactics were critical for the seizure of Soledar and Bakhmut in 2023 bringing a new impetus to the Russian army and public support for the war.

Certainly, PMSCs such as Wagner were functional tools to increase public support for the war. In parallel Prigozhin engaged in a public communication campaign, backed by the Kremlin to disseminate the military operations of Wagner and its victories, as well as their atrocities such as the cases of beheading of Ukrainian POWs or the execution of Yevgeny Nuzhin with a sledgehammer. This aggressive campaign aimed to promote a Wagner brand based on a subculture which combined cult to crime and death, social conservatism values and orthodox belief, and patriotic aspirations. Wagner's brand was supported by prominent Russian military bloggers intimately connected with the ultra-nationalist sectors in society including the spiritual guide of the Ukrainian invasion, Aleksander Dugin. By reinforcing Wagner on the battlefield, Putin aimed to content the nationalist public dissidence, while increasing support for war by the rest of society and facilitating the recruitment of new soldiers. The use of Wagner reveals the difficulties of Putin to justify this war and advance the military mobilisation campaign. Even in authoritarian regimes, the regime needs certain public support to engage in an armed conflict,

Wagner enabled Putin to overcome this challenge. However, the visibility of Wagner will have consequences for the Kremlin's proxy warfare strategy in other armed conflicts in terms of plausible deniability.

The military power of Wagner Group grew in parallel to Prigozhin's political ambitions, colliding with key political figures such as the Russian military leadership. Prigozhin's political aspirations became a threat not only for the Minister of Defense, who attempted to limit the power of Wagner, but for Putin himself, as we observed in the events of June 2023. Wagner was a product of Putin to influence foreign governments but also a tool to counterbalance internal power dynamics. Putin allowed or even promoted rivalries which led to conflicts between other towers of the Kremlin, believing that it would prevent one faction from gaining enough prominence to challenge his power. As Galeotti states: "This court is managed by the age-old tactics of divide and rule. Rival individuals and institutions with deliberately overlapping responsibilities and antagonistic interests are pitted against each other. Like an emperor overseeing gladiatorial games, Mr Putin stands apart, the arbiter who decides everyone's fate".³²¹ In the first instance, the conflict between Prigozhin and Gerasimov served this purpose, but in a second phase, when Putin attempted to reduce Wagner's autonomy through subordinating them to the Ministry of Defense, Prigozhin rebelled threatening even the power of his 'patron'. The immediate result was, on the one hand, that Putin's authority and legitimacy at international and national level was affected. On the other hand, the popularity of Prigozhin remained high and the ultra-nationalist sectors in Russian society could use this opportunity to increase their leverage in the Russian political landscape and confront Putin more openly. In any case, the utility of Wagner as an internal balance strategy was counterproductive for Putin, because it exacerbated factionalism in Russian politics and undermined the authority of the Kremlin, which could end up being decisive in the final outcome of the war in Ukraine.

The assassination of Prigozhin and the military leader of Wagner, Dmitry Utkin, in August 23rd ended another political threat to Putin, but won't prevent the proliferation of Russian PMSCs. It is still too early to predict the future of Wagner. The company may disappear or be taken over by the Kremlin, but already other PMSCs such as Convoy or Redut are occupying the space left by Wagner in Ukraine. The privatization of warfare will continue in Ukraine and PMSCs will remain a strategic tool for Putin to advance its grand strategy until impunity is confronted. Wagner allegedly committed human rights abuses in all the Ukrainian locations where they were operating, ranging from tortures to extra-judicial killings and cruel human treatment of POWs and civilians, and these grave human rights violations should be prosecuted and punished. We should not forget that Wagner Group in Ukraine followed a similar pattern of human rights abuses and war crimes to that of other armed conflicts they were involved in, such as Syria and this was possible because the lack of accountability and scrutiny. The chain of impunity continued in Ukraine and Wagner increased its scale of operations and human and military capabilities, leading to a corresponding upscaling of their participation in war crimes.

321 Galeotti, M. (June 27, 2023). Mark Galeotti on Vladimir Putin's self-inflicted wounds. Op. Cit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Holding PMSCs accountable for their human rights violations is complex, on the one hand because of the lack of legal tools framing their liability, and on the other hand because of the opacity around the PMSC industry which hinders collection of evidence related to human rights abuses. A certain number of countries, including the EU³²² members and the US³²³, have put some sanctions in place, mostly economic, against Wagner and some individuals and entities linked to it. However, they have so far proven ineffective, because of the fluid and unofficial nature of the organisation, sanctions are indeed easily circumvented by creating new companies and finding new proxies for their activities. Based on the outcomes of this research, the following recommendations are addressed to international organisations, national government and civil society human rights organisations, to limit the privatisation of warfare in general and to regulate the Russian PMSC industry in particular, with the final goals of preventing violations of IHL and IHRL, and ensuring accountability and remediation for victims.

Recommendations to international organisations and States:

1. To strengthen national regulatory frameworks to control PMSCs including robust licensing, oversight and redress mechanisms to prevent human rights abuses and ensure accountability and reparation to victims. The Montreux document provides a blueprint in this direction, including standards for transparency and public procurement of security and military services. PMSCs should be considered ‘state agents’ when performing state duties. As the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) defines: “PMSCs are ‘state agents’ when performing state duties; incorporate applicable legal obligations directly into the contracts signed with the PMCs and into the licensing or regulatory scheme under which PMCs are incorporated”.³²⁴

2. To create a comprehensive a legally binding international instrument: due to the transnational nature and activities of PMSCs it is essential to develop an international instrument with a special focus on clarifying PMSC operatives’ status in combat, the responsibility of the financing entity in the operatives’ actions and the delimitation of military services they can undertake, prohibiting combat operations and other services with high potential impact on human rights. This process requires the participation of states in multilateral initiatives aiming to promote international standards, consider and integrate the recommendations of the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries and advance the discussions of the “Revised Zero Draft Instrument on an International Regulatory Framework on the Regulation, Monitoring of and Oversight over the Activities of Private Military and Security Companies”.

3. To designate Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation and paramilitary group: considering Wagner to be a terrorist organisation reinforces the tools to prosecute the

322 For more information see: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/>.

323 For more information see: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>.

324 Center for Civilians in Conflict. (2022). The Impact of Private Military Companies on the Protection of Civilians ISSUE BRIEF. https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CIVIC_PMC.pdf

group for its crimes, holding accountable anyone who provides assistance to Prigozhin and Wagner, and making it more difficult to raise money, recruit contractors or operate in other countries. The US has designated Wagner as a “significant transnational criminal organisation”³²⁵ placing it under its specific regime of sanctions, and France and the rest of the EU are following a similar path. Moreover, there are legal grounds to consider that Wagner Group is a paramilitary group which followed orders and received military equipment from the Russian Federation to attack enclaves in Ukraine.

4. To advance international criminal prosecution: since having an internationally ratified set of rules seems unlikely in the near future because of conflicting interests between states and because of the current war in Ukraine, the attention now should be placed on using all available legal tools to prosecute PMSC operatives in Ukraine for their human rights violations and abuses. As anticipated in the chapter on the impact on human rights, their individual criminal responsibility should be applied. They should be prosecuted by a Ukrainian tribunal and the ICC, and states that politically support the Special Tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine should incorporate the universal jurisdiction principles into their national regulatory frameworks. Moreover, holding Wagner accountable for its crimes on the African continent could contribute to bringing justice globally. Overall, it is necessary to explore mechanisms to prosecute Wagner Group’s operatives for belonging to a terrorist organisation or partaking in mercenary activities.

Recommendations to civil society organisations:

5. To reinforce monitoring and reporting mechanisms: lack of disaggregated data prevent the attribution of abuses of civilians to Wagner and other PMSCs. This information would provide strong evidence on the impact of the use of PMSCs on civilians which could be used in national and international tribunals and forums to regulate the activities of private contractors such as Wagner. In the process of data collection ‘Do No Harm’ principles must be incorporated when engaging with communities and individuals affected by violence, also to protect personal data. As for access to the battlefields this may remain difficult for human rights organisations for security reasons, so OSINT tools could be used to gather proof.

6. To raise awareness among the public and conflict-affected communities about the PMSCs’ activities to enable them to distinguish Wagner/PMSC operatives from the regular forces, through various communication tools such as social media and mass media, simplifying messages and providing visualisations to promote understanding of the impact of the privatisation of warfare on human rights, similar to the work of [ShockMonitor](#).

7. To engage in advocacy actions to promote international and national regulations to control PMSCs, prosecute Wagner Group and other PMSCs, and ensure redress to victims, through rigorous and solid evidence on the impact of the use of these private contractors. To consider engaging in international coalitions to increase political leverage to advocate before international organisations and governments.

325 For more information: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220>



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APPENDIX

List of key informants interviewed during the field research in Ukraine (April 2023)

1. Vadym Denysenko. Executive Director, Ukrainian Institute for the Future
2. Military high official 1
3. Nick Davydiuk. Political Analyst
4. Official. Ukraine Border Guard Service
5. Sasha Romantsova. Executive Director, Center for Civil Liberties
6. Tetiana Pechonchuk. Head of the Board, Zmina Human Rights Center
7. Oleksandr Kovalenko. Military and political analyst, Information Resistance group
8. Oleh Baturin. Journalist, Reckoning project
9. Maria Kucherenko. Senior Analyst, Come Back Alive
10. Anton Muraveinyk. Analyst, Come Back Alive
11. Denys Volokha. Coordinator, Kharkiv Human Rights Organization
12. Artur Kadelnik. Activist, Youth Up
13. Igor Semivolos. Director, Ukrainian Peacebuilding School
14. Mariya Levonova. Director, Center for United Actions
15. Military high official 2
16. Nazar Zabolotny. Analyst, Center for United Actions
17. Myhalov Samus. Director, The New Geopolitics Research Network
18. Myhailyna Skoryk-Shkarivska. Deputy Mayor Bucha City Council
19. Chief Staff of Territorial Defence. Bucha City Council
20. Dmytro Gapchenko. Head of Administrative Services, Bucha City Council
21. Oleksiy Melnyk. Co-Director, Foreign Relations & International Security Programmes, Razumkov Centre
22. Olga Reshetylova. Coordinator, Media Initiative for Human Rights
23. Taras Semkiv. Head Deputy, Department for Combating Crimes Committed in the Context of Armed Conflict of the Prosecutor General's Office
24. Roman Synitsyn. Head of the military direction, Prytula Foundation
25. Ukrainian soldier 1
26. Ukrainian Soldier 2

27. Oleksiy Hetman. Military analyst, Reserve major at the National Guard of Ukraine
28. Volodymyr Zhabenko. Lawyer, working on war prisoners
29. Andrii Kruglashov. Humanitarian Advisor, Red Cross
30. Humanitarian worker. Red Cross
31. Slava Oleinik's father. Bucha's resident
32. Obidin Yuri. Bucha's resident
33. Stanislav Miroshnychenko. Head of the Information Department, Media Initiative for Human Rights
34. Dmytro Koval. Legal Director, Truth Hounds
35. Maryna Slobodyanuk. Head of Analytical department, Truth Hounds
36. Vadym Miskyi. Program Director, Detector Media
37. Lilia Iapparova. Special Correspondent, Meduza Project
38. Dr. Sorcha MacLeod. Member of the United Nations Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries
39. Mika Golubovsky. Editor, Mediazona
40. Sergey Sukhankin. Senior Fellow, Jamestown Foundation

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