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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES AS INSTRUMENTS OF STATECRAFT: THE CASE OF THE WAGNER GROUP IN UKRAINE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence and operations of the Wagner Group in Ukraine between 2014 and 2018, situating the private military company (PMC) within the broader framework of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. The analysis demonstrates that Wagner was not an independent mercenary organisation, but rather a state-linked proxy used to advance Moscow's geopolitical objectives while maintaining *plausible deniability*. Drawing on academic studies, investigative journalism, and reports by international organisations, the paper traces Wagner's evolution from its early deployment during the annexation of Crimea to its expanded role in the Donbas conflict. Wagner's activities included direct combat support, training and reinforcement of separatist militias, political assassinations, and the elimination of dissent within the self-proclaimed republics. These actions underscored the group's dual function as both a combat force and an enforcer of Kremlin interests. The findings suggest that Wagner blurred the boundaries between state and private actors, providing Moscow with a flexible instrument to destabilise Ukraine while avoiding direct accountability. Furthermore, this case illustrates how PMCs can serve as key components of modern hybrid warfare, combining military, political, and informational dimensions. Wagner's trajectory in Ukraine laid the foundation for its subsequent global expansion, highlighting its strategic utility for Russia in conflict zones beyond Eastern Europe.

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INTRODUCTION

The post-Cold War period was marked by significant changes in Russian military strategy, including the way the state approached regional conflicts in the former Soviet Union. Faced with a new geopolitical environment, Russia increasingly relied on **indirect means of influence**. This was particularly evident in Moscow's engagement in conflicts on the periphery of its sphere of influence, where the use of **non-state actors**, often portrayed as "volunteers," became a crucial tool. This approach enabled Russia to advance its interests while maintaining **plausible deniability** of involvement. During the 1990s, such practices became visible in separatist conflicts in Moldova and Georgia. Although Russia's involvement was evident, Moscow maintained the narrative that these were merely "internal civil wars." The **strategy of deploying volunteers and proxy forces** re-emerged with renewed intensity in Ukraine in 2014. Despite evidence of Russian soldiers and military hardware on the ground, Russia consistently claimed that all fighters from its territory were acting solely as "volunteers," not as official representatives of the Russian military. In this context, the **Wagner Group** represents a paradigmatic example of these tactics. Officially, Wagner does not exist—it is not registered in Russia or anywhere else. Yet, in practice, it operates as a **significant geopolitical actor** in multiple conflict zones. This "legal invisibility" is consistent with Russia's doctrine of **strategic ambiguity**. Such an arrangement allows the state to distance itself from controversial or internationally condemned actions, while simultaneously ensuring that the group has access to

resources, intelligence, and operational support. The advantages of this

relationship are clear: the state can leverage the capabilities of private military and security companies (PMSCs) to pursue its interests abroad without formally deploying the national military or assuming international responsibility. If a mission succeeds, Moscow can quietly claim the political and strategic benefits; if it fails or attracts international condemnation, the state can simply deny any connection.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the Wagner Group as a key instrument of Russia's strategy of informal warfare, to trace the continuity of employing "volunteers" and PMSCs from the 1990s to the present, and to highlight the security and legal implications of this model for the international system.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on a **qualitative research approach**, focusing on the analysis of the Wagner Group's role in the Ukrainian conflict from 2014 to 2018. The methodological framework consists of the following elements:

Secondary Source Analysis – drawing on academic studies, reports from research institutions (Jamestown Foundation, FIIA, CSIS), as well as scholarly articles in journals such as *Post-Soviet Affairs* and the *Journal of Strategic Studies*.

Primary Source Analysis – including reports by international organisations (UN, OSCE, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), investigative media outlets (BBC, Bellingcat, Novaya Gazeta), and official statements by Russian and Ukrainian authorities.

Comparative Analysis – contrasting Wagner’s activities in Ukraine with its subsequent engagements in Syria and Africa, in order to identify continuities in covert warfare strategies and the application of *plausible deniability*.

Critical Discourse Approach – examining how Wagner has been portrayed across different narratives, including Russian official rhetoric, international media coverage, and human rights reporting. This methodological framework is designed to integrate **empirical evidence with theoretical insights** from security studies, hybrid warfare, and private military company (PMC) research, providing a comprehensive and critical assessment of Wagner’s operations in the Ukrainian context.

THE GENESIS OF THE WAGNER GROUP: CONTEXT AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

“In this paper, the evolution of the Wagner Group is examined across three key stages: from its initial formation in 2013, through its militarization, to its eventual association with the highest structures of the Russian state.”

Slavonic Corps – the failed predecessor of Wagner

An examination of the Wagner PMC’s genesis requires a retrospective look at its initial phase in 2013, marked by the emergence of the **Slavonic Corps**. Established by Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov, both former members of MSG (a company known for maritime security expertise), this entity soon shifted from a security agency into a **paramilitary structure**. The Syrian civil war became the catalyst, with the declared mission of protecting oil fields under Damascus’ approval. However, behind this official objective lay broader **strategic implications** tied to Russian interests in the region.

The operations of the Slavonic Corps were short-lived. Logistical shortcomings and a disastrous military defeat led to withdrawal and the collapse of the venture. Upon returning to Russia, Gusev and Sidorov were arrested and sentenced under Article 359 of the Criminal Code to three years in prison. Their prosecution is interpreted both as an attempt by Moscow to conceal its connection to the mercenary mission in Syria and as a signal that a more sophisticated project was yet to come.

Dmitry Utkin – a symbolic figurehead

During this transitional phase, **Dmitry Utkin** emerged as a central figure. A former GRU officer and commander of a Spetsnaz unit, he officially ended his military career in 2013. Although often portrayed publicly as the “mastermind” behind Wagner, subsequent analyses suggest he was primarily a **symbolic figure**, embodying the group’s ideological image. Under the nom de guerre “*Wagner*”, Utkin instilled a militaristic culture defined by brutality, discipline, and uncompromising violence.

Under his nominal leadership, the group quickly gained a reputation synonymous with **extreme ruthlessness and unconventional methods of warfare**, frequently operating outside the boundaries of international humanitarian law. This profile suited the Russian state: Utkin gave a face and name to the organization while simultaneously serving as a **cover to obscure the real patrons and architects** behind it.

Yevgeny Prigozhin – business intermediary and state connection

The true strength of the Wagner PMC lay in its connections with the **highest echelons of the Russian military and political establishment**. According to numerous analyses, the concept was developed under the auspices of Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, and possibly sanctioned by President Putin. Within this framework, **Yevgeny Prigozhin** played a pivotal role. A businessman close to the Kremlin, he became widely known as “*Putin’s chef*” due to his restaurant and catering empire.

Having transformed in the 1990s from a convicted felon into a prominent restaurateur in St. Petersburg, Prigozhin established **close ties with Putin**, then deputy mayor of the city. These ties enabled him to act as an intermediary between the state and the private sector, securing lucrative government contracts. Later, according to indictments by the U.S. Department of Justice, he directed the **Internet Research Agency (IRA)**, an organization tasked with digital propaganda and interference in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, for which he faced multiple sanctions. Prigozhin’s role in Wagner demonstrates that the group never functioned as an autonomous PMSC operating on market principles. Instead, it was a **state instrument**, reflecting a synthesis of economic interests, political loyalty, and military strategy—key elements that enabled Wagner to become the most prominent example of state-sponsored mercenary activity in the modern era. This developmental trajectory—from the Slavonic Corps, through Utkin’s symbolic leadership, to Prigozhin’s state-connected role—confirms that Wagner PMC did not arise spontaneously. Rather, it represents a **strategic project of the Russian state**, a hybrid of military, intelligence, and business structures designed to provide Moscow with a flexible and deniable instrument of power projection abroad.

THE GLOBAL FOOTPRINT OF THE WAGNER GROUP: OPERATIONS AND STRATEGIC ENDEAVOURS

Wagner in Syria (2015–2018)

In the latter part of 2015, the Kremlin initiated a restructuring of the Wagner faction, recruiting individuals who had already fought in Syria (Sukhankin, 2019). The reformed unit operated without Russian insignia, though it remained closely integrated with Russia’s military apparatus under the supervision of security services (Rácz, 2020). This model enabled Moscow to obscure the true scale of military casualties among regular troops, supporting a propaganda narrative of strength while delegating high-risk missions to mercenaries (Marten, 2019).

Yevgeny Prigozhin oversaw the creation of this entity, appointing Dmitry Utkin as commander (BBC Monitoring, 2017). Between 2015 and 2016, Wagner expanded into a light infantry battalion and engaged in multiple battles against Islamist militants. By 2017, it had grown to around 2,000 personnel (US DoD Report, 2018). Despite tactical successes, Wagner’s battlefield role relied heavily on Russian military firepower and air support (Rácz, 2020). This dynamic became clear in February 2018, when Wagner fighters and pro-Syrian forces attacked U.S. and allied positions near Deir Ezzor. American retaliatory strikes reportedly killed up to 300 Russian fighters (BBC, 2018; Sukhankin, 2019). Moscow denied direct involvement, while Russian media portrayed the operation as a victory with minimal losses. Independent outlets, however, highlighted Wagner’s central role and reported instances of torture and abuses against Syrian civilians (Amnesty International, 2018). Several investigative journalists covering the group later died under suspicious circumstances (Novaya Gazeta, 2018).

Expansion into Africa

By 2018, Wagner had expanded operations into the **Central African Republic (CAR)**, offering military and security support to President Faustin-Archange Touadera (UN Security Council Report, 2019). The deployment was framed as stabilisation but also served to anchor

Russian influence in a resource-rich and politically fragile state (Sukhankin, 2020).

In **Libya**, Wagner aligned with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, strengthening Haftar's military capacity and positioning Russia as a potential power broker in the civil war (CSIS, 2020). Access to Libyan oil infrastructure underscored the economic incentives of the intervention (Wezeman, 2020). The group also deployed to **Mozambique in 2019** to assist government forces against Islamist insurgents. Poor preparation and significant casualties, however, led to withdrawal (Foreign Policy, 2019). The Kremlin disavowed responsibility, stressing that no official Russian soldiers were involved. In contrast, Wagner's operations in **Mali** proved more durable. Following the withdrawal of French troops in 2021, Wagner entered into agreements with the ruling junta, providing training, security, and operational support (International Crisis Group, 2022). This move faced criticism from the U.S. and EU, which feared human rights violations and destabilisation (European Council, 2021). In response, the European Council imposed restrictive measures against Wagner and affiliated entities, citing involvement in resource exploitation, intimidation of civilians, and violations of international law (Official Journal of the EU, 2021).

Economic and Propaganda Dimensions

Wagner's activities were closely tied to economic incentives. Operations in Libya and other theatres were often linked to securing energy and resource contracts for Russian companies (Stronski, 2020). Payment schemes were structured to limit financial exposure for the Russian state, while unrecovered casualties reduced public awareness of losses (Soldatov & Borogan, 2019). Propaganda played a parallel role. Wagner cultivated the image of the "Russian mercenary archetype": a resilient fighter, operating globally to defend national interests, and often portrayed through Prigozhin-linked media outlets (Polygraph.info, 2021). This narrative masked allegations of war crimes and human rights abuses while glorifying the group's exploits abroad (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Casualties and Human Rights Concerns

Managing the visibility of casualties became central to Wagner's role as a "**deniable asset**" of the Kremlin (Rácz, 2020). By concealing deaths, Moscow limited the risk of public backlash and political unrest. Human rights advocates argue that such concealment represents deliberate suppression of information, with whistleblowers facing intimidation or legal repercussions (Memorial Human Rights Center, 2020). Reports of atrocities committed by Wagner operatives in Syria, CAR, and Mali—including torture, extrajudicial killings, and mutilation—have drawn widespread condemnation (Amnesty International, 2021). Yet the group's ambiguous legal status provides Russia with a protective shield against accountability (Sukhankin, 2020). Wagner's trajectory from Syria to Africa highlights its dual role: both as a **disposable force** shielding Russia from the political costs of war, and as a **strategic instrument** advancing Moscow's geopolitical and economic ambitions. Through this "grey zone" warfare, Russia has expanded its influence in fragile states, exploited natural resources, and challenged Western dominance—all while maintaining plausible deniability (Marten, 2019; Rácz, 2020).

FINANCING OF THE WAGNER GROUP: STRUCTURES AND SOURCES

The Wagner PMC developed a solid financial backbone through diversified streams of revenue. These channels enabled the group to maintain a well-stocked arsenal, provide training, and offer generous salaries to its mercenaries. They also facilitated the acquisition of advanced weapons and equipment, transforming Wagner into an effective military force (Marten, 2019; Sukhankin, 2020). A major source of financial sustenance came from enterprises linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin. His business conglomerate, **Concord**, secured lucrative contracts with Russian state agencies, providing services

ranging from catering to logistical support for the armed forces (Soldatov & Borogan, 2019). One company within this network, **Megaline**, increased its revenues from 13.4 million roubles in 2012 to 2.7 billion roubles in 2015, largely due to contracts with the Ministry of Defence (BBC Monitoring, 2017). However, relations between Wagner leadership and Defence Minister Shoigu deteriorated after the Palmyra operation, reducing the availability of such government-backed contracts (Marten, 2019).

Beyond Russia, Wagner expanded into **Africa**, capitalising on the continent's abundant natural resources. In the **Central African Republic**, it became embedded in the mining sector, reportedly generating profits of around USD 1 billion (UN Security Council Report, 2019; Sukhankin, 2020). In the **Congo Basin**, the group secured a 30-year concession for forestry exploitation, a project estimated to yield up to USD 890 million through timber exports (Stronski, 2020). Wagner also built relationships with governments by providing protection and training. In **Mali**, the government agreed to pay approximately USD 10 million per month for Wagner's services (International Crisis Group, 2022). The group also obtained a majority stake in **Marina Gold**, a leading mining and processing company (European Council, 2021). A similar model was applied in **Sudan**, where the Prigozhin-linked firm **M-Invest** gained gold mining concessions and generated an estimated USD 2.6 million in 2021, despite U.S. sanctions (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In the **Middle East**, Wagner extended its operations into the Syrian energy sector. In 2018, Prigozhin's company **Europolis** obtained concessions from the Assad regime, granting Wagner a 25% share of revenues from oil and gas fields recaptured from ISIS (Rácz, 2020). These ventures demonstrated the group's ability to combine military force with economic exploitation. Nevertheless, Wagner's expanding operations required immense financial outlays, especially after the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This raised questions about the sustainability of funding solely through Prigozhin's business empire. Analysts have suggested that the Kremlin offset a substantial share of Wagner's costs, particularly in supplying weapons and ammunition (Marten, 2019; Soldatov & Borogan, 2019). Such support underscores Wagner's position not as an independent private enterprise, but as a state-supported proxy combining profit motives with strategic utility.

WAGNER'S 2014 FORAY: THE PMC'S COVERT FOOTPRINT IN UKRAINE

Crimea and the Initial Deployment

The emergence of the Wagner Group coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014. As part of Moscow's strategy of *plausible deniability*, Wagner mercenaries, often described as "polite people," provided direct support to Russian forces in seizing strategic facilities while concealing state involvement (Marten, 2019; Rácz, 2020). Unlike its failed predecessor, the Slavonic Corps, Wagner displayed close coordination with the Russian Army, facilitating covert objectives in Crimea (Sukhankin, 2020).

Wagner in Donbas: Hybrid Warfare in Practice

Following Crimea, Wagner became a central actor in the Donbas conflict, operating alongside separatist formations such as the LPR and DPR. Initially engaged in sabotage and reconnaissance, Wagner evolved into a more centralised and disciplined force, spearheading offensives and reinforcing inexperienced militias (Bellingcat, 2016; Galeotti, 2017). This organisational consolidation marked the transition of Wagner into a hub for hybrid warfare, blending mercenaries, local insurgents, and clandestine support from Russian military intelligence (Rácz, 2020).

Political Assassinations and Control

Beyond battlefield operations, Wagner was implicated in political assassinations within separatist-held Luhansk. Commanders such as Alexey Mozgovoy, Alexander Bednov, and Pavel Dremov were eliminated, consolidating Kremlin-aligned leadership (Polygraph.info, 2018). Such actions highlight Wagner's role as both a combat force and an enforcer of Russian geopolitical strategies, ensuring compliance within proxy structures (Sukhankin, 2019).

Atrocities and State Denial

Wagner personnel were linked to severe war crimes, including the downing of a Ukrainian Il-76 transport plane (killing 49 servicemen) and participation in the battles for Luhansk Airport and Debal'tsevo (Marten, 2019; HRW, 2021). Despite mounting evidence, Moscow consistently denied direct involvement, using Wagner as a disposable proxy to blur the line between state and non-state actors (Soldatov & Borogan, 2019).

Prigozhin's Admission and Legacy

For years, Yevgeny Prigozhin denied any connection to Wagner. However, in September 2022, he publicly acknowledged founding the group, framing its origins as a patriotic initiative to aid separatist forces in eastern Ukraine (BBC Monitoring, 2022). This admission marked a shift from secrecy to open endorsement, reflecting Wagner's transformation from a covert auxiliary into a recognised instrument of Russian statecraft. The Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2018 epitomise Russia's hybrid warfare doctrine: covert interventions masked as local insurgency, enforced through mercenary violence and political control. Wagner's trajectory in Ukraine laid the groundwork for its later global expansion into Syria, Africa, and beyond, confirming its dual role as both a disposable force and a strategic proxy.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Wagner Group's operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2018 demonstrates that this private military company did not emerge as an autonomous profit-driven actor, but rather as an instrument of Russian state policy. From its initial deployment in Crimea to its activities in Donbas, Wagner embodied the doctrine of hybrid warfare: a combination of regular and irregular forces, intelligence support, and political control, all under the umbrella of plausible deniability. Wagner's role went beyond conventional military tasks. The group was implicated in political assassinations in Luhansk, the consolidation of separatist structures, and the enforcement of Kremlin interests through the elimination of inconvenient local leaders. Such activities cemented Wagner's reputation as a force not only destabilising contested territories, but also disciplining them in line with Moscow's strategic objectives. Yevgeny Prigozhin's later admission of founding Wagner revealed the group's deep entanglement with the highest levels of Russian political and security structures. This shift—from denial to public legitimisation—illustrates how Wagner evolved from a covert paramilitary formation into a recognised instrument of Russian statecraft. The broader implication of this case is that Wagner blurs the boundary between state and private military actors. Its deployment has enabled Russia to project power, obscure responsibility, and simultaneously pursue political and economic objectives. Thus, Wagner emerged not only as a key actor in the Ukrainian conflict, but also as a model for understanding the transformation of modern warfare and the dynamics of "grey zone" security in international relations.

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