Russia's "Private" Military Companies: The Example of the Wagner Group

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Key Messages

• “The Wagner Group” is a name, not a traditional organization.
• Wagner is not a “private military company” and is not mercenary:
  – It is a semi-state security actor.
• It has become a Russian tool throughout Africa.
  – New model: support a particular leader, in return for raw materials access.
Why Russia Uses “Private Military Companies” Is *Not* a Mystery: Same as Other Countries

- Saves state budget resources.
- Adds skill sets to regular troops.
- Provides *plausible deniability* for state actions.
- **Avoids casualties** for regular troops
  - Ivan Safranchuk (MGIMO and CSIS): “proxy warfare”
Yet There are Three Mysteries about the Wagner Group:

- **Mystery #1**: Whatever happened to Dmitry Utkin (Mr. “Wagner”)?
- **Mystery #2**: Why is the Wagner Group illegal in Russia?
- **Mystery #3**: Why is Putin interested in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Central African Republic (CAR)?
The Wagner Group emerged in Ukraine, 2014/15

• Immediate predecessor: the Slavonic Corps (Syria).

• Commander Dmitry Utkin: a GRU spetsnaz veteran with the nom de guerre “Wagner.”
  – He wore a Wehrmacht steel helmet.

• They participated in:
  – Fighting in eastern Ukraine (Donbas).
  – Infighting among pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine.
The Wagner Group

• Cooperated in combat with Russian forces in Syria (2015/16).
• **Dmitry Utkin** received a Kremlin medal for bravery in December 2016.
  – ...but has not been seen publicly since.
  – Named the head of Concord Management and Consulting (a Prigozhin firm), Nov. 2017.
• **We don’t have an answer to Mystery #1.**

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Wagner is Illegal in Russia

• The state refused to legalize PMCs, March 2018.
  – They are technically “unconstitutional.”

• Yet:
  – Wagner trains in Krasnodar (Molkino) next to GRU special forces.
  – Uткин received that Kremlin medal.
  – Some Wagner dead were buried with military honors.
  – Putin on Wagner, Dec. 2018:
    • “If they comply with Russian law, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world.”
Why are Russian choices puzzling?

• Many powerful states use PMCs.
• But all other major powers have recognized them as legal contractors.
• Most are parties to the 2008 ICRC Montreux Accord.
  – Even China was an original signatory.
Why Are PMCs Illegal in Russia?

• Most common answer: plausible deniability.
  – Becoming less “plausible” with time.

• Some Russian analysts: to prevent a coup?
  – Unlikely: relative size of forces.

• My argument:
  – Illegality is a form of control.
  – Illegality limits the market to Putin’s friends.
Two Examples: The Russian State Did Not Protect “Wagner” in Eastern Syria

- The **Slavonic Corps**: 2013.
  - Veterans were recruited by an **FSB** reserve officer.
  - Leaders were arrested as “mercenaries” by the **FSB**!

  - Russian **Defense Ministry** disowned them.
  - Flown home on Russian **military** airplanes...
  - but the **Defense Ministry** would not send helicopters to evacuate them from the battlefield.

- **Yet**: both Deir-el-Zour gasfield contracts were probably reached via the **Russian energy ministry**.

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2016: Wagner’s Primary Contractor is revealed: Yevgeny Prigozhin

- Spent 9 years in Soviet prison for organized crime (got out early).
- Started a sausage kiosk in St. Petersburg (Putin in mayor’s office).
- Turned it into a successful St. Petersburg restaurant chain.
- Became the primary caterer for the Kremlin (Putin in the Kremlin).
- Became the primary caterer for Russian public schools.
- Became the primary food and cleaning contractor for the Russian military.
February 2018 Syria Disaster

• Why did Russia allow those veterans to go to their doom?
• Could not have been miscommunication: the battle had 2 phases and lasted 4 hours.
• Was it a test of US military mettle?
• Or was it infighting between Prigozhin and the Russian Defense Ministry?
  – Prigozhin is an ex-con with no military experience.
  – He was an oligarch interloper in the Russian battle space (uniformed military vs. PMCs).
  – He was known to cheat the Defense Ministry: major 2017 contract disputes.
“Wagner” in the Central African Republic (CAR)

• Dec. 2017: Wagner guarded weapons Russia brought in with UN Security Council approval.

• 2018: Pres. Touadéra accepted Valery Zakharov (former GRU officer) as his security advisor.
  – Zakharov may have been paid by Prigozhin and lives on Prigozhin property (CNN investigation).

• Wagner is training CAR special operations forces.
  – The first cadre graduated in May 2019.
  – *Not* integrated with UN MINUSCA or EU training programs.

• Russian troops and weapons have increased over time.
Meanwhile...

- Prigozhin has deals with:
  - CAR to guard its **diamond and gold mines**, in return for a cut of the profits...
  - Sudan to provide training, and guard its **gold mines** in return for a cut of the profits.

- All of these mines are **artisanal**.
Also meanwhile...

- **Zakharov** and **Prigozhin** helped rebel militias in CAR mining areas negotiate a peace deal with Touadéra (done in Sudan).
- This jump-started (but also sidelined) the UN MINUSCA/African Union process.
- Rebels got positions in government and defense forces with inadequate vetting (ICG).
- Russia may be testing a new **model of indispensable influence**.
  - May not be working.
- Is Prigozhin making any money?
2020: Russia Rotates in as Chair of the “Kimberley Process”

• UN-mandated trade regime for certifying rough diamonds as “conflict-free.”
• CAR was allowed to reenter in 2015...
  – But only 8 districts in CAR are approved.
  – One, Boda, has *some* Prigozhin contracts.
• Russian **Deputy Finance Minister** Aleksei Moiseev: Russia wants to get *all* of CAR approved.
  – Moiseev also chairs the strategic planning board of Alrosa.
• Meanwhile, is Prigozhin engaged in money laundering using diamonds? (Arnaud Kalika, IFRI)
• Could he also be engaged in “diamond laundering”?
By 2019, “Wagner” is also in:

- **Libya**: supporting warlord Khalifa Haftar.
- **Mozambique**: fighting jihadist insurgency in Cabo Delgado (may now have withdrawn).
- **Mali**: fighting terrorism.
- **Back in Syria?** New gas and oil contracts.
Prigozhin and Media in Africa

• He operates a radio station in CAR.
• His fake social media accounts are attempting political influence in 8 African countries (Shelby Grossman and team at the Stanford Internet Observatory, Oct. 2019)
• He has launched campaigns to discredit French forces as “neo-colonial.”
  – Obvious lies about the French have been repeated in the UN Security Council by Russia’s Vasily Nebenzya (Foreign Ministry).
  – Yet France and Russia are important natural gas business partners in both the Russian Arctic, and the Nord Stream II European pipeline.

Kimberly Marten, April 2020