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Research article

Russian Private Military and Ukraine: Hybrid Surrogate Warfare and Russian State Policy by Other Means

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Abstract

This article investigates the Russian government's reliance on commercial soldiers in the hybrid war efforts against Ukraine until the invasion in February 2022. Russian private military companies (PMCs), such as RUSCORP and the Wagner group, have already been active in Syria and Africa over the last years, signalling the resurgence of Russian machinations on the world stage. They also played a key part in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as well as the struggles on Ukraine's Eastern border areas around Luhansk and Donbas. The article shows that PMCs have become an integral part of the Kremlin's approach to foreign policy. Unlike Western PMCs, which can arguably augment their ability to provide effective public security, Russian PMCs are used to construct insecurities to the point of fighting hybrid surrogate wars. While they fulfil the same outcome for the Russian state to be strengthened through the public-private security arrangements, their function is radically different: (1) providing deniability without the deployment of Russian troops, (2) providing military ambiguity and (3) thus, furthering the Kremlin's foreign policy objectives. The significance of the deployment of these PMCs is that they are an extension of the Russian security apparatus, closely linked to the FSB, GRU and SVR, and with similar

command and control structures, staffed by former members of the Russian security services.

Keywords: *private military companies, Russia, Ukraine, surrogate warfare, hybrid warfare*

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Introduction

Over the last 8 years Putin's Russia has sought to re-establish itself on the world stage by projecting power across the Middle East and Africa, harking back to the height of Soviet influence in the 1970s and 1980s. The Kremlin see this as Russia's right in the world. With this in mind Putin's Russia has started to employ what have been termed *Private Military Companies* (PMCs) or perhaps more accurately *semi-state security forces* to assist in the re-establishment of Russia's international standing (Marten 2019). However, Russia's deployment of these types of companies represent a very serious threat to international security as they have re-imagined the mercenary in their own way and in a departure from the traditional 'soldier of fortune' seen in the mid to late 20th century. Between 1800 and 1945 the mercenary profession was frowned upon and unlike previous centuries had almost dropped from view. However, mercenaries returned to the international stage in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Wars of Decolonisation between 1945 and 1980. British, French, Belgian and Portuguese mercenaries were prevalent during this period (Mockler 2006). The late 1990s saw their re-emergence in Africa particularly in Angola and Sierra Leone in the mould of the classic soldier of fortune. The trend continued in Afghanistan and Iraq after the invasion by the US led Coalition in 2001 and 2003. Their use has been well documented elsewhere.

This marks a departure from the established norms for companies such as these and also signals a very worrying precedent. Russia can and has been using the legal ambiguity that surrounds these companies in terms of International Law to expand its influence in Ukraine, Africa and Syria. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the encroachment of so called Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine highlight their increased use by Moscow to further its regional goals in a more aggressive interpretation of the 'near and abroad' policy or in Soviet parlance 'Spheres of Influence'. This has been made possible by the ambiguous legal standing of private military companies internationally. The most prominent Russian mercenary group is the Wagner group which first appeared in Crimea in 2014 and since then has been in the vanguard of Russian foreign policy in Africa, the Middle East and in the contested areas of Eastern Ukraine. Thus,

our article contributes to a dimension of the war in Ukraine, in particular the role of PMCs in Russian Foreign and Security Policy and their use in Ukraine. Russian PMCs have been used to construct insecurities to the point of fighting hybrid and proxy wars. The presence and activities of PMCs in Ukraine were actively involved in false flag operations as a pretext for Russia to intervene, as well as constructing war infrastructure in Crimea and the Donbas. The article is structured as follows: The first section analyses the theoretical framework of hybrid surrogate warfare, a term linked to state sponsorship of terrorism, but also broadened to include the use of proxy militias, insurgent groups, PMCs and even drones. We then analyse the rise of PMCs in Russia in other theatres of violence, such as Syria and Africa. The final section will apply the framework to Ukraine through the different periods from 2014 and the take over of Crimea until the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022.

Hybrid surrogate warfare and Russian semi state proxies

The phenomenon of hybrid warfare has been debated since it entered into the security and military lexicon. On the one hand, as states and non-state actors have employed both conventional and irregular methods to achieve their goals throughout history, some view hybrid warfare as the latest definition for irregular or asymmetric methods used to counter a conventionally superior enemy. On the other hand, others assert that the concept of hybrid warfare represents a new type of phenomenon implemented by contemporary threat actors (Jasper & Moreland 2014). According to Hoffman (Hoffman 2007: 8), hybrid warfare comprises different types of warfare, which can all be executed by both state and non-state actors. These types of warfare include conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts and criminal disorder. By conducting this variety of acts of warfare, Hoffman (ibid: 8), asserts that the main goal of hybrid warfare is to obtain 'synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict'. In addition, Hoffman notes that in hybrid war, all the forces, whether they are regular or irregular, become blurred into the same force in the same battlespace (ibid: 8). Pindjak (Pindjak 2014:18) contends that Hybrid warfare involves multi-layered endeavours that aim to destabilise a functioning state and polarise its society. Thus, by combining kinetic operations with subversive efforts, the adversary goal is to have an impact on decision-makers. Usually, according to Pindjak (ibid: 18), in order to avoid attribution or retribution, the aggressor using hybrid warfare conducts clandestine actions that leave no credible smoking gun. In that sense, Deep (Deep 2020) argues that hybrid warfare has the 'potential to transform the strategic calculations of potential belligerents due to the rise of non-state actors, information technology, and the proliferation of advanced weapons systems' (ibid).

This section analyses the theoretical framework of hybrid surrogate warfare. Given the fact that the phenomenon of hybrid warfare poses a substantial challenge to democratic states in the current era, the conundrum is what happens when a situation occurs where hybrid warfare poses an existential threat to a sovereign state. How does the threatened state respond to that hybrid threat when it poses an existential threat to it? Thus, in order to combine these two concepts, hybrid warfare and surrogate warfare, this article will synthesise hybrid and surrogate warfare, but now broadened to include the use of proxy militias, insurgent groups, PMCs and even drones. The term surrogate warfare has been used recently by Krieg and Rickli (Krieg & Rickli 2019: 7-8) to describe 'a sociopolitical phenomenon rather than just another mode of war' involving the externalisation of the burden of warfare. Initially a concept that emerged during the 1970s and referred to state sponsorship of terrorism, it has now been expanded to include the use of proxy militias, insurgent groups, PMCs and even drones. Thus, 'a surrogate force does not necessarily have to be indigenous, nor does it have to be non-national. Rather, any force . . . that conducts an operation on behalf of another is probably a more accurate definition of a surrogate' (Pelletier 2004: 13). Surrogates have tactical and operational utility because they act as force multipliers for the Russian forces. As defined, the term is conceptually precise to cover the use of militias and PMCs by Moscow in Ukraine and Syria.

Where does the Russian military doctrine and strategy come from? It has been derived from the Soviet armed forces, in which, based on a Marxist perspective, war was viewed 'as a socio-political phenomenon . . . [where] armed forces are used as chief and decisive means for the achievement of political aims' (Glantz 1995: xiii). After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks established a militia-type volunteer army, which, for instance, fought against the Basmachi insurgents in Central Asia (Statiev 2010: 25). Subsequently, Leon Trotsky transformed the Red Army into a regular army with hundreds of thousands of soldiers. After the end of World War II, the Soviet leadership used militias extensively to suppress nationalist insurgents in western Ukraine (*ibid*: 97-123). Militias were subsequently used as a tool of Soviet counter-insurgency efforts to tap into local knowledge and intelligence. Thus, militias played an important role of the regular army and the party closely supervised them (*ibid*: 26). The collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated nationalism in the former Soviet space. Ethnic conflicts prompted Moscow to intervene in former Soviet republics, whereby Russia had inherited most of the Soviet military capabilities, yet its army was trained to fight a conventional war against NATO. An example for Russia's new foreign policy approach in the post Soviet space is the case of the insurgents from the Russian-speaking region of Transnistria, who fought a short war against the former Soviet republic of Moldova in 1992. While the Moldova-based Soviet/Russian

14th Army was officially neutral, it covertly supported pro-Russian Transnistrian militias. During the 2008 Georgian war, Russian forces were helped by local militias in their support of the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Several thousand South Ossetians and volunteers from North Caucasus, as well as up to 10,000 Abkhazians, participated in the war (ECHR 2009: 216).

The post war surge in mercenary activity prompted Geneva Protocols I and II in 1977 that banned mercenaries. The primary objection is that they were warriors without a state, fighting for money rather than national ideology. The most widely accepted definition of a mercenary in international law comes from Article 47 of Protocol I to the Geneva Convention. Article 47 forms the international legal basis against mercenaries (ICRC 1949). However it is widely regarded as not only unworkable legislation but also laughable as it is so ambiguous that any clever legal council would be able to argue their client out of it (Geoffrey 1980: 375). Russian military companies like their western counter operate globally with relative ease due to Article 47. This utilisation of poor law and loopholes within international legislation is called *lawfare* and has been exploited by the Russian Federation continually (Chifu & Frunzeti 2020: 47). Article 13 paragraph 5 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Art. 208 of the Penal Code prohibit the operation of private armed groups, and deal with concerns about the security of the state (Dyner 2018). While Russian Law prohibits mercenary activity there has been an upsurge in Russian mercenary activity in the last 8 years, papers relating to Wagner and the Slavonic corps have pointed out that the Kremlin uses the question of legality as leverage against the Russia military companies to keep them in line and operating in Russian interests (Chifu & Frunzeti 2020). However, this outlook fails to account for the fact that Russian Law is what the Kremlin says it is when it suits them. This is especially valid when it comes to matters of state security and foreign intelligence operations. Russian Law has been continually distorted to suit the ends of the oligarchs and of Vladimir Putin. In keeping with what has transpired in Russia since the end of communism in what Paul Klebnikov (Klebnikov 2001) termed the era of 'gangster capitalism', Russia has a propensity to act in the grey zone between peace and war, where they can deny involvement and quite often get away with actions that violate international norms, if not international law (Peterson: 30). Chifu and Frunzeti point out that these so-called Russian PMCs are the perfect tool for conducting *lawfare* by allowing the Kremlin to operate on the edge of the law or in territories where the law has no application (Chifu & Frunzeti 2020: 47). Private security and military companies are neither explicitly legal nor illegal in Russia, a status that may serve Russian authorities well in situations where attribution and attention is unwanted. While the exact shape and role of the Russian PMSC industry may not be carved out fully, Russia is now home to a small, but potent,

PMSC industry that can be mobilised to inflict harm on the country's enemies (Østensen & Bukkvoll 2020).

The registration of the various PMCs outside of Russia is not simply an effort to get around *Article 13* of the Russian Constitution, which forbids mercenary activities and enshrines the monopoly on violence with the military forces of the Russian Federation. It is a very simply cut out to provide Moscow with insulation when it comes to the deployment of these companies, in a word – deniability. But the closer we look at Wagner and its ties, the thinner the veil becomes and its relationship to the State more visible. Research by Kimberly Marten notes that training facilities used by Wagner were at one point situated on the grounds of the 10th Brigade of the GRU Spetznaz base and its original training facility in Mol'Kino in Krasnodar Krai was across the highway from a GRU facility there (Marten 2019: 192). Wagner Group Commander Dmitri Utkin who has been spotted in Donbas was originally a Colonel in the GRU Reserve; he formally ended his service in the GRU in 2013 (ibid: 192). Utkin was appointed CEO of Concord Management and Consulting in 2017, which is a holding company of Yevgeni Prigozhin catering empire.

The question of legality in the case of Russian military companies is merely a façade that shields Moscow and its intentions. The proximity of Oligarchs such as Wagner's owner Yevgeni Prigozhin to Vladimir Putin indicates collusion at the highest level. Prigozhin is an unusual individual to head up a military company, as he has no military background and made his money in a chain of restaurants in St. Petersburg after a stint in jail for petty crime (Harding 2020: 160-161). Kimberly Marten (Marten 2019: 196-197) considers him a middleman when it comes to Wagner, making money out of contracting Wagner operations. Prigozhin is worth in the region of 200 million dollars after securing lucrative catering contracts for the Russian military. He is closely linked to Vladimir Putin and has been called 'Putin's chef'. Prigozhin denies any links to Wagner and the Kremlin also denies their existence, after all being a mercenary is illegal in Russia. Prigozhin is no stranger to deniable operations as he is also suspected of funding a troll farm in St. Petersburg that was involved in the on-line manipulation of US voters in 2016 (Chifu & Frunzeti 2020: 47; Belton 2020: 483). This places Prigozhin firmly in the grey zone of hybrid warfare along with Wagner; yet, even Putin and the Russian Federation deny the existence of such entities. As Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov noted '*De jure* we do not have such legal entities' (Harding 2020: 153). However, Putin has noted that individuals do not represent the Russian Federation that 'it is a matter of private individuals not the state' (Belton 2020: 483). Caroline Belton notes that in this instance Putin was being facetious, and that the term private individual was a typical KGB tactic that allowed for plausible deniability for any Kremlin involvement. She goes

further by pointing out that by this time all of Russia's so-called private businessmen have become agents of the State (ibid: 483). This is a sentiment shared by Bill Browder (Browder 2015) who highlighted this same issue in his acclaimed book *Red Notice*.

In the same way as we have viewed groups like Wagner and RUS-CORP as PMCs and attributing the title company to them, we have perhaps also overestimated the oligarchs in this landscape. Far from being independent from the Russian state they are inextricably linked to it and to Vladimir Putin. They merely do the Kremlin's bidding and benefit financially by doing so acting as caretakers for Moscow's deniable operations, in this case Prigozhin and Wagner. This means that challenging such companies via international institutions is inherently difficult. The oligarchs owe their loyalty to Putin and the Russian State and are thus an extension of the Russian intelligence apparatus and in that regard insulated and protected. The motion to legalise PMCs in Russia in 2018 was vetoed, as it would have put at risk the GRU's deniable operations, it was not in the best interests of the Russian Federation to allow the legalisation of such companies. Maintaining the status quo is in the interest of the Russian secret services structures with which the PMCs are linked and through which they are controlled because legalisation of their activities could limit this influence and control (Dyner 2018: 2). Doing so would have destroyed the veneer plausible deniability that protects the GRU and its private army. It is not a coincidence that the Wagner group trains on GRU bases and deploys globally with the assistance of the regular Russian Military.

Even if international law could be applied, there would be a necessity to establish beyond any doubt who owns the companies and where they are registered. With the exception of the RSB-group and the Moran Group, it is unclear where Wagner is registered with a view to establishing culpability. Whether inside Russia or externally, challenging these groups is inherently difficult and, in terms of their use in Eastern Ukraine and in particular the Donbas, very worrying. On all levels, the Kremlin has built a very dangerous foreign policy tool. They have insulated themselves legally, financially and in terms of employment at all levels. Moscow has applied the deniability rationale completely, including the denial of the death of Russian contractors in Syria in 2018 at Deir ez-Zor. This deadly incident involving United States Special Forces led to the death of 200 to 300 Russian contractors of the Wagner Group. The death of Russian nationals in a foreign country should have elicited a strong response from the Kremlin, yet it did not (Neff 2018). This shows the lengths to which Moscow is willing to go to pursue its foreign policy aims up to the point of allowing its operatives to be abandoned, if necessary. While Africa represents a significant part of Wagner's operations it also represents a learning curve. Moscow has used

them on the continent to learn how to best employ them, using it as a proving ground with little or no consequence in any respect should the operations there fail (Østensen & Bukkvoll 2020). This approach as we have seen has been very successful and the scope of operations has become broad. Groups like Wagner are very well suited to making a significant contribution for low financial cost in a power as prestige way (Østensen & Bukkvoll 2022).

PMCs in Russia and their role in other theatres of violence

This section outlines and evidences the role of PMCs in Russian Foreign and Security Policy. Russian PMCs have been used to construct insecurities to the point of fighting hybrid and proxy wars, for which our theoretical framework on hybrid surrogate warfare is used in the analysis. This section outlines their role in other theatres of violence in order to make the broader point of their essential rise in Russian Foreign and Security Policy. The subsequent section will analyse the presence and activities of PMCs in Ukraine – which were actively involved in false flag operations as a pretext for Russia to intervene, as well as constructing war infrastructure in Crimea and the Donbas. The term surrogate warfare describes ‘a sociopolitical phenomenon rather than just another mode of war’ (Krieg & Rickli 2019: 7-8) and includes the use of proxy militias, insurgent groups, PMCs and even drones. ‘[A]ny force . . . that conducts an operation on behalf of another is probably a more accurate definition of a surrogate’ (Peltier 2004: 13), and, thus, act as force multipliers for the Russian forces.

One of the most problematic aspects of understanding Russia’s use of hired soldiers is the nomenclature that is used, in particular the term ‘Private Military Company’. This term has been applied to the various mercenary groups that appear to be Russian, starting with the Moran Group followed by Anti-terror Orel, the Slavonic Corps, RUS-Corp and, of course, the Wagner Group. What makes the term ‘Private Military Company’ difficult is the fact that these groups are unlike any previous type of military company. A side-by-side comparison with Western firms that are private military companies and the new breed of so called Russian military companies shows us that there is a vast difference between the two. In the West private military companies are just that, they are registered companies and operate legally. They are also limited in the types of mission they can undertake while employed. Western companies such as Blackwater, Ageis, DynCorp and XE act as private contractors. The most important tasks of PMCs in a Western sense include securing the regular activities of the armed forces (providing logistics, convoy protection), training and protection of facilities and people. Private military companies work for state and private entities.¹ They are

¹ Blackwater and Wagner as companies share the title of private military company. However they differ in terms of legality and purpose. Blackwater, which is now Xe (since 2009), is owned by private investors and legally registered in North Carolina

also used by UN agencies, including UNICEF, the World Food Program and the UN Development Program. This is a very important distinction when it comes to the emergence of Russian military companies. Western PMCs are not employed in roles that meant they would be involved in the planning and execution of military operations. Private companies are used in special missions, their degree of use being relatively restricted to rescue after kidnappings, assistance and security of private individuals in hostile territories, above all, responsibilities regarding security and protection (Marten 2019). These are not the same types of mission as undertaken by Russian companies of a similar type. Russian use of PMCs differs from the standard Western perspective in the sense that Russian PMCs carry out purely military functions, both kinetic and non-kinetic, rather than the supporting and enabling tasks of Western PMCs (Peterson 2019: 71). Russian military companies have been involved in a wide-ranging area of assignments from the annexation of sovereign territory to régime change to extrajudicial killing (Harding & Burke 2019; Marten 2019; Mckinnon 2021). Kimberly Marten (Marten 2019) has called them semi-state security forces and this is the most succinct definition of what Russia has created. It has re-imagined the mercenary in its own image and in a way that presents a serious threat to international security. The Kremlin has created a deniable fighting force that does its bidding up to and including murder on a large scale by existing in the grey zone of international law.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which saw Wagner's first success, they have grown and Moscow has sought to expand their scope and mission in line with Russia's aim to re-establish itself on the world stage, harking back to the high watermark of Soviet influence in the 1970s and 1980s. By utilising the vast pool of former military manpower within Russia and post-Soviet states, the Kremlin seeks to achieve strategic effect and incremental advantage across multiple domains, while mitigating the risk of strategic over-commitment and military over-extension, as occurred during the proxy wars of the 1980s (Peterson 2019: 71). It has been most successful in Africa where we can see use of the Moscow's semi-state soldiers on an increasingly large and worrying scale. After Crimea was annexed in 2014 Russian PMCs were redeployed to Africa as well as Syria. These deployments have continued up to the present day with Wagner involved in a number of countries on the continent including Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and more recently in Mali and Burkina Faso. Its activities range in type from leading training exer-

as an Limited Liability Company (LLC) under US Law. Wagner by comparison is not a legally registered company, is not legal under Russian Law and even though Yevgeni Prigozhin is thought to be the owner there is no concrete proof of this either. In terms of the scope of their operations, Blackwater/Xe augment US operations and the activities of private companies in warzones. Whereas Wagner has been in the vanguard of Russia foreign policy moves in Crimea, Syria and Africa since 2014.

cises, fighting anti-government forces and brutally quelling protests; it also has interests in mining and extractive industries (Marten 2019). A United Nations Report in June of 2021 cited that Wagner instructors had been involved in indiscriminate killings, enforced disappearances while operating with the armed forces of the Central African Republic (UNSC 2020). In late 2021 and early 2022 Wagner was involved in régime change in Burkina Faso (Obaji 2022). These incidents highlight how Wagner has grown in terms of its scope of operations. From Crimea in 2014 to Burkina Faso in 2022 the group has become an increasingly dangerous organisation. This is not the work of a rogue company which is attempting to maximise its profit margins. It is undertaking missions that are normally the preserve of intelligence services. More simply put, it is working in the interests of the Kremlin and its masters at the GRU.

Since the 1990s, NATO has been cooperating with Ukraine. The Cooperation intensified in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the self-proclaimed breakaway republics of the war in the Donbas region. During this period, the Armed Forces and NATO have supported Ukraine with the implementation of reform initiatives, training of personnel and the introduction of NATO standards (Danish Defense Forces 2022). This has been in keeping with agreements in place since the end of the Cold War. In comparison to Russian groups such as Wagner, NATO forces have not been involved in direct military operations and support of separatist groups in the region.

Recent journal articles have focused on the Wagner group calling it a company and one that is focused on private gain. This is merely fortuitous cover and a useful by-product, which conveniently muddies the waters in terms of trying to understand their motivations. The Wagner Group is driving Russian foreign policy aims wherever it goes, and, in a very methodical way, which, according to Parens (Parens 2022), is a three-tiered approach. First, it conducts disinformation and pro-government information warfare strategies, including fake polls and counter-demonstration techniques. Second, Wagner secures payment for its services through concessions in extractive industries, particularly precious metal mining operations. Wagner uses a variety of organisations and companies to oversee these extraction projects. Third, Wagner becomes involved with the country's military, launching a relationship directly with Russia's military, usually through training, advising, personal security and anti-insurgency operations. The most prevalent indicators or 'signposts' that an entity is vulnerable to Russian hybrid actions include political and social turmoil, large Russian investments in its key capabilities and weak security structures (Peterson 2019: 23). These tasks, while not outside the realm of mercenaries, go beyond simply soldiering for private gain. Wagner's operations are in depth and well thought-out and fit Moscow's efforts to re-establish itself as a global power. Throughout the

process, the Russian foreign policy establishment's involvement is clear, particularly as the beneficiary of military-to-military relationships with a new potential client state (ibid). The process has become easier in recent years since the United States and the French have sought to cease their training missions in Africa. Russia has stepped into this void using Wagner as a proxy to extend its reach in a deniable fashion.

This leads us back to claims that Wagner is merely a military company; this needs to be challenged more vigorously as it is not only problematic, but also unwise. Moscow cannot be seen to be manipulating foreign states and effecting régime change in Africa directly, so it using Wagner to do it for them and thus keeping the Russian military out of such matters directly. Journalists Luke Harding and Jason Burke noted in a 2019 article for the Guardian newspaper that Moscow was using Wagner to re-establish itself on the African continent (Harding & Burke 2019). Part of this reengagement in Africa is to do with Russia's place in the world and where Vladimir Putin sees it, closely modelled on the idea of 'Russkiy Mir', or Russian world. The concept has become fashionable under Putin and signifies Russian power and culture extended beyond current borders (ibid). The Russian Strategic Intentions White Paper SMA TRADOC from 2019 notes that this is also an excellent way for the Russian Federation to streamline its expeditionary capabilities while advancing Russian geo-economic interests, without requiring major involvement of the state and its resources (Peterson 2019: 73). More simply put, it allows them to spread Russian influence without the necessity of deploying regular military units. These activities in Africa represent a very dangerous threat to international security as Moscow can deploy groups like Wagner with deniability and manipulate sovereign states without sanction and spread its influence more effectively (Sukhankin 2019). They are being used as a vanguard in the re-establishment of Russian influence globally and to paraphrase Von Clausewitz they are doing this via other means. The approach is very adroit, by utilising Wagner the Kremlin remains covert to a certain extent and if their plans come to fruition we see the regular Russian military move in to act as Russia's representative and consolidate the gains made initially by Wagner. Wagner also gives them deniability. If it does not work out on the ground, Moscow can deny them completely as it did in Syria after the Dar ez-Zor incident. As yet Wagner has not been challenged in Africa and has spread its shadowy spectre across the continent. Moscow has created and developed a very effective tool and has used Africa as a proving ground to hone its use over the last decade. Wagner has established itself in the contested regions of Eastern Ukraine and worryingly it is at the heart of the unrest in that region supporting Russian Proxy groups and so called separatists thus giving Putin the ability to manipulate and foment unrest without sanction. This has been allowed to

happen because of the nature of international law and Russia's deliberate manipulation of its own laws to create a safe environment for groups like Wagner to operate.

Ukraine as theatre of violence for Wagner

This section outlines and evidences the role of PMCs in Russian Foreign and Security Policy, specifically in Ukraine. Here, in particular, Russian PMCs have created insecurities through fighting hybrid and proxy wars. In our analysis, we have termed this hybrid surrogate warfare. This section outlines their role in Ukraine with an emphasis on military presence and activities, such as false flag operations, constructing war infrastructure in Crimea and the Donbas, etc. As outlined before, 'any force . . . that conducts an operation on behalf of another is probably a more accurate definition of a surrogate' (Peltier 2004: 13), and, thus, acts as force multipliers for the Russian forces. It would not be proper to claim that the war in Ukraine was a result of the Wagner group; however, they have played a significant part in the process. Since 2014 Wagner has been at the forefront of Russian operations in Ukraine and will continue to be.

The departure of President Yanukovich led to a Russian intervention in the autonomous republic of Crimea, initially, which was subsequently followed by operations in Donetsk and Luhansk. Following the staged referendum of 16 March 2014, Russia officially annexed Crimea. Within two weeks, Russian-backed agitators and military personnel occupied government buildings in Kharkiv, Donetsk and Luhansk, with the ambition to also stage a so-called referendum in eastern Ukraine. After significant protests leading to clashes, Ukraine ordered 'anti-terrorist operations' to re-capture control, which largely did not succeed until representatives of Russia, Ukraine and the self-declared People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk signed the Minsk Protocol in early September 2014. Until the full invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, eastern Ukraine had been in a state of semi-frozen conflict with occasional military skirmishes. In this conflict, while Russian regular troops had undoubtedly participated in the fighting, pro-Russian militias were also used, notably also Wagner soldiers.

The Wagner Group had become infamous during the war in Donbas in Ukraine in 2014, where it supported separatist forces of the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. As it operates in furtherance of Russian foreign policy interests and objectives, and is trained on installations of the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), Wagner is seen as an arm's-length unit of the MoD or Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU (Higgins & Nechepurenko 2018). Furthermore, the group is believed to be owned and/or financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch linked to President Putin. It has most recently been in-

volved in the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, where it aimed to assassinate Ukrainian leaders (Alexandra 2022). The Wagner Group was founded in 2014 by Dmitriy Valeryevich Utkin, a veteran of the First and Second Chechen Wars, who until 2013, served as lieutenant colonel and brigade commander of a unit of special forces unit of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (Vaux 2016). Initially, he worked for the Moran Security Group, a private company founded by Russian military veterans. The Wagner Group became first active in Ukraine in 2014, in the Luhansk region (ibid). The company's name is reportedly derived from the German composer Richard Wagner, which Utkin is said to be very fond of due to his passion for the Third Reich, and Wagner being Hitler's favourite composer. Thus, Utkin is believed to be a neo-Nazi, with the Economist reporting that he has several Nazi tattoos (The Economist 2022). Wagner has also been linked to white supremacist and neo-Nazi far-right extremists. Russian Oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin has links with both Wagner and Utkin personally, being either the funder and/or actual owner of the Wagner Group (Rabin 2019). Signals intelligence intercepts also placed Utkin at the heart of Wagner operations in Eastern Ukraine during the battle of Debaltseve in 2015. The battle which took place around the city saw the deployment of pro-Russian separatists, ethnic Russian volunteers from the former Soviet Republics as well as GRU and regular army field commanders (Noorman 2020). The likely sighting of a Russian general named Lentsov within the city of Debaltseve that day raised yet more questions about the true depth of Russian military involvement (McDermott 2015).

Wagner was first active in February 2014 in Crimea during Russia's annexation. They operated in tandem with regular Russian army units, disarmed the Ukrainian Army and took control over Crimea in an almost bloodless manner. They were part of the so-called 'little green men' given that they were masked with an unmarked green army uniform (Shevchenko 2014). Subsequently, they went to the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, taking part in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. With Wagner's help, the pro-Russian forces destabilised Ukrainian government security forces, took control of local government institutions and towns (Kyiv Post 2018). Their activities included attacks, reconnaissance, as well as intelligence-gathering and accompanying VIPs. In October 2017, the Ukrainian SBU claimed it had established the involvement of the Wagner Group in the June 2014 airplane shoot-down at Luhansk International Airport that killed 40 Ukrainian paratroopers, as well as a crew of nine (Interfax-Ukraine 2017). According to the SBU, Wagner PMCs were initially deployed to eastern Ukraine on 21 May 2014 (Kyiv Post 2018). By late November 2017, the Ukrainian SBU published alleged direct links between Dmitry Utkin and Igor Kornet, the interior minister of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Apparently, Wagner left Ukraine and returned to Russia in autumn of 2015, with the start

of the Russian military intervention in Syria. Finally, in late November 2017, with the eruptions of a power struggle in the LPR in Eastern Ukraine between LPR President Igor Plotnitsky and the LPR's interior minister, Igor Kornet, who Plotnitsky wanted to dismiss. During the struggle, armed men took up positions in Luhansk who allegedly belonged to Wagner. The power struggle was resolved when Plotnitsky resigned and fled to Russia and LPR security minister Leonid Pasechnik was named acting leader. At the time, veteran Russian officer Igor Strelkov who had played a key role in the annexation of Crimea, confirmed that Wagner PMCs had returned to Luhansk.

Wagner's role in Eastern Ukraine has not just been limited to covert operations as part of a larger mercenary force. Regular separatist formations were reinforced with so-called volunteers and supported by Russian military advisors, often with Spetznaz operators or GRU operatives attached, especially for the conduct of reconnaissance and sabotage missions (Hoffman 2007). Given the close links between the GRU and Wagner there it is more than likely that the two are operating in concert with each other and indicates more than fomenting regional tension. It is no accident Wagner and other Kremlin-backed separatists have been using Soviet era legacy equipment with original Russian army unit-markings painted over and often replaced with a white open square (Inform Napalm 2015). Investigative journalism websites like Bellingcat and Inform Napalm attained considerable success in identifying Russian military hardware and personnel covertly being deployed into Eastern Ukraine and yet groups like Wagner make it very difficult to pin it on the GRU and the Kremlin (Noorman 2020). Russia has sought to use older vehicles of Ukrainian origin in an effort to conceal its material support including the deployment of Soviet era T64 tanks, which are also in service with the Ukrainian army adding to the layers of deniability (Miller et al. 2015: 14-20; Noorman 2020; Inform Napalm 2015). More recently social media pages such as AFV Recognition have reported on the use of Russian military equipment in the hands of Wagner group units in Eastern Ukraine as recently as mid-May 2022.

In the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Wagner units have been identified in eastern Ukraine, operating in conjunction with regular Russian army formations, the full extent of these operations has not yet been established. The nature of Wagner's operations with the Russian Special Forces units is as yet unclear. However, based on their activities in Crimea and Ukraine, as well as Africa, it is reasonable to surmise they are acting as auxiliaries (Trad 2022). As of May, they have been implicated in massacres outside Kyiv (Harding 2022), and in mopping up operations in eastern Ukraine where they have been sighted using more modern Russian armoured vehicles (AFV Recognition 2022). To date, Wagner's presence on the eastern front has not been as visible as the group's op-

erations in Syria or Africa, which have been widely documented on Telegram channels and by news outlets, as well as the DFRLab. In Ukraine, mercenaries have been reported in regions of strategic importance for Russia's military command. Most recently, the DFRLab has monitored their activities in Zaporizhya, Volodymyrivka and Klynove, in Donetsk oblast. Klynove was taken on 4 July by the Russian army with the assistance of Wagner (Trad 2022). Unlike previous operations in Ukraine and Africa, the movement of their fighters in Ukraine has been in secret as they have been mostly attached to the Russian Special Forces, Spetsnaz, and other elite forces of the Russian army (Trad 2022).

The Times (Rana 2022) reported that the Wagner Group flew in more than 400 contractors from the Central African Republic in January 2022 on a mission to assassinate Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and members of his government. The objective of this assassination was to prepare the ground for Russia to take control of Ukraine. The war finally started on 24 February 2022. The Ukrainian government was informed of this assassination attempt early on 26 February, and declared a 36-hour curfew to sweep the capital for Russian saboteurs. By 3 March 2022, according to The Times (*ibid*), Zelenskyy had survived three assassination attempts, two allegedly by the Wagner Group. On 8 March 2022, the Ukrainian military claimed they had killed the first Wagner PMC members since the start of the Russian invasion.

Over the last decade the Kremlin has been developing and learning how to handle their deniable fighting force. This makes Wagner a very dangerous force, not because they are a particularly large force but because they operate outside the rules of war and can undertake any type of operation without regard of international norms. In the case of Eastern Ukraine there is no doubt that they have been involved in the trouble in the region. During a Ukrainian Intelligence sting operation starting in 2019 it emerged that a large number of former Russian military personnel had worked in Eastern Ukraine. By September 2019, GUR MOU had accumulated background personal data, including current employment status, whereabouts and contact details of over two thousand former mercenaries. Most had fought in Eastern Ukraine at some point between 2014 and 2018. As the Ukrainian sting operation continued they began to gather a vast quantity of 'job' applications. The resumes contained direct admissions and details of how Russia's hybrid war in Ukraine had developed. Some militants described their arrival to Donbas in 2014 as 'under the cover of rebels', while others described their presence there as direct deployments by their regular Russian army units. Crucially, the GUR MOU team started noticing names among the applicants that they knew were already wanted by their colleagues at the SBU for what they believed were serious crimes committed in 2014 and 2015 in Eastern Ukraine (Grozev 2021). Many of the recruits also provided insider data on how the Rus-

sian government had provided support to and steered the operations of the ostensibly private Wagner PMC. In the presumed job interview with Alexander Krivenko, a former Lt. Colonel in the Russian Army, he described how in 2014 he was instructed by his regional voenkomat (the Ministry of Defence's conscription and recruitment office) to form a battalion to fight in Eastern Ukraine. He spoke of his role of combat training chief for 'Wagner', which took him to Syria and the Central African Republic, where he served as advisor to that country's chief of staff. Notably, he describes a previously undisclosed training programme that was provided to the CAR's chief of staff at the GRU's Frunze Academy in Moscow (Grozev 2021). Even small groups of Wagner mercenaries could do serious damage not only in terms of acting as advisors and weapons experts but in fomenting unrest and sparking tensions. If their activities in Africa are an indicator, we can expect to see similar tactics in Eastern Ukraine up to and including crimes against the civilian population and destabilisation of the region in general, all at Moscow's behest and in a deniable fashion. The hybrid nature of Wagner means that they will be hard to counter in the long term as they can on the one hand act as cheap counterinsurgency force for the Kremlin or tool of foreign policy as we have seen, but also become insurgent groups themselves, they are a truly flexible fighting force. The latter is the most dangerous as Moscow seeks to stir up tensions in areas where there are Ethnic Russians, groups like Wagner could act as stay behind forces even in small numbers they could be lethal.

Even if diplomacy prevails there is nothing to stop the Kremlin from keeping groups like Wagner in play to suit their ends or to keep tensions simmering wherever they please. Due to the ambiguous nature of their formation we could see them disappear overnight only to reappear under a new name. A force like this could be kept in play by the GRU long term in the region to act as a 5th column for Moscow. If there is a lesson in Russian Military intelligence operations it is this, they are long term planners and Wagner is a part of a strategy as we have seen in Africa. As the War in Ukraine continues, Wagner will continue to feature in the contested regions of Eastern Ukraine. This is an important point as Wager has been at the forefront of tensions in the region since 2014 and in that the Kremlin has developed them as a tool in its foreign policy toolbox. As Trad (Trad 2022) outlines, they have been less visible on social media than they have been in Africa and Syria, which is quite telling; however, Luke Harding has shown that Wagner has already been implicated in war crimes (Harding 2022). Crimea was the beginning of Wagner and in the intervening period Moscow has learned how to use the group quite effectively, as we have outlined. At this point there is no answer as to how to combat the use of such groups, making them one of the most, if not the most, dangerous developments in the international sphere since the Cold War (Østensen & Bukkvoll 2020).

Conclusions

Over the last decade the Russian intelligence has re-imagined and developed the mercenary in a way that is unlike anything we have seen historically. While the use of soldiers of fortune was popular during the Cold War the Kremlin has turned them into a 21st century tool of hybrid warfare. Russia has created a completely deniable military entity that can use any means necessary to achieve the end goal. A military force comprised of professionals that are not bound by the articles of war or international norms is truly dangerous. Russia has shown through military actions in Ukraine and Crimea, and through wider political influence operations, its willingness to openly flout international rules and norms to achieve its strategic goals (Peterson 2019). Operations in Africa have allowed them to develop and hone their skills to the point that we will see their use into the future and in a more overt way. 'We have Russia as a competitor that is willing, and did, break international law' . . . and 'I think Russia will continue to press against the international norms' (Scarparotti 2017). The appearance of Wagner in the future should act as a red flag to Western countries as to Moscow's intentions. They have consistently been in the vanguard of Russian foreign policy for near on a decade.

From Crimea to Central Africa to Eastern Ukraine the full gamut of dirty tricks has been employed by groups like Wagner and has been done so unimpeded. If the history of the Cold War has taught us anything it is that Russian intelligence operations are far reaching and long term in scope, we have not yet seen the extent to which Moscow has utilised so-called Private military companies, but they are not going away and if they are to be challenged it will require a broad and comprehensive approach that is flexible. Efforts to counter these groups will require a full spectrum of legal and financial resources, and very likely the use of military force to roll them back. Military force may well be the answer as doing so could make their deployment by Moscow unpalatable as it would begin to raise questions and necessitate a Russian response, thus, forcing the Kremlin to acknowledge their use of these companies. Until they are effectively challenged we will continue to seek their use in more and more aggressive ways. As Østensen and Bukkvoll (Østensen & Bukkvoll 2022) point out, Moscow would need very good strategic reasons not to continue to use them. Vladimir Putin's quest to re-establish Russian prestige globally has placed these groups in the vanguard of Russian strategic thinking, meaning they are here to stay.



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