



POLICY PAPER

ANATOMY OF "WAGNER PMC"

CREATION, WAR IN UKRAINE AND
WAYS OF COUNTERING THE GROUP

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APRIL 2023





INTERNATIONAL
RENAISSANCE
FOUNDATION



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Analytical study of the program of Russian and Belarusian studies of the Council of Foreign Policy "Ukrainian Prism" was carried out with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation. The views expressed are the sole responsibility of the Ukrainian Prism and do not necessarily reflect the position of the International Renaissance Foundation.

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Introduction

The words Wagner PMC, Wagner Group, and Wagnerites have become common in the information space, especially since 24 February 2022. With the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this Kremlin-backed hybrid tool has evolved and expanded.

Despite the common use of the term Wagner PMC (Wagner private military company) in public discourse, such a company officially does not exist. It has not been registered anywhere, it is not part of the regular Russian army, it lacks legal status, and its fighters are not formally [listed as personnel](#). Moreover, private military companies are de jure prohibited in Russia, and engaging in mercenary activities is [punishable](#) by seven years in prison, while recruiting, training, and financing mercenaries can lead to a jail term of up to 15 years. Thus, the use of the term Wagner PMC in this study is merely nominal.

Despite claims by Prigozhin in late April about the PMC's dwindling personnel and expert predictions of its reduced activities in Ukraine, it is crucial to maintain focus on these issues. The activities of the Wagner PMC have served as a model for the establishment of similar regional and all-Russian structures, and the crimes committed by these militants must be investigated and punished.

Therefore, the authors of this study aimed to analyse and systematise available information from open sources, examining the history of the Wagner PMC, its beneficiaries, and its involvement in Ukraine both prior to and after Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. We delved into the specific aspects of the Wagner PMC, including recruitment and internal organisation, the arming and equipping of mercenaries, their tactics, evolution, and financing. Additionally, we analysed the information support for the Wagner PMC's activities, the possible political objectives of the Kremlin, and the international response to the Wagnerites' activities. Finally, we explored potential military and political prospects for the Wagner PMC and provided recommendations for countering their activities, drawing insights from an interview with an expert.

The study aims to serve the expert community by ensuring a comprehensive analysis and condemnation of this manifestation of Russian criminal paramilitary activity. The recommendations for countering the Wagner PMC will be of value to government representatives involved in tackling this issue.

Section 1. The history of the Wagner PMC, its beneficiaries, and involvement in Ukraine

1.1. How the Wagner PMC was founded

Analysing the history of the Wagner PMC, it is important to look back at the events of 2013 when the so-called Slavic Corps was established in Hong Kong. This private military company was founded by Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov, employees of the legitimate Russian private security company Moran Security Group (MSG). Established in 2011, MSG initially focused on safeguarding private vessels against pirates. However, with the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2012, Bashar al-Assad sought assistance from Putin, leading the Kremlin to employ mercenaries to support Assad's regime. To mask its true intentions, the Syrian Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources signed a contract with MSG, entrusting it with [securing](#) oil production, transportation, and refining facilities.

Although MSG had already been operating in Syria for a year prior to the contract signing, it was decided to form a separate company, the Slavic Corps, which was [deployed in 2013](#) to [fulfil](#) the task. In essence, the Slavic Corps was an offshore company of Moran Security Group, recruiting former special forces officers from the FSB, the Main Directorate of the General Staff, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other agencies to take part in the Middle East operation. The project was led by aforementioned Vadim Gusev.

The sole combat operation of the Slavic Corps was a fiasco as the Syrian side failed to fulfil its logistical commitments. During the battle, the Russian mercenaries found themselves nearly surrounded but managed to retreat miraculously with minimal losses. Subsequently, the Slavic Corps reversed its course and returned to Russia.

Upon their arrival at Vnukovo airport, the mercenaries were promptly detained by the Russian Federal Security Service. Security forces seized all their media and documents, conducted brief interrogations and released them. Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov, the organisers of the Slavic Corps, [were arrested](#) as part of a criminal case filed for violating Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code, which pertains to mercenary activities. Both organisers of the Syrian campaign agreed to cooperate with the investigation, resulting in each receiving a three-year prison sentence. They have since [been released](#). It is likely that the Russian leadership took this step to conceal its role in orchestrating the Syrian campaign, yet the use of mercenaries as a tactic has persisted.

Around that time, investigations revealed the name of Dmitry Utkin, a retired GRU special forces officer known as Wagner, who was among the MSG contractors. According to one version, after the disbandment of the Slavic Corps, Utkin [recruited his former comrades-in-arms](#) for new purposes. This viewpoint was supported by US officials who included Utkin's name in the first sanctions list mentioning the Wagner PMC, identifying him as [the company's founder and leader](#). Initially, it was believed that Utkin was the ideological driving force behind the Wagner PMC, but this is not the case. It is currently unknown who initiated the creation of the Wagner PMC, but evidence suggests that Utkin was not in charge of this. Instead, he was used as a convenient and undeniable figurehead to disguise its state origin. For instance, Bellingcat researchers discovered an archived copy of a job search website that

featured [Utkin's CV](#) from 2013. In the CV, he mentioned living in Pskov at the time and seeking a job as a deputy director, expressing readiness to relocate to Moscow.

Contrary to Prigozhin's claims that [he founded](#) the Wagner PMC on 1 May 2014, after the start of active hostilities in Donbas, the project is [an endeavour of the Russian General Staff and the Russian Ministry of Defence](#). Although the idea of establishing a private military company had been circulating in Russian circles since the 2000s, it first gained support in 2012 from Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, who likely obtained approval from the Russian president due to his direct access. The General Staff entrusted [Prigozhin](#) with financial and economic matters, as he was relatively unknown but had a personal connection with Putin. Additionally, Prigozhin had previously overseen the so-called "troll factory" in Olgino. [Sergei Troshev](#), a former Interior Ministry colonel, headed the Wagner PMC alongside Prigozhin. Prigozhin [began recruiting people](#) as early as 2013, and it was likely during that time that Utkin was invited to join the Wagner PMC. Eventually, a legend was fabricated, designating Utkin as the company's founder, while Prigozhin remained in the background for a long time.

Although Utkin was not the founder of the PMC, he [did assume command](#) of one of the units involved in the fighting in Ukraine from 2014 to 2015. At the time, Utkin reported to Russian officers. Intercepted conversations indicate Utkin's [reports on the frontline situation](#) to Oleg Ivannikov, an officer of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, and Yevgeny Nikiforov, the head of the 58th Combined Arms Army of the Russian Federation.

Furthermore, the fact that the Wagner PMC is subordinate to the state is evidenced by the training of mercenaries in two camps associated with the 10th GRU Special Forces Brigade in Molkindo, Krasnodar Territory. [Construction of a separate facility](#) for the Wagner PMC began in 2014 to the north of the 10th Brigade's primary military base. The base, consisting of approximately nine permanent structures of varying sizes, [was completed](#) between 2015 and 2016.

Additionally, apart from the General Staff, the governor of Tula Region, Alexei Dyumin, benefits from the activities of the Wagner PMC. Dyumin had long served in Vladimir Putin's security detail and later became Sergei Shoigu's deputy in the Ministry of Defence. However, their relationship deteriorated, and fearing that Dyumin might take his place, Shoigu [insisted](#) on his transfer to Tula.

Prigozhin and Dyumin previously shared [common business interests](#), which have kept them in close contact. Alongside Prigozhin, other figures such as Ramzan Kadyrov, Putin's aide Dmitry Mironov, and various regional officials [have come together](#) to support the interests of the Tula governor. Therefore, the head of the Wagner PMC and Dyumin have shared interests. Dyumin aims to return to the Ministry of Defence, possibly even as its head, while Prigozhin wants Shoigu to be fired, which would secure Prigozhin's own political standing and enable him to once again [receive lucrative contracts](#) from the Russian Ministry of Defence.

Hence, there are evident connections between the Wagner PMC and the state, indicating that it was indeed created under the direction of Russian security agencies. The narrative surrounding Utkin's role in the formation of Wagner is more of a legend fabricated by Russian security forces. Furthermore, Prigozhin was not the founder of the PMC; his role was

limited to carrying out assigned tasks. These manipulations were orchestrated to obscure the true entities behind the establishment of Wagner.

1.2. How the Wagner PMC was used before Russia's full-scale invasion

The Wagner PMC embarked on its "combat journey" in 2014 during the Russian [occupation of Crimea](#). Initially, the Wagnerites were part of the so-called "polite people" and were engaged in [disarming](#) Ukrainian military units. Following the seizure of Crimea, they extended their activities to eastern Ukraine. The exact number of Wagner's [personnel](#) remains uncertain, with estimates ranging from approximately [1,000 to 5,000](#) fighters. The covert movements of Russian regular and irregular forces began in May 2014, and the involvement of the Wagnerites was first observed on [21 May 2014](#).

Initially, former soldiers of the Slavic Corps took part in the fighting in Donbas. However, as the Wagner PMC demonstrated superior organisation and training, hundreds of ex-soldiers, who were previously concentrated in Russian separatist groups known as the LPR and DPR, [joined the ranks of the Wagner PMC](#).

The leadership of the Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine was entrusted to Oleg Ivannikov, the aforementioned officer from the General Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. Ivannikov issued orders to Wagner PMC fighters in Luhansk Region and to Ihor Plotnytsky, who held the position of minister of defence in the self-proclaimed LPR in 2014. The Wagner members were [based in Luhansk](#) and actively participated in hostilities in Luhansk Region.

The first notable event in which the mercenaries were directly involved was the downing of an Il-76 military transport aircraft of the Ukrainian Air Force, which resulted in the largest tragedy for the Ukrainian Armed Forces since independence, [claiming the lives of 49 soldiers](#). The Wagner PMC was involved in the [storming of Luhansk airport](#), where a group of 60 mercenaries managed to [displace](#) 800 Ukrainian Armed Forces servicemen, giving rise to the myth of their invincibility in the Russian media.

The second and final major operation conducted by Wagner before the signing of the Minsk agreements and the de-escalation of the conflict was the battle for Debaltseve in early 2015. A [video](#) made by a Wagner mercenary provided evidence of their involvement in the battle for the Debaltseve bridgehead.

During the period of 2014-2015, Wagner PMC mercenaries were also responsible for [the killing of several militants](#) of the self-proclaimed people's republics, including Aleksandr Bednov, known as Batman, who allegedly stopped complying with Kremlin orders.

The last notable mention of the Wagnerites prior to the full-scale invasion was linked to a [special operation carried out by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence and the Security Service of Ukraine \(SBU\) in 2020](#). The operation aimed to lure dozens of people, including former members of the Wagner PMC, by recruiting them into a fictitious PMC under the pretence of protecting Rosneft facilities in Venezuela. While the operation did not achieve its intended objectives and the mercenaries, who were initially detained by Belarusian security forces, eventually returned to Russia, Ukrainian special services were able to obtain valuable information that significantly expanded the evidence base.

Section 2. The Wagner PMC in a full-scale war: the situation after 24 February 2022

2.1. Involvement of Wagner PMC mercenaries in hostilities during the invasion

The Wagner PMC units were not initially intended to be actively involved in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This is evident from the fact that the Wagner members themselves were not directly preparing for participation in the invasion, and on the day it commenced, PMC recruiters informed candidates that there would be no increase in recruitment to the Wagner ranks. This can be attributed, among other factors, to the existing conflict between Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defence, as well as the [inability to establish direct contact with the authorities](#) prior to the invasion.

Until mid-March 2022, the involvement of the Wagner PMC in the full-scale invasion had not been widely publicised. However, evidence indicates that mercenary units were present in Kyiv Region, particularly in Bucha, where they became active [participants in atrocities against local residents](#). For the first time during the full-scale invasion, the Wagner PMC was "officially" engaged in hostilities on 19 March 2022 during an assault on the city of Popasna and the village of Novooleksandrivka in Luhansk Region. According to Russian sources, it [was decided](#) to deploy Wagner units due to the complexity of the offensive. Initially, a Wagner unit commanded by a mercenary known as Ratibor attacked Novooleksandrivka. Subsequently, the combat groups took part in street battles in Popasna, and on 15 April, the Wagnerites managed to reach the city council building. The town [was completely captured](#) by the Russians on 8 May. The assault on Popasna marked the mercenaries' first "achievement" in a new phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Later, Wagner PMC units were actively employed in Russian offensive operations in Donbas. The mercenaries [played a direct role in the battles](#) at the Svitlodarsk salient, where they seized the Vuhlehirsk thermal power plant in Svitlodarsk on 26 July 2022. Wagner units were also observed storming the cities of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. Wagner mercenaries entered Severodonetsk before the arrival of regular Russian troops and [carried out raids](#) against the Ukrainian military.

The period from mid-autumn 2022 to early winter 2023 saw the most extensive involvement of Wagner's forces in the Russian-Ukrainian war. The focus was on involving them in the offensive on the cities of Bakhmut and Soledar in Donetsk Region, where they served as the main assault force for the Russians. Both seasoned Wagnerites and newly formed units consisting of prisoners began to operate in this area. In early January 2023, the Ukrainian military reported that the most combat-ready units of the Wagner PMC took part in the [assault on Soledar](#). Together with regular Russian troops, the mercenaries identified weaknesses in the Ukrainian defence and [successfully broke](#) into the city. After the capture of Soledar, Wagner's men were directed to continue the assault on Bakhmut, where they also assumed the role of the primary assault force.

During the autumn-winter military campaign around Bakhmut, the Wagner PMC faced serious problems with conducting hostilities. The first issue was the "shell hunger" among

the mercenary units, leading to repeated complaints about the lack of ammunition for the assaults. On 16 February 2023, four members of the group recorded a video appeal to the Russian Ministry of Defence about the lack of shells. Subsequently, Prigozhin himself raised the issue of "shell hunger" and demanded the supply of ammunition from the Russian military leadership. Supporters of the war in Russia also [began demanding](#) weapons and ammunition for the Wagnerites.

The losses among the group's personnel due to massive assaults on Ukrainian positions increased significantly. According to Ukrainian data as of 15 January 2022, out of the 38,244 prisoners recruited to Wagner, 2,543 [were killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner by Ukraine](#). On the other hand, according to the Russia Behind Bars charity foundation, [approximately 10,000](#) of the 50,000 Russian prisoners who joined Wagner remain at the front. Instances of mercenaries deserting or escaping have become quite frequent, although the PMC does not keep tabs on this. Additionally, reports indicated that Russia had relocated most of its regular troops to Bakhmut due to substantial losses among the Wagner PMC.

Overall, the participation of the Wagner PMC in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been consistently increasing. The mercenaries became Russia's "multifunctional tool" in the hostilities on Ukrainian soil, used for spot operations along specific areas of the frontline, solving complex operational tasks, as well as serving as the main assault force in large-scale offensives. The expansion of the group's size also resulted in the transformation of its tactics and role on the battlefield.

2.2 Inner workings of the Wagner PMC

A) Recruitment to Wagner and its internal organisation

Given the unique status of the Wagner PMC as an allegedly separate entity within the Russian occupying forces in Ukraine, there are differences in recruitment, battlefield tactics, and the availability of weapons compared to the regular Russian army. Recruitment into the Wagner PMC is voluntary, unlike the forced mobilisation of Russian troops. As a result, the private military company mainly consists of [motivated individuals](#) who have agreed to the terms of its organisation.

While there were certain restrictions on joining the Wagner PMC before the full-scale invasion, most of these restrictions have now been lifted to recruit as many personnel as possible. Prior to Russia's aggression in 2022, residents of occupied Crimea, as well as the so-called DPR and LPR, were [not recruited](#) into Wagner due to concerns that Ukrainian saboteurs might infiltrate the group. However, currently, the PMC accepts all applicants, including residents of occupied territories, debtors, and criminals. According to the BBC, the Wagner PMC base in Molmino, Krasnodar Territory, recruited a large number of people who had [previously been on the "blacklist"](#), i.e. those failing to meet many criteria, such as place of residence, debts, lack of a police clearance certificate, or absence of a passport. [Social media](#) platforms are also commonly used to entice people to join Wagner.

Recruiters offer candidates the opportunity to sign contracts for up to six months. The salary for participating in hostilities is \$3,000 per month, with \$1,000 paid during training. Meanwhile, Wagner veterans who have been with the PMC for a long time receive significantly higher salaries, ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per month. Candidates [may](#) be

misled during the signing of the contract, with emphasis placed on tasks such as facility protection, while the reality is that they will be sent to fight.

The active mobilisation of Wagner PMC resources for the war in Ukraine began in April 2022. Faced with combat losses in the Russian army, [the Russian Ministry of Defence compelled the Wagner PMC to recall mercenaries from abroad](#), including those from Africa, Libya, and Syria, in order to participate in the war in Ukraine. Additionally, mercenaries from the core of the group were also ordered to deploy to Ukraine.

Towards the autumn of 2022, a rapid campaign to recruit militants for Wagner was initiated to compensate for the increasing losses suffered by the Russian army. A new practice of recruiting inmates from Russian prisons began. It was heavily emphasised that serving in the Wagner PMC under contract could potentially lead to amnesty. Yevgeny Prigozhin, in particular, is believed to have been personally involved in this prisoner recruitment effort. He made multiple visits to Russian penal colonies during the summer of 2022, publicly urging criminals to join the Wagner PMC by offering release from prison and cash payments. Prigozhin [did not talk](#) about the conditions of service, punishments for misconduct, desertion, or torture. As a result, approximately 23,000 prisoners were [recruited](#). Wagner also started recruiting individuals with [financial difficulties](#) and debtors, presenting service as a means to quickly earn money. Consequently, the group's numbers [swelled, reaching 50,000 mercenaries](#).

Within the Wagner PMC, there is a certain division among the mercenaries based on their experience, length of service in the PMC, and involvement in other military conflicts aside from the war in Ukraine. The so-called "core" of the Wagner PMC comprises the [most trained mercenaries and specialists](#) who have had extensive combat experience in Ukraine, Syria, and African countries, along with specialised training. This "core" is categorised as follows:

- Wagner veterans. Long-serving mercenaries who have participated in operations abroad, and have significant combat experience and training. They are assigned to the most critical missions.
- Specialists from various military backgrounds. Responsible for logistics, supply, and communications. This includes artillery personnel, operators of military equipment used by Wagner, and retired pilots hired to fly military aircraft and participate in combat.
- Instructors and heads of training centres. Responsible for training Wagner personnel.

Another category consists of recently recruited members who currently make up the largest group of Wagnerites. These recruits are extensively utilised in the group's assault operations and, as a result, account for the majority of Wagner's combat losses. This category includes:

- recruits who joined the Wagner PMC through recruitment programmes (including individuals facing financial difficulties, and those who voluntarily decided to join the group);
- recruited prisoners, who now constitute a significant portion of Wagner personnel;
- new leaders and commanders of assault groups formed from prisoners or volunteers.

It is worth noting that the high casualty rates among recruits are not due to inadequate training. On the contrary, journalist Ivan Kyrychevsky says that due to the high autonomy of the Wagner PMC, it can afford to provide recruits with possibly the longest training course, lasting at least three weeks.¹ Furthermore, even recruits are usually better equipped than mobilised soldiers in the regular Russian army. The high casualties among recruits are attributed to their more frequent and extensive deployment in combat operations. Kyrychevsky notes that the recruitment of prisoners was not directly aimed at compensating for Russian losses on the battlefield. Instead, prisoners were recruited because they are considered a disenfranchised category in Russian society, and their elimination or disappearance does not hold significant moral weight for society. Additionally, prisoners lack psychological barriers and are more willing to carry out combat missions and tasks that terrorise the local population.

Wagner also has a distinct group known as Liga (League). Despite claims that Liga is merely another name for the Wagner PMC, this is not the case. Liga is positioned as an elite unit of the Wagnerites, comprised of highly professional mercenaries. It is assigned the most complex and critical combat missions. Compared to the Wagner PMC in general, Liga [maintains high recruitment standards](#), and its fighters are known for their aggressive and proactive approach on the battlefield.

B) Arming and equipping of mercenaries

When it comes to equipment and armament, the Wagner PMC can be compared to a combined arms group. The PMC consists of representatives from various branches of the armed forces, including infantry, artillery, tank troops, and even military aviation. As a result, the Wagnerites have access to a wide range of military equipment, which they employ in various types of operations. Aviation, artillery, infantry fighting vehicles, and other types of equipment are used to support the [actions of assault groups](#). However, according to Ivan Kyrychevsky, the exact number of armoured vehicles and artillery at the PMC's disposal remains unknown, as the PMC is closely linked to the Russian regular army and may use equipment formally assigned to Russian army units².

Wagner PMC units have access to a variety of military equipment. Mercenaries make use of artillery systems such as the 2A65 MSTA-B, 2A18 D-30, 2S7M Malka, as well as multiple rocket launchers like the TOS-1A, Uragan, BM-21 Grad, and Tornado-G, 82-mm and 120-mm mortars. Artillery is primarily employed [to provide support to assault groups and conduct counter-battery operations](#). It has also been noted that the Wagnerites use the latest Russian tanks like [T-90M and T-80BVM](#). However, these tanks are not used for traditional offensive operations but rather as self-propelled units to shell Ukrainian positions from a distance.

In terms of air defence, the Wagner PMC employs ZU-23-2, a short-range air defence system. The most advanced air defence weapon available to them is the Pantsir S-1 system. However, the Wagner PMC does not use medium-range air defence systems due to the extensive training required to operate such systems. There is no information suggesting the formation of a separate aviation wing exclusively comprised of Wagner PMC representatives. Nevertheless, pilots recruited to the group can use military aircraft, primarily Su-25 and

¹Interview with journalist Ivan Kyrychevsky by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2 April 2023

²Interview with journalist Ivan Kyrychevsky by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2 April 2023

Su-24 attack aircraft, as well as Mi-8 helicopters. The Wagnerites have not been entrusted with fighter jets or the latest models of Russian military aircraft. Instead, they are provided with older models of combat aircraft. This is because Wagner PMC aircraft are predominantly used in the frontline zone, where Ukrainian air defence systems pose a threat. Therefore, Wagner aircraft are used for risky missions, partly because PMC pilots are considered "less valuable" than Russian career pilots³.

The supply of infantry in the PMC also has certain differences. Similar to the regular Russian army, particularly mobilised units, there is a differentiation in equipment among the Wagnerites. The group's "newcomers" are generally better equipped than mobilised Russian soldiers, but compared to the "elite", their equipment is considerably inferior. Elite units [are equipped with night vision devices, thermal imagers, and predominantly modern small arms](#). Wagner's emphasis on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles on the battlefield is noteworthy. They use the most affordable types of drones, such as Mavic and Matrix, for reconnaissance purposes and to monitor the activities of assault groups. In terms of communication, unlike regular Russian troops, the militants [use US-made Motorola radios](#). Additionally, mercenaries are provided with [combat uniform directly from the military intelligence of the Russian army](#), even when there is a shortage of clothing among regular troops.

Thus, the Wagner PMC is fully equipped with weapons and armoured vehicles and, in certain cases, receives better equipment than regular Russian troops, especially mobilised soldiers. Due to the nature of PMCs, the use of military equipment and aircraft by the Wagnerites is facilitated through interaction with the Russian army.

C) Wagner PMC tactics and their evolution

The tactics employed by Wagner PMC units have evolved since the start of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. In the first months of the war, Wagner's mercenaries served as mobile sabotage and reconnaissance groups in targeted operations. They were also deployed to breach Ukrainian defences in challenging areas where regular Russian troops faced difficulties. They participated in evacuations, on-site reconnaissance and rear operations against the Ukrainian armed forces. However, as Russian casualties increased and the need to compensate for losses arose, the Wagner PMC was increasingly used for [mass assaults and complex offensive operations](#) that required a significant manpower advantage.

Currently, the tactics employed by Wagner PMC units can be summarised as follows: the Wagnerites operate at the front in assault units comprising assault groups of 7 to 50 mercenaries. Each group follows its own designated attack route, with specific positions assigned to each individual. A group leader oversees the direction of the assault and the activities of subordinates. [Tablets with topographic maps](#) are used to assess the ground situation.

The assault teams seek to approach Ukrainian positions covertly, often accompanied by unmanned aerial vehicles that provide battlefield surveillance. Quite often, artillery backs the attackers by initially targeting Ukrainian positions. Once the artillery has targeted the positions, the mercenaries proceed to engage identified firing points using small arms, mortars, and automatic grenade launchers. This is followed by a direct assault on defensive structures or buildings, led by the assault group commanders (leaders). If unsuccessful, the

³Interview with journalist Ivan Kyrychevsky by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2 April 2023

assault [may be repeated several times](#). The use of drones to monitor the situation and artillery support enhances the organisation and coordination of the offensive.

Upon successfully capturing a position, the Wagnerites try to fortify it by constructing defensive structures and trenches. They may receive artillery support to [deter Ukrainian forces from reclaiming the position](#). According to reports from the Ukrainian military, mercenary units can launch "countless" assaults on Ukrainian positions, disregarding casualties, in order to achieve their objectives at any cost. Armoured vehicles are [seldom employed in close combat](#), primarily being used for long-range shelling of Ukrainian positions, and mercenary-controlled artillery is dispersed to avoid Ukrainian counter-battery fire.

The infrequent use of armoured vehicles is also attributed to the Wagnerites' pursuit of maximum surprise in their assault operations. Additionally, mercenaries often opt for night-time attacks on Ukrainian positions. Night battles typically involve assault groups comprising 10 to 20 militants. In urban areas, the mercenaries engage in combat in small groups, primarily consisting of four smaller subgroups. Two of these subgroups are "light" and the other two are armed with heavy weapons, such as grenade launchers, anti-tank guns, and various types of machine guns. The assault team commander typically accompanies one of the heavily armed subgroups, while the "light" subgroups assume the role of detection and initial contact with the enemy.

One notable aspect of the tactics employed by the Wagner PMC is their complete disregard for casualties and the general treatment of soldiers as "expendable material", revealing morally cruel discipline. For instance, assault troops are prohibited from retreating without explicit orders, and failure to comply results in immediate execution. Additionally, they are not allowed to evacuate wounded personnel from the battlefield until the assault is complete, often leaving the injured to their fate. Any attempt to surrender [can be met with physical violence or even execution](#). Despite the harsh and unethical treatment of subordinates, this tactic enables the Wagner PMC to achieve certain results on the battlefield.

The lack of scruples and perpetration of atrocities extend beyond the interactions among Wagner soldiers in combat. These mercenaries exhibit incredible cruelty towards the Ukrainian civilian population both during combat missions and in other contexts. Disturbing accounts from two captured Wagner operatives detailing the mistreatment of civilians in the war zone have been disseminated online. According to one of the captives, the combat group received orders to "annihilate everyone in their path", including civilians. Another captive, a direct participant in the hostilities, revealed that he and his unit [shot unarmed individuals](#), including women and young children. These testimonies confirm the direct involvement of the Wagner PMC in war crimes and the killing of Ukrainian civilians. Moreover, the alarming statement by Prigozhin that the Wagner PMC would no longer take prisoners of war but instead kill everyone on the battlefield, even those severely wounded, has caused significant outrage. Such actions represent a blatant [violation of humanitarian law and serve as further evidence of Wagner's brutality](#).

It is noteworthy that regular Russian troops are attempting to adopt the tactics and operational experiences of the Wagner PMC in conducting assault operations. An illustration of this is the establishment of assault units within the Russian army that closely mirror Wagner's tactics. These units, known as Storm and Storm-Z, are comprised of highly trained soldiers selected for assault operations, who are supported by tank units, artillery, and

aviation. These battlegroups undergo rigorous training in the rear, lasting up to a month, where they practice clearing positions, engaging in urban warfare, and sharpening their shooting and tactical medical skills. The tactics employed by these units bear similarities to those of Wagner's units, but they also benefit from additional reserves and engineering groups. Notably, Storm-Z employs prisoners to compensate for personnel losses. These groups exhibit a high degree of autonomy and a flexible structure that can be adapted to assigned tasks. The approximate size of such a group is around 100 individuals.

D) Financing of the Wagner PMC

The Wagner PMC benefits from various sources of funding, enabling it to provide its fighters with generous salaries, equipment, weapons, and thorough combat training.

In the past, Prigozhin's companies received substantial funds through contracts with government agencies. For instance, companies within Yevgeny Prigozhin's Concord holding were extensively involved in providing catering, cleaning, utilities, and repair services to Russian military units. Megaline, a company that is part of the Concord group, notably increased its revenue through contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence. While its profit stood at 13.4 million roubles in 2012, it reached [2.7 billion roubles](#) in 2015. However, following [clashes between the head of the Wagner PMC and Defence Minister Shoigu](#) after the capture of Palmyra, the company's opportunities for profitable government contracts diminished.

Wagner's operations in Africa have proven lucrative, allowing the company to capitalise on the continent's natural resources. For example, the Wagner PMC significantly expanded its presence in the Central African Republic, with mining profits [reaching USD 1 billion](#) last year.

Furthermore, the Wagner PMC secured a 30-year permit to engage in forestry business within the Congo Basin, home to one of the largest remaining undeveloped tropical forests globally. Should 30% of the forests in the Congo Basin be exploited, forestry revenues [could reach USD 890 million](#). Timber exports could therefore prove highly profitable for Prigozhin.

The Wagner PMC also generates income in other African countries through agreements with local governments to provide security for senior officials. For instance, an agreement with Mali alone entailed a monthly payment of USD 10 million. In Mali, the Wagner PMC [acquired a 78% stake in Marina Gold](#), a national gold mining and processing company.

A similar approach was taken in Sudan, where in 2017, M-Invest, a company linked to Prigozhin, [signed a gold mining concession agreement](#). Despite being subject to US government sanctions, M-Invest's profit amounted to [USD 2.6 million](#) in 2021.

The Wagner PMC also profits from oil production. In 2018, Europolis, a company controlled by Prigozhin, [obtained energy concessions from the Syrian regime](#) in exchange for Wagnerites seizing oil and gas fields held by the ISIS terrorist group, resulting in a [25% share of the revenue generated from these fields](#).

However, sustaining the Wagner PMC requires significant financial resources. According to British intelligence, the Wagner PMC units in Ukraine require [USD 100 million per month](#) to fund their operations. It is therefore doubtful that Prigozhin alone can support the activities of the Wagner PMC not only in Ukraine but also in Africa or the Middle East. Consequently, a large portion of the expenses, including the supply of weapons and ammunition, is covered by the Kremlin.

2.3 Information support for Wagner PMC activities

The activities of the Wagner PMC receive extensive coverage in the information domain through social networks, media outlets, propaganda events, and the involvement of individual propagandists. The majority of information resources highlighting the "successes" of the mercenaries are somehow connected to Prigozhin. Even before the full-scale invasion, Prigozhin actively collaborated with so-called "military correspondents" and "military bloggers" who provide coverage of Russian troops' activities in general. These include individuals like Yuriy Podolyaka (Yurasumy) and Maksim Fomin (Vladlen Tatarsky), who was killed in St Petersburg on 2 April 2023. These "military correspondents" directly cover and comment on the Wagnerites' actions in the Russian-Ukrainian war, thereby [promoting the group as an effective military unit](#) among Russians who support the war.

The Internet Research Agency, also known as the Troll Factory, incorporated into a group of companies affiliated with or created by Prigozhin, makes a significant contribution to the coverage of the Wagner PMC's activities. Established in St Petersburg in 2013, the Troll Factory initially focused on criticising opposition figures and supporting the Russian authorities on social media. Presently, the primary activity of the Factory revolves around publishing pro-government comments on various information platforms. However, its employees are also involved in information projects that cover the war in Ukraine, as well as the activities of the Russian army and Wagner. Some [notable projects](#) include Weapons of Russia, Art of War, Actual Russia, and others.

Unofficially, the Troll Factory employs a substantial number of IT specialists who undergo polygraph tests prior to their employment. Moreover, Prigozhin openly acknowledged that he created and controls the Internet Research Agency, stating that its purpose is ["to protect the Russian information space from aggressive propaganda and anti-Russian accusations from the West"](#). Additionally, Prigozhin [supports a new information project called Cyber Front Z](#), which engages in Russian military [propaganda on the Telegram messenger](#).

The information support for the Wagner PMC's activities significantly intensified from mid-spring to early summer 2022 when Wagner's involvement in the hostilities was first publicly confirmed. This period coincided with a surge in heavy losses among Russian military personnel and setbacks for the Russian army on the front lines, such as the failure to keep the northern regions of Ukraine and the unsuccessful offensive on Mykolayiv. In contrast, the mercenaries began to demonstrate success in capturing several cities in Donbas, including Rubizhne and Severodonetsk. These circumstances created an [opportunity to promote](#) the Wagner PMC as an effective armed group. Active propaganda and public relations campaigns were launched to showcase the mercenaries' achievements and establish the Wagner PMC as an appealing "brand" for the Russian audience. Apart from publishing various materials on social networks like Telegram and VKontakte, other promotional methods were employed. For instance, a documentary film titled "PMC Wagner - Contract with the Family," showcasing a Russian propagandist's trips and participation in hostilities with the mercenaries, as well as a feature film called "The Best in Hell," [allegedly directed personally by Prigozhin](#), were produced.

A strong emphasis is placed on portraying the Wagner PMC as the most effective unit in the Russian-Ukrainian war. This approach also promotes a cult of violence and the unscrupulous

nature of the mercenaries' activities. The group showcases the harsh treatment of members who have committed misdemeanours and shares videos of executions of deserters captured by the Ukrainian military. For instance, the publication of a video showing the brutal execution of Wagner member Yevgeny Nuzhin garnered widespread attention on the Internet. Prigozhin personally involves himself in highlighting the success of the Wagner PMC by regularly traveling to the war zone, showcasing and commenting on the mercenaries' "achievements."

Various activities are carried out in the Russian Federation to promote the private military company, cultivate its support base, and intensify recruitment efforts. Attempts are made in some Russian cities and the occupied territories of Ukraine to display outdoor advertisements and banners featuring the group's symbols and encouraging involvement. However, Wagner's promotion campaign is facing significant challenges, as advertising the activities of mercenaries and soliciting their involvement contradicts Russian law, as it essentially promotes illegal actions. Nonetheless, Prigozhin [manages to circumvent the law](#) and successfully advertise the Wagner PMC in different cities and on various media platforms.

A notable event was the opening of the so-called Wagner Centre in St Petersburg in November 2022. It was established in the Sea Capital business centre. Officially, the centre is presented as a complex that provides free accommodation for inventors, designers, and IT specialists, aiming to foster the promotion of ideas to enhance Russia's defence capabilities. However, the true purpose of the centre remains undisclosed, though it is most likely [associated with supporting and promoting the Wagner PMC's activities in general](#). A legal entity named PMC Wagner Centre was also officially registered, supposedly involved in "consulting on commercial and management matters". A legal entity under this name was [entered into the Unified State Register of Legal Entities of the Russian Federation](#) on 27 December 2022 as a non-public joint-stock company with a share capital of 10,000 roubles. The shareholders of the newly formed company are not disclosed, and its director is Alexey Tentsin, who previously managed the production facilities of the Kalashnikov concern in Izhevsk.

Additionally, Prigozhin resorts to creating additional recruitment centres for Wagner, even targeting young individuals to join the PMC's cult. An example of this is the establishment of the Wagneryonok (Little Wagnerite) youth club, officially declared as aiming to provide patriotic education to young people. The club is directly sponsored by Yevgeny Prigozhin and is [expected to hold meetings](#) with government officials, military propagandists, and the military. Plans are also underway to establish recruitment centres for the Wagner PMC in several cities, with [one such centre already opened in Moscow](#), based on a sports club, as reported by Prigozhin's press service.

Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, information support for the activities of the Wagner PMC has significantly intensified. The focus is on demonstrating the unit's military effectiveness compared to the Russian regular army and creating a "Wagner cult" within the Russian information landscape. To achieve this objective, such steps as the dissemination of information about the Wagnerites' activities, efforts to promote mercenaries across various media platforms, and the establishment of public organisations and structures engaged in such activities are being taken. However, in certain cases, promoting the Wagner PMC may be problematic due to the group's semi-legal status in the Russian Federation.

Section 3. The Wagner PMC and the Kremlin's political goals

From an external perspective, the activities of the Wagner PMC and Yevgeny Prigozhin may appear to be autonomous and, in some cases, contradictory to the Kremlin's position. However, the Wagnerites' handler has not faced significant condemnation nor have attempts been made to substantially curtail their activities. This could be attributed to the Russian authorities and Putin personally having an interest in the existence of the Wagner PMC and a figure like Prigozhin.

Prigozhin and the Wagnerites can serve multiple purposes.

First, they [can divert attention](#) from the failures of the Russian army at the front and potential problems in the Russian Ministry of Defence. This can involve highlighting both the "successes" and failures of the Wagner PMC. For instance, reports about the numerous casualties among Wagner's personnel and their war crimes may shift focus away from similar or even more severe problems within the Russian armed forces.

Prigozhin's anti-elite rhetoric may also be advantageous to the Kremlin to some extent. It exerts pressure on specific groups of elites, including the military and business sectors, thereby reducing the likelihood of intensified power struggles. Indeed, certain messages conveyed by Prigozhin may prove useful for Putin's control over his entourage. Lastly, the Russian ruling elite may employ Prigozhin as a long-term strategy, especially in the event of further setbacks or a complete failure of the Russian invasion.

Furthermore, the mercenary handler can be used to channel and control potential protest sentiments among the population and military. Traditional institutions have limited influence over such sentiments, but Prigozhin and the Wagner PMC, with their established authority among the regular military and a portion of the population, can, at the Kremlin's direction, play a role in "pacifying" citizens. The fact that Wagner's personnel and Prigozhin himself now hold significant roles in the invasion [creates conditions for gaining citizens' support and the ability to influence them if necessary](#).

Simultaneously, the Kremlin can exploit the Wagner PMC to carry out brutal practices, aiming to demoralise a segment of Ukrainian society and the army. By creating an aura of autonomy or even independence for the Wagner PMC, Moscow shifts responsibility to the mercenaries and their supervisors. This makes it more challenging to establish the involvement of Russia's top political leadership in war crimes.

By allowing the recruitment of prisoners, Moscow also solves practical problems. Using prisoners helps reduce state budget expenditures on their maintenance, as the majority of those who agree to fight will simply perish. At first glance, it may seem that Russia has to spend large sums of money on soldiers' salaries and compensations to the families of the deceased. However, this is not the case. Since salaries [are only paid after the completion of contracts](#), most of the money goes unseen. Families will only receive payments in the event of a soldier's death if the body is returned. As the bodies of killed Wagner soldiers are [rarely recovered from the battlefield](#), many families are unaware of their relatives' deaths.

Ultimately, the use of mercenaries allows for replenishing personnel losses and mitigates public discontent, such as that which [arose during the initial wave](#) of the so-called "partial mobilisation" in the Russian Federation.

Section 4. The Wagner PMC's prospects and how to counteract them

4.1 International reaction to Wagner PMC activities

The participation of Wagner PMC mercenaries in the Russian-Ukrainian war has not gone unnoticed by the international community. CIA Director William Burns has stated that [the CIA is actively countering the Wagnerians abroad](#). Recently, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on eight individuals and 16 entities associated with the Wagner PMC. Likewise, [Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the European Union](#) have taken similar measures against the Wagner PMC. The EU, in particular, [has imposed sanctions on 11 individuals and seven entities](#) responsible for grave human rights violations in the Central African Republic and Sudan, actions that jeopardise peace, security, and stability in Mali, as well as actions that threaten Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence.

In addition to sanctions, some Western countries have designated the Wagner PMC as a terrorist organisation. The parliaments of [Lithuania](#) and [Canada](#), as well as the [French legislature](#), have enacted relevant laws to this effect. The United States has taken a slightly different approach by designating the Wagner PMC as a [transnational criminal organisation](#).

The activities of the Wagner Group have also been addressed at the level of international organisations. Independent human rights experts appointed by the United Nations have expressed ["deep concern" over reports of the systematic recruitment of prisoners across Russia by the Wagner Group, which plays a significant role in the hostilities in Ukraine](#). Thus, independent experts from the UN Human Rights Council affirm that the Wagner Group has been involved in violations of human rights and humanitarian law, including enforced disappearances of Ukrainian soldiers and officers.

4.2 Political prospects of the Wagner PMC and Yevgeny Prigozhin

The future of the Wagner PMC is intricately tied to the future of its leader. Yevgeny Prigozhin's fate hinges on the success of Wagner fighters, the information support for their campaign, and the outcome of internal conflicts affecting both federal and regional levels.

At the federal level, Prigozhin is in conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defence and the General Staff, represented by Sergei Shoigu and Valery Gerasimov, respectively. Tensions with the head of the Defence Ministry began when [Prigozhin was involved in supplying the army with subpar-quality food](#). The conflict resurfaced after the battles for Palmyra in Syria when Prigozhin was displeased with Shoigu taking credit for the city's capture. In response, the Ministry of Defence [significantly worsened](#) the supply of provisions to Wagner fighters. [Marat Gabidullin also mentioned](#) this confrontation [in his memoirs](#), describing the emergence of mutual disrespect and distrust between government forces and the Wagner PMC, as well as the negative attitude of the Russian command towards the Wagnerites.

The conflict between the Ministry of Defence and the Wagner PMC spilled over into the media in February of this year when Prigozhin began accusing the Ministry of Defence of intentionally delaying the supply of ammunition to Wagner fighters. This occurred amidst the dismissal of Sergei Surovikin from the post of commander of the Joint Group of Forces in the area of the so-called "special military operation". While Surovikin was in charge, Prigozhin leveraged [his conflict with Valery Gerasimov](#) and his [proximity to Putin](#) to his advantage. However, the reshuffle that took place during the winter and its consequences forced Prigozhin to claim that there [were no problems with ammunition](#) under Surovikin's command. He then launched a media campaign aimed at drawing attention to the needs of Wagner fighters. Alongside [videos and impassioned appeals](#), he even [published photos of dozens of soldiers killed in a single day](#), attributing their deaths to "shell hunger". Prigozhin's conflict with the Russian Ministry of Defence goes beyond mere [attacks on the agency](#), as the latter has responded to his aggressive outbursts. For example, Prigozhin recently complained that official resources [remove any references to the Wagner PMC](#), favouring representatives of the authorities. In addition, the Russian Ministry of Defence [deprived Prigozhin of the ability to recruit prisoners](#), which has had a negative impact on the group's human resources. The conflict escalated to the point where, according to leaked classified documents from the Pentagon, Putin personally attempted to resolve the feud by summoning Prigozhin and Shoigu to a meeting that allegedly took place on 22 February. The document indicates that the conversation, at least in part, [concerned Yevgeny Prigozhin's public accusations and the strained relations with the head of the Ministry of Defence](#).

Recent statements made by the head of the Wagner PMC regarding future developments are also noteworthy. Prigozhin has repeatedly praised the Ukrainian army, acknowledging its combat capabilities, while [warning of potential negative consequences](#) that could arise in the event of a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive. Notably, he has taken on the role of a truth-teller, usurping the already marginalised figure of Girkin, and presenting an alternative agenda. The aim of this move is to gain more influence and popularity, particularly among radical circles.

The second track of the conflict concerns regional dynamics. Prigozhin is in a tense relationship with St Petersburg Governor Aleksandr Beglov as he strives to secure his position as the most influential figure in the city. Disagreements between them emerged almost immediately after Beglov's election as governor in September 2019. The exact cause of the conflict between Beglov and Prigozhin, who helped the current governor during the election campaign, remains unclear. However, it can be presumed that the tension arose due to Beglov's failure to fulfil promises regarding permits for Prigozhin's infrastructure projects in St Petersburg. One of Prigozhin's main grievances is that the St Petersburg administration terminated his company's contract for the development of the Gorskaya territory. Allegedly, at an economic forum in 2021, Prigozhin's company signed an investment agreement with Beglov, which he [later annulled, granting the territory to a yacht club](#). Another project that fell through was the reclamation of an island in the Gulf of Finland. The administration had to commission a study proving that the [creation of an artificial island would pose flood risks to the city](#).

The head of the Wagner PMC initiated his attack on Beglov quite some time ago. In addition to his usual information campaigns, he has resorted to involving law enforcement agencies. Prigozhin has already appealed to the Prosecutor-General's Office to investigate the possibility that the governor had formed an organised criminal organisation to embezzle the

[state budget](#). He also appealed to the Prosecutor-General's Office and the FSB to investigate Beglov under the [charge of high treason](#). Recently, Prigozhin requested the opening of a criminal case against the governor for the [destruction or damage to cultural sites](#).

Despite Beglov's limited political clout, Prigozhin has not been successful in eliminating his opponent. However, this does not mean that Prigozhin will give up his attempts to gain influence in Russian political circles. Nevertheless, his influence should not be overestimated.

Prigozhin is likely to continue to try to exert influence on the situation in St Petersburg by joining an existing political project. Notably, he has been getting closer to Sergey Mironov, the leader of the A Just Russia party. Mironov praised the Wagner PMC as a heroic military formation and [called for the company to be legalised](#), giving it all the credit for the capture of Soledar. Mironov has also been [photographed with Wagner's sledgehammer](#), and in one of his interviews, he [emphasised his long-standing acquaintance with Yevgeny Prigozhin](#).

Prigozhin may be interested in gaining control over the St Petersburg branch of A Just Russia in order to use it as an additional tool in his fight against Aleksandr Beglov. This would allow Prigozhin to have his own deputies and deliver the necessary narratives from the platform of the Legislative Assembly.

Another possible scenario is the beginning of Prigozhin's political game at the federal level. Towards the end of 2022, there were reports that Prigozhin was [considering the creation of his own patriotic conservative movement](#), which could eventually evolve into a political party. In March, the [Wagneryonok youth club was opened](#) in St Petersburg, aiming to "instil love for the fatherland" among its members. Prigozhin regularly speaks [to activists from patriotic movements established by his media empire](#), and information about the "patriot of Russia" is disseminated through media outlets under his control.

[Back in 2020](#), the head of the Wagner PMC [considered](#) running for the State Duma but eventually decided against it. Given the weakening military power of Wagner, Prigozhin should seek opportunities to gain traction within the upper echelons of Russian politics. A closer alliance with Sergey Mironov could potentially provide such an opportunity, although it remains uncertain whether the Kremlin will allow this move. There are reports suggesting that the authorities are [preparing to nominate former servicemen and volunteers to run in regional elections on behalf of United Russia](#), with a focus on the military component. This approach may be an attempt to channel the radical sentiments of certain segments of the population and the military in a direction aligned with the Kremlin's interests. The regional elections would serve as a testing ground before nominating military candidates for federal elections. Additionally, in 2019, the Kremlin [prevented Konstantin Malofeev from gaining control of A Just Russia](#). If Prigozhin is allowed to engage in a political project at the federal level, it will be within the framework established by Putin.

Currently, the Wagner PMC faces competition from various other private military companies (PMCs), including Patriot and Redut, as well as the Storm unit, affiliated with the Russian Ministry of Defence. Some Russian governors and the Gazprom corporation have also [expressed intentions to establish their own private armies](#).

Despite active recruitment efforts by the Russian Armed Forces, the Kremlin evidently intends to continue utilizing prisoners. While the functions of recruiting prisoners have been assumed by the Russian Ministry of Defence, they cannot sign official contracts with the armed forces. Consequently, the creation of several PMCs under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence allows for the involvement of criminals in combat without undermining the

authority and status of the regular army. However, the proliferation of private armies should be viewed in a broader context:

- 1) The Kremlin seeks to prevent Prigozhin's influence from further expanding based on the success of the Wagner PMC. Although Prigozhin, in his attempts to shed the role of a "proxy," remains in that position, the Kremlin is taking proactive steps to limit opportunities that would satisfy his political ambitions.
- 2) Moscow aims to scale up what it perceives as the successful use of PMCs. The existence of private armies provides an alternative for those who wish to engage in combat but not as part of regular forces. Moreover, the Kremlin portrays these volunteers as individuals who allegedly operate autonomously from the regular forces, free from the constraints associated with state structures and with the ability to end their service after a short-term contract.
- 3) For Sergei Shoigu and certain Russian governors, this presents an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to Putin following military setbacks and the failure of recruitment into national battalions in most regions of Russia.

4.3. Military prospects of the Wagner PMC

Regarding the prospects of the Wagner PMC as a military group, several scenarios can unfold depending on various factors. Much will depend on the further development of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the internal dynamics within the Russian regular army, and Prigozhin's ability to garner sufficient support from authorities to advance the Wagner project.

The first scenario involves strengthening the Wagner PMC as an independent military unit while reducing its reliance on the Russian Armed Forces. This could be achieved through the group's "successes" on the frontlines, enhancing its reputation as an effective fighting force in Russia compared to the regular army. In this case, granting the mercenaries greater autonomy for increased operational efficiency, providing them with advanced equipment, and intensifying recruitment efforts to bolster their ranks becomes plausible. Mercenaries may gain access to more sophisticated weaponry and military gear, currently unavailable to them through Russian military channels or other supply sources. Additionally, expanding arms procurement from other countries, including co-aggressors like Belarus or Iran, could be a viable option. Strengthening the Wagner PMC might also coincide with Yevgeny Prigozhin's rising influence in Russian politics. As Prigozhin gains more power, the development of the Wagner PMC could become a primary tool of leverage. It is unlikely that Prigozhin would disregard investing resources in the PMC if his influence in Russia continues to grow.

The second scenario entails potential competition between the Wagner PMC and other emerging private military companies. The accomplishments of the Wagner PMC may inspire members of the Russian elite and security forces to establish similar groups, seeking to enhance their influence and earn recognition by participating in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Presently, there are already several projects and alternative private military groups, such as the Redut PMC, among others. According to Ivan Kyrchevsky, the creation of new PMCs could also serve as an incentive to encourage more Russians to join the war in Ukraine. The prospect of fighting in a private group with better training, equipment, and decent salaries

may appear more appealing than forced mobilisation⁴. If the popularity of such PMCs increases, they may compete the Wagner PMC, prompting Prigozhin to allocate additional resources to effectively rival other groups in order to maintain his influence and authority.

The final scenario revolves around the decline of the Wagner PMC due to increased personnel losses and the inability to secure additional resources for the war in Ukraine. Existing problems, such as "shell hunger", may resurface. If Ukrainian forces achieve significant successes, and tensions between Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence escalate, Wagner's activities in Ukraine may be scaled back as unpromising. This could result in substantial reputational losses for Prigozhin. However, it is possible that the PMC itself will not vanish entirely but will shift its focus to operations abroad, particularly in Syria, Africa, and other regions where Wagner members had been heavily involved before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the Russian authorities may have an interest in preserving the Wagner PMC as an instrument of influence in those regions. Therefore, the PMC is unlikely to disappear completely. Such a possibility could arise in the context of Russia's significant defeat in the war with Ukraine and profound transformations of power in Russia.

4.4. Recommendations

Today, countering the Wagner PMC is crucial across three dimensions: legal, political, and military. Based on this study, the following recommendations can be made to effectively counter the group:

A) Legal dimension

Currently, Ukrainian law enforcement agencies are pursuing certain legal proceedings related to the Wagner PMC. Andriy Kostin, the Prosecutor-General of Ukraine, said that Yevgeny Prigozhin had been served with a notice of suspicion for crimes under Articles 110 and 437 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine. Furthermore, two Wagner fighters in the EU have been interrogated, and [Norwegian colleagues investigated another one for potential involvement in war crimes](#). Despite the large amount of work done, more actions are needed to combat the Wagner PMC in the legal realm:

1. Advocate for the designation of the Wagner PMC as a terrorist organisation by international organisations, particularly by the UN Security Council.
2. Regulate the procedure for recognising an organisation as a terrorist one under Ukrainian law and officially designate the Wagner PMC as such. This should be done despite the resolution passed by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, which recognised the Wagner PMC as an [international criminal organisation](#) following the example of the United States. The regulation of this procedure should include amendments to the Laws of Ukraine "On Combating Terrorism" and "On the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine," granting exclusive powers to the NSDC to designate an organisation as a terrorist one.
3. Task the Security Service of Ukraine with preparing evidence for recognising the Wagner PMC as a terrorist organization.

⁴Interview with journalist Ivan Kyrychevsky by the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", 2 April 2023

4. Persuade Western partners to designate the Wagner PMC as a terrorist organisation. This would send a strong signal in the fight against mercenaries and [lead to significant restrictions on their financing and the profits of PMC affiliates](#).
5. Establish a legal framework for prosecuting war crimes by amending the Criminal Code of Ukraine to include a section based on the Geneva Conventions. These provisions should apply not only to ordinary soldiers but also to their commanders, in line with the doctrine of command responsibility.
6. Collaborate with Western partners to gather evidence linking the Wagner PMC to the Russian state concerning crimes committed on Ukrainian territory in order to punish the state as a whole rather than particular individuals. This approach should not solely rely on establishing a legal connection between the PMC and official Russian agencies, as the company is part of the Armed Forces. Instead, the emphasis should be on [establishing effective control](#) and finding evidence that Russian officers directly supervised the actions of the Wagner fighters.
7. Ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. As Ukraine has already recognised the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, ratification will enable the country to exercise certain rights, including the ability to refer cases to the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC and influence the timing and status of case consideration.
8. Collaborate with partners to gather evidence proving that the top political and military leadership authorised the commission of crimes by the Wagner PMC on Ukrainian territory. Holding the Russian leadership accountable for Wagner PMC activities is only possible within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, where the principle of immunity for top officials does not apply.

B) Political dimension

To some extent, Ukraine may benefit from Prigozhin's political strengthening, which has the potential to provoke new conflicts within the Russian political elite. However, Ukraine does not benefit from the Wagner PMC's military strengthening. The group poses a threat to the Ukrainian defence forces due to its superior equipment and motivation compared to the regular Russian forces. To draw attention to the issue of Wagner's existence and neutralise the threat from Russia, several measures should be taken:

1. Inform a wide audience, particularly in the West, about the crimes committed by the Wagnerites, such as the [execution of Ukrainian prisoners of war](#) and the [killing of civilians](#).
2. Clarify to governments and international organisations that Wagner's activities are not the work of a mysterious owner of the world's largest private army, they are orchestrated by the Kremlin and the top political and military leadership of the Russian Federation.
3. Ukrainian diplomats should explain that Wagner's fighters pose a threat not only to unstable, war-torn regions but also to peaceful and secure Europe. Russia, by exploiting the perceived uncontrollability of the Wagner PMC, may attempt [to recruit European citizens](#) and engage in activities such as [smuggling migrants or even assassinating specific officials](#).

4. Enhance cooperation between Ukrainian uniformed agencies and Western countries, particularly France and the United States, to share experiences and information regarding the activities of the Wagner PMC. This collaboration will enable more effective countermeasures against the destructive influence of the Wagner PMC in Africa and the Middle East.
5. Upon the request of Ukrainian special services, launch information campaigns targeting Prigozhin and his opponents to fuel hostility between them. This can be achieved by utilising Russian bloggers, military correspondents who hold a negative view of the head of the Wagner PMC and his enemies, as well as experts who are commonly used by political talk show hosts to create the illusion of balanced discussion and objectivity in the main narrative.
6. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine should collaborate with relevant Western ministries to ensure the security of former Wagner PMC members who choose to flee abroad and are willing to testify. Establishing a hotline and providing information support for such a project would facilitate the collection of extensive evidence, which would be crucial for implementing the aforementioned legal and policy recommendations.

C) Military dimension

To effectively counter the Wagner PMC militarily and ensure protection against mercenaries' actions, the following measures should be implemented:

1. Enhance the equipment of combat positions and firing points in areas where direct contact with Wagner PMC fighters is likely. Strong fortifications should be constructed to reduce the impact of wave attacks by mercenaries. Additionally, soldiers should be provided with means to counter unmanned aerial vehicles which the mercenaries frequently employ during assaults. Ensuring the mobility of units defending against the Wagner PMC is crucial, which can be achieved by providing additional armoured transport and evacuation vehicles to swiftly evacuate the wounded or reinforce the defenders.
2. The presence of allies' armoured vehicles in well-protected positions can effectively deter mercenary offensives and provide defenders with additional firepower. Care should be taken to deploy armoured vehicles in secure areas to minimise vulnerability to enemy anti-tank weapons.
3. Active reconnaissance and elimination of the commanders of Wagner PMC assault units are essential elements of the counter-attack strategy. Removing leaders and commanders significantly undermines the combat capabilities of assault units, particularly those composed of prisoners and newly recruited individuals. Employing assault groups behind enemy lines can help locate dispersed mercenary artillery and effectively neutralise it.
4. It is crucial to identify and destroy Wagner's military bases where they train and store precision weapons in the rear. Since Wagner PMC units are not fully autonomous, they often rely on the infrastructure of the Russian army or resources from regular troops to establish their own bases. Destroying this infrastructure would make it more challenging for them to recover from losses, as it would necessitate interaction with the Russian army.

5. Strengthen the protection and security of Ukraine's own facilities in the rear and near the frontline to counter potential sabotage groups that may include specially trained mercenaries from the Wagner PMC. Given the enemy's effective use of such groups during certain episodes of full-scale invasion, it is imperative to ensure robust protection of infrastructure.

Conclusions

The Wagner PMC represents Russia's attempt to create another tool for hybrid influence and the pursuit of its interests. Its establishment was not a spontaneous initiative of a small group disconnected from state governance, but a calculated project by the Russian authorities. The creation of the Wagner PMC has expanded Russia's military capability to project influence in Africa, the Middle East, and Ukraine through methods that the state cannot officially employ.

The group is characterised by its distinct hierarchy, separate sources of funding, specific recruitment procedures for mercenaries, the level of training among some of its personnel units, unique tactics, and its role in combat operations. These factors set the Wagner PMC apart from the regular Russian army. However, the group remains semi-autonomous, as it must comply with government instructions, interact with the Russian armed forces for weapons and ammunition supply and during operations, and lacks official status.

The services offered by the mercenaries have gained significant popularity in African and Middle Eastern countries where they are present. This has contributed to their credibility and attracted additional sources of funding. However, the most intensive use of the Wagner PMC and its development began with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, when the militants became a tool for conducting complex combat operations. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the group has been used as an assault force in various sectors.

The activities of the Wagner PMC are actively covered in the Russian information space, which contributes to its popularisation as an "alternative" to service in the regular Russian army. Undoubtedly, the key figure associated with the Wagner PMC is Yevgeny Prigozhin. Leveraging his influence and resources, he develops the group's activities while simultaneously enhancing his political capital in Russia.

The future development of the Wagner PMC hinges directly on the course of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the domestic political situation in Russia. It is currently difficult to determine whether the group will decline entirely or evolve into a fully independent military and political structure in Russia.

POLICY PAPER

ANATOMY OF "WAGNER PMC"

CREATION, WAR IN UKRAINE AND
WAYS OF COUNTERING THE GROUP



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