How Did Wagner Become Russia's Most Popular Hybrid Warfare Strategy Tool?

written by Fuad Shahbazov Fuad Şahbazov

Private military contractors (PMCs) re-emerged as a popular phenomenon in the post-Cold War era, particularly in the early 2000s, when the exodus of war veterans from Western militaries expanded the pool of PMCs. As of today, PMCs operate in most (about 110) countries. Among the top 30 PMCs in terms of financial resources and recruited mercenaries, most were established or have their headquarters in the US (13) or the UK (6).[i] Traditionally, PMCs operate mainly in active armed conflict zones or areas where the political and social situations are unstable. In this vein, their activities are usually coordinated with the foreign policy aims of the countries where they are headquartered.

Unlike the Western countries possessing solid experience in establishing and managing PMCs, this phenomenon has long been a tabu in the post-Soviet region due to those countries' fragile political situations and the nature of their internal power dynamics. However, the situation changed when the Russian government gave the green light to establish its first PMC — Wagner — in 2011, which would be headed by the Kremlin-linked businessman and former criminal convict Yevgeni Prigozhin. In the beginning, Wagner's main activities were limited to Syria, the Central African Republic, Mali, Libya, Mozambique, and Sudan, with the aim of providing "security and paramilitary services" to local governments struggling with armed rebellion and frequent terrorist attacks in exchange for resource concessions and diplomatic support.[ii] Hence, Wagner's services vary based on the needs of client countries.

I will analyze Russia's attempts to use private military

companies, such as Patriot, ENOT, AKTGroup, MAR, Center.R, MSGroup, and Wagner as foreign policy tools aimed at boosting the country's influence in various geographies within Russia's well-tailored hybrid warfare strategy. In this article, I will assess the role and impact of Wagner, as Russia's largest PMC, in Russian politics, particularly after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By doing so, I will show how Russia's abandonment of its traditional principle, according to which the state has a monopoly on security, caused an unprecedented domestic security gap and weakened the ruling government.

Russia's Renewed Geopolitical Strategy

Using mercenary groups has been deemed a viable option for Russia as it reduces state institutions' social and legal responsibility, while simultaneously seeking to maintain a footprint on different continents where Moscow might extract political and economic dividends. For example, the active role of mercenaries in a major offensive in Ukraine enables Moscow to keep reserves of regular forces, consisting of poorly trained conscripts, and avoid catastrophic death tolls and public anger. After Wagner's durable and successful operations in Africa and the Middle East, the PMC nevertheless came home to fight alongside Russian troops when Russia launched an invasion campaign against Ukraine in February 2022.[iii]

Consequently, Wagner, now deeply intertwined with the Russian military and intelligence community, has become an effective tool to advance Russian foreign policy interests.[iv] In the very beginning of its deployment in the Middle East and Africa, Wagner was an asset for President Vladimir Putin, but the rising political ambitions of Yevgeny Prigozhin and his open feud with the Russian Defense Ministry amid Russia's tactical losses in Ukraine made the mercenary group an onerous burden for the regime.[v]

The continuous internal power confrontation between Wagner and

the Russian Ministry of Defense resulted in the recent short-lived mutiny of the former against the government on 25 June 2023.[vi] Because Wagner has so expanded and become increasingly integrated into the Russian military over the last decade, Prigozhin gained sufficient leverage over Putin's government based on a patron-client system in which elites are compensated for their allegiance with access to resources.[vii] Putin accepts bad governance by trusted elites to cultivate a loyal and informal power base separate from those formal institutions which might normally challenge his authority.[viii]

Why does Russia need PMCs?

Russian PMCs are pivotal players in Moscow's ongoing hybrid warfare in the Middle East, Africa, and, most recently, Ukraine. In this regard, Wagner has emerged as Russia's premier PMC and a good example of Moscow's use of semi-state security forces. Nevertheless, claiming that Wagner has been the first example of a semi-state security body closely cooperating with the government of the country in which it is headquartered and taking part in conventional and proxy wars abroad would be inaccurate. Putin's government has been using Chechen paramilitary-style forces, widely known as Kadyrovites (referring to Chechnya's strongman Ramzan Kadyrov), in Syria and Libya amid surging civil wars in these countries.[ix] The use of such paramilitary forces enabled Russia to intensify asymmetric competition with the U.S. in Africa and the Middle East.

In fact, there are deep disparities between understanding of PMCs in the West and that in Russia. The most critical tasks of Western PMCs include securing the regular activities of the armed forces by providing logistics, convoy protection, training and protection of facilities and military personnel.[x] In Russia, instead of approaching the issue from the perspective of "cheaper and flexible armed forces," the Kremlin perceives them mainly as political-military tools of

state influence, which can be employed under cover of plausible deniability.[xi] Hence, the complex and diffused structure of Wagner makes it challenging to define the group. Indeed, the group is rather a network of business entities and mercenaries sharing unique relations with the government. Unlike Western PMCs, Wagner largely does not operate without the Kremlin's approval like a genuinely independent private military contractor might, though it wields some autonomy at tactical and operational levels.

Moreover, while Western PMCs are not subject to funding from the state budget, Wagner depends on the Russian government in terms of finance, logistics, ammunition, and supplies, thus sticking to the alignment with the government's broader foreign policy.[xii] For example, between 2014-2015, Ukrainian intelligence intercepted three phone calls of the founder of Wagner, Dmitry Utkin, a former officer of Russian army intelligence (formerly known as and still referred to as GRU)[xiii] and Major General Yevgeni Nikiforov, commander of the Western military district.[xiv] These conversations of Russia's high-ranking military officials with the Wagner representative indicated that the group was subordinated to Russian military command and GRU. Moreover, another significance of Wagner is that it can operate either independently in conflict zones or alongside regular Russian forces wherein it creates an adaptable operational model, as in the case of the Ukraine war.

However, Wagner mercenaries' poor performance in the full-scale war in Ukraine against Western-trained and supplied Ukrainian forces revealed its limitations, even though Wagner's use permitted the Russian state to hide the mounting losses and casualties suffered by its side.[xv] Ironically, Ukraine served as one of the first proving grounds for Russian state-linked PMCs in 2014 following the illegal annexation of Crimea. The successful deployment of contractors in Crimea triggered Moscow to invest in mercenaries and expand its PMC network in Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

Another significant nuance in Russia's once-growing interest in PMCs is that, unlike most conventional militaries, such organizations do not follow the rules of engagement promulgated by international organizations. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that Wagner has deliberately failed to issue any code of conduct for its operatives since its establishment.[xvi]

Notably, Wagner's reputation was severely damaged shortly after its deployment in eastern Ukraine as the group reportedly failed to take Bakhmut, a small town in Ukraine's Donetsk province, after months of ferocious battle and suffering significant losses. Various sources indicate that on the Ukrainian front, Wagner deployed about 50.000 personnel on the battlefield, as well as 10.000 contractors and 40.000 convicts recruited from the Russian prisons in exchange for promises of early release made by Prigozhin.[xvii] Notwithstanding the recruiting numbers, Wagner's effectiveness in ensuring a breakthrough on at Bakhmut amid the stalemate is highly arguable. For example, although Prigozhin in May 2023 declared that "Bakhmut fully fell under Wagner's control," independent sources were quick to dismiss his allegations.[xviii] Notably, mounting losses in Ukraine and Prigozhin's growing personal ambitions added more fuel to his rivalry with the Russian Defense Ministry, leading to the mutiny in June 2023 with Wagner fighters marching to the Russian cities of Rostov and Voronezh with the aim to "seize power."[xix]

The Russian PMC strategy is designed for strategic deception and reflects the culture and hierarchy of the Russian military and intelligence system. Hence, the presence of the Wagner on the Ukrainian battlefield and its growing role in combat activities can be perceived as *power projection*: Wagner is used to conduct covert false flag operations, intelligence collection, perpetrate sabotage operations, etc.

The Fall of Wagner

The Russian government's attitude towards Wagner has not always been approving because of the group's involvement in illicit activities; video footage of the group's brutal killings and torture of civilians and prisoners of war in Syria, Mali, CAR, Sudan and Eastern Ukraine by Wagner mercenaries, including the leak of the details of secret operations amid Ukrainian forces' ongoing counter-offensive have become important factors discrediting Russia's international image.[xx]

Unlike in Africa and the Middle East, Wagner mercenaries faced tough conditions in Ukraine and fell short of matching the battlefield capabilities of Western-trained and supplied Ukrainian forces, instead preferring to avoid direct confrontation. Despite Wagner mercenaries' immense combat experience on global battlefields, in Ukraine they demonstrated that they were not technically and morally well-prepared for full-scale conventional warfare. Faced with manpower shortages, Wagner recruiters turned to applicants whom they previously refused to hire. As a result, the group has grown to include tens of thousands of people, but its overall combat experience and readiness decreased.[xxi]

But, despite its lack of preparedness, Wagner nevertheless showed a more professional attitude on the Ukrainian front compared to Russia's poorly-trained regular forces. For example, in 2022, Wagner played a crucial role in capturing important cities such as Mariupol (Donetsk) and Popasna (Luhansk), though at the expense of heavy casualties.[xxii]

The Kremlin and Prigozhin were quick to capitalize on that, as the latter emphasized the "government's trust in Wagner group as an effective tool."[xxiii] Hence, Wagner's relative effectiveness in Ukraine was ensured by its willingness to take huge losses. According to various estimates, Wagner's major losses in eastern Ukraine consisted of convicts recruited by Prigozhin and numbered ten thousand. As of February 2023, Wagner had lost around 30.000 mercenaries, many

of whom were convicts, in Ukraine even before the major battles for Bakhmut started.[xxiv] Although prison inmates proved to be ineffective fighters and stretched Prigozhin's finances, they became ideal cannon fodder in Wagner's repeated assaults on Ukrainian positions in Bakhmut, the siege of which raised Wagner's profile in the eyes of the Kremlin and ordinary Russians.

During his time on the Ukrainian front, Prigozhin tailored a myth of Wagner through frequent media appearances on mass and social media platforms. This myth enabled Prigozhin to build the commercial side of Wagner, ensuring that the government's financial aid flowed smoothly. The fact that Wagner was not able to ensure full control over Bakhmut and only captured Soledar, a town northeast of Bakhmut after months of clashes, did not initially cause a crisis in Prigozhin's relations with Putin . However, these failures boosted international observers' and the Russian Ministry of Defense's skepticism regarding Wagner's effectiveness.[xxv]

The more MoD skepticism regarding Wagner's role in Ukraine became louder, the more Prigozhin's rivalry with the MoD deepened. Indeed, the escalatory rhetoric of Prigozhin against the MoD and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was an attempt to hide Wagner's failures on the battlefield amid depleting resources and Ukraine's mass counter-offensive operation.

As a result of the shrinking maneuvering space and deepening schism with Putin, Prigozhin openly revolted against the government by arranging a *March of Freedom* to Moscow and facing almost no resistance from Russian internal troops (Rosgvardiya).[xxvi] Even though Wagner's plan to storm Moscow was halted, according to Prigozhin, to prevent further bloodshed among civilians and armed forces, we should note that Prigozhin's revolt was doomed to fail because of several factors, including insufficient resources to force regime change in Russia. However, Wagner's insurrection against the government signaled that Putin's new approach of using PMCs in

the security sector was not working anymore, and its end result could be very violent and chaotic.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, Russia has developed and re-designed its hybrid warfare strategy in a way that is unlike anything we have seen historically. In addition to deception and disinformation campaigns against the West, Moscow for a time successfully used soldiers of fortune as a lethal tool in its hybrid warfare strategy. Such a strategy enabled Russia to create a plausibly deniable military force comprised of professionals that are not bound by Russia's Articles of War or international norms. The growing network of Russian PMCs, including Wagner, extended Russia's long arm in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Ukraine.

As an organization closely linked to the Russian government and relying on its military infrastructure, Wagner is more than an ordinary PMC and should be viewed as a classic proxy organization. Therefore, Wagner's expansion in broad geography serving Russia's foreign policy interests was a particularly troubling trend. However, Wagner's rising influence on battlefields triggered an internal emergency at home, highlighting the looming crisis in Russian governance, particularly in the command system of the armed forces. The emotional war of words between the Russian government and Wagner and the subsequent Wagner mutiny revealed the limitations of the Kremlin's influence over the powerful PMC and its rogue chief. As such, it is most likely that as a result of the insurrection, Wagner group will withdraw from Ukraine and its mercenaries will be gradually absorbed into the regular armed forces. Moreover, new changes to the Russian legislature also should be expected in order to prevent further potential mutiny attempts that would threaten the safety of the regime.

Although Wagner's recent insurrection weakened the ruling

government in Russia and demonstrated the weakness of Russia's system of one-man rule, Vladimir Putin is unlikely to back away from his well-treaded PMC approach in foreign policy. However, as explained above, significant changes will be introduced to tighten the state's grip on PMCs, ensuring they serve national interests. As for now, the PMC approach is the only viable option for Russia to maintain its violent strategy and continue the invasion of Ukraine with the aim of reaching Ukraine's recognition of Russia's annexations by way of attrition.

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