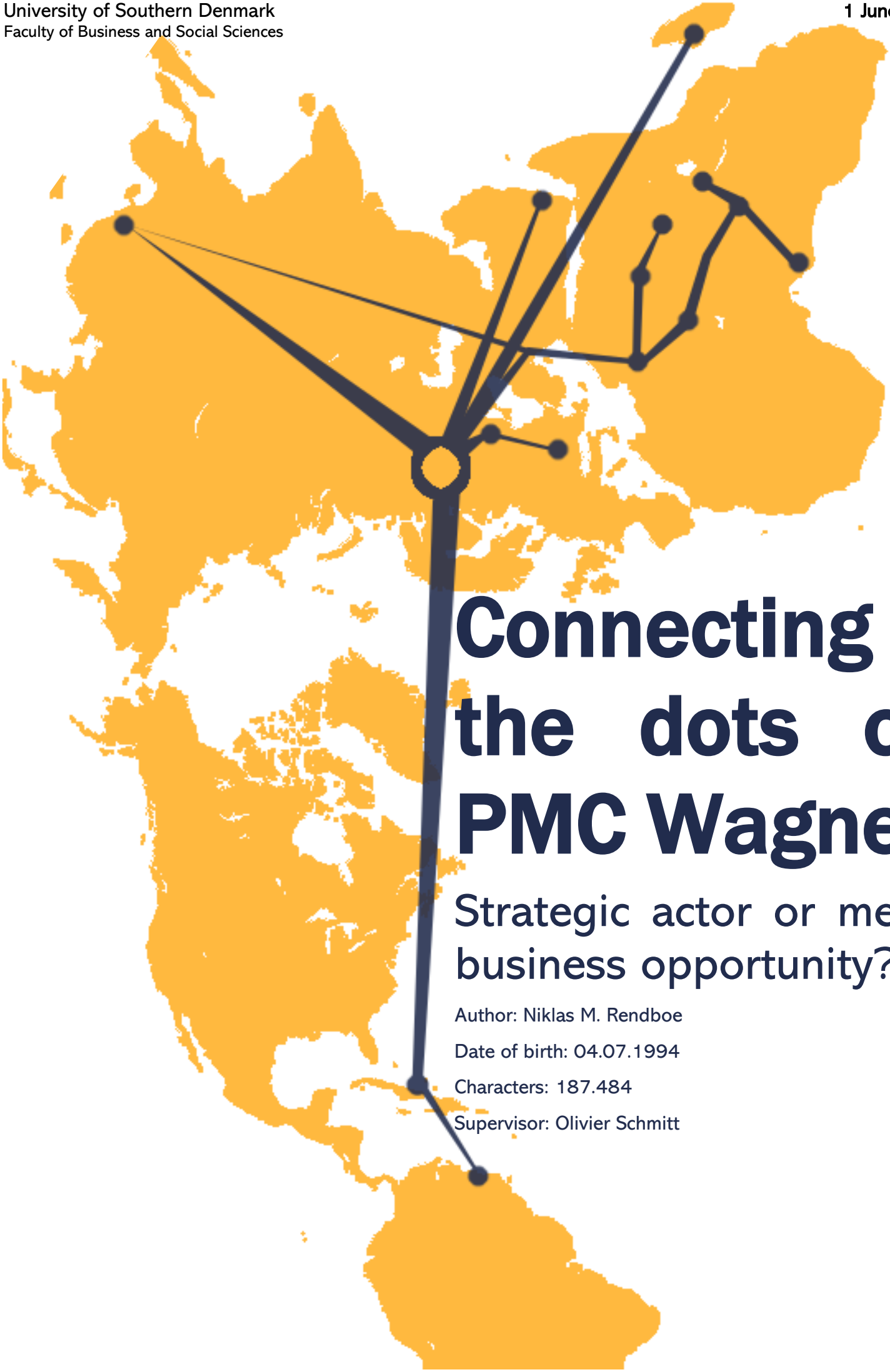
University of Southern Denmark
Faculty of Business and Social Sciences

1 June 2019



Connecting the dots of PMC Wagner

Strategic actor or mere business opportunity?

Author: Niklas M. Rendboe

Date of birth: 04.07.1994

Characters: 187.484

Supervisor: Olivier Schmitt

Abstract

Russia has commenced a practice of using military companies to implement its foreign policy. This model is in part a continuation of a Russian tradition of using non-state actors, and partly a result of the contemporary thinking in Russia about war and politics as well as a consequence of the thorough reform process of the Russian military which began in 2008 under Anatolii Serdiukov. By using the subcontracting firms of business leader Evgenii Prigozhin as a channel for funding Wagner, the Kremlin has gained an armed structure which is relatively independent of its official military structures. The group was formed as part of a project to mobilise volunteers to fight in Ukraine in 2014-15. The following year, Wagner went to Syria and made a valuable contribution to the Assad government's effort to re-establish dominance in the Syrian theatre. Since then, evidence has surfaced pointing to 11 additional countries of operations. Of these, Libya, Sudan, Central Africa and Madagascar are relatively well supported. In all these countries, Wagner's ability to operate are dependent on Russia for logistics, contracts and equipment. Wagner is first and foremost a tool of Russian realpolitik; they will not win wars nor help bring about a new world order, but they further strategic interests in two key ways; they deploy to war where Russia has urgent interests, and they operate in countries where the interests of Russia are more diffuse and long-term to enhance Russian influence. From the perspective of international law, several of Wagner's operations warrant the judgment that they are a de facto organ of the Russian state, but in other operations they act more independently. Their activities must therefore be considered on an ad hoc basis. Militarily, the group can be conceived of as a commercialised volunteer corps. The use of Wagner reaps several small rewards in terms of difficulty of attribution, economic profit, limitation of expenses, and diplomatic influence.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

... Can they do that?

Thus sounded the refrain of onlookers worldwide in 2014 as a Russian military operation asserted control of the Crimean Peninsula and moved into the mainland of East Ukraine. No longer would Russia tolerate being suffocated by the steady creep of the expanding NATO and EU. In Moscow's view, the time called for bold moves, but the risks involved in unleashing the full might of the Russian military on a democratic nation at the border of the EU and NATO were too dire to run. Moscow took a different approach by employing a mix of special forces, enthusiastic gangs, secessionist rebels and ex-military volunteer corps whilst denying official involvement in the process. This move made observers pause and many actors accepted in part the premise that auxiliary actors did to some degree make the conflict less attributable to the Kremlin, even if it had ultimately broken international law.

When some of these ex-military volunteers were found the following year to be fighting in Syria as part of an ostensibly private military company known as *PMC Wagner*, it began to dawn on observers that their engagement in Ukraine was not merely a one-off fitted for the occasion, it was the beginning of an incorporation of military companies into Russian foreign policy.

PMC Wagner was not the first military company in Russia, but its scale and scope is unprecedented. In February 2018, the group appeared in news headlines all over the world due to reports that it had sustained somewhere between 60 and 200 casualties in a battle against US forces in the east of Syria whilst working with pro-government forces. Once again, this has been the reason for pausing: Would Washington interpret this as an armed attack by the Russian state, or would they accept the premise that being attacked by a Russian military company is not quite the same? Later that same year, three Russian investigative journalists went to the Central African Republic to investigate reports that Wagner was active within the country. When their bodies were found soon after, media attention toward Wagner got more intense. As a result, a wealth of evidence of its activities in at least six different countries is now available. The evidence

makes it possible to investigate Wagner and thereby open a window on some of the most contentious areas of Russian foreign policy, namely, use of force, employment of proxies and covert influence abroad. The use of military companies is a recent development in Russian foreign policy and it is not immediately clear what purposes it serves in the short and long term. This thesis studies the case as thoroughly as evidence allows in order to answer the research question:

What is the role of PMC Wagner in Russian foreign policy?

The immediate context of the question is the recent decade-plus of Russian foreign policy since the August War in 2008 against Georgia. The conflict which occurred between the colour revolutions of the noughties and the Arab spring from 2010, preceded a revitalised effort to remake the Russian armed forces and its thinking under Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov and his successor Sergei Shoigu. Russian strategic thinking of this age is inextricably linked to the view that Russia has been forced into the defensive by the expansion of the EU and NATO who will not admit Russia with due regard for its vital interests. A large part of the Russian populace are, furthermore, as many others worldwide, gripped by an acute sense that there is an institutional yolk in international relations of which they must rid themselves to once again be able to carry out unilateral foreign policy. This romance of unilateralism requires a political leadership that embodies *udal*, daring, and can break out of the deadlock. Studying Wagner also means considering its ability to contribute to this bold agenda.

The wider context of the question is a change in the use of force away from war on the industrial scale toward less intense or more sporadic uses of force in the tradition of guerillas and terrorists such as Chairman Mao, Che Guevarra and Osama bin Laden, respectively, who all specialised in the art of achieving the greatest military-political effect in a world where great powers, nuclear weapons, and surveillance keep most states deterred from action (Creveld, 1991; Kaldor, 1999; Münkler, 2005; R. Smith, 2007). Whereas war had hitherto been treated as a crisis that one may initiate or endure to change the relative bargaining powers of the involved parties, these conflicts saw war being opened as a permanent sphere of politics, a calm fire which is kept going so it can always be stoked when needed (Kaldor, 2010). The victims of this approach to war are the civilians whose societies are never ensured by a state, but who are forced to side with local security providers such as PMSCs or warlords. Geographically, these wars proliferate in the weak states of Africa and in the Middle East and South America – and this is indeed where the presence of Wagner is also reported.

In accounting for the activities of Wagner, we are also unavoidably engaged in an interpretation of Russian foreign policy as such, because a necessary corollary to our research question is *which account of Russian foreign policy explains the use of Wagner?* The complexity of interpreting such a large body of relations and practices which touch upon the various nations, peoples, persons and institutions of the world, prevents

us from merely positing a conclusive account of the matter. Instead, we must accept a certain degree of hermeneutical open-endedness to all aspects of the inquiry. The structure of the thesis is supposed to reflect this approach by reserving the introductory chapter to the various sources of literature and thought that are relevant to the case of Wagner as well as to an open-ended account of Russian foreign policy. The second chapter contains the case-study proper which is informed by the concepts rolled out in the preceding chapter without being formulaic. Concluding remarks and further perspectives are all included in the final chapter.

1.1 Review of sources, studies and literature

PMC Wagner has recently become an object of study by several Russia experts, journalists and scholars. In this section we consider what has so far been written about Wagner specifically. We also survey the literature on the broader theoretical categories to which Wagner seems to belong: *Private Military and Security Companies* (PMSCs) and tools of the *new Russian way of war*.

1.1.1 Sources and case studies

The vast majority of encountered sources on Wagner agree. They agree on Wagner's ties to the Kremlin, its leadership, the approximate timeline of its activities, the equipment used and more. Most sources can trace their lineage to a small handful of investigations, but these investigations have often provided good evidence to support their claims. These sources constitute the data for this study and surveying them in this section gives us the opportunity to preliminarily survey the quality of our data.

Russian investigative journalism During his employment with the local St. Petersburg-based news medium *Fontanka*, Denis Korotkov investigated Wagner and the business structures that preceded it, and he has provided the general account of Wagner upon which most sources rely. As an investigative journalist, Korotkov is seen as a detractor of the powerful and has been faced with numerous threats and accusations of espionage in Russia (Baev, 2019). He is nevertheless widely respected as an honest reporter who supports his claims with evidence (Marten, 2019, p. 10).[1] Another important contributor is *The Bell*, an investigative news medium which has carried out interviews among Kremlin officials to understand the interaction between Wagner and Russia's political leadership (Baev, 2019; Gubenko, 2018; Malkova and Baev, 2019; Malkova, Stogney and Yakoreva, 2018; Yakoreva, 2018). Fontanka and The Bell are very forthcoming in

[1] It speaks to Korotkov's value as a source that smear pieces written about him resort to rather outrageous accounts of his journalistic practices (such as him kidnapping a source) without providing evidence against the claims he makes in his articles (Petrov, 2018).

terms of showing their work and this is likely the reason why so much work on Wagner can be traced back to their evidence.

Another prominent figure is Mikhail Khodorkovskii, an exiled business tycoon and famed enemy of Putin, who has funded various journalistic enterprises that have investigated Wagner. Among these, we find *Dossier* who collects evidence of corruption within the circle of President Putin, the *Investigation Control Center* an investigative news medium which existed only for a short while, *The Project* who have published reports on Wagner's presence in Africa based on insider interviews, and most importantly *the Conflict Intelligence Team* whose work on Wagner is based on open sources. Although Khodorkovskii quite clearly has an interest in discrediting the Russian President, the findings of his ventures do not conflict with any credible sources available. *Echo Moskvy*, *Meduza*, *Republic*, *Kommersant* and *Novaya Gazeta*,[2] staples of Russian critical journalism, have also published several articles by and interviews of well-credentialed journalists such as Aleksandr Minkin and the late Orkhan Dzhemal that are valuable for this study. Russophone journalists at the international media *Reuters* and *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty* (RFE/RL) have also reported on events on the basis of knowing both Western and Russian coverage as well as contributed with original research.

Russian PMC experts A different debate and view of Wagner can be found in the articles on the web page of the *Pushkin Centre for Strategic Conjunctures*.[3] Among other things, the page hosts several articles by Vladimir Neelov, prominent commentator on Russian PMCs and proponent for the widening of their use. The centre has also published a widely cited pocket book on the evolution of PMCs by Konovalov and Valetskii (2013). Certain conclusions and viewpoints found on the page are diametrically opposed to that of the investigative journalists and lie far closer to the official line of the Kremlin, but the general picture of Wagner's activities is nevertheless in agreement with Korotkov and Co.'s. Furthermore, Neelov has subsequently been arrested on charges of high treason, a fact media widely attribute to his authorship on Russian PMCs (CR, 2018). Another expert is the so-called Cossack *Ataman* Evgenii Shabayev, an activist and person of authority in the Cossack community of Russia whose grounding in this community gives him privileged access to information on the topic because many Wagnerites are recruited from these circles. His political role as a spokesperson and organiser forces us to treat him as an interested party. Given that considerable aspects of our picture of Wagner have come to us through Shabayev, we use his information but note explicitly when doing so.

Ukrainian sources Information on Wagner is also readily supplied along with commentary by several Ukrainian sources, such as *the Ukrainian security service* (SBU), the

[2]Where Korotkov has been employed since leaving Fontanka (Baev, 2019)

[3]www.conjuncture.ru

open source initiatives *InformNapalm* and *the Kharkiv human rights protection group*, and the Russian critical news medium *Euromaidan*. These sources have a vested interest in discrediting Russian policies and armed groups aligned with Russia, but they also provide data which has on several occasions been verified by third parties.

Western journalism Western mainstream media such as *CNN* and *BBC* and more niche media such as *Foreign Policy* have also covered Wagner. They derive their data largely from Russian journalism and consulting with experts on defence and Russian policy. Their strength lies in their access to the Western intelligence communities who have on several occasions disclosed vital information about Wagner activities. An exception to the pattern in Western journalism is the reports by Bellingcat in which original and replicable open source investigations are presented.

The need for interpretation The value of the abovementioned sources of data for this study can hardly be overestimated, but being as they are news articles, reports, updates or opinion pieces, their findings still require collection and systematisation to provide a fruitful picture of Wagner. Luckily we have a number of case studies that have done exactly this.

Wagner case studies The varying approaches to Wagner taken in the studies by Dreyfus (2018), Hellem (2019a,b,c,d,e), Marten (2019), Østensen and Bukvoll (2018), Spearin (2018b) and Sukhankin (2018a, 2019a,c) demonstrate the value of alternative lenses on this topic. These studies reveal that Wagner is a significant development not only within Russian foreign policy and its so-called *new way of war* but also within the private security industry itself. This study adds to their work by working with more recent data on Wagner and a more systematised account of its activities. We focus on Wagner as a phenomenon of Russian foreign policy and military doctrine (thus taking our queue from Marten and Sukhankn) but we go further in covering our bases by surveying the literature on private military and security companies and including considerations of international law.

1.1.2 Wagner's place in the PMSC literature

The Russian concept of PMCs Østensen and Bukvoll (2018), Dahlqvist (2019, p. 3), Marten (2019, p. 3), Sukhankin (2019c, p. 5) Spearin (2018b, p. 43) agree that as a company, Wagner is difficult to fit within the categories and theories of Private Military / Security Companies (PMSCs) because Wagner does not operate independently of its home state and because it engages directly in combat operations – a practice which died out in the PMSC industry in the late 90's (Tonkin, 2011, pp. 35–41). Its name,

PMC Wagner, or *ChVK Vagner* translates to Private Military Company Wagner.[4] Most sources will tell us that PMCs, unlike private security companies (PSCs), are illegal in Russia due to article 359 of the Russian penal code prohibiting mercenarism.[5] And indeed there are Russian PMSC-employees who have served time in prison under this law (Poteeva and Korotkov, 2012). However, according to the academic literature, PMCs cannot be equated with mercenaries (See e.g. Adams, 2002; Avant, 2005; Leander, 2005a; McFate, 2014; Shearer, 1998; Singer, 2003; Spearing, 2017; Tonkin, 2011).

This is because PMSC-literature is often also legal literature, international law provides a very narrow definition of a mercenary in the Geneva Convention Additional Protocol I:[6]

> *A mercenary is anyone who:*
>
> A *is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;*
>
> B *does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;*
>
> C *is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that Party*
>
> D *is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict;*
>
> E *is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and*
>
> F *has not been sent by a State which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces.*

Instead, the most common understanding of PMCs and PSCs is that PMCs provide services that facilitate military operations; PSCs provide services that facilitate other endeavours in which recourse to the use of force may be necessary. PMCs are then again usually subdivided into categories such as these provided by Singer (2003, pp. 92–3):

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[4] In Russian: Chastnaia Voennaia Kompaniia Vagnera.

[5] *"Article 359. Mercenarism 1. Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of four to eight years. 2. The same acts, committed by a person through his official position, or with relation to a minor, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of seven to fifteen years, with confiscation of property or without such confiscation. 3. Participation by a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of three to seven years. Note: A mercenary shall be deemed to mean a person who acts for the purpose of getting a material reward, and who is not a citizen of the state in whose armed conflict or hostilities he participates, who does not reside on a permanent basis on its territory, and also who is not a person fulfilling official duties"* (*The Criminal Code of The Russian Federation* [5th June 1996]. Adopted by the State Duma on 24 May 1996, adopted by the Federation Council on 5 June 1996).

[6] *Additional Protocol I-II* (June 1977). *Geneva Convention Additional Protocol I-II*. URL: `www.icrc.org/en/war-and-%20law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions`, Art. 47(2).

Military provider company (MPC)	offering combat deployment or command of troops in combat.
Military consulting company (MCC)	offering combat training, operational advice.
Military support company (MSC)	offering logistic, sanitary and intelligence support.

Among these services, only combat deployment by MPCs falls under what Russians consider to be PMC work (See Solomin and Naryshkin, 2018). Are Russian PMCs simply what PMSC scholars would call MPCs, then? Not quite, several self-styled Russian PMCs do not perform military provision but rather military consulting, guarding or policing work (Østensen and Bukvoll, 2018, p. 22). Case studies of Russian PMCs, like the present one, can help clear this conceptual confusion by being explicit about which groups carry out which tasks.

Separating Russian PMCs from auxiliary categories Classifying Wagner as a PMSC rather than as a volunteer force is a claim that requires evidence, since its establishment is tightly connected to the Russian tradition of using auxiliary and *ad hoc* actors such as militias, mercenaries, volunteers, warlords, terrorists and rebels in war up to the present day (Dreyfus, 2018; Driscoll, 2015; Galeotti, 2013, 2019; Sukhankin, 2019a). However, studies of Wagner tend to overlook the resources available in the PMSC literature to distinguish between mercenaries, volunteers, seconded retirees and contractors (See Percy, 2007, pp. 50–62; Tonkin, 2011, p. 12 and Spearing, 2017, pp. 65–6). These terms will inform the present study of Wagner and be explained in section 1.2.

The emergence of the global security industry The literature describing why the PMSC industry has emerged (Howe, 1998; Shearer, 1998; Singer, 2003, pp. 49–70; Avant, 2005, pp. 30–38; and Petersohn, 2010) cannot quite tell us why Wagner has emerged. Two of the most cited explanations, namely the rising demand for private security in Africa after the Cold War and the amount of unemployed troops and unused equipment from USSR at the time are certainly relevant. But they often suffor from methodological vagueness and cannot be used to explain whywhy the growth of the Russian PMC industry has happened so recently (Meegdenburg, 2015).

A nation-level model for PMC use Galeotti (2019) and Marten (2019) suggest that to understand the Russian use of PMSCs, we must also understand how the patrimonial mechanisms of the Russian state figure into the use of force. Such relations could be modelled by elaborating on the model for PMSC use provided by Kruck (2014) who synthesises theoretical models for PMSC use based on National norms (Meegdenburg, 2019; Petersohn, 2010; Ramirez and Wood, 2018), Prevailing international

norms(Percy, 2007; Petersohn, 2014; A. White, 2018), Cost-efficiency (Petersohn, 2010, pp. 533–4; Cockayne, 2007, p. 198; Kinsey, 2006, pp. 52–6) and Political instrumentalism[7] (Avant, 2005, p. 60; Chesterman and Lehnardt, 2007, pp. 252–3; Avant and Sigelman, 2010).

Principal-agent issues The most immediate danger of using PMSCs is the loss of control that comes with delegating command to someone who is not socialised within the same system as the client (Percy, 2007, p. 59; Berndtsson, 2012). Galeotti (2019, pp. 76–7) suggests that the Russian military has established Wagner as a satisfactory trade-off between being able to deploy a deniable force and making sure the force is militarily effective. This principal-agent issue is not one that is typically dealt with in the literature that focuses rather on issues of security (Faulkner, 2017; Leander, 2005b; Percy, 2009; Solomon, 2017), legality (Tonkin, 2011; Torroja, 2017; N. D. White et al., 2018) and policy (Avant, Boot et al., 2009; Berndtsson, 2012; Cutler, 2009; Leander, 2010; McFate, 2014; Nevers, 2009). These three ways of problematising PMC use, have yet to be thoroughly applied to Wagner in but headway is being made by scholars such as Marten (2019), Spearin (2018a,b), Sukhankin (2018a,d) and Torroja (2017).

All in all The theoretical literature on PMSCs requires some reworking to describe the phenomenon of Wagner. However, the recent interest in Wagner by scholars, journalists and military institutions is likely to change this state of affairs gradually as models and concepts emerge that can tie together the literature on PMSCs and the new Russian way of war respectively.

1.1.3 Wagner and the new Russian way of war

The host of terms and models that has recently been created or re-applied to describe the contemporary Russian military modus operandi – primarily under the heading of hybrid warfare[8] – provides a very broad overview of how foreign policy and strategy interact in Russia and it surveys an abundance of different tools including, importantly, lawfare and the concept of plausible deniability. However, the literature often suffers from vagueness with regard to terminology and levels of analysis, and it does little to theorise the case of Wagner considered at present, because PMSCs rarely get more than an off-hand remark in the Russian warfare literature.

[7] Such as obscuring casualty rates from the population, or securing a loyal private army

[8] Besides 'hybrid', the set of overlapping adjectives and terms include: post-modern (Ehrhart, 2017), asymmetric (Breen and Geltzer, 2011), compound (Huber et al., 2002),political (Galeotti, 2018), non-linear (Schnaufer, 2017), grey-zone (Spearin, 2018b), unrestricted (Liang and Xiangsui, 1999), masked (Applebaum, 2014), ambiguous (Mumford and McDonald, 2014), special (Schindler, 2013), new generation (Bērziņš, 2014), new-type (Monaghan, 2015), full-spectrum (Jonsson and Seely, 2015), complex irregular (Hoffman, 2006), rebellious (Banasik, 2015), shadow war (Barno, 2014), maskirovka 2.0 (Robert, 2017), and contemporary Russian conflict (Seely, 2018).

Military reform literature By tracing and interpreting the reforms of the Russian military since the 90's DIA (2017), Galeotti (2013, 2017), Giles (2016), Persson et al. (2016), Petraitis (2019) and Renz (2018) provide the context of Russia's overall military capabilities in which Wagner must be placed, but they do not discuss Wagner.

Gerasimov's legacy The divergent ways of interpreting a famous article by the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov (2013) constitute a considerable part of the literature. The article was interpreted by many in the Western military community through the lens of hybrid warfare promoted by Hoffman (2007) to reach the conclusion that Russia adheres to a *Gerasimov doctrine* (of hybrid warfare against the West) (Mastriano, 2017). The notion of hybrid warfare has gone through a theoretical transition in the works of i.a. Glenn (2009), Hoffman (2007, 2010), McCuen (2008) and McCulloh and Richard Johnson (2013) and when the Ukraine conflict occurred, this became the new paradigmatic example of hybrid warfare (See Blank, 2017; Hoffman, 2014; Jensen, 2017; Neville, 2017; Palmer, 2015). But this has a caused a conceptual stretching beyond recognition (Robert Johnson, 2018).

Corrective literature A considerable part of the work by Bērziņš (2014), Galeotti (2017, 2019), McDermott (2016), Revaitis (2018), Seely (2018) and Thomas (2017) is devoted to correct what the authors perceive as mistakes within the hybrid warfare literature and create alternatives. Among other things, they criticise the transference of the term hybrid warfare to Russia, the lumping together of different types and levels of conflict under the same heading,[9] and the lack of attention to Russian language sources. By consulting Russian sources directly they are able to link doctrinal debates, domestic politics, and reforms in ways helpful to the present project, but they do not offer much in the way of theory on Wagner and similar groups.

The literature of continuity Applebaum (2014), Banasik (2015), Fridman (2017), Galeotti (2016), Giles (2016), Maigre (2015), Murray and Mansoor (2012), Robert (2017), Seely (2018) and Wither (2016) all emphasise the continuity in Russian military thought from Tsarist and Soviet doctrines, most notably the concepts *active measures* and *maskirovka* [10] and in the non-binary understanding of war and peace present in the thought of Lenin, Messner (2005), Svechin (1991) and Vladimirov (2013) among others. These writings serve as a background to understand the Russian auxiliary tradition, and writers such as Sukhankin (2019a, p. 2), Østensen and Bukvoll (2018, p. 14) and Spearin (2018b, p. 43) have already illustrated that classical Tsarist and Soviet thought is valu-

[9] Nevertheless, valid arguments have also been made to defend this lumping together on the reason that all these are mere phases in Gerasimov's notion of war (Seely, 2018, p. 12).

[10] translated either as *military deception* or *masked warfare*.

able for understanding Wagner, and their work informs the present study as well, although we are by no means engaging in a study of maskirovka in this limited scope.

All in all Analyses of Wagner drawing on the Russian warfare literature have already been made, but much can still be added. Vague references to plausible deniability and hybrid warfare do not suffice to illuminate how contemporary Russian military thought may or may not determine the establishment and use of Wagner.

1.2 Terminology

As illustrated in the literature review, the terminology of armed groups and their employers is contested, confusing and overlapping. Below is an overview of how key terms are used in the thesis.

Private Military / Security Company (PMSC) A private company offering military and security services of any type from cleaning to combat. They are typically, registered corporate entities offering their services openly and driven by a profit maximizing motive.

Private Military Company (PMC) Used here in the scholarly sense as a subtype of PMSCs offering services to facilitate military operations.

Private Security Company (PSC) A PMSC that operates in a non-military context.

Contractor An employee of a private military and security company responsible for providing the service to the client (as opposed to other types of employees who may be clerks, lawyers, salespeople etc.).

Mercenary A fighter who joins a conflict between foreign parties motivated essentially by financial gain. In terms that *do not hold up in court* we can say that the primary feature of mercenaries is their outsider status; the intrinsic factors of the war must be insufficient to move them to fight such that payment is necessary to secure their loyalty. Besides this condition, they may be very passionate about participating.

Seconded retiree A soldier who has retired from active duty in his home military and has instead been seconded (lent) to the service of a foreign nation (often as part of a diplomatic gesture or a training programme). This is akin to being a diplomat, and the salary will usually be paid out by the home military rather than the host.

Volunteer corps A combat unit formed of volunteers – usually in response to a conflict. We use the term here to refer to cases where the volunteers are not integrated with the military. These often act as risk willing vanguards at the front or to bolster defence on the rear. Legally, they are equal to regular soldiers.[11] **NB**: In the literature, the term is often used to refer to any soldier who is not drafted. Here we instead divide non-draftees into two groups: volunteers (who are often moved by a certain cause) and professional soldiers (who choose the military as a career path).

Militia Citizens organising as combat capable units without thereby being employed by the government. Militias are used in Russia to build the combat capability and patriotism of the population.

Special forces our translation of the term *spetsialnogo naznacheniya* (lit. "of special purpose" popularly called *spetsnaz*). Such units vary greatly in purpose and training.

1.3 Method

The thesis is a case study which builds a thick account of PMC Wagner's activities and organisational structure using open sources and insights from foreign policy analysis. New sources are published weekly about Wagner's activities and we have therefore had more available sources than previous case studies. The aim is to explore and explain. The exploratory element consists in building an account of Wagner from open sources and surveying interesting avenues as they are uncovered. The explanatory element lies in applying the context of Wagner to discern patterns otherwise unnoticed. In section 1.5 We will therefore consider different paradigms for understanding foreign policy. Setting up a series of hypotheses to support or falsify would be futile in a study that involves so many discrete events as ours. Instead, the move through theory and case is hermeneutic. We are trying to establish a consistent interpretation from our knowledge of the context and of the case.

Exploratory method There have been a number of obvious and serious empirical constraints for collecting and analysing data on Wagner. Most primary investigations on Wagner are Russian, a language that the author does not master. However, knowing the Cyrillic alphabet and a few key phrases, having a web plug-in for Google Translate, and being situated at a workplace with fluent speakers of Russian has helped to reduce this constraint to a mere inconvenience. More important is that the phenomenon of Wagner is new, hidden from the public, legally ambiguous and politically controversial. Scrutinising source material and cross-referencing information has thus been a major part

[11] *Hague V* (Oct. 1907). *Rights and duties of neutral powers and persons in war on land (Hague V)*. URL: www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000001-0654.pdf.

of the work in this thesis. When sources conflict, the conflict is often about dates and amounts to e.g. *How far back does the relationship between Prigozhin and Putin go?* and *How many Wagner contractors died in February 2018 Syria?*. To settle such questions, we turn to those sources which make their case the best and these are usually the more recent sources being published as a result of more intense research that includes witnesses, employment contracts, pictures and open source geolocating to support claims. A walkthrough of the most important of these sources was provided in section 1.1. We also explore the relation of Wagner to the Kremlin using the concept of control tests from international law. These concepts are useful theoretical tools in their own right, and their role in international jurisprudence (a very practice-based field) helps tie our exploration to the institutionalised practices of international politics.

1.4 Legal control tests

Much of the interest in Wagner can be boiled down to the question of whether it acts on direct orders from Moscow, but the scholarship on Wagner so far has not methodically operationalised a concept of Russian control which can be used to discuss degrees of control and possible political consequences. This is a shame because international law provides the so-called control tests by which we can assess different meanings and implications of the state control of auxiliary actors and get beyond often espoused but rarely defined notions of control, plausible deniability and non-state actors. In this section, we survey these notions to probe how they may inform our study of Wagner.

DARS In 2001, the International Law Commission (ILC) adopted the *The Draft articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts* (DARS) as its authoritative interpretation of current international law concerning state responsibility when breaches arise. International law is subject to change as new treatises and declarations are made and new practices and official opinions are observed,[12] but DARS is nevertheless widely referred to as laying out the law on its topic. Given that Wagner is a company operating internationally, in close cooperation with foreign governments and in close coordination with the Russian government, at least the following norms stipulated in DARS are relevant to its case:

- *The conduct of an organ placed at the disposal of a State by another State shall be considered an act of the former State under international law if the organ is acting in the exercise of elements of the governmental authority of the State at whose disposal it is placed.*[13]

[12] Cf. *ICJ Statute* (26th June 1945). *The Statute of the International Court of Justice*. Annexed to the Charter of the United Nations, Art. 38.

[13] *DARS* (2001). *Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts with Commentaries*. UN Document A/56/10, Art. 6.

- *The conduct of a person or group of persons shall be considered an act of a State under international law if the person or group of persons is in fact acting on the instructions of, or under the direction or control of, that State in carrying out the conduct.*[14]

- *A State which aids or assists another State in the commission of an internationally wrongful act by the latter is internationally responsible for doing so if:*

  A *that State does so with knowledge of the circumstances of the internationally wrongful act; and*

  B *the act would be internationally wrongful if committed by that State.*[15]

In other words, whenever a state controls and directs a group for its purposes, then it also bears responsibility if it violates international law. What consequences such a breach entails in practice may well be decided in large part by power politics as IR realists would have it (Glennon, 2015). But the legal provisions just presented are precisely not divorced from this reality, the ILC bases its reading of international law not merely on lofty speeches made by well-intentioned liberal diplomats, but on actual rulings and practices observed within international relations. Some of these rulings give us further concepts useful for understanding Wagner and determining whether it is under Russian control. In order to establish whether The Russian Federation is responsible for the actions of PMC Wagner, we look to the tests of *strict control*, *effective control* and *overall control*.

Strict control In 1986, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on the case of US support for several rebel factions known collectively as the *Contras* against the government of Nicaragua.[16] The ICJ established that the acts of non-state armed groups (the Contras in this case) would be completely attributable to a foreign power if the groups were under the complete control of said power in all fields of their activity. The ICJ considered what practical mechanisms the US had at its disposal to control the actions of the Contras, and they only found that USA could punish the Contras for being disobedient by stopping support for them. The ICJ did not find the US thereby to exercise strict control.[17] When determining whether this test holds for Wagner's relation to Russia we are thus looking for evidence of control measures that go beyond cessation of aid.

[14] *DARS* 2001, Art. 8.

[15] *DARS* 2001, Art. 16.

[16] *Nicaragua v. USA* (June 1986). *Military and Paramilitary Activities In and Against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. USA), Merits*. ICJ.

[17] *Nicaragua v. USA* 1986, p. 109.

Effective control In the Nicaragua ruling, the ICJ further established that a foreign state exercising general control of an armed group can still be held accountable for the actions of the armed group if the state effectively controls the operation *when* the acts are committed.[18] Later, in the case of Bosnia in 1995, the ICTY established that the strictness of this test only holds when the armed groups in question have a low degree of organisation.[19]. I.e. if a foreign state directs or enforces the use of force by disorganised groups against a state, that foreign state is liable for these particular acts. Effective control also translates to operational control, and the principle seems to recognize that whilst a group may sometimes benefit from following the leadership of a highly capable sponsor state, that state cannot be blamed when the group goes off on its own. In the worst case, the use of proxies may amount to *aggression*,[20] and thus warrant proportional armed self-defence by the defending state against the home state. In the case of Nicaragua, the court ruled that various violations of international humanitarian law by the Contras could not be attributed to USA because effective control in these instances could not be proven, but USA had 'by training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying the contra forces' nevertheless violated its obligation 'not to intervene in the affairs of another State.'[21] Thus even in cases where neither strict nor effective control can be proven, states can still be found guilty of unlawful intervention.

Overall control In 1997, the ICTY ruled on the case of Tadić who had acted with the support of Serbia and Montenegro (then named Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) in the Bosnian War (1992-5) and committed human rights violations in the process.[22] The court found that Serbia's effective control of Tadić was unproven. The question then arose whether Serbia's involvement changed the conflict from a civil war to a war between states. The ICTY established the principle that a conflict is international rather than internal if it is between a state and a highly-organised group under the overall control of a foreign state.[23] The legal framework governing internal conflicts is underdeveloped, but if a conflict is designated as international, then the classic Geneva Conventions apply and the case can be prosecuted by the international criminal court in countries where it has jurisdiction (Cassese, 1981). This norm does not imply that Russia would be prosecuted if Wagner committed war crimes but it implies that Wagnerites may be individually prosecuted if they commit war crimes in a conflict that has been determined as international. When using the overall control test, the ICTY put less em-

[18] *Nicaragua v. USA* 1986, para. 115.

[19] *Prosecutor v. Tadic* (Oct. 1995). *Prosecutor v. Tadic, Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction*, para. 97.

[20] See UN General Assembly (14th Dec. 1974). *Resolution 3314 (Definition of Aggression)*, Art. 3(g).

[21] *Nicaragua v. USA* 1986, Para. 292(3).

[22] *Prosecutor v. Tadic* (July 1999). *Prosecutor v. Tadic, Judgment, Appeals Chamber,* ICTY.

[23] *Prosecutor v. Tadic* 1999, paras. 569-608.

phasis on operational control at a certain time, and more emphasis on the general part played by Serbia in terms of planning and supervising the actions of its proxy. Thus, any evidence encountered with regard to whether Russia has an overall function of control of Wagner is pertinent to whether we should see these conflicts as international.[24].

Summary of our legal concepts The point of this discussion of legal principles is to give us a toolset for analysing the significance of Wagner's conduct and its relations to the Russian state. We have seen that where strict control can be established, there is no legal distance between the state and its agent, whilst effective control implies state responsibility only during the operation where that control is in effect. On the other hand, the overall control of an organised group in an internal conflict serves to internationalise that conflict. This means that Wagner's conduct may be responsible (wholly or in part) for changing the status of several of the world's ongoing internal conflicts.

1.5 Russian foreign policy

Scholars of Russian foreign policy generally agree that the state is seeking to enhance its influence in international politics through policies that are more assertive in character and unilateral in nature than those typically pursued by economies of similar size.[25] They also largely agree on invoking the history of Russia-West relations (at least since 1990) to explain its dispositions.[26] Very few points beyond these stand uncontested. In the section below we consider some of the dividing lines of theory that are relevant for our study.

We define foreign policy broadly as state level plans, patterns and practices within the international sphere as well as state level preparations thereof. The element of preparation requires a qualification: all domestic politics always also create the preconditions for foreign policy, but there is an important difference between indirectly forming the palette of available future options in foreign policy by, say, investing in renewable

[24] For discussion of internationalisation in Ukraine and Syria see Alexander Antonov (July 2018). *Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine: State Responsibility, Individual Responsibility and Accountability*. Master's thesis. University of Southern Denmark; Lasse Heckmann (2017). *The Syrian Conflict as an "Internationalized Armed Conflict"? Proxy Wars and the Process of Internationalization Under International Humanitarian Law*. Master's thesis. University of Southern Denmark.

[25] Italy is often mentioned as a country of reference and indeed the two are not far removed from each other in regard to nominal annual GDP. A more apt overview however is the following: In annual nominal GDP Russia is comparable to Canada, Australia and South Korea. Russian annual purchasing power compares to Germany and Indonesia. Its nominal GDP per capita compares to Argentina and Malaysia and is at the world average. Its purchasing power per capita compares to Eastern European countries such as Latvia, Romania, Croatia and Greece (IMF, 2019).

[26] Compare e.g. Leichtová (2014), Mearsheimer (2014), Renz (2018), Trenin (2019), Tsygankov (2014) and Zygar (2016).

energy and the preparation of measures that are relevant primarily as a means of foreign policy such as developing military capacities (See Jervis, 2004). In our view then, military reforms are part of foreign policy, and in some cases, the domestic activities of security services are as well.

1.5.1 Two key divisions

One of the major turning points is the question of whose interests determines Russian policy. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that Russian foreign policy is shaped to serve the narrow interests of President Putin and his inner circle at the expense of what could be achieved for the Russian nation if only the elites had different preferences. The scholars who hold this view are often Russia experts. They include voices such as Dawisha (2011) who argues that the Russian foreign policy is quite simply shaped to secure the enrichment of a small kleptocracy and Galeotti who argues that the President's belief in conspiracy theories is a decisive factor in East-West relations (Cf. Gault and Gannon, 2019). At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that Russia's foreign policy is a function of its national interest which can be objectively determined by looking at the distribution of material power within the international system. This view of modern Russia has most famously been espoused by Mearsheimer (2014) in his account of why the Ukraine conflict occurred in 2014.

Particular or universal rationality Rather than casting this difference in terms of international relations paradigms - a frame which is an odd fit for many of the Russia experts who are historians and military scholars - we note that the spectrum defined above has at one end particularist scholars who explain Russian foreign policy with resort to *the particular interest of the smallest unit* (i.e. Putin and his inner circle), whilst the universalists at the opposite end resort to *the universal interest of the largest unit* (the entire international system). Framing our question in these terms means asking whether the activities of PMC Wagner serve Russian national interest or the interests of a select elite, and whether Wagner is a means very specific to Russian military thought.

Strategy or opportunism A related schism in the literature concerns the long-sightedness of Russian foreign policy. President Putin is variably described as a gambler, a practitioner of opportunistic realpolitik, a grand strategist and a revisionist (See respectively Allison, 2017; Blank, 2018; Marten, 2015; Richey, 2017). The dominant trend is that universalists emphasise the long-term logic of Russian foreign policy, but the particularists are more divided. Renz (2018) whom we will consider below, emphasises the persistent priorities behind Russian military revival, whilst Marten (2015) describes Russian foreign policy with an outset in President Putin's preference for the judo way of deftly manoeuvring enemies to defeat one by one. A distinction made in the debate

and accepted in differing degrees by many scholars is that Russia has long term priorities which it will pursue systematically in some areas (such as nuclear deterrence and energy security) whilst being more opportunistic in others (such as initiatives that undermine trust in US foreign policy and EU) (See e.g. Kofman, 2019, p. 1).

Positions in between Most scholarship falls somewhere between the extremes and occupy positions that combine the importance of elite-specific agendas, national culture as well as material drivers to explain Russian policy. It is almost rare to find a book on Russian foreign policy which does not admit a significance of the two facts that the president had a career in the KGB and that the enlargement of NATO poses a material threat to Russia. Many of these positions operate implicitly or explicitly with a notion of a particular Russian strategic culture (Facon, 2016). I.e. a set of norms for interpreting questions of security policy vis-à-vis national culture and traditional avenues of policy. Or in the terms we have just established: It is a particular *way* of managing universal interest. This concept combines the rather obvious fact that decisionmakers come from a certain tradition and are trained in specific ways with the more contentious notion that this tradition has a causal effect on their policies in the short and long term which cannot be reduced to other factors such as national culture, available means and objective interests. A different approach frames Russia as a petrostate whose reliance on oil money shapes society and foreign policy thoroughly (Goldman, 2008). A more recently developed approach proposes a regionalist particularism for Russia with the claim that Russian foreign policy is influenced by an ancient steppe tradition of foreign politics which involves a particular way of framing politics, power and security (Neumann and Wigen, 2018).

1.5.2 Priorities of Russian foreign policy

The causal models used by scholars to explain Russian foreign policy differ widely, but most will agree with Renz and H. Smith (2018) who propose a parsimonious way to conceive of Russian foreign policy. They elaborate on a few key permanent principles of Russian foreign policy:

1. Recognition as a truly sovereign, great power
2. Retaining a sphere of influence
3. Engaging in multipolar multilateralism

We will consider each in turn below:

Sovereignty Whilst the rest of the world does not tend to question Russian sovereignty, this notion carries some idiosyncratic connotations in the Russian understanding that makes it something quite rare. The Russian notion of sovereignty goes back to

the establishment of autocratic rule under Ivan IV[27] and to the imperial expansion and great power brokering that took place under leaders such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great (Hellie, 1998; Lieven, 2006; Neumann and Wigen, 2018, pp. 218–21). To Russia, *sovereignty* concerns the ability of the government to make policy effectively within Russia without fear from popular revolt and to make independent foreign policy without having its hand forced by institutions such as the UN, EU, and NATO (Renz and H. Smith, 2018, pp. 34–5; Nünlist, 2017, p. 19). The danger from revolt and secessionism has been a constant throughout Russian history due to its vast expanse and the many ethnicities present within the country (Marshall, 2016, pp. 17–41). The preferred solution has historically been to channel authority upwards and to have firm riot control measures ready (such as Cossacks) (Neumann and Wigen, 2018, pp. 242–50; Tsygankov, 2014). The dual priority of maximising power outwards and inwards agrees well with the pessimistic view of how countries can achieve security espoused by the universalist Mearsheimer (2001, pp. 1–2). Mearsheimer is far from alone; many scholars see the equality of states within the UN General Assembly as a political fiction which fails to reflect the reality that the sovereign rights of some are more respected than those of others (Glennon, 2015, pp. 80–1). More particularist views of Russian foreign policy emphasise instead how Russia's preferred solution of centralising power has shaped its foreign policy in unique ways that cannot be explained without description at societal, elite or even individual levels of analysis (See respectively Cadier and Light, 2015; Gelman, 2015; Hill, 2015).

A sphere of influence Russia's concepts of sovereignty necessitates that the other great powers respect its sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union or what Russians call *the near abroad* (Facon, 2016, pp. 70–3). According to the Kremlin's understanding, a sphere of influence is exactly what the US, EU, and China have (Lavrov, 2016). The Western dismissal of this right is considered a scornful attack and a discredit of Russia's historical role as a ward against threats to Europe such as the Mongols, the Ottomans, the revolutionary French, and Imperial and Nazi Germany (Carleton, 2017, Intro). Russia affords little credit to the argument that recognising such a sphere would undermine the sovereign rights of other former socialist republics and thus undermine the UN system (Lavrov, 2016). In other words, the Kremlin claims the privilege of being consulted if outsiders want to do business within the former soviet sphere, in the same way that it prefers to do business in the rest of the world through top-down channels. The military value of having a sphere of influence and thus a strategic buffer zone is obvious (Marshall, 2016, p. 17), but in addition, the states within the former Soviet Union also constitute an important part of the market for Russian energy and a geographic zone which could be used to set up oil pipelines from competing states (Rossbach, 2018).

[27] Tsygankov (2014, p. 33) notes the modern emergence of autocracy already in 1325 under Ivan I, but the characteristics with which we are presently concerned, were not developed decisively before Ivan IV.

As we will see below (particularly in section 2.3), PMC Wagner has been significantly active in countries farther away than the near abroad where Russia has energy political interests.

Multilateralism and multipolarity In the UN Security Council, Russian sovereign rights are by codification explicitly more respected than those of others. Russia has a permanent seat and the right of veto in this most powerful body of international politics, where 15 nations can issue binding resolutions on security issues such as approving armed intervention, embargoing UN states and issuing fact finding missions. A classic insight of security policy is that all relevant parties should be part of negotiations (Kissinger, 1956). Hence, Leichtová (2014, 2018) posits that in calling attention to itself through armed conflicts and high-profile power politics, Russia manages to inflate its importance as a locus of international politics. In contrast, the UN General Assembly consisting of 193 states that all have equal votes on non-binding resolutions is of less interest (Lo, 2015, pp. 74–6). Nevertheless, the premium that Russian diplomats put on the UN and international law is a very pronounced feature of how they talk diplomacy (For instance: Newman, 2018). There is an obvious tension between trying to achieve true sovereignty by having a sphere of influence *and* by retaining a prominent place in international institutions that swear by the principle of sovereign equality but whilst Russia emphasises the need for multilateralism it tends to equate it with multipolarity (Gault and Gannon, 2019; Rowe and Torjesen, 2008). Those who see this as a radical overturning of the present order thus consider Russia to be a *revisionist* power, whilst others posit that there is no long term strategy of revising the entire international order, but merely a conservative opposition to liberal norms in international relations (Compare Allison, 2017; Krickovic, 2018). When investigating the Wagnerites, we must therefore ask: do their activities support a wholesale revisionism or conservative opposition if any of these at all?

Lower order priorities As we have thus surveyed, the Russian notion of sovereignty gives rise to further lower order priorities that condition each other and structure Russian foreign policy. Two stabile strategic priorities that support a material reading are the maintenance of nuclear deterrence and the role as a major exporter of natural resources. Kofman (2019, p. 2) describes nuclear deterrence as the condition that prevents industrial scale war with foreign powers and thus opens a space for an assertive foreign policy and lower-scale uses of force. Oil exports, on the other hand, are the most important source of Russian wealth and the ability to diversify energy and other resource exports underlies Russia's ability to build military power in the long term and is a useful tool of foreign policy in the short term (Rossbach, 2018). We have also hinted in several ways at how groups like Wagner may feature in Russian strategic thought. The role of this class of actors becomes progressively more pronounced in our account

below of how the present Russian military revival has developed since 1989.

1.5.3 Catalysts for Russia's assertive direction

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe in terms of all the priorities just discussed that forced Russia to focus on internal and immediate security rather than geostrategy, but its priorities persisted and this necessitated a build-up of military strength sooner or later according to Renz (2018, p. 61), but it was not (and is not) obvious how the military should ideally be reformed (Renz, 2014). The reforms that took place subsequently were shaped by a plethora of emerging regional and global threats.

Disintegration of the union Russian commentators today often refer to the Yeltsin era as the *smuta* or *Time of Troubles* thus making a reference to the time after the reign of Ivan IV whose death left Russia with an absence of leadership, and occupations by Poles and Lithuanians (Tsygankov, 2014, cha. 2, 7). This morbid analogy is in part meant as a put-down of the efforts to liberalise Russia but also as a genuine expression of the societal and national insecurity of the time. The disintegration of the union cut Russia off from its nuclear weapons and industry in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan and left Russia with a military of 2.8 million servicemen rather than the over 4 million man strong force of the Soviet Union (Renz, 2018, p. 52). Conflicts erupted in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan and the Russian republics of North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Chechnya as well as in socialist (but non-aligned) Yugoslavia and posed a type of threat for which the Soviet army was ill equipped. Russia's imperial legacy and claim to great power status was at odds with the rights claimed by the emancipating republics, and the Russian initiative to form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) accomplished little in the way of reasserting military control of its near abroad.

Desperate mobilisation The Soviet armed forces were based on mass conscription and forces poised for territorial defence and mechanised war, but the erupting conflicts required professional, mobile units trained for counterinsurgency (DIA, 2017, pp. 10–1). Efforts towards professionalisation have been constant in military reforms ever since then, but serious progress in this regard did not come before the late noughties with the military reforms of Anatolii Serdiukov (Renz, 2018, p. 72), the reasons for this shortfall are legion but one of them was the drastically decreasing attractiveness of military employment in terms of pay, conditions, and prestige (Renz, 2018, pp. 56–57). Instead, the Kremlin's coping strategies combined diplomacy, mass military, the mobilisation of internal security forces, mercenaries and paramilitary groups, the insertion of Russian armed forces as peacekeeping contingents and brokering with local warlords (Galeotti, 2013, 2017).[28] Two notable precedents of Wagner from this time are six Russian special

[28]See also: Dreyfus (2018), Driscoll (2015), Goltz (1993), Koknar (2003), Ohanyan (2018), Poulsen (2018) and Renz (2018).

Figure 1.1: Map of Russian engagements as the Union disintegrated

operatives who (presumably with Russian support) left their units to fight as mercenaries in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the Kostenko Group of Afghan veterans that engaged in the Dniester conflict only to die shortly thereafter (Goltz, 1993).

Humanitarian intervention Given Moscow's priorities and its top-down understanding of political legitimacy, the turn towards *human security* within multilateral politics was a threat to the international order at large (Renz and H. Smith, 2018, pp. 34–5). The concept of human security implied a change of the unit of analysis in security policy away from the stability of the state and national security toward the welfare of individuals and communities within the state (UNDP, 1993, pp. 2–3). By directly linking security at the sub-state level to the international community, the liberal proponents of this norms were threatening the very notion of sovereignty (especially as it is understood in Moscow). This threat would not have been so detrimental if Russia could trust that its veto power in the UN Security Council was able to thwart any international interest in the human security of the citizens of Russia and its sphere of influence, but this turned out not to be the case. In 1999, NATO ignored the Russian veto against Operation Allied Force, and intervened against Russia's ally, Serbia, under the slogan of *humanitarian intervention* (Renz and H. Smith, 2018, pp. 34–5). Moscow was thus faced with yet another threat: regime change in the guise of peacekeeping (Yeltsin, 1999). In 2003, the feat was repeated in Iraq. Few events could have swayed Russian foreign policy more strongly in the direction of a pessimist foreign policy.

The European security architecture In parallel with the erupting conflicts, Russia was also engaged diplomatically with the West to settle the post-Cold War security structure of Eastern and Central Europe. This process began with German reunification, and includes NATO's admission of Poland, Hungary, and Czhechia in 1999, and later of the Baltics, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia in 2004. Then Ukraine and Georgia were declared aspiring nations to NATO, although Ukraine's territory reaches across the traditional strategic depth of Russia (Nünlist, 2017). In the Kremlin's view, the post-Cold War settlement was an instance of great power brokering akin to the Yalta conference during World War II and the Vienna Congress after Napoleon, and in both these cases, respecting a Russian sphere of influence was a key aspect of creating conditions for a lasting peace. Posed in neorealist terms, it was therefore a very dangerous choice to allow NATO – an anti-Soviet alliance – to expand into the Russian sphere of influence and it implied to Russia that NATO had simply continued as an anti-Russian alliance with a strengthened Germany and new Eastern members (Rynning, 2015). This process and the decision to invade Iraq became the outset for Putin's relationship with the West after he assumed the presidency in 2000 with an explicit priority of restoring Russian greatness (Galeotti, 2019, p. 19). In the view of Trenin (2019), however, the priority of integrating with Western structures on beneficial terms (i.e. recognition of Russian great power status) was not off the table in the Kremlin but it has too often been ready to use force rather than skilful diplomacy.

Terrorists and insurgents From 1999-2009, Russia resumed the war in Chechnya, where it sought to mobilise the locals around the support of one of their own, the warlord Akhmad Kadyrov, whilst adopting successful counterinsurgency tactics in the field (Galeotti, 2014a; Thomas, 2005). As these lessons were being implemented, Russia was increasingly struck by terrorist attacks, and in 2001 (during a brief window of relatively good relations with USA) Moscow supported the so-called *war on terror* initiated by President Bush Jr. (Zygar, 2016, p. 34). This era saw a drastic proliferation of *spetsgruppy* (i.e. special operations units) within Russia - partly because of the new threats and partly because many of the state agencies insisted on having their own spetsgruppa in order to assert their jurisdiction unilaterally (Galeotti, 2013, p. 6). The use of these units reflected little distinction in practice between foreign and domestic spheres as the same units who have a history of operating outside the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, also operated in Lithuania, Chechnya and Moscow (Galeotti, 2014b, pp. 35–6), and the lack of jurisdictional distinctions between different agencies has been a potent source of inter-agency strife (Renz, 2014, p. 77)

Colour revolutions: Light touch regime change Despite the effort to meet novel challenges with special units, internal security forces and military reforms, Russia considered none of these means appropriate for meeting the challenge of expanded West-

ern influence in its near abroad through the so-called colour revolutions, i.e. Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Orange Revolution of Ukraine in 2004 both of which saw the loss of support for Russian-leaning governments.[29] Whilst most people in the West perceived these to be relatively pacific and benign victories for democracy, Russian media portrayed these pivots away from Russia as Western hybrid operations executed with a touch so light that military intervention was unnecessary. The enabling mechanism for this strategy was thought to be the internet as a tool for organising and spreading information (Graeme, 2005). Hence, this period saw a *securitisation*[30] of protest movements, social media and information itself (Thomas, 2016, p. 558).[31]

Russian identity abroad In 2006 this Eastern European turn away from Russia was manifested by a political movement in Estonia to demolish an old Soviet monument called The Bronze Solider located in Tallinn. This caused tension between Estonian nationalists and ethnic Russians that culminated in 2007 when Russia demonstrated some of the fruits of its thinking on protests, information and social media. Estonian public institutions were hit for three weeks with cheap but effective cyberattacks committed by hackers and encouraged by Russian authorities (Blank, 2010, pp. 37–43). This operation is widely regarded as a rehearsal by Russia preceding its use against Georgia the following year. The same year, President Putin established the Russkiy Mir foundation. *Russkii Mir*, which means The Russian World, is a vague notion used to describe the world or parts thereof in so far as they are defined by the Russian heritage. In a narrow sense, ethnic Russians abroad belong to this world (Suslov, 2018, pp. 330–1), in a wider sense, Russian speakers, the East Orthodox Christians, former Soviet citizens etc. (Suslov, 2018, pp. 332–7) The foundation serves to strengthen this identity, and as a means of soft power it also seeks to be able to mobilise it when needed (Suslov, 2018, pp. 338–40).

Background for the war with Georgia The new Georgian government had come to power after campaigning for re-asserting Georgian control of the autonomous regions of Adjara, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Adjara, a Russian base was closed, and the re-

[29] Often included is also the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan 2005 and the Cornflower Revolution in Belarus 2006, and some sources may include a whole host of other revolutions stretching back far into the Cold War.

[30] The concept of securitisation describes a discursive practice of imbuing a certain area of policy with the urgency of being about an existential threat and thus outside the realm of ideological and partisan disagreement and, at least typically, exclusively within the jurisdiction of the highest offices of the government, military and security services (See Buzan, Ole and de Wilde, 1998, Cha. 2).

[31] Nikitina (2014) argues against this view of Russia's stance on the grounds that Russian diplomats emphasised how the danger of colour revolutions consisted in their unconstitutional nature which would tend to weaken law and order henceforth; whereas the Russians do not mention colour revolutions as a military threatin key foreign policy documents. There is some merit to the argument that revolutions may weaken the rule of law, but Nikitina is demonstrably wrong to suppose that Russian sources did not perceive colour revolutions as a threat (See Lavrov, 2016)

Figure 1.2: The Georgian theatre

public was successfully brought under Georgian control (Staun, 2018, p. 233). The two remaining republics both border on Russia and Russian peacekeepers had been present since the 90's, and South Ossetia's northern counterpart was a Russian territory. When in April 2008, Georgia and Ukraine were designated as aspiring countries of NATO,[32] an implication was the risk of a NATO mission on the border with Russia and a danger of spill-over into North Ossetia, Chechnya and Ingushetia – the soft underbelly of Russian control. But this did not have to be so, in 1999 NATO had secured Kosovo's prospects for breaking away from Serbia, and in February 2008, many Western states including the US supported its formal declaration of independence.[33] The popular refrain in Russian media also compared the case to Georgia's own independence: 'if Georgia can break away from the Soviet Union, why can't South Ossetia break away from Georgia?' (Qtd. in Thomas, 2009).

The August War with Georgia The Russian military presence in South Ossetia was enlarged in May, followed by military exercises on both sides of the border by Russia, and Georgia and USA respectively (Zygar, 2016, pp. 153–6).On 10 July, Russia emphasised publicly its will to support the peacekeepers in South Ossetia (Thomas, 2009, p. 33) On 29 July, Georgian public institutions were hit by Russian cyberattacks committed by internet users mobilised on online fora (Rid, 2012, p. 11). The Swedish Defence University describes the subsequent events in the following terms:

> In early August 2008, the South Ossetian separatists, apparently encouraged by Russia, began shelling Georgian villages in breach of a 1992 armistice

[32] *Bucharest Summit Declaration* (3rd Apr. 2008). Press release. NATO.

[33] *Full text: Kosovo declaration* (17th Feb. 2008). The Republic of Kosovo. URL: `www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7249677.stm`.

> and Russian military units illegally entered into South Ossetia. Georgia rashly responded to these manifestly aggressive actions by attempting to recapture South Ossetia by force (Karlsson, 2016, p. 50).

Among these separatists were Russian volunteers to whom a fact finding mission applied the effective control test (discussed in section 1.4) and found that Russian effective control of the volunteers during the operation could not be proven (IIFFMGC, 2009, pp. 259–61). The Russian narrative was that Georgia was guilty of aggression[34] against South Ossetia, ethnic Russians in South Ossetia and Russian peacekeepers and that Russia was acting within its right of self-defence[35] when it responded by launching an assault on Georgia and assert control of the two republics (Allison, 2009, pp. 175–6). The outcome of the conflict was that both Georgian and Russian forces retreated from South Ossetia and Abkhazia after five days of war (7-12 August 2008).

To sum up So far, Renz and Smith's model of Russian foreign policy priorities explain roughly why Russian military revival was to be expected, and how it assumed its present anti-Western form. But more importantly, the account built from their model also allows us to survey the catalogue of threats facing Russia - to some of which Wagner is supposedly the answer. The types of threats surveyed above can be summarized as:

1. Simmering conflicts and insurgencies in the near abroad (e.g. Ossetia, Tajikistan)
2. Secessionist insurgencies at home (Chechnya)
3. Regime change through peacekeeping (Serbia/Kosovo)
4. High-tech military conflicts (NATO expansion)
5. Terrorism (Happening continuously in Russia)
6. Regime change through arranged revolutions (Colour revolutions)
7. The weakening of Russian compatriotism abroad (Estonia)

The war with Georgia is an appropriate place to pause for two reasons. First, the conflict tested the reformed Russian military and highlighted concrete weaknesses that motivated further and more effective reform which we will delve into below. Second, the new military thinking of this period is what led directly to the creation of PMC Wagner who appeared in the Ukraine conflict of 2014 which bore many similarities to the Georgian conflict.

[34] With explicit reference to: UN General Assembly, 1974.

[35] Enshrined as an inherent right of international law *Charter of the United Nations* (26th June 1945). UN, Para. 51.

1.5.4 The Russian military after Georgia

Russian conceptions of contemporary warfare were in a state of flux after the war against Georgia. Reform efforts had been on-going since the 90's, but operational shortcomings in Ossetia made it clear to everyone that Russia could not afford to let institutional inertia hinder reform (Mathiesen, 2018; Renz, 2018). Meanwhile, out in the world, Barack Obama was elected president of USA in 2008 determined to lead a liberal foreign policy, and in 2010 a series of movements against the entrenched power structures known as *the Arab Spring* began in the MENA region. The reinvigorated reform effort also reacted to these developments, determined to catch up with Western developments in a uniquely Russian way.

Appraisal of the war Even before Russia had made a decisive move to make new progress with reforms by appointing Anatolii Serdiukov as Minister of Defence, a civilian who had been head of the federal tax service (Monaghan, 2017, pp. 69–70). Shortly after Georgia, retired colonel Anatolii Tsyganok pointed to a range of weaknesses for the armed forces during the conflict. Their battlespace awareness was low due to insufficient reconnaissance, communications and night-time equipment as well as lack of satellite support.[36] The inter-service coordination was insufficient and the ground forces lacked armoured vehicles and helicopters whilst the air force lacked drones. The Presidium of the Globalization Problems Institute emphasised the lack of attention paid to the ability of signals from radios and phones to be intercepted and compromised, whilst the commentator, Olga Bozhevya, pointed out how much collateral damage could have been avoided through the use of digital guiding systems for munitions. On the command side, smaller units lacked tactical independence and were forced constantly to request instructions from superior officers (Thomas, 2009, pp. 40–2). Improving the use of volunteers seems not to have been on the agenda, despite their prominent role in the conflict. This appraisal thus confirmed what many had already said in Russia: the balance between high-mobility, high-tech forces and a mobilisation military needed an adjustment in favour of the former(Sukhankin, 2019c, p. 3). The Russian armed forces had for centuries entertained an ideal of material self-sufficiency, and thus employed its own personnel for all manner of logistic and production tasks. The new minister moved to privatise these aspects of the military whilst also radically reducing the officer corps (Mathiesen, 2018, pp. 143–5).

A Russian way forward Renz (2014) emphasises that Russian reformers did not thereby want their forces to look like their Western expeditionary counterparts, her characterisation of Russia's needs and reforms amounts to the plain but insightful point that Serdiukov's reform did indeed follow the pattern of leaner, meaner and quicker forces, but

[36] In military parlance, they had insufficient *C4ISR* capability (i.e. command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance).

not as lean as one would have thought if they were merely preparing for smaller armed conflicts. As Revaitis (2018, pp. 278–9) explains, Russian strategists were preparing for the risk of *local wars* (i.e. wars within the former Soviet Union) possibly combining with *armed conflicts* (i.e. insurgencies within and near Russia) whilst always also being ready for global war (i.e. high-tech war with USA / NATO and China), and the performance of high-tech Western militaries had been less than stellar in the context of lower scale conflicts in 90's and 00's (Renz, 2014, p. 67). To meet these challenges, Russian reforms were not moving in the direction of abolishing conscription (as many outsiders expected), but of a combined recruitment system relying on both conscripts and professional soldiers (Renz, 2014, p. 74). This is when PMCs come into the picture. Eeben Barlow, founder of Executive Outcomes, the company that kickstarted the PMSC industry, had attended the St. Petersburg Forum in 2010 and given a presentation to the Russian General Staff about PMCs (Malkova and Baev, 2019, para. 1). Russian PMCs were already active in Iraq, on the seas and elsewhere[37] but whether they could add to the effectiveness of military reforms and foreign policy was another matter.

The Arab Spring The vision of how to use PMCs was undoubtedly influenced (like all other Russian military thought) by the Arab spring (Revaitis, 2018, pp. 280–4). We conceive here of The Arab spring rather loosely as a series of societal events across the MENA region that started with protests in Tunisia 2010 and which in 2012 either ebbed out or resulted in regime change, armed conflict or public reforms in the countries concerned. In Libya, the process was particularly fast and drastic. The head of Libya since 1969, Muammar Gaddafi, angered at rebels in Benghazi vowed to hunt them down door to door in February 2011. And then he called them *cockroaches* (Zifcak, 2012, p. 2). Seasoned diplomats would remember that the same word was used in 1994 in Rwanda to mobilise the Hutus against the Tutsis and commit a genocide.

R2P This became the first ever occasion of operationalising the so-called third pillar of R2P. In the time of colour revolutions in 2005, Russian relations with the West were apparently no worse than it was possible in the UN General Assembly to agree on an outcome document for the UN World Summit. Clauses 138-9 emphasise that states must protect their citizens (pillar one), that the international community is obliged to help them do so (pillar two), and that the international community is obliged to do so regardless of the state's will 'should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity' (pillar three).[38] This norm has become known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P for short) and whilst documents adopted by the UN General Assembly do not in and of themselves create new law, they are part of the pro-

[37] More on this in section 2.1

[38] UN General Assembly (16th Sept. 2005). *World Summit Outcome Document, UN Doc. A/RES/60/1*.

cess of shaping international law. This particular document acted as a seal of approval from the international community, that it is legitimate for the UN Security Council when dealing with *genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity*[39] to intervene in another state against its will.

Resolution 1973 Thus, when France proposed to let NATO intervene against Gaddafi, neither Russia nor China used their veto.[40] The intervention did not merely hold back the government's assault on Benghazi however, it allowed the rebels to effectuate a regime change. This was more than Moscow had bargained for when it abstained from using its veto. Its interpretation of the situation was clear: the West had now combined the formats of the humanitarian intervention and the colour revolution for maximum effect (See Bartosh, 2018).

The value of science is in foresight It seems these developments were being digested for a while. Serdiukov was dismissed in 2012 (officially because of corruption related to privatisation contracts (Korotkov, 2016c)) after completing a second set of reforms and replaced with Sergei Shoigu. President Putin publicly stated that PMCs may be a good option to implement foreign policy without involving the state directly (RIA, 2012). Then the new Chief of the General Staff, Gerasimov gave a speech, which has been relayed in shortened form in an article in the Military Industrial Courier on the contemporary character of war.[41] It adheres to an old Soviet rhetorical device of claiming to speak about the wars of other nations, when one is really discussing future Soviet doctrine (Galeotti, 2014b). It begins as follows:

> In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template. The experience of military conflicts — including those connected with the so-called coloured revolutions in north Africa and the Middle East — confirm that a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war (Valerii Gerasimov, 2014).

[39] UN General Assembly, 2005, para. 139.

[40] At the time, Dmitrii Medvedev and was president of Russia (2008-2012) not Vladimir Putin. Putin criticised Medvedev for not using the Russian veto, but this was most likely a PR-stunt made to suggest that his foreign policy would be more vigilant when he posed for election the following year (Felgenhauer, 2017).

[41] The original speech was titled "Basic Tendencies in the Development of Forms and Methods of Employing Armed Forces and Current Tasks of Military Science Regarding their Improvement" and was published in the *Journal of the Academy of Military Science*(Thomas, 2017, p. 35).

The article goes on to develop a vision of a scaled conflict, of which only a small part consists in armed engagements, and which is predominantly carried out by dominating the infosphere, fomenting strife and using auxiliary actors. Specifically, the speech mentions US contractors in Libya. And Western PMCs re-appear in the 2014 Russian military doctrine.[42] Revaitis (2018, pp. 281–3) explains that the new Russian thinking centred on different ways to incorporate lessons on how to nullify the strengths of the enemy by engaging in asymmetric warfare in three ways: by having superior networked technology, by employing guerrillas or by instigating colour revolutions. Interestingly, only one key detail had changed 10 years after the then President of the Academy of Military Sciences Gareev (2003) wrote a similar article. In it, he highlighted the same dangers as Gerasimov later would and the number of threats which we listed above, but he reiterated the importance for the military of remembering that 'experience shows and as stated in the Federal Law "On Defense" (Article 18), the state of war is determined by the beginning and cessation of hostilities.' The new direction in Russian military thought was to rescind this requirement and allow considerations of non-military means on the same footing as the properly military in the tradition of past Russian military political thinkers such as Lenin, Messner (2005) and Svechin (1991) (Grau and Bartles, 2017; Westerlund and Norberg, 2016).

PMCs in the new Russian military This scaled vision of conflict is what Western observers quickly labelled the *Gerasimov Doctrine*, and/or *hybrid warfare* using a term originally developed by Nemeth (2002) to describe the Chechen secessionists of the Second Chechen War who combined modes of organisation from tribal and Weberian society. On the other hand, Russian military officials began to use the terms *new generation warfare* and *new type war* but (again) claimed that these were Western models. These thinkers do not elaborate on the use of PMCs, though PMCs are sometimes mentioned for good measure, but for his own money, the military expert Neelov (2013) proposed a place for them in foreign policy adding that: 'it would not be necessary for the state to conclude contracts with PMCs—these structures could work in the interests of private persons, companies, corporations and even international organizations... the state could use their services only in exceptional cases... to relieve its armed forces from non-typical functions.'[43] This vision fit with a leaner military and a future of privatisation. Neelov (2013, p. 45) also considered legal PMCs to be an adaptable concept for a world in which threats are replaced by more intangible risks. It is also a round-about way to achieve -at least *on paper* – what the theorist Slipchenko called *contactless war* during his academic career in the 90's (Thomas, 2016, pp. 554–5). This concept conceived of the future battlespace as one in which the superior power uses precision weaponry against the enemy at a distance. PMCs and special forces may act as a small-

[42] Russia (Dec. 2014). *Military Doctrine of The Russian Federation*. The Russian Federation, Arts. 12k, 15h.

[43] Translation provided in Sukhankin, 2019c, p. 5.

scale placeholder for medium scale ground war to free up resources whilst the rest is handled from the air and sea.

PMCs in the Russian adhocracy Galeotti (2019) argues that Russia is not engaged in a hybrid war with West, but that they are engaged in political war: constant strategic offence with non-military means. The development of capabilities for global and local war is something they do at home (DIA, 2017; Persson et al., 2016), but their offence is meant to be a permanently open realm of resistance to the US and the West through propaganda, information leaks, cyberattacks, funding of divisive political actors, diplomatic dividing etc. In the pursuit of this strategy, the Kremlin seeks to mobilise actors capable of contributing to do so of their own accord, such that millions of inexpensive initiatives are made in this regard, and those who succeed may be rewarded. And indeed, many of the cyberattacks we have seen, involve freelancers and volunteers (Gault and Habte, 2017). Volunteers are also likely to be recruited from among many military summer camps and other related programmes that serve to initiate children and adolescents into a culture of serving the nation directly (Sherwin, 2018). Finally, Russian business leaders are also expected to act as *adhocrats* who can be called upon to perform ad hoc services in this regard. In the vision of Neelov, this is exactly where PMCs should fit (Galeotti, 2019, p. 23).

To sum up The place for a PMC like Wagner in Russian foreign policy and military doctrine was not a fleshed out vision before the concept was also developed in practice over the years of 2013-15, as we will see in the following. Nevertheless, we have an account of Russian foreign policy priorities, events and military elements that contains many possible points of connection for PMCs.

1. Russia has a tradition of using auxiliary actors within the near abroad and indeed used Ossetian volunteers and freelance hackers in the August War.
2. The new Russian way of war emphasises the use of non-military means, a category to which PMCs belong by some definitions
3. PMCs are cheaper than professional soldiers because they do not demand permanent employment and pensions.
4. PMCs offer a way to circumvent international law without manifestly breaking it, thus allowing Russia to reach foreign political goals by use of force without jeopardising its position in international institutions.
5. PMCs can be sent abroad to engage in other tasks whilst acting as a bulwark against colour revolutions
6. PMCs can be profitable and thus serve to align interests of adhocrats and the Kremlin

7. The perceived danger of colour revolutions / humanitarian interventions instigated by the West, may have strengthened demand for non-Western PMCs. The danger from third pillar R2P has also made the need to contain rebel movements more acute.

8. The West is employing PMCs with great effect, so Russia cannot afford to be completely unfamiliar with this mode of using force.

9. PMCs offer Russia a form of *remote* participation in conflicts

The following case study will bring us in a position to review which of these purposes Wagner may serve.

Chapter 2

A case study of Wagner

2.1 Creation of Wagner 1998-2015

This section outlines how Wagner has emerged as a structure out of a network of Russian veterans' organisations and PMCs to engage in Ukraine in 2014. The emphasis is on the military side of the organisation and the civilian and political aspects are left for the next section.

The city of Orel The internal structure of Wagner can trace its roots back to the demobilisation of Russian special forces after the Cold War (Østensen and Bukvoll, 2018, p. 21). In 1998, the company R.O.S.A-Spetsnaz-Orel was registered in Orel as a *regional public organisation* for former special forces. [1] When war subsequently broke out in Iraq and Afghanistan, it created market opportunities for security firms with stronger fighting capabilities than the usual protection firms (Solomin and Naryshkin, 2018). Thus, ROSA partnered with the Union of Russian Paratroopers to create *Antiterror-Orel* which operated as a PMSC in Iraq through its detachment *Tiger Top Rent Security* with the support of Moscow and secured contracts with Russian oil and gas companies (Konovalov and Valetskii, 2013, p. 96). This pattern fits the typical explanation for the emergence of PMSCs in the 90's: Military downsizing frees up personnel and resources, whilst wars provide a market for force (Meegdenburg, 2015).

Ties from Moran to the Slavonic Corps The Moran Security Group emerged as one of several offshoots of this Orel complex 'established by a mix of former FSB and Russian navy personnel' (Østensen and Bukvoll, 2018, p. 22) no later than 2009 and registered as a company providing maritime security on 18 January 2011 (Neelov, 2013, p. 26).[2]. The company purports to have operated internationally since 1999 when it provided

[1] This is a legally defined category in Russia, see (Konsultant Plius, 2017).

[2] NB: This period covers the time when Eeben Barlow consulted with the Russian general staff on the use of PMCs

anti-piracy to a UAE shipping company.[3]. Their existence became public knowledge in 2012 when nine Moran contractors were arrested for carrying weapons illegally in Nigeria (Poteeva and Korotkov, 2012). These were released following diplomatic efforts from the Kremlin (Marten, 2019, pp. 10–11). That same year, another company by the same name was registered in Baghdad as a provider of private security that operated until 2014 (Korotkov, 2014c), whilst two entities named *Slavianskii korpus* (Slavonic Corps) were founded – one in St. Petersburg and one in Hong Kong.[4] Korotkov (2013a) identifies a handful of key people in this complex: Sergei Kramskoi is listed as head of the two entities, Sergei Sokharev is their founder, Boris Chikin is the deputy general director (a position he also enjoys in Moran), Viacheslav Kalashnikov (head of Moran Security in Russia) was provided as the one to contact about Slavonic Corps by Sokharev, whilst Weiss (2013) points to Vadim Gusev as the 'manager of the entire outfit' and owner of all shares in the Hong Kong-based company. Several of these characters also have backgrounds within the Russian special forces or intelligence sector and the relations between these entities speak to a culture of management that relies less on contractual relations and legally defined services, and more on personal connections and understandings.

The Slavonic Corps in Syria In 2013, Kalashnikov carried out initial recruitment interviews with Russian veterans on behalf of the Slavonic Corps, and a second round of interviews were held at the Baltic Shooting Centre in St. Petersburg. Those who got through the recruitment process (let us call them *Slavonics*) came out with the notion that they were going to Syria as per agreement between the Russian and the Syrian governments (Korotkov, 2013b; Marten, 2019), a highly problematic proposition since Russia had not officially entered the Syrian conflict at this point (Østensen and Bukvoll, 2018, p. 25). As they arrived in Syria, the Slavonics realised that their presence was the result of an agreement between a Syrian oligarch and their Russian private recruiters. Several experts (cited by Weiss (2013), have weighed in on this matter all agreeing that the recruiters must have been using contacts within the Russian force structures to be able to set up the arrangement. When photographs of some of these recruits surfaced, Oleg Krinitsyn, head of another Russian PMC called *RSB-Group*, offered the assessment that these recruits were expendables offered as cannon fodder in suicide missions (Korotkov, 2015a; Weiss, 2013). This whole scenario is worth dwelling on because it gives us a model for how modern PMCs may operate in contemporary conflicts: Business leaders / adhocrats are making use of the diplomatic relations between their countries to coat a private arrangement with *official* décor, the agreement involves using people as mere means in armed conflict. Such an agreement is possible because tak-

[3] www.moran-group.org/en/about/index

[4] Marten (2019, pp. 10–1) States that in fact, there were three legal entities named Slavonic Corps, two in Russia and one in China.

ing place between parties belonging to (neo)patrimonial states (where using pseudo-official channels in this way is presumably easier than in truly republican states (see Arutunyan, 2014)) and being implemented within an ungoverned space (where contractors are not encountered by authorities with a monopoly on the use of force). McFate (2014) calls attention to the (neo)medieval nature of PMC-politics, and it is hard to disagree when it comes to the case of the Slavonic Corps but, as we shall see, the case of Wagner seems to be quite different and with good reason, because the mission of the Slavonic Corps was a failure. On 18 October 2013 the Slavonics were forced into retreat in the field. They returned to their camp on an air base in Homs where Gusev and the Syrian employer had a heated argument after which the corps returned to Russia, and Gusev along with Evgenii Sidorov (head of personnel for the maritime Moran, and director of the private protection Moran) were arrested for mercenarism by the FSB, who interrogated all returnees (Weiss, 2013). Marten (2019, p. 11) emphasises that this seeming arbitrariness of the FSB enforcement of the criminal code suggests that illegality of mercenarism serves to provide the FSB and the Kremlin with an instrument of control over these arms-length agents, and this point is duly noted.

Callsign 'Wagner' Lt. Col. of the reserves, Dmitrii Valerevich Utkin, was among the returning Slavonics. In combat, the ethnically Ukrainian Dmitrii Valerevich is known by the call sign *Wagner* - supposedly due to his being enamoured with the ideology and aesthetics of the Third Reich in which Richard Wagner was considered the foremost German composer (Korotkov, 2015a). How his callsign came to be namesake of the entire outfit is a matter of debate that provides important clues as to how Wagner was formed. Utkin, a former officer of Russian military intelligence (GU), is widely considered to be the operational leader of PMC Wagner. Anonymous sources claiming to have been employed by Wagner[5] paint a picture of Utkin as a cruel, competent and mystically inclined fighter in an interview with RFE/RL (Khazon-Kassia, 2018; Khazov-Kassia and Coalson, 2018).[6] The anonymous interviewees make a range of claims that may seem incompatible at first sight:

1. Utkin became the commander of PMC Wagner because he was made an offer he could not refuse by the FSB officers who interrogated the Slavonic Corps members upon their return to Russia.

2. Utkin formed a volunteer corps to fight in Ukraine to assist Igor Girkin's secessionist fight in Slaviansk.

3. This volunteer corps was one among several organised as part of a larger structure

[5] According to the interviewers, this claim has been verified

[6] We retain here the reference to the original interview in Russian because the English translation is heavily edited. E.g. the original version tells us that Utkin may in fact be a *Rodnover* (i.e. a practitioner of a modern Slavic form of paganism).

which trained at a facility in Rostov-on-Don.[7]

4. The volunteer detachments were trained and commanded by competent officers with a background in the special forces.

5. The larger structure is now known as Wagner through an accident of journalism which pinned Utkin's callsign to the whole structure.

6. (At least since starting operations in Syria) PMC Wagner has become an initiative securing cannon fodder to the frontlines by recruiting expendables.

If all these statements are true, they are very informative about the creation of the entity currently known as PMC Wagner but it requires some exegesis to untangle how these statements can be internally consistent: 1) suggests that Utkin is ultimately an FSB-pawn, whilst 2) would have him be an entrepreneurial volunteer. If both are true, it suggests that Utkin was made an offer (with an element of coercion) that he willingly accepted to train and command a detachment in Ukraine. A number of circumstances would have made Utkin a good candidate for this job: His GU training and recent combat experience are obvious assets, whilst his erratic character, ethnicity and religious background could make it easier for Russian authorities to use him as a scapegoat in case they were held to account for the actions of the group.[8] Sukhankin (2018a, p. 300) posits that Utkin is even a great proponent of Russkii Mir, which in his case as ethnic Ukrainian like means embracing and furthering the bond between the near abroad and Russia due to their shared legacy, a detail speaking to his own eagerness and his contribution to an effective corporate spirit – something he would need to be very skilled at indeed if 6) is true. Perhaps his receiving the Russian Order of Courage from Putin in 2016 was a testament to such skill (Coynash, 2018). Bestowing this honour upon Utkin also serves to draw attention to him directly and away from other people connected to Wagner – and according to an investigation by The Bell (Baev, 2019; Malkova and Baev, 2019) this may be the primary purpose that Utkin serves. This narrative is supported by the fact that Utkin is officially also the manager of the firm, *Concord* which we examine in the next section for funding Wagner, although he is unlikely to have acquired much business acumen through his work (Zhegulev, 2013). We are thus left with a picture of Utkin as both pawn and participant, a figurehead in the media and an asset in the field, none of which are incompatible though they are idiosyncratic.

Project Wagner The sources interviewed by RFE/RL claim that Wagner was first formed when fighting began in the Donbas (in March 2014), whilst Marten (2019) and Sukhankin

[7] This is the city from where Ianukovich gave a speech against the Maidan revolution on 28 February 2014 (Zygar, 2016, p. 269).

[8] The risk of Russia using ethnically Ukrainian operatives only to disown them as organic defectors from Ukraine and thus evidence of the injustice of Ukrainian policies is taken very seriously by Ukrainian intelligence (SBU, 2019a).

(2018a) (among others) claim that Wagner was among the little green men who appeared in Crimea in February 2014 to facilitate the swift annexation of the peninsula by Russia. This discrepancy suggests that the establishment of PMC Wagner was a gradual project of recruiting, training and deploying auxiliaries, and that the different sources point to different stages in the process when dating the foundation of the group. The gradual nature of the process mirrors what we have seen in the many organisational permutations from Antiterror Orel to the Slavonic Corps. To avoid confusion between the process of creation and the resulting entity we use the name *Project Wagner* to refer to the process that established the group.

Recruitment and training The troops for Project Wagner were recruited trough word of mouth (and possibly internet ads) from among former soldiers in Russia's rural regions seeking work, from among the Cossack community of Ukraine and Russia, and former soldiers in Serbia and Bosnia (Korotkov, 2015a; SBU, 2019d; Vaux, 2016). Sources disagree as to how important a clean criminal record was, but most state it as a prerequisite for Russians to be admitted into the group whereas foreigners are not subjected to the same demand (Khazov-Kassia and Coalson, 2018; Sharogradskii, Gostev and Krutov, 2016). E.g. a group led by Davor Savicic who is wanted by Interpol, reportedly joined Project Wagner (Korotkov, 2016b). The recruits were initially trained for at least a month in a government-sponsored facility in Rostov-on-Don located approximately 66 km from Lugansk, Ukraine (Khazon-Kassia, 2018). Vaux (2016) claims that training was very basic but given that most training is likely to be re-training, it is difficult to say much about the general shape of these units.

Links to the GU and FSB: In Ukraine, Project Wagner received its orders, equipment, training, and leadership through GU and FSB channels (Bellingcat, 2018). GU Officer, Oleg Ivannikov (also known under the alias Andrei Ivanovich and the call sign *Orion*) acted as coordinator in Lugansk. Calls between him and Utkin have been intercepted. Ivannikov is implicated in the downing of the passenger plane MH-17 which occurred early in the conflict because he was reportedly the one who provided the weapon (Malkova and Baev, 2019). Whilst we know little about Wagner's first training facility in Rostov-on-Don, the second facility is located by the GU 10th brigade in Molkino, Krasnodar[9] where it purports to be a pioneer camp for young patriotic Russians (Korotkov, 2017a; Sagdiev, Zverev and Tsvetkova, 2019). When Wagner went to Syria and further abroad, passports for its personnel were also provided by the GU (Bellingcat, 2019). Project Wagner is also known to have been working with the FSB-group Vympel in Ukraine and likely also in Syria (Dolgareva and Botviniev, 2018; Sukhankin, 2018a). Besides this, the role of FSB with regard to Wagner is unclear, but it is likely that they are acting as political control and approval panel for the use of PMCs in foreign policy

[9]Located 216 km from Kerch, Ukraine. The facility can be found on Google Maps (May 2019)

Figure 2.1: The Ukrainian Theatre

as was suggested in a bill to legalise PMCs submitted to the Duma in 2014 (Marzoeva, 2015).

2.1.1 Wagner timeline 2013-15

Using Dolgareva and Botviniev (2018), Korotkov (2013a, 2014b,c, 2015a, 2017c), Marten (2019), SBU (2019c,d), Sharogradskii, Gostev and Krutov (2016), Sukhankin (2019c), Vaux (2016) and Zoria (2019) we can assemble a best guess approximation for a multi-track timeline of this process (see figures 2.1.1 and 2.1.1).

2.1.2 Findings

Freikorps Wagner? During Wagner's engagement in Ukraine, its relation to the Kremlin was not a company-client relation, thus it did not begin to operate as a PMC before its deployment to Syria. Wagner emerged as the result of bottom-up organising by Russian veterans and a top-down programme established by the Ministry of Defence to mobilise volunteers to fight for Russia against Ukraine. In terms of strategic thought, this organisational format seems to be an example of mobilising Russkii Mir. Calling them volunteers at this point requires some qualification: They are not mercenaries because the conflict between Russia and Ukraine makes them *prima facie* parties to the conflict.

They are not contractors because there is no PMC and they are not regular soldiers because they are not enlisted in the army. Some of them may have participated under duress (having been given an offer they could not refuse) but we assume that this is a minority case. The volunteers from outside Ukraine and Russia may have been a testament to the reality of Russkii Mir, or they may have been true mercenaries, but we shall not dwell on that point because they constituted a minority (SBU, 2018b). If genuine enthusiasm for fighting weighed heavily when mobilising volunteers in local Ukraine, we expect the profit motive to become more important in the distant war of choice in Syria (See Pedersen, 2019, p. 232).

Hybrid mobilisation? Designating the Ukrainian phase of Wagner as something closer to a policy of volunteer recruitment than a PMC serves to underline its organisational fluidity. Being an offshoot several links removed from Antiterror Orel, Wagner has allegedly already generated further offshoots (Sukhankin, 2019b). Wagner's organisational fluidity is reminiscent of criminal networks and terrorist organisations (Parker

Timeline of Wagner's establishment 2013-15

2013 **October**
A large part of the Slavonic Corps returns to Russia. The Slavonics are interrogated and two of their leaders, Gusev and Sidorov, are imprisoned. Lt. Col. Utkin is made an offer to train and command a volunteer detachment for deployment to the Donbas. Thus begins Project Wagner.

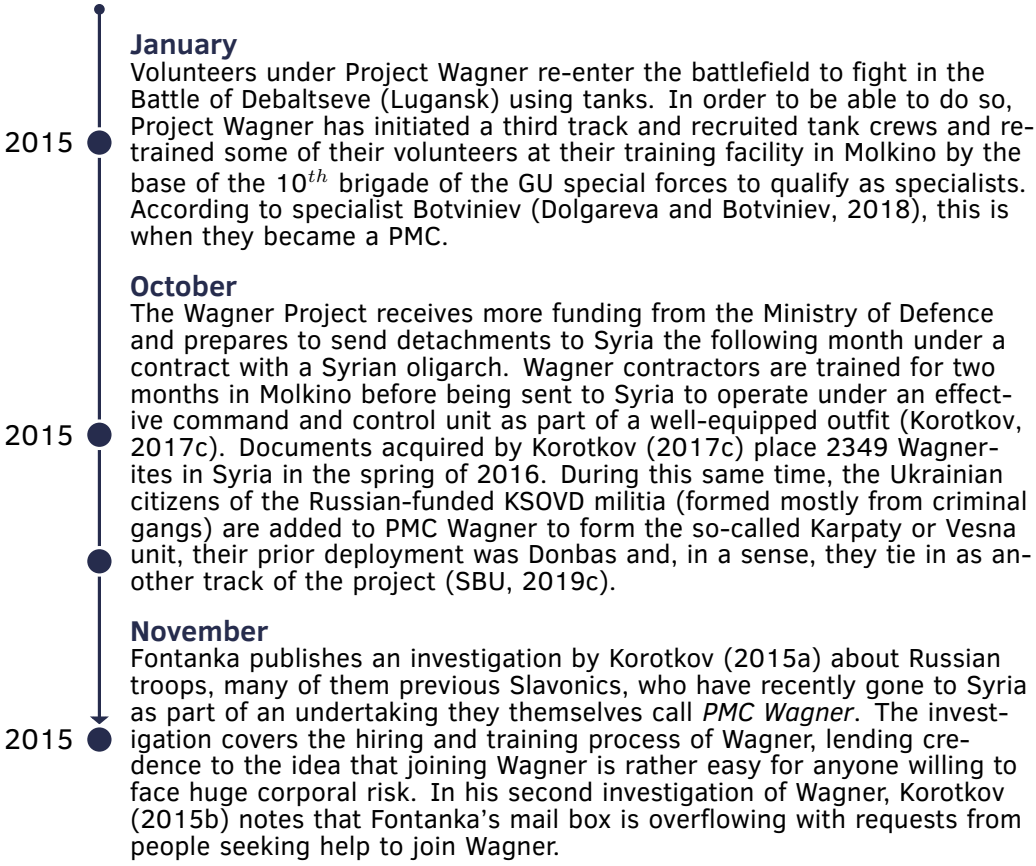
2013 **November**
The remains of the Slavonic Corps return to Russia. The remaining units had until then been working under a contract offered to them by the Cypriot recruitment company, Zeitplus Consultancy Serivces Ltd.

2014 **February**
The little green men appear in Crimea. Among them are Slavonics with fresh combat experience from Syria, their presence is one track of Project Wagner.

2014 **March**
In another track of the project, Utkin and other officers with special forces background lead volunteer detachments of about 250 troops into Donbas whom they have trained in Rostov-on-Don. Utkin's detachment becomes known as *Gruppa Vagnera* (The Wagner Group).

2014 **May**
The project deploys to Lugansk, where they carry out *cleaning work* behind the frontlines, meaning that they hold locations taken by others and keep order within these zones with the use of threats, violence and assassinations against unruly civilians and militia members in Lugansk and Donetsk. They take orders from GU, work with FSB special operations' unit Vympel, and they add a Serbian group to the project led by Davor Savicic (Korotkov, 2016b).

2014 **October**
Russian debate over legalising PMCs culminates in the debate of a draft bill to this effect. Korotkov (2014b) asks whether this bill is merely meant to facilitate the fighting of volunteers in Ukraine and is scoffed at by members of the policy and private security communities.



and Sitter, 2016), and such fluidity is an oft-cited feature of smaller armed groups operating during wartime (as opposed to industrial military organisations in peace time) (Kilcullen, 2018) and of the Chechnyan secessionists who initially gave rise to the term *hybrid warfare* (Nemeth, 2002). This does not justify slapping the label 'hybrid warfare' unto Project Wagner, however. Nemeth's (2002, pp. 50-6) text emphasises how the Chechens combine conventional army training with tribal bonds to make a highly flexible military organisation for territorial defence and terrorist offensives. This is not the case with the Wagnerites: their fight in Ukraine is offensive and their inter-relations are primarily professional (Korotkov, 2016b; SBU, 2018b). Whilst their organisation is indeed fitted to the occasion and changed on the run, the Wagnerites also use tanks and take orders from Russian military intelligence.

Plausible deniability In international law, the degree of organisational oversight and control from the Russian military clearly implies that Russia has both effective and overall control of Wagner. This means that alone by virtue of the activities of Wagner, we should legally consider the Ukraine conflict to be an interstate war. Furthermore, if people like Utkin got their position directly through the FSB and took orders from GU, then the relation is arguably one of strict control for which Russia is completely responsible. Whilst lack of intelligence may therefore have made the group plausibly deniable at the time, it is by no means deniable in hindsight. Recruiting Ukrainians and Serbians,

and employing an odd personage such as Utkin may be a further attempt to boost the deniability of the group by suggesting that they are part of an organic insurrection. Importantly, great powers may want to play along with the claim that they do not belong to Russia, even if their intelligence apparatus presents reliable information to the contrary. First, it spares them having to explain to their polity, why they may not be responding to the situation by starting a war with Russia. Second, if they do choose to respond, they can fight the auxiliaries and use against Russia the fact that it will not want to be seen offering support publicly.

2.2 Funding and political ties 2010-16

This section outlines which people, businesses and political bodies are behind Wagner in terms of leadership and funding.

Evgenii Prigozhin As recounted in the previous chapter, the general staff of Russia's armed forces was discussing the prospects of establishing a PMC to serve its purposes already in 2010 when it met with former CEO of Executive Outcomes, Eeben Barlow. Sources interviewed by Malkova and Baev (2019) report that the general staff needed a willing and competent oligarch to be responsible for financing (or rather for laundering the needed funds) and securing contracts. The choice fell upon Evgenii Prigozhin, a restauranteur / caterer who is known by the moniker *Putin's chef* (he has a business occasionally visited by Putin and he provides catering for state institutions) and for his business aptitude. His career began in the criminal milieu of St. Petersburg where he was arrested in the 80's for theft, gang robbery, fraud and pandering of minors (Zhegulev, 2016).[10] Subsequently, he started a hot dog stand with his stepfather, later he became part-owner of a franchise of grocery shops and continued into restaurants and catering and managed to make a considerable fortune.[11]

In relation to Wagner, it may relevant that Prigozhin has been willing to get his hands dirty in the past but he also offers other benefits as a patron because he is simultaneously a client of Putin / Shoigu: He needs the support of the Kremlin to secure state contracts for his business, he is relatively harmless (he is not the head of any security agency) and he has Putin's favour without being close enough to be able to play Putin off against others (Malkova and Baev, 2019). In USA, Prigozhin is known to the foreign policy community[12] as the owner of the *Internet Research Agency*, a so-called troll farm,

[10] This became public knowledge in 2016 when he unsuccessfully sued the search engine, *Yandeks*, to enforce his right to be forgotten by preventing the engine from supplying information of his prior convictions and time served.

[11] Though, by all accounts, not a fortune that would qualify him as an oligarch in the sense of a powerful leader of industry with power to influence political decisions (Gusev, 2017).

[12] Sometimes referred to as *The Blob* (S. M. Walt, 2018).

responsible for influencing US public opinion during the presidential election 2016 by spreading stories (true as well as false and biased) that discredited the campaign of Hillary Clinton and favoured Donald Trump. In Russia, the agency has created the Federal News Agency as a channel for its messages (DFRL, 2018; ODNI, 2017).

Prigozhin's proximity to power Like Putin, Prigozhin is a St. Petersburg native and their relation dates back to Putin's visits with his former employer, Mayor Anatolii Sobchak, to Prigozhin's restaurant *Staraia tamozhnia* (The Old Customs House) established as one of the first true luxury restaurants of the city in 1996 (Gusev, 2017). According to a source close to Prigozhin, his subsequent friendship with Putin first went through the president's driver and then his security chief, Viktor Zolotov, (a person well known in Russia to be a gatekeeper for Putin's circle) through whom he got the opportunity to charm the inner circles of the Kremlin (Zhegulev, 2013). Since then, Prigozhin has hosted Putin and guests such as then Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (2000), Jacques Chirac (2001), George Bush, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice (2002) followed by Putin's own birthday in 2003 (Malkova and Baev, 2019, par. II). Prigozhin and Putin have been seen together at several dinners and it is said of Prigozhin that his expertise is not so much running a business as it is *servicing men in power* (Stanovaia, 2019). Rozhdestvenskii and Badanin (2019) cites an anonymous source as saying that Prigozhin is adept at selling Putin's vision of foreign politics to foreign dignitaries. Whilst this would make Prigozhin a willing adhocrat,[13] he is reported by witnesses to have been very uncomfortable with the idea of financing and managing a PMC (Malkova and Baev, 2019, para. III), and so we find it most likely that accepting this task was done as a *quid pro quo* to secure highly attractive contracts with public institutions.

Prigozhin's business empire Russian investigative journalists have been at pains to uncover the links between Prigozhin, the *Concord company group*, and its (*de jure* and *de facto*) subsidiaries.[14] Accordingly, it is clear today that Prigozhin is the main owner and manager of Concord and its subsidiaries. They have also uncovered that the funds for financing Wagner were initially laundered through these structures. Concord's expansion of business with Russian public and state institutions coincides with the early development of the Slavonic Corps beginning in 2010 when the factory of *Concord – Culinary Line* opened in Yanino (just east of St. Petersburg) and won the bid to supply

[13] As noted in section 1.5, this is Galeotti's 2019, p. 77 term for an oligarch who can be called upon on an ad hoc basis by the Kremlin to perform services.

[14] From Baev (2019), Dolinina and Marokhovskaya (2019), Gusev (2017), Korotkov (2016a,c, 2017b), Rozhdestvenskii and Badanin (2019), Sagdiev, Zverev and Tsvetkova (2019) and Zhegulev (2013), we have compiled the following list of companies related to Prigozhin: *Concord Management and Consulting*, *Concord Catering*, *Magazina kuptsov Eliseevykh*, *Muzeia shokolada*, *Blindonalt-invest*, *Blindonaltsom*, *Megaline*, *Lakhta*, *Sevzapstroi*, *The Dvizhenie Group*, *Nordenergo*, *Scotia*, *Exedra Plus*, *Promstandart*, *SK Lider*, *Phoenix*, *Eurogroup*, *Euro Polis*, *Neva*, *Kollektiv Servis*, *Agat*, *Ferrum Mining*, *Beratex* but there are many others.

school lunches for 15 schools. This number increased with 400 schools the following year, and a 10.5 billion rouble bid for school lunches was won for 2013-15. Since then, Concord has won a 3 billion rouble contract for EMERCOM[15] and contracts amounting to 92 billion to supply food to the Ministry of Defence were signed over to Concord from the previous holders by direct order of the Minister Shoigu (Zhegulev, 2013). Around 2014, Prigozhin went from using the name of Concord for defence contracts to operating through a dense web of shell companies organised around Megaline providing maintenance of military camps (Korotkov, 2014a, 2016c).

2.2.1 Findings

Money laundering through subcontracting The principle of financing through Concord and related businesses and shell companies seems to have been quite simple: By outsourcing camp maintenance and catering for schools, EMERCOM and the military, the Ministry of Defence has created a detached and obscure entity which is well-suited to evade budgetary scrutiny from journalists and the Duma. Thus, more funds than is needed for the services can be inserted and retrieved at the other end for Wagner expenditures (Malkova and Baev, 2019). The burden of evading attention is thus proportional to the ratio of Wagner's budget to the collective size of the contracts. We note here that this mechanism is distinctly patrimonialist, not simply because subcontracts are not being awarded by merit or because money are being laundered through such a channel, but because the money fund the ability of specific people to use public funds to strengthen their own political power in a way reminiscent of feudal lords.

The inheritance from Serdiukov To appreciate the position in which these contracts have put Prigozhin, we should remember that the decision to outsource catering and camp maintenance in the military was part of the reforms under former minister of defence, Anatolii Serdiukov, whose efforts to professionalise the military included outsourcing functions that were not directly related to combat. Subsequently, it was discovered that the open contracts were won by Serdiukov's companies who were stealing from the military and Serdiukov was soon dismissed (Korotkov, 2016a). Being a civilian who came into the job as defence minister to radically cut down the number of officers ensured that Serdiukov had an abundance of enemies in the military, so some reason to dismiss him was likely to be found at some point. The timing is noteworthy, however, Serdiukov began the second round of reforms in 2010, when Barlow visited Russia and Prigozhin supposedly got the offer. Moran Security was established (or at least registered anew) in the meantime, and when the reforms were implemented in 2012, Serdiukov was sacked and his contracts started being transferred to Prigozhin bit-by-bit shortly before Slavonic Corps was ready to deploy to Syria. How to interpret

[15] Russian emergency services

these events in the face of the arrests made on Gusev and Sidorov from the Slavonic Corps is not quite clear, but certainly we can say that the establishment of Wagner is partly a result of military reform and not merely of novel military doctrine.

Prigozhin's package deal Having taken over these contracts, Prigozhin is at the centre of Russian military privatisation with PMC Wagner acting as military provider and consultant, Concord as military support company, and the Internet Research Agency acting as a *private propaganda company*. Furthermore, in section 2.4, we will look into how a new iteration of the Internet Research Agency has acted in coordination with Wagner to implement Russian foreign policy. The system of funding for Wagner changed in 2016-17 for unknown reasons. [16] Since then, Wagner has become more dependent on generating profits through contracts but it has by no means become less dependent on cooperation with the Kremlin. In the following section, we will look into their activities in the MENA region during which Wagner underwent this change.

2.3 Middle East and North Africa 2015-19

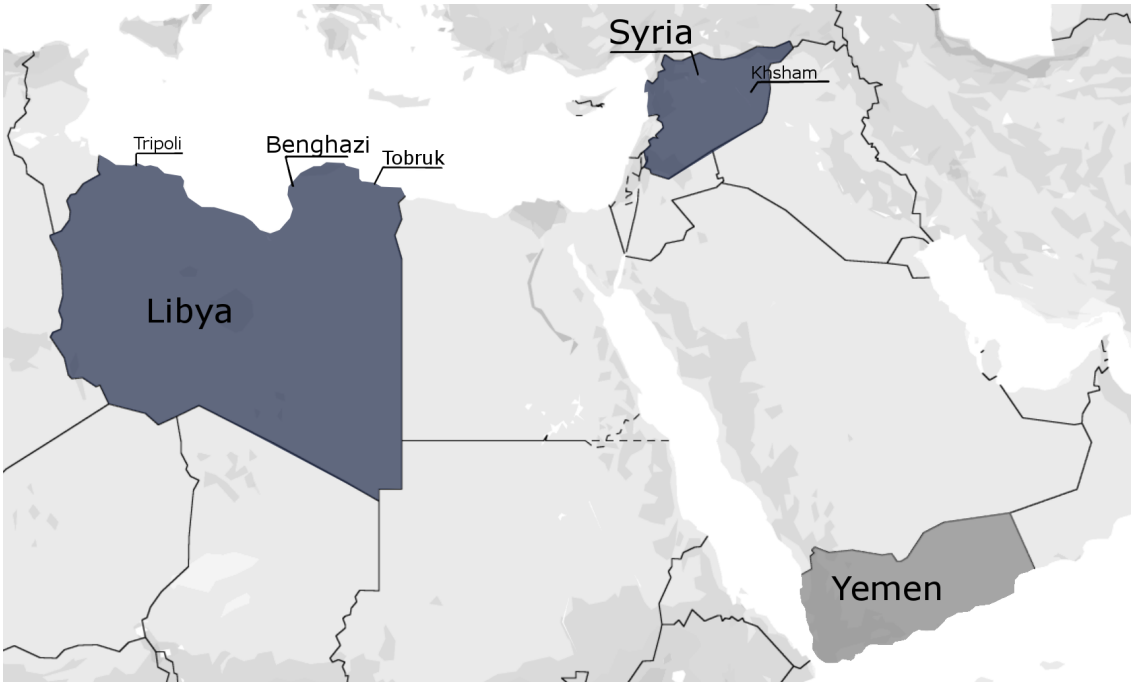


Figure 2.2: Wagner presence in MENA (Blue = confirmed, grey=rumoured)

[16] Guesses and conspiracy theories on this topic are readily bandied about on internet forums and in interviews. Several plausible explanations are offered such as personal fallings out between leading people (Korotkov, 2017c), an intention from the start to use Wagner as a real client funded PMC rather than a state funded venture (Galeotti, 2019, p. 77) and the wish to punish Wagner for acting too independently.

2.3.1 Syria

The conflict and Russia The on-going civil war in Syria began in 2012 as a conflict between parties loyal to the government of President Bashar Al-Assad, an ally of President Putin, and Arab Spring protesters who formed into militias with support from foreign states and non-state actors. The dividing lines of this conflict quickly multiplied with the mobilisation of ethnic and religious identities and the involvement of terrorist groups such as *Islamic State, Al Nushra, Hezbollah* and *Al Qaeda*, whilst foreign powers such as USA, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Israel began making incursions into the country. Russia had quickly been losing allies abroad since its war with Georgia in 2008 and it was determined to hold onto Syria (See Zygar, 2016, ch. 21). It had many reasons to do so, such as the ones we are reminded of by Borshchevskaya (2013):

1. The Russian navy has its only Mediterranean port in Tartous, Syria.
2. When the civil war began, 100,000 ethnic Russian were living in Syria mostly as a result of its important status as an ally during the Cold War.
3. Russia was profiting from considerable oil industry in Syria.
4. Syria is the main purchaser of Russian arms sales.

Besides these material reasons, intervention can also be sold by the Kremlin to the Russian public as a meaningful project of counter terrorism and great power politics to justify the burden of having to live under US sanctions (especially after 2014) (See Pedersen, 2019, p. 332). And in addition, the conflict provides a scene where Russia can showcase its arms industry to friends and foes alike for sales and deterrence respectively. For these and other reasons, Russia has acted as a broker for and collective defender[17] of Syria whilst striving to keep a light footprint in terms of offensive ground forces (Sukhankin, 2018a).

The initial state of operations in Syria As recounted in section 2.1.1, Wagner's turn from Ukraine to Syria involved a change from a disparate programme of volunteer mobilisation to the establishment of a cohesive military company. Wagner's first tour to Syria took place from September to December 2015 with 1500-2000 contractors who had been trained for two months for the occasion at the base in Molkino (Korotkov, 2016b, 2017a). Their employer was an unknown Russian oligarch, their commanders were Utkin and his deputy, Andrei Troshev, their mission was to retake and hold lost oil terminals in Palmyra[18] and for that job they were provided by Russian authorities with T-72 tanks, BM-21 Grad Systems and D30 Howitzers, and they were stationed at a

[17] I.e. a party invited by the host nation to aid in its defence and thus participate legally in the conflict without violating the ban in international law on the breach of sovereignty.

[18] Located in-land to the East of the population centres of Homs, Damascus and Aleppo.

permanent base at the Hayan Petroleum Company plant (Korotkov, 2017c; Kuznetsov, 2018). Russian military provided transport by plane and ship (Tsvetkova and Zverev, 2016).[19] Wagner contractors have to keep silent about their whereabouts and abstain from internet use whilst contracts are active. They also sign a non-disclosure agreement lasting 10 years and a personal declaration of intent, stating that they are not mercenaries but are present to document the objective facts of the conflict (Korotkov, 2015b). Judging by the profiles of Wagnerites of this period who have been identified, it seems likely that they were all former military (IF, 2018; Korotkov, 2017a,c; SBU, 2018b; YŞ, 2017). This accords well with other sources about their activities in this period (see Cavanagh, 2019). Korotkov (2015b) report that their activities fall into four categories colloquially called *columns* ordered from 2-5[20] according to the following designations for *privates*:

2. **Basic rate** 60,000 roubles/month (827,38 Euro)
3. **Training at the base** 80,000 roubles/month (1.103,18 Euro)
4. **Policing operations** 120.000 roubles/month (1.654,77 Euro)
5. **Combat** 240.000 roubles/month (3.309,54 Euro)

Each Wagnerite was thus provided expensive training and equipment whilst being paid handsomely for working abroad in secret. We should note immediately that with the inclusion of policing operations, the operation (in this phase at least) falls outside the strict definition of a PMC and spills over into the usual understanding of a PSC (Avant, 2005, p. 17). Their contract emphasises that they sign up to carry out military tasks (sluzhebno-boevykh zadach) which may in the Russian understanding include offensive as well as defensive tasks and guarding whilst being on high-readiness (Smirnov, Mishin and Vasenev, 2002, p. 125; Chesterman and Lehnardt, 2007). However, multiple sources have confirmed that much of their work is reminiscent of Soviet offensives in World War II as concerns frontal assaults at great risk to the soldiers (Khazov-Kassia and Coalson, 2018; Korotkov, 2016b). Not wanting to throw so many resources at expendables may have been the central reason for the decrease in funding from the Ministry of Defence which occurred followingly – although this is a heavily contested subject (Korotkov, 2017c).

A transformation occurs in Syria In the spring of 2016, according to sources interviewed by Korotkov (2017c), an internal dispute occurred between Wagner and the

[19] The missile cruiser, Variah, has been identified by the SBU as one used for transport of Wagnerites to Syria (SBU, 2018a).

[20] We presume that they are called columns and begin from no. 2 because of how they appear in book keeping where names are placed in the first column, basic rate in the second and bonuses are added in subsequent columns.

Russian authorities resulting in an order to return much of their equipment to Russia. The timing coincides with a round of upgrades being made in Russia to T-72 tanks (de Larinaga, 2016), it is not unlikely that wanting to reduce the costs of Wagner and having to bring the tanks home for upgrades was the occasion to change the format of Wagner. A large part of Wagner returned to Russia, and from December 2016 Wagner assembled and deployed new contingents with less training, pay and worse equipment. Perhaps equipment made obsolete in the reforms.

Euro Polis This corresponds in to the Kremlin's reception of the Syrian minister of energy that same month, following which an obscure one-man company called *Euro Polis* (registered in July) changed CEO to someone tied to Prigozhin, opened a branch in Damascus, and grew by a factor of 300 (i.e. its budget changes from 10,000 to 3,000,000 roubles) (Korotkov, 2017b). The only business of this company known to the public is a contract signed with Syria's state-owned General Petroleum Corporation testifying that Euro Polis accepts the task of seizing and holding oil terminals in Syria in return for 25 % of the profits from the liberated sites (Malkova, Stogney and Yakoreva, 2018).[21]

The quality plummets As employment with Wagner became less desirable, the quality of the contractors fell drastically (Sukhankin, 2018a, p. 308). Sources having served with Wagner in this period informed RFE/RL that military experience and a clean criminal record became nice-to-haves rather than need-to-haves (Khazon-Kassia, 2018). Whether the overall picture is quite so grim is uncertain since tasks and conditions differ between Wagner detachments, but there is wide agreement that the overall quality of personnel decreased in this period (Sukhankin, 2018a, p. 308). Another task in Wagner's portfolio is reportedly training the *ISIS Hunters*, a unit which has promoted itself online through videos of exchanges and kill confirmations and which also works in the region of Palmyra to take and hold oil fields (Marten, 2019, p. 14). This work falls under the category of *military consulting* which is a widespread practice in military institutions following the logic in other spheres of industry of hiring private consultants to develop one's business (Singer, 2003, p. 122). But as we shall review in the following subsection, Wagnerites go further by fighting alongside the ISIS Hunters and other groups at great risk to themselves and in August 2017 the Turkish medium, Yeni Şafak, reported that their numbers had reached 5000 (YŞ, 2017).

[21] A draft of the contract was published online by *Associated Press: Kontrakt [Contract]* (2017). *po osvobozhdeniiu territorii, vosstanovleniiu infrastruktury, proizvodstvu nefti i gaza mezhdu Pravitelstvom SAR i Generalnoi Neftianoi Korporatsiei i kompaniei Evro Polis [on the liberation of territories, restoration of infrastructure, oil and gas production between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the General Petroleum Corporation and Euro Polis]*. Euro Polis contract obtained by Associated Press. Associated Press. URL: `www.documentcloud.org/documents/4326734-EvroPolisContract.html`.

2.3.2 The Battle of Khsham February 2018

One of the most contentious empirical issues in the case of Wagner (and the case that made the group famous) concerns its number of casualties on 7-9 February 2018 in Khsham by Deir ez-Zur in Eastern Syria. An episode occurred of which the popular view (popularised by the New York Times) in the West and certain circles in Russia is that the US and Kurdish forces repelled an attack by Pro-government Syrians, Wagnerites and Russian special forces resulting in the death of 1-300 Wagnerites (Gibbons-Neff, 2018; Varfolomeevna, 2018). Russian newspaper *Kommersant* and Cossack Ataman Evgenii Shabayev largely support the US account (Mayetnaya, 2018; Solopov et al., 2018).

The official view from Russia (with *Der Spiegel* as its co-advocate) is that the US repelled an attack from Syrian forces and in doing so happened to kill 20-30 Russians in the vicinity (whom Spiegel designate as Wagnerites) who were not participating in hostilities (Reuter, 2018; Solopov et al., 2018). A third view, *from the underground* so to speak, is held by certain current and former Russian military personnel who tell of a betrayal by the Russian authorities against Wagner leading to the death of 5-600 contractors. A fourth view from the Syrian government, is that the attack occurred as the result of US backed fighters from Islamic State effectively lured Syrian fighters into a trap (Aboufadel, 2018). Apart from rumours, we have nothing to support the third and fourth narratives, so only the first and second will be investigated here (Varfolomeevna, 2018). The episode, if we can get it right, is informative about the tactics of Wagner, the motives of its commanders and its relation to the Kremlin.

What led to the attack? The river Euphrates passes through the city of Deir ez-Zur and divides the area into north-east and south-west. The latter is government territory where pro-government forces (including Russian forces) are active. In the former area lies the Conoco gas plants guarded by an outpost with an unknown number of Arabs and Kurds of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and 30 US special operators coordinating with US military at a mission support site 30 km away and the Al Udeid air base in Qatar. In the interest of uniting against the common enemy of the Islamic State and avoid interstate war, an agreement had been made that the two sides to leave each other alone as long as the Euphrates was not crossed. US and Russian military therefore kept in contact over so-called deconfliction phones to avoid tension.

Reuter (2018) adds that a small group of pro-government forces were allowed on the east of the river as long as their numbers did not exceed 400. The Syrian government claims that leading up to the attack, the ISIS Hunters were pursuing a group of Islamic State fighters fleeing in the direction of the SDF base (Aboufadel, 2018).

US intelligence, on the other hand, claimed to have observed an on-going increase in the number of Russian forces near the river and had been in contact with Russian authorities who denied that this was the case (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). Furthermore, a call

by Evgenii Prigozhin had been intercepted in which he spoke excitedly of a coming move in the area which would please Assad (Nakashima, DeYoung and Sly, 2018). Sources agree that at least some Wagner contractors were active in the area (Gibbons-Neff, 2018; Reuter, 2018), and as we know from their contract under Euro Polis, their main interest as a PMC is the seizure of oil and gas plants.

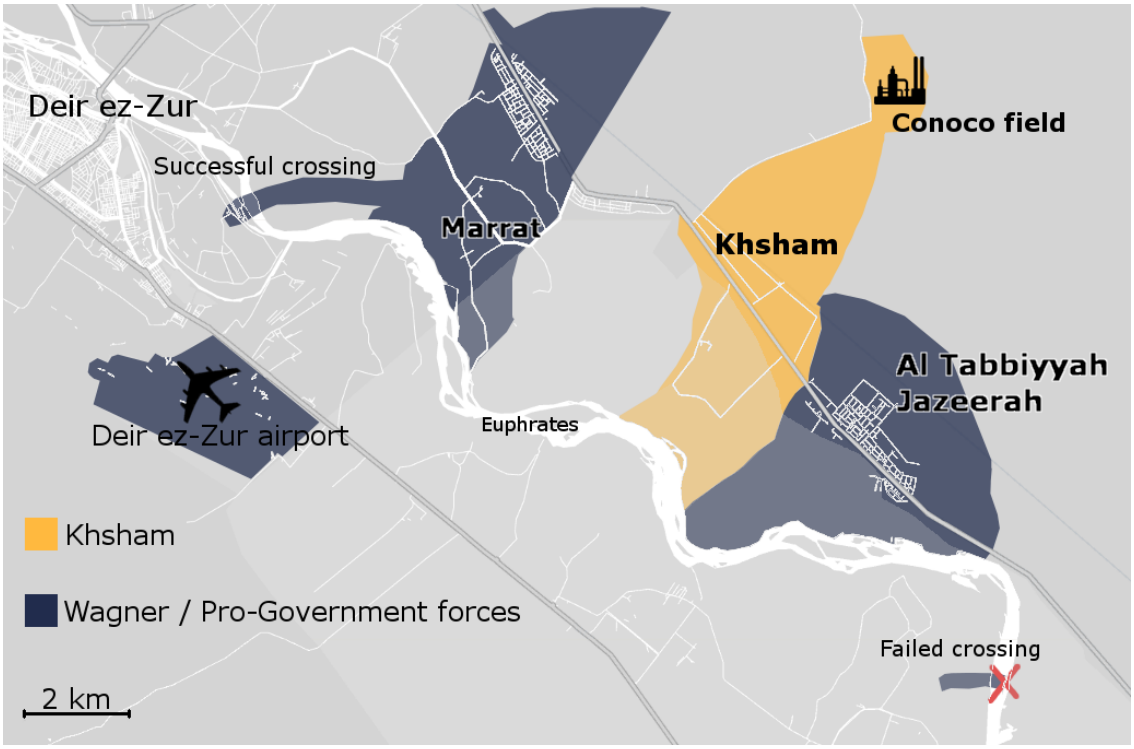


Figure 2.3: The Khsham area with annotations of places and events described by Reuter (2018). Following his account we designate the entire Khsham in yellow, although the account by Gibbons-Neff (2018) suggests that SDF and US units were located at Conoco and not in the Khsham town.

How did the attack proceed? According to Spiegel, a group of 250 Iranian-led forces from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan attempted to cross the Euphrates at 5 am 7 February but received a warning shot from the SDF outpost and retreated unharmed. The NY Times does not report a warning shot but claims that 'The day began with little hint of the battle that was about to unfold', but both sources agree that a force of more than 500 troops with tanks and armoured personnel carriers (APCs) assembled later in the day (3 pm according to NY Times).

This prompted the mission support site to prepare a response team, whilst the air-base in Qatar was put on high alert (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). They waited until into the night (East Syrian night begins at 6.20 pm in February),[22] and crossed the Euphrates

[22] *Deir ez-Zor, Syria — Sunrise, Sunset, and Daylength* (2019). URL: `www.timeanddate.com/sun/syria/deir-ez-zor` (visited on 11/02/2019).

undetected further north and assembled in the village of Marrat (Reuter, 2018). According to US Intelligence, they *were* indeed detected and the SDF outpost was getting ready as 8.30 pm marked the time when the attackers were within a mile of Conoco and at 10 pm (at least some of) the vehicles moved in attack formation clashing with the outpost at 10.30 pm (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). They attacked with tanks, artillery and mortars.

This is when the NY Times report that the US fired warning shots and a Howitzer (a strange combination) holding out whilst US military personnel contacted the Russian military to have them stop the attack. The attackers were not acknowledged by the Russians as their own, and the attack continued (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). Sources agree that around this time, the US air power came to bear on the attackers: 'Reaper drones, F-22 stealth fighter jets, F-15E Strike Fighters, B-52 bombers, AC-130 gunships and AH-64 Apache helicopters [...] pummelled enemy troops, tanks and other vehicles' (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). In the absence of air support and counter-air defence, the attackers had relied on the speed of their vehicles to bring them close enough to the outpost that US air support could not engage without killing Americans, but according to a Wagner source speaking to Kommersant, only some of the attacking vehicles succeeded in assuming proper formation resulting in the messy execution that fell prey to the (surprisingly) swift aerial assault of the US in the cover of night (Solopov et al., 2018). In the meantime, 40 additional US troops arrived at the outpost and began setting up machine guns and missile launchers, and at 2 am 8 February, the attackers retreated before a new group arrived to evacuate the wounded and remove the dead according to the NY Times. In Der Spiegel, the case is more complicated: whilst the first group of attackers were being fought off, a second arrived in the dead of night from the village of Tanbiyyah and were pummelled in like manner. They came to retrieve their fallen the next morning and were attacked again. On the 9th, the SDF unit took the initiative and attacked this group which had hitherto been protected by the agreement allowing less than 400 pro-government on the east of the Euphrates – an agreement which could be considered void due to the attacks the previous days. In the attacks against the militias coming from Tabbiyyah, 10-20 Wagnerites who happened to be present were killed as collateral damage (Reuter, 2018).

Who is right? The dead were first reported to number around 100 by US intelligence who did not specify how many Russians were amongst them whilst official Russian sources denied the whole affair, later Russian sources began circulating numbers of Russian dead in the order of 200, and soon the (in)famous Russian former special operator and volunteer Igor Girkin chimed in with the number 644 (Varfolomeevna, 2018). (Given that the rate of killed to wounded is on average about 1-3, this would imply an attacking force in the order of 2400 if every single man was wounded so we must dismiss this suggestion), After a few days had passed on 12 February 2018, the director of

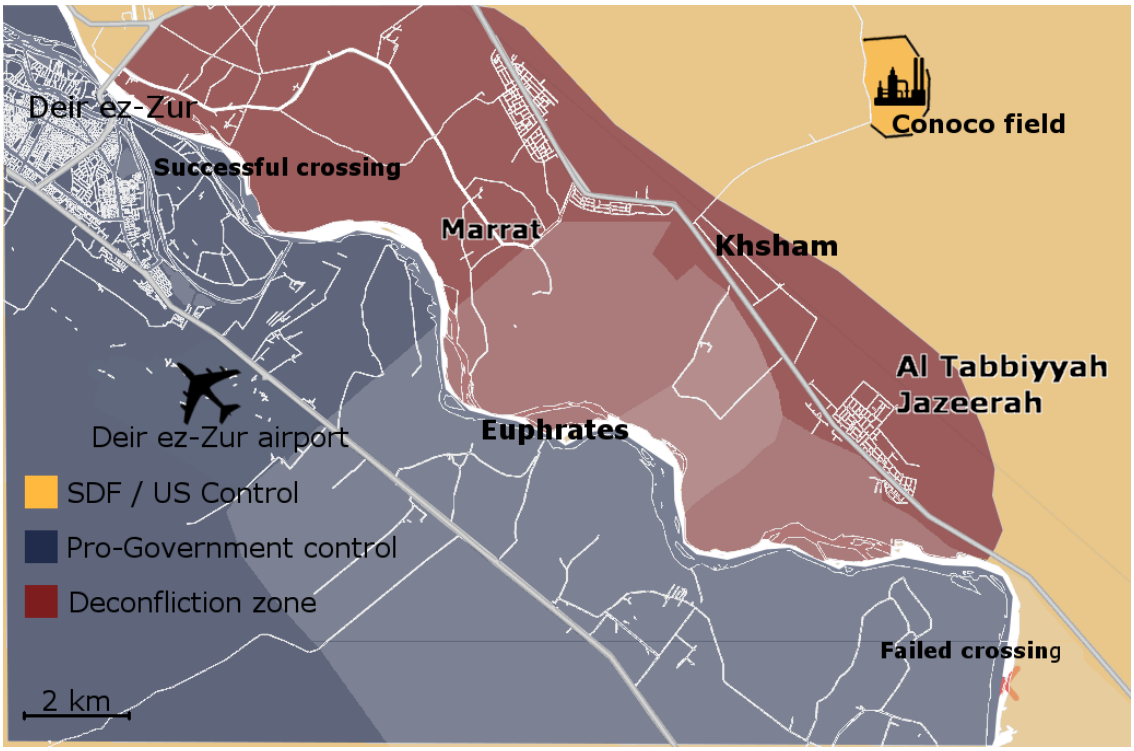


Figure 2.4: The Khsham area annotated under the assumption that so-called SDF presence in Khsham, really means presence at Conoco. This interpretation is in line with how Liveuamap depicts SDF / US presence in the area and the NYT article. I.e. US is not within the deconfliction zone but is able to expell pro-government forces from it if necessary.

CIA[23] put the number at several hundred ('Pompeo says 'couple of hundred' Russians killed in February Syria clash' 2018). Russia admitted officially of five dead Russians on the 15th February, whereas Russian left-wing politician Viktor Alsknis gave an *unofficial* figure of 334 deaths (Dozhd, 2018). Tsvetkova (2018) interviewed Shabayevm a Russian military doctor and an anonymous source. The doctor noted 100 dead and 200 wounded. Tsvetkova and Zverev (2019a) later reported on attempts to obscure this number by Russian authorities. SBU has provided a list of 206 identified Wagner employees of whom 65 are designated as having died as a result of the battle (SBU, 2018b). The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights has suggested that the number has been inflated because the deaths resulting from the explosion of a warehouse in Tabbiyyah in a separate incident have been added to the count. (SOHR, 2018).

In such a chaotic news climate, media consumers are bound to favour the accounts of media they (think they) know and trust, and then work such as that done by Reuter (2018) is absolutely essential to establish a trustworthy account. By having interviewed local militia members in villages and hospitals, he has established an account seemingly

[23]The director of the CIA at the time was Mike Pompeo who has served in President Trump's administration as Secretary of State since April 2018.

independent of the large military and policy apparatuses of US and Russia, but for his account to be right, it would take the CIA, the Secretary of Defense, the Ataman Evgenii Shabayev, the politician Alsknis and various sources used by RFE/RL, Reuters and Kommersant to tell roughly the same lie, whilst SBU's verification of identities would be a forgery despite its open source methodology. Concocting such a lie would be an inconsistent move by the US who have tried to avoid clashing with Russia in Syria. Although, Wordpress user Mike Kofman writing in the comment section below the article of namesake Russia expert Kofman (2018), makes a thoroughly researched argument to the effect that indeed these things can happen in the confusion of war reporting and due to political interests, and that a number of incidents in early February 2018 may amount to 100 pro-government actors dead in total, of which perhaps half were Wagner.

For Reuter to be wrong, it would take the locals misinforming him which they might have done as the result of a standing agreement with Wagner or Russian forces who would like to keep their presence secret. Such a conspiracy theory would be entirely unwarranted to entertain if it was not for the fact that a local counter narrative serves clear purposes: securing Russian support and hurting the US and (not least) the Kurdish forces in the area by tying them to deceit and even to the Islamic State. According to Shabayev, the Russian casualties were transported back to Russia where many injured died later from their wounds, that explains their absence from the hospitals in Syria and the *delay* of their deaths may have added to the confusion regarding the exact number (Mayetnaya, 2018).

The Russian official denial of battle deaths serves many obvious purposes such as denying the arrangement with Wagner, their own lack of ability or at least coordination (in case the operation was an instance of Wagner acting without Kremlin's approval) and most importantly denying to the Russian people that their fellow men are being slaughtered in pursuit of Middle Eastern oil up to the presidential election which took place on March 18. Sukhankin (2018a) has opined that insufficient training, discipline, and equipment may be sufficient to explain such a failure by a Russian group; we may add that the shortcomings of Wagner in this battle sound reminiscent of the shortcomings of the Russian military in Georgia according to colonel Anatolii Tsyganok (section 1.5.4) who noted the insufficient battlespace awareness at night. When the budget of Wagner was cut in 2016, the changes may have reduced them in part to a pre-Serdiukov state of operations.

A best estimate conclusion Despite its complexity and tentativeness, the simplest estimate of what occurred on 7-8 February 2018 is that 65-200 Russians (of which a few may have been Russian special operators assisting or leading the Wagnerites) died as a result of the fighting, some in the field, and some in hospital beds in Syria and Russia. It also implies that Reuter (2018) has been misinformed by locals. We will not ponder deeply the reasons for the attack since the aim of seizing the Conoco gas plant

and other gas plants in the area seem sufficient when combined with the ambition of Prigozhin and the declining quality of Wagner as a fighting unit at this time as proposed by Sukhankin (2018a, pp. 307–10).

They have not left The Wagnerites are still present in Syria, where they participate in the ongoing offensive in the provinces of Hama and Idlib (Klaus, 2019). In a twist of fate emblematic of proxy wars, the group *Malhama Tactical*, a pro-rebel PMC consisting of former Soviet citizens trained by Russian military, has reported that one of its primary reasons for coming to Syria was to fight back the Russian contractors on this front (Hanrahan, 2018, 4:00-5:00).

2.3.3 Libya and Yemen

The conflict in Libya As discussed in section 1.5.4, the Arab Spring had a Libyan instantiation which resulted in the murder of Muammar Gaddafi. Subsequently, a government called the *General National Congress* (GNC), was elected for the term 2012-14. When the GNC refused to hold elections at the end of its term, the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive against it. Consequently, elections were held and won by the House of Representative (HoR). The GNC rejected the result and the civil war continued with HoR in exile in the eastern Tobruk until a peace agreement was made in 2015 creating a unified government called the Government of National Accord (GNA) (News, 2015). Haftar did not support the GNA, in December 2017 he declared the peace agreement void (Child, 2017). At the time of writing (May 2019), FM Haftar's forces are engaged in a decisive offensive against the capital, Tripoli, and stand as the strongest military party in the country.

Wagner's role in Libya Haftar has been on a diplomatic campaign to secure support for the LNA – and Russia is amongst his patrons (LA, 2018; Lewis, 2017). Through 2016-18 the Field Marshal met several times with the Kremlin and his information office has published a recording[24] of one of these meetings that betrays the presence of Prigozhin (Malkova and Baev, 2019, para. IV). Evidence of what these meetings resulted in, is scarce but the core themes of Putin-Haftar cooperation during the civil war are almost certainly energy wealth and military cooperation (ICG, 2015b). Russia already secured its prominence in the Libyan energy sector during lobbying in the last years of Ghaddafi's reign, but – of course - war presents an opportunity to secure a better deal (Dyner, 2018).

[24] LNA (Nov. 2018). *Mashahid min lahzat wusul alqayd Aleami Almushir Khalifat Huftar 'iilaa Maqari Wizarat Aldifae alruwsia [Scenes from the moment of the arrival of the General Commander Marshal Khalifa Hafter to the headquarters of the Russian Defense Ministry]*. Information Office - LNA General Command. URL: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp4e8u71o20&feature=youtu.be.

Reportedly, elite personnel under Wagner began operating to seize and hold oil terminals in Eastern Libya in February 2017 – the same month as the Russian state-owned oil giant, Rosneft, signed an agreement with the National Oil Corporation of Libya (Assad, 2017). And later that same year, Russia was caught red handed trying to smuggle military equipment through Libya and Sudan down to the Central African Republic (more on this below) (Hellem, 2019c). In October 2018, *The Sun* reported on the presence of PMC Wagner in Libya stating that the company had established military bases in Benghazi and Tobruk where GU officers were providing training for Haftar's forces under the guise of being Wagner contractors.[25] This may merely be an example of former GU officers being hired for consultant work through Wagner. The article also mentions provisions of S-300 air defence missile system and Kalibr anti-ship missiles (Dunn, 2018). *Africa Intelligence* followed up on the article in January presenting the finding that Haftar had been offered Wagner's support in an offensive against the oil rich Fezzan in southern Libya (AI, 2019). And in March, *the Telegraph* reported on the basis of sources within British intelligence of 300 Wagnerites in Benghazi who are serving the interests of Russia as regards oil and the possibility of establishing a Russian deep-water port in Tobruk, Evgenii Shabayev has apparently also chimed in to add that they are involved in the trafficking of people and drugs whilst British intelligence claims that they are interchangeable with GU officers (Luhn and Nicholls, 2019).

Since then, the LNA has begun an ambitious offensive against Tripoli which may allow it to become the unrivalled hegemon within the country. We have not encountered any reports that Wagner or Russia has played a significant role in this offensive, on the contrary it seems that Russian support for Haftar has faded – likely because Russia would rather appear as a neutral broker if Haftar is less than completely successful (Wesolowsky and Eaton, 2019).

The conflict in Yemen Yemen's present civil war is the latest conflict in a series that have been sparked over the years as the Shiite movement of so-called Houthis have fought for the oppressed Shiites of the country by targeting the regime as well civilian Sunnis and Jews. During the Arab Spring in 2011, new uprisings began and in 2014 the Houthis seized the capital (Baron, 2018). The present conflict is particularly grave because it is being prolonged by support from Saudi Arabia, UAE and USA to the government, and from Iran to the Houthis (ICG, 2016). Russia has acted as a mediator in the conflict since 2015 and hosted meetings between the two sides that met with support from their respective backers. Initial support for the Houthi side supposedly faded when, in 2017, they killed Yemen's President Saleh who had requested Russian involvement since 2016 (Shabhaz, 2019).

[25] Prior to the peace agreement of 2015, Britain had taken it upon itself to train part of Haftar's forces, but the programme was quickly terminated after two Libyans were arrested for raping a man in Cambridge and two others were convicted of sexual assault on two women (Khomani, 2015; Taylor, 2014).

A Russian PMC in Yemen In September 2018, Semen Pegov, a Russian war correspondent, claimed that a Russian PMC had deployed to Yemen and such a presence is also admitted by the *All-Russian Officer's Assembly* who allude to it in a public statement urging lawmakers to form a new legal framework for PMCs in Russia (Maetnaya and Baryshnikov, 2018). Interestingly, Pegov and other Russian sources agree that the PMC in question is not Wagner because of its 'bad reputation' (qtd. in Sukhankin, 2018d). They suggest that *PMC Patriot* – a rival of Wagner - may be present. This PMC is making a name for itself for being staffed by more highly trained personnel who are paid more to provide security and military consulting in conflict zones ('Media: New Russian private military company operates in Syria' 2018; Sukhankin, 2018c).

If a Russian PMC was in Yemen to seize oil fields, then Wagner would be the obvious choice. But in Yemen, most of the oil and all the gas are placed in the province of Marib which has prospered since Saudi Arabia assisted in ousting the Houthis from most of the province. Now Marib has a high degree of autonomy from the government and relative security (Baron, 2018, pp. 9–10). If Wagner went to disturb the peace in this province to gain oil plants, they would clash with the interests of Saudi Arabia within its sphere of influence. A more realistic objective would be training Houthi rebels or guarding oil fields in areas of relative order on behalf of Yemeni and Saudi parties whilst Prigozhin and the Kremlin build business and diplomatic ties to secure oil revenue, arms sales and the establishment of a local naval base at the strategically important Gulf of Aden (Shabhaz, 2019). If indeed either Wagner, Patriot or another Russian PMC is deployed with this purpose, then it would accord well with Russian activities in Africa which we shall observe in the following section.

2.3.4 Findings

Purposes Wagner has been deployed to nations in MENA that are littoral, conflict stricken and rich in oil/gas. Its first MENA deployment was to bolster the Palmyra offensive of the Syrian government and this seems to have been its most significant operational contribution. Wagner's business model (since the contract of Euro Polis in Syria) is ostensibly based on the willingness of soldiers to risk their lives to seize violently oil/gas plants as sources of revenue but this accont only makes sense if we add the more long term goals for the Kremlin in supporting this business: building valuable business ties and building naval deployment capacity in the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden. These activities thus seem to tick all our boxes for both opportunist foreign policy, strategic potential and building Russia's multilateral profile in the long-term.

Effectiveness If Wagner has managed to become a valuable (perhaps even indispensable) force for local people in power, then their armed presence can become highly instrumental to Kremlin's ability to exercise political influence and obtain these goals

because they provide leverage. Letting Wagner improve the negotiating position of Russia allows Russia to seem less partial and facilitates the ability of Moscow to bet on yet another horse or attempt to insert itself as a neutral broker. If Wagner fails and its contractors suffer heavy losses, then Russia will deny these ties and clutter the infosphere with conflicting narratives and discredit the open source investigators who work to remove doubts. This logic cannot be taken too far; operating in this two-faced manner does not gain Russia any trusted allies, but merely relationships of convenience. The effect must not be exaggerated either, several other great powers are invested in these conflicts and the influence of USA, Saudi Arabia and France in these parts outweigh the Russian. What the Kremlin can hope to achieve is disproportionately large pieces of the MENA-pie of resources and military bases because it has employed a relatively cheap and risk willing strategy with many facets including contractors, arms sales and lobbying in the UN Security Council.

Russian control Our evidence is too scant to make any meaningful pronouncements as to whether Russia has strict control of Wagner's activities in MENA, but there is a case to argue that Wagner has been *dispatched* by Russia, in that they have most likely been trained by the GU, equipped by the Russian armed forces, flown/sailed to a camp provided through Russian channels and work on a contract secured by the Kremlin (in both Libya and Syria). On this basis we may argue that their mission and organisation are defined by Russian authorities who are thus in overall control of the group with the implication that the civil war in Libya has been internationalised (Russia against the Government of National Accord through Wagner and Haftar). In the conflict in Syria, Russia is working with the official government, and the internationalising factor is rather USA (Heckmann, 2017, p. 123).

2.4 Africa and Venezuela 2017-19

In 2017, Prigozhin set up a St. Petersburg based operation with the purpose of coordinating activities for a complex diplomatic project in Africa with activities in 20 countries[26] of which we have reported details of Wagner's presence in 4: The Central African Republic, Libya, Madagascar and Sudan (Rozhdestvenskii, Badanin and Rubin, 2019), and rumours of its appearance in Chad, Rwanda, Gabon and Congo[27](Bocharkin, 2018). The operation spans several different spheres of policy and jurisdiction such as military cooperation, intelligence work, public diplomacy, energy security and state building and serves to secure allies, influence and resources in Africa at the expense of China and the

[26] Angola, Benin, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan, South Africa, South Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe (Rozhdestvenskii, Badanin and Rubin, 2019).

[27] .

West (Stratfor, 2019). Prigozhin has toured through Africa in parallel to similar tours by Russian diplomats, such as foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, working to strengthen Russo-African cooperation (Meyer, Arkhipov and Rahagalala, 2018; RMFA, 2018a). Wagner is one piece among others, not only in the larger project, but even in Prigozhin's part of the project, where they are inserted into operations according to the following format:

1. The country in question and Russia strengthen their diplomatic ties by beginning talks on security cooperation, trade and/or state building.
2. As a result, one of Prigozhin's companies obtains the right to extract minerals, oil and/or natural gas within the country.
3. Supporting this venture is security provided by PMC Wagner
4. Political technologists either from the Russian foreign service or from Prigozhin's St. Petersburg based venture appear to ensure that the local partner obtains or maintains the necessary political power.

Evidence of this operation has been presented by several media including a documentary by BBC (2019a). The SBU has uncovered a contract between Prigozhin's company *M Invest* and the 223rd flight detachment of Russia's defence ministry for eight flights between Moscow and four Wagner host countries: Syria, Libya, Sudan and Central Africa. The contract is worth 56 million roubles (768,627 €) and dated 30 July 2018 with (SBU, 2019b). Furthermore, the SBU posits that the vast majority of Wagnerites in Sub-Saharan Africa also participated in the Ukraine conflict and this suggests that Wagner is rather successful at retaining its personnel despite the infamous Battle of Khsham in 2018 (SBU, 2019d). Evgenii Shabayev has, furthermore, estimated that 5-10,000 Wagnerites are in Africa presently (Ross, 2018)

2.4.1 The Central African Republic (CAR)

The conflict Although CAR is a member of the UN and is formally led by a government equipped with ministries, there is no cohesive statehood to speak of in the country (ICG, 2007). The country is rather home to one of the most paradigmatic cases of what we might call *war amongst the people* or *new war* (Kaldor, 1999; R. Smith, 2007). The conflict combines inter-ethnic, inter-communal and inter-sectarian strife with resource war and outsiders engaging in a war of pacification(ICG, 2014). In March 2013, the *Séléka* (a Muslim group in the majority Christian CAR) seized the presidential office and was then officially disbanded by their own leader. The Séléka fighters refused to be dissolved and were soon met by majority Christian militias called *Antibalaka* (ICG, 2015a, pp. 2–12), whilst the UN Security Council placed an arms embargo against the entire country[28]. Optimists worldwide hoped for new tidings when a democratic presidential election was held in 2016 that resulted in the election of the former prime minister,

[28]UN Security Council, 2013, 2015, 2016.

Faustin-Archange Touadéra (ICG, 2017a). France was quick to disengage from the conflict due to the election (Irish, 2016), but no peace ensued and Touadéra quickly started pleading for support from the international community (ICG, 2017a, pp. 2–4).

Wagner and Prigozhin's role Moscow (and St. Petersburg) answered the call, and in October 2017 *Lobaye Invest* (a subsidiary of Prigozhin's company *M Invest*) began exploring gold and diamond deposits in CAR before Wagner contractors appeared under the name of *Sewa Security* and *M-Finance Security Service* to provide security in March 2018 (Binnie, 2018; SBU, 2019b). These contractors have been noted as using military

Figure 2.5: Wagner presence in Africa and MENA (Blue = confirmed, grey=rumoured)

Ural-4320 trucks for transport around CAR[29] as did the Wagner volunteers in Ukraine (Zoria, 2019). And we may know how the trucks were transported.

In February 2018 Tunisian authorities searched a Russian ship (aptly) named Ural which had been on an erratic path toward Libya but chose to dock at Sfax, Tunisia instead. The ship contained the necessary means for establishing and equipping a military camp including bulldozers, uniforms and Ural-4230 trucks (Voytenko, 2018). The appearance of these trucks soon after in CAR leads us to conclude that the ship was attempting to smuggle them either through Sudan (where Wagner is also active using Ural trucks (Leviev, 2019)) or Chad (where Wagner's presence is rumoured). To facilitate the operation, the Kremlin has obtained permission from the UN Security Council to dispense from the embargo and send arms and 175 combat instructors to CAR in December 2018 (Plichta, 2018; Rosbalt, 2018),[30] and these instructors (or at least the 170 of them that Russia claims are civilian) are most likely Wagner contractors (Sukhankin, 2018b).

Since Touadéra's term lasts until 2021, we do not expect to see political technologists arrive as part of the current operation, but Valerii Zakharov, a Russian diplomat, has been assigned as security advisor to Touadéra and an agreement of military cooperation between the two nations was signed in August 2018 (Elabdi, 2018; RFE/RL, 2018). Russian diplomats have also met with the rebel opposition to Touadéra to discuss Russia's access to rebel held mines (jeuneafrique, 2018). The simple explanation for their doing so is that they do not want to wait for a time when Touadéra's government is able to take control of these mines and offer mining concessions since the Russian push in Africa is *now*, but we might also be tempted to entertain the explanation offered by new war theory (see Münkler, 2005, pp. 90–8) that Russia would prefer that the conflict is kept alive because peace would lower the incentive for locals to concede mining rights in return for security cooperation.

These activities attracted heightened attention when three Russian investigative journalists from the Khodorkovskii-funded Investigation Control Center, Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastorguev and Kirill Radchenko, were killed in CAR when working to investigate the rumours of Russian PMCs in the area (Higgins and Nechepurenko, 2018). Whether Wagner or PMC Patriot (who are reportedly also in the area (Sukhankin, 2019c, p. 13)) or a third party committed the murders is unclear; most sources point to Wagner but that could be explained by the relative obscurity of Patriot (Hauer, 2019; Unian, 2018).

[29]This is, for instance, visible from a video of a Wagner instruction session shot by Al-Jazeera (Haque, 2018).

[30]UN Security Council, 2018, paras. 21-22.

2.4.2 Sudan

Sudan's societal rift Historically, Sudan has been encumbered by tensions between the Arab Muslim north and the Sub-Saharan Christian and Animist south. This conflict was a major factor in the civil war in the noughties when the president since 1989, Omar Al Bashir, famously made use of the nomadic militias known as the Janjaweed who committed a genocide in the Darfur region (Kristof, 2004). The conflict led to the warrant for the President's arrest by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009[31] and the secession of South Sudan in 2011, but President Bashir managed to maintain his rule despite wide opposition. As a result of these war crimes as well as providing a haven for terrorists and dimplomatic support for North Korea, USA had a rather hostile relationship with Sudan. Relations have since thawed because Sudan has cooperated with the US on counter terrorism and ended relations with North Korea in return for having sanctions lifted in the spring of 2017 after which CIA opened a new office in the country (Amin, 2017; Lynch, 2019).

Moscow steps in to help President Bashir Then, in November 2017, President Bashir requested the protection of Russia from aggressive US action (F24, 2017). This may well be what the Sudanese president was told to say by the Kremlin, or it may be his assessment of CIA activities in the country, but on the diplomatic level US and Sudan were undergoing reconciliation. SBU reports that the following month saw the deployment of PMC Wagner (SBU, 2019b). Reportedly, Wagner was operating to bolster the rule of the president through providing security and carrying out intelligence operations. President Bashir alluded to the presence of military experts from Russia in Sudan during a meeting in Moscow July 2018, and the Russian foreign ministry acknowledged the presence of Russian security firms in Sudan in January 2019 whilst denying any ties to the firms (MZ, 2019; RMFA, 2018b).

Prigozhin's Africa format was then applied to Sudan: The company, *Meroe Gold* began exploration of gold deposits soon after its mother company M Invest secured gold mining rights from the Sudanese ministry of minerals as a result of the meeting in November and Wagner deployed to provide security and oppose protests (Goble, 2018; SBU, 2019b; Yakoreva, 2018). The Conflict Intelligence Team has done its part to document this presence and from work done geolocating Ural trucks, Leviev (2019) suggests that Wagner is moving freely between the border of Sudan and CAR. That Wagner may be moving across borders is all the more likely, when we consider that Foreign Minister Lavrov has recently confirmed to Russian media that Russia military advisers were present in Congo, which also borders on CAR (MT, 2019a).

Protests against the presidency gained momentum in December 2018 and the president lost the support of large parts of the military and internal security forces. The

[31] *Warrant of Arrest for Omar Hassan Ahmad Al Bashir* (Mar. 2009). ICC, Pre-Trial Chamber.

opposition culminated through 6-10 April 2019 when Bashir was ousted from the presidency by civilians and security forces putting the country into a precarious state of transition (ICG, 2019). The transition serves as a litmus test of the staying power of Wagner: if it maintains presence whilst Prigozhin maintains business ties, then Bashir's overthrow may serve Prigozhin's and the Kremlin's interests in the end, but there is also a risk that Wagner ends as a superfluous and unwelcome element in Sudan.

2.4.3 Madagascar

Madagascar's business and power struggles In 2009, the mayor of the city of Antananarivo, Andry Rajoelina, (a politician of the young and dynamic sort) led an anti-government protest which turned into a coup when Rajoelina declared himself president following the ousting of Marc Ravalomanana (CNN, 2009). One of the major points of contention about the Ravalomana government had been its relations with foreign industry such as its 99 year lease of half the arable of Madagascar to the firm *Daewoo Logistics* which wanted to grow corn and make palm oil for the South Korean market (V. Walt, 2008). Rajoelina's ousting of Ravalomanana met with broad disapproval from the international community and in particular the African Union, but relations normalised somewhat when the country got a new constitution and Rajoelina agreed only to be president of a transitional council. In 2014 a *regular* government was formed by the newly inaugurated of Hery Rajoanarimampianina (for brevity, henceforth *Pianina*) but in the next election (November-December 2018), Rajoelina was eligible to run again and for this aspiration he reportedly had the blessing of USA and China (Rozhdestvenskii, Badanin and Rubin, 2019).

Prigozhin and the Kremlin influences Madagascar Prigozhin's operation arrived with a team of 10-15 political technologists, some geologists and an unknown number of Wagnerites in Madagascar in the spring of 2018. The operation concerned the attainment of mining rights and gaining a political foothold in the country by electing the winner, or at least allying with the winning party who was initially thought to be the incumbent President Pianina. According to several sources interviewed by BBC (2019a) and Rozhdestvenskii and Badanin (2019) this changed several times as they went through eight candidates before in the end, supporting Rajoelina who won the election. Meanwhile, the Prigozhin company, *Ferrum Mining* began operating in Madagascar in 2018 in chromium mining, whilst the only discernible use of Wagner was to provide security for mines and for the presidential candidates when they were sponsored by Russia.

It is noteworthy that we see no apparent contribution by Wagner to the creation or implementation of the agreement of military cooperation signed by Russia and Madagascar in 2018. Its details are unknown to the public but given that Russia already has an agreement of military cooperation with the Southern African Development Community (a sub-organisation of the AU) to which Madagascar belongs, it is likely to in-

clude the training of Malagasy personnel by Russian military. Shortly after the document was signed, the Russian anti-submarine ship, Severomorsk, arrived in the Malagasy port city of Antsiranana, presumably as a show of deployment capacity (TASS, 2018). Wagner's involvement in Madagascar which has even been featured in a BBC documentary (BBC, 2019a) and the elaborate articles of Rozhdestvenskii, Badanin and Rubin (2019) remains obscure. Wagner may have acted as security to create the right operating environment for the technologists, but it also seems likely that in the end their skills were unsuited to the task of gaining influence in Madagascar.

2.4.4 Venezuela

The Bolivarian crisis Since the nationalisation of key industries that began with the presidency of Hugo Chávez in 1999, the economy of Venezuela has become weaker and more dependent on the price of oil. And when prices dived in 2014 it triggered an economic and political disintegration weathered by Chávez' predecessor, President Nicolás Maduro, only through the use of security forces and with the firm support of the Kremlin (ICG, 2017b). In 2017, Maduro unconstitutionally dismissed the opposition-dominated Venezuelan parliament, the National Assembly, and in 2018 he won an election claimed by the assembly to be rigged (BBC, 2019b). The Venezuelan constitution provides for the opposition of undemocratic and unconstitutional policies, and for the assumption of the presidency by the leader of the National Assembly, in cases where the president is absent.[32] These were the provisions invoked when the president of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó (a politician of the young and dynamic sort) declared himself interim president with the support of the National Assembly which had ceased to recognise the presidency of Maduro (Redaelli, 2019). The country is now in a state of violent conflict.

Is Wagner in Venezuela? In October 2018 the Kremlin sent economic advisors to Venezuela, to assist Maduro's government in drafting reforms to alleviate the crisis and thus rehabilitate Venezuela as a highly valuable partner in the region (Biryukov and Andrianova, 2018). This cooperation is unlikely to continue under Guaidó since Maduro and Russia have denounced him as a US puppet (Holland and Wroughton, 2019). On 25 January 2019, Tsvetkova and Zverev (2019b) reported that 400 Wagnerites had been flown to Venezuela by way of Cuba to act as security for President Maduro; they cite Evgenii Shabayev and two anonymous sources. Several journalists have since attempted to verify this claim but without success, although planes linked to the Kremlin and the Russian military have certainly travelled to Venezuela more often in this period and military cooperation has openly increased (MT, 2019b; Trevithick, 2019; UAW, 2019; Varfolomeevna, 2019). However, there is a clear role for Wagnerites or other Russian

[32] *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela* (Dec. 1999). National Constituent Assembly, translated by Ministerio de Communicación e Información (2006), paras. 233, 333, 350.

Figure 2.6: Venezuela's position south of Cuba and USA

contractors to play if indeed they are present: Maduro is losing supporters among the military and the security forces, but he still has the support of the so-called *Colectivos*, militias formed by civilians to ensure the endurance of Chavist rule in Venezuela (Fiorella, 2019). It would be a great boon to Maduro if these vigilantes were well-trained in anti-riot techniques and Russia would not be seen doing this, so Wagner or Patriot are obvious options. However, a report by InSight crime cites a rumour that part of the Colectivos receive training from guerrillas in Colombia and indeed doing so is far more convenient and could still be supported by Russia (VIU, 2019). It is of course possible that Wagnerites are truly acting as security detail for President Maduro and his family, but the word of Shabayev and two anonymous sources is insufficient evidence to allow us to work from this assumption.

2.4.5 Findings

Prigozhin has become a prominent figure in Russia's ambitious new Africa policy, but according to available sources, Wagner's only significant contributions to this project are within Central Africa and Sudan where the services it offers are used to gain the loyalty of the presidential office. These services are indeed typical PMSC services, but

this does not mean that Wagner's African engagement fit neatly into the category of PMSC activities since they could not have been carried out without the logistical and political support from the Russian military. Despite the extraction ventures of Prigozhin, which are presumably profitable on balance, it is unlikely that Wagner's business plan is really built on being able to protect these or the African host nations. In reality, the Russian Ministry of Defence seems to be Wagner's only client, or we could say: Russia is the primary client, and services offered to any other country is offered only in order to complete the objective set out by the Kremlin. Wagner's deployment appears as purpose fitted rather than principled since its work amounts neither to the protection of sovereignty, nor interventionism. Services offered to private businesses are most likely offered to use some room for private enrichment for Prigozhin agreed with the Kremlin as a source of motivation for Prigozhin.

Russian control In Central Africa, Wagner's instructors are present with the support of the UN Security Council who readily refer to Russia's training of CAR troops. This is highly significant because the black ink of the documents from the UN Security Council implies a formal recognition by Russia that the instructors are acting on their behalf. The instructors are therefore arguably a *de jure* organ of Russia. However, there is a little room for interpretation: If the authorities of CAR are able to give orders to the Wagnerites, then the instructors are *seconded*[33] and constitute an organ which has been put at the disposition at another country, at which point the liability for their conduct is transferred to CAR.[34] Also, Russia has denied that their instructors are from Wagner, whereas Shabayev has claimed that there are about 1000 Wagnerites in CAR. Whilst these may be present in contravention of the UN Security Council embargo, their presence is not covered by the Russian recognition. Our very lack of information about their presence underlines this point: They are deniable – yet implausibly so.

[33] See section 1.2.

[34] *DARS* 2001, Art. 6.

Chapter 3

Conclusions

The answer to the question of Wagner's role in foreign policy requires some qualification in light of the investigation. We find it most likely that the infamous *Wagner Group* that fought in Ukraine was merely one volunteer detachment (likely consisting of 250 men) among many others and within a larger set of special actors. The role of this volunteer project in Russian foreign policy seems to have been to delay international response to the situation by (in so far as possible) having the operation masquerade as secessionist insurgency and lower the risk of industrial scale war, whilst saving precious resources. The Ukraine conflict acted as a recruitment campaign for the later PMC Wagner operation in Syria which would outdo the Slavonic Corps. Reading PMC Wagner back into the Ukraine conflict at any point earlier than 2015 at the entrance of tank units trained in Molkino would be a mistake from the evidence we have seen. The time since then and up to the Euro Polis contract is debatable. The group exists but it does not act as a PMC and that invalidates the implied corollary of the research question for this period, namely, what is the role of *a PMC* in Russian foreign policy? Instead we suggest that there is such a thing as an SMC - a *state military company* - which could be understood as the commercialised version of a volunteer corps, or simply a state agency providing military services. Such a concept makes sense since the peculiar model of finance for Wagner puts it at some distance from the conventional understanding of a PMC in that payments in the form of contracts or political power obtain their value in large part by virtue of state involvement. This is an example of the state creating a market - at least opening a new pocket within an existing market.

Transversely, Wagner is also an example of the market acting on the state by casting its employees in the role of so-called *proficians* and *precariants*. The economist Standing (2011) argues that the present state of globalisation, technology and neoliberal thought is bringing into being two new classes neither of whom should expect permanent employ from their workplace in the future: The proficians have skills that are so highly valued that this fluidity of the jobmarket suits them well and they are paid handsomely for consultancy work and technical skills in demand. The precariants, however, have skills that many others have; they are not in demand and are subject to the new

culture of the job market where they receive a meagre pay for working inconvenient (in our case: dangerous) odd-jobs without benefits such as pensions, healthcare or sick-leave. Wagner and most likely all the other Russian PMCs seem to fit the bill. Whereas PMCs are strictly proficiant workplaces in the West, only the officers of Wagner are reported to be highly proficient and in demand. The average Wagnerite is replaceable and expendable to the company venture. With these qualifications in mind, we conclude the following:

1. **Wagner is an instrument of realpolitik:** In Ukraine Wagner acted in interstate warfare, in Libya Wagner is supporting Haftar who is undertaking a coup d'état, in Sudan and Venezuela they are/were supposedly preventing a coup'détat, in Madagascar they were seemingly looking for a client to indebt, in CAR they found one such client. This is not exactly a revision of the international order, but looks more like Marten's (2015) idea of judoka foreign policy (section 1.5.1). Nevertheless, whilst they do not serve to revise the present international order, they may still serve strategic goals within the present order:

2. **Wager is used as a supporting element of strategy in two ways:** The activities of Wagner correspond both to places where Russia has quite pressing strategic interests (Ukraine, Syria, Libya, possibly Venezuela) and to places where Russia has more diffuse long-term strategic interests (Sudan, Madagascar, Central Africa and possibly South Sudan, Chad, Rwanda, Gabon, Congo). In the former countries, their activities seem to be closely tied by Russian control and they may indeed be working side-by-side with Russian military officers. The strategic interests in these countries seem to be geopolitical and center on oil and deployment capabilities for the Russian navy. In the latter countries, their mode of operation is more independent and more opportunistic. Their presence is established with the help of the Kremlin and may serve the Kremlin at its convenience, but in the meantime, the company is present as a commercial venture. Whilst they serve the long-term strategic interest of furthering Russian influence, they are really partly self-sustaining stand-by forces – presumably a much cheaper format than regular stand-by forces. It is important to emphasise, however, that we do not find it likely to be true that Prigozhin was somehow the brain behind the recent Russian push for Africa as suggested by Rozhdestvenskii and Badanin (2019). It seems he found a way to add to an existing strategy, and a clumsy one at that judging by the election debacle in Madagascar and the dead journalists in CAR.

3. **Wagner is the product of military privatisation:** Wagner's funding structure based on Prigozhin's vast network of companies and shell companies could not exist if it were not for the military reforms of Serdiukov from 2008-12. By virtue of these contracts Prigozhin has become a central enterpriser of military privatisation and can now offer all the classical services of the PMC industry (As described

by Singer, 2003, pp. 91–3) with the addition of political technologists.Focusing on Wagner in a vacuum without Prigozhin would therefore be a mistake. Prigozhin offers the full package of commercialised warfare from propaganda campaigns to camp service to trainers to combat units. Defence Minister Shoigu is reported not to like Prigozhin. We should not be surprised. Prigozhin has been placed as a central node in a network of functions which used to be under the near exclusive purview of the minister (Bingham and Muzyka, 2018). The power dynamics at play here are distinctly (neo-)patrimonialist, in that the offices in play not only allow officials to extract financial benefits but to exert power into the system through clients and armed force, whilst being able to engage with the surrounding world to find new channels for rents.

4. **Wagner is fitted to reap the profits of contemporary warfare:** Today, war is not the entire economy of a nation fitted unto a dreadnought. From the perspective of rebel groups and warlords, war is more akin to looting and mobilising violent political movements. From the perspective of activist states, it means armed risk management in all countries of relevance (Rasmussen, 2007). Wagner seems to combine these two approaches by fighting for enrichment, acting as an entrepreneur of warfare, and acting to prevent violent uprising. They can thus constitute a profitable alternative to peacekeeping contingents that come with all the red tape of AU or UN initiatives (Marzoeva, 2015). If such a use of Wagner or other Russian PMCs is popularised, then that opens a channel for reducing the costs of keeping the armed forces in fighting shape whilst promoting Russian soft power in Africa and elsewhere.

5. **Wagner's deniability is a delaying tactic and a means of preventing escalation:** In our investigation we have found that information about Wagner's activities in a given theatre can be brought forth through human source work, geolocationing, financial investigation and signal's intelligence. They can be used to tie Wagner's activities firmly to the Kremlin and may in some cases be able to lift the burden of an international legal control test. If Russia is in control of an auxiliary actor as it carries out an act of aggression against another state, that actor may choose to defend itself by striking at Russia proper (in a proportional manner) as per the inherent right of self-defence. But combat operations are not a court of law, and if the uncertainty is too large at the time, then the deniability will be completely effective at the time and delay enemy action. It may also be in the interest of other military powers to entertain this rhetorical denial even when they have evidence to the contrary simply to avoid having to escalate so as not to be seen to reneg on a principle of foreign policy. E.g. if the Battle of Khsham 2018 had immediately and unequivocally been portrayed by the media and military as a Russian attack on USA, then we would likely have seen a popular demand for a more hawkish Russia policy.

6. **Wagner may be *accepted* by its enemies:** There is a clear discrepancy between how US has reacted to Wagner's activities and how it reacts to the Russian military: In the case of Khsham, there has not been much of an aftermath in the international public sphere aside from a sensationalist interest. In the case of CAR, the US ambassador, Cohen (2019), called for investigating the Russian instructors for torture, and investigating the murders of the three journalists. The smuggling incident in Libya raised very little alarm, although the ultimate implication of all this may well be that Wagner is acting as weapons and security providers in a network across the Sahara in increasing numbers. And there may be good reasons for accepting that premise. By using force that is removed by an additional link, the willingness of Russians to see soldiers risk their lives to protect or evacuate Wagnerites will be equally weakened, and that would make Wagner a smaller threat. Using Wagner can thus work a bit like disarmament: by showing that a less effective unit, with less support and love from the Russian people is being deployed, they may descend down the list of military threats in Syria, Libya and Central Africa.

3.1 Limitations to the study

Describing PMC Wagner means shooting at a moving target. It is therefore beyond our ability to present the conclusive story of Wagner, but we have sought to be comprehensive in consulting the sources presently available. The result is thus that we have an informative study of the aspects of Wagner that have been reported on by the media so far. Informative, because it provides a particular example of the wider phenomenon of Russia's use of PMSCs in foreign policy, but this information also points to a limitation of the very premise; that there is indeed a group called Wagner. We have been willing to conclude that this was not the case in Ukraine, but in reality we have little understanding of how the operations in e.g. Syria and Libya relate to each other, and whether placing them under the same heading is ultimately informative. Wagner has undoubtedly become a *brand* in the world of military affairs and it is uncertain how quick intelligence officers and journalists are to designate a group as Wagner, when it might be RSB, Patriot, ENOT or the reported (but disputed) Wagner spin-off, Vega (SBU, 2019a). It should also be clear to the reader that an disproportionate amount of our information comes from Evgenii Shabayev, about whose motivations we know little. If his testimony falls through in all instances, then the activities of Wagner from late 2018 onwards are mostly documented by Western sources and sources linked to Mikhail Khodorkovskii who is also an interested party. Another limitation concerns quantities. The full significance of Wagner is difficult to gauge without knowing how many they are, Shabayev proposed 5-10,000 in Africa, and that is a high degree of uncertainty. The secrecy of the Russian state and the fog of war keep decisive matters obscure despite our great

fortune of evidence, but we expect that more evidence on Wagner will be published soon.

3.2 Further research

The case of Wagner has implications that branch into all of the fields relevant to the study of conflict. Our main context, foreign policy, has acted as a rather large heading under which parts of several disciplines can be drawn upon such as history, social science and international law. Each of these are in turn fruitful angles to develop in their own right.

Historical research The approach of Sukhankin (2019c) has been to invoke the Russian tradition of using auxiliaries going back to the beginning of European Modernity. Whilst Dreyfus (2018) has emphasised the stricter continuity from the conflicts in the nineties. The latter approach has been more useful within the limits of our scope, but both examples of *continuity literature* need to be further elaborated to be able to give us a clear vision of the Russian auxiliary tradition and the place of military companies therein. One thing is that there are clear precedents for the use of armed groups tied only loosely to the state, such precedents can inspire foreigners and Russians alike, the informative point is rather whether a tradition has been kept alive within Russian institutions which is more important to the establishment of Wagner than inspiration from abroad such as when Vladimir Neelov proposes a *Chinese model* (Sukhankin, 2019c, p. 5), or the media who use the example of the US firm Blackwater (Korotkov, 2014b).

Social science Whether Wagner truly has counterparts in China or USA is an important point which must be established through comparative case studies. In a large study of PMSCs worldwide, Laborie (2017, pp. 19–20) addresses Wagner with a few remarks that place it very far from the mainstream agreeing with our assessment in the literature review (section 1.1.2), but Wagner may serve as an example to other states, particularly other BRICS, who can use PMCs to reduce the costs of having a qualified reserve. If such a trend catches on, we will need a theory to describe State Military Companies that can explain whom they recruit, where and how they operate, how they are funded and other questions that we have addressed on a mere explorative basis in our account.

International law Few things are as central in international legal history as the state monopoly on violence (Osiander, 2001, pp. 260–1). When we are observing the process from afar of Russia renegotiating this aspect of its own legal order, we could inform our understanding of the situation by comparing it to other similar processes of transition abroad (A good example of something like this is Percy, 2007). What are the good

examples of a clear new deal being agreed upon? What are the bad examples of postponing the question and letting the whims of incumbent officials decide the status of auxiliary actors on an ad hoc basis? By knowing these instances, we can adjust our expectations for the legal future of Wagner and other groups like it. The legal principles used to institute a new deal with regard to state use of force will also have consequences in the field because it will decide whether the state in question willingly considers all the actions of the auxiliary as its own and so is part of deciding the priority of providing reinforcements, evacuation, prisoner transfers etc.

Anthropology Though we have not done it here for the sake of time, money and personal security, another fruitful line of inquiry is to conduct interviews among the Wagnerites and those close to them. The Wagnerites work under a confidentiality clause, but several of them have posed for interviews anyhow. Scrutinising the motivations, self-images and personal values of willing Wagnerites can contribute to an understanding of the conditions under which establishing a state military company becomes possible. In our study, we have followed the suggestion of Wagner interviewees (Khazon-Kassia, 2018) that emphasise the outsider status following military retirement of most Wagnerites in society, but there may well be some among them who feel called more strongly on behalf of Russia, Russkii Mir or general benevolence, such as suggested by those PMSCs studied by Joachim and Schneiker (2012) who frame their work as a form of realist humanitarianism.

In short, companies like Wagner operate in a growing niche that presents opportunities to various actors around the world. The number from Shabayev of 5-10,000 contractors in Africa is no trivial matter. The phenomenon of PMCs (or SMCs) must be afforded more than a few casual remarks on the nature of new wars, Russian hybrid warfare and plausible deniability. Researching the case of Wagner is one step in this direction.

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