



# **THE WAGNER GROUP AS A RUSSIAN HYBRID INTERFERENCE TOOL IN WORLD POLITICS**



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# INTRODUCTION

The Wagner Group, a private military company with very close links with the Kremlin, has proved to be a beneficial hybrid instrument for the Russian state allowing them to operate in the grey zone. Its status reduces costs, provides flexibility, and allows the Kremlin to pursue its political and economic objectives through a sponsored non-official military group, avoiding direct responsibility and possible legal claims. It is worth mentioning that the Wagner Group is just one of the different Russian private military companies whose number has continued to grow in the last years.

The Wagner Group has been accused by NGOs and the UN of committing systemic and grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations in countries where it has established a presence. The EU decided to sanction the Wagner Group and individuals related to it in November 2021 and labelled it as a proxy organisation of the Kremlin. To justify these sanctions, the European Parliament cited a 2012 speech by President Putin in the Duma, in which he stated that a group of private military companies would be an efficient tool to accomplish national goals without directly involving the Russian State.

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## HYBRID WARFARE AND RUSSIA

Hybrid warfare is a concept that has acquired increased relevance after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Frank J. Hoffman defines hybrid warfare as 'any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives'. The tactics used by Russia to annex Crimea in 2014 (the 'little green men', disinformation campaigns, economic warfare, cyber-attacks, subversion...) were labelled as 'hybrid' by Western countries. Russia successfully targeted Ukrainian vulnerabilities, exploiting the ambiguous state of the 'grey zone'.

Russian strategic theory identifies 'hybrid warfare' as a category of conflicts rather than as a specific set of tools. The term denotes a form of war in which all efforts, including military operations, are subordinate to an information campaign, aimed at shaping the long-term governance and strategic orientation of a target state.

Russian doctrine refers to 'hybrid warfare' as 'non-linear war', with the former term associated with Western actions against Russia. This is based on the belief that since the end of the Cold War, Western countries have been promoting the overthrow of political regimes in Russia's close proximity through non-military means to establish an anti-Moscow diplomatic front. Russia believes it is in a situation where it has to carry out a defensive 'non-linear war' against Western 'hybrid warfare' to survive. The methods used will include subversion, economic warfare, disinformation, and political and military instruments. The Kremlin regards hybrid warfare as the most common form of conflict in the 21st century. Russian hybrid activities do not target the West exclusively, with the methods of 'non-linear' warfare deployed on a wide scale to advance the Kremlin's global interests.

Russia believes that non-state actors such as private military companies (PMCs) are taking a more critical role in current conflicts and regard them as a vital hybrid asset that a state can indirectly control. The Kremlin considers PMCs a valuable instrument for advancing its political and economic interests abroad while avoiding accountability.

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## **WHAT IS THE WAGNER GROUP?**

### **WHAT DO WE KNOW?**

The Wagner Group emerged in 2014. The exact date cannot be determined, because there is no sign of any instrument of incorporation nor of official documents regarding the formal creation of a society called Wagner: nowadays, the Wagner Group does not formally exist, neither in the Russian Federation (where the Constitution reserves all matter of defence, security and foreign policy to the state, making any kind PMC illegal), nor in any foreign country. An Israeli website famous for its dealing with intelligence rumours affirms that the Wagner PMC is registered in Argentina, where the Wagner surname is quite common (due to the high volume of German immigration post-WW2), and any kind of bureaucratic evidence leading to the contractor's group is easily concealable.

The Wagner Group appeared just after the disbanding of another PMC, known as the Slavonic Corps: this company was founded in 2013 in Hong Kong by two former members of the Moran Security Group.



The first recorded deployment of the Wagner Group was in 2014. While the Group's participation in the annexation of Crimea remains uncertain, its deployment in the Ukrainian Oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk has been confirmed. The main missions carried out by Wagner contractors in the self-proclaimed people's republic included 'conventional' fighting against Ukrainian troops (Wagner troops were involved in the important battles of Luhansk airport and Debaltseve), disarming of paramilitary formations, gathering intelligence, and liquidating internal opposition to the Kremlin-backed authorities. During the Wagner Group's deployment in Ukraine, Kyiv's secret services intercepted telephone conversations between Utkin and Russian officers, including Major General Evgeny Nikiforov (chief of staff of the 58th Army, deployed near the Ukrainian borders) and the GRU Colonel Oleg Ivannikov.

However, the evidence showing a strong connection between the Wagner Group and the Russian Federation's military intelligence service is much more consistent. The PMC had (and still has) its main base in the rural locality of Molkino, in the Krasnodar Krai. The facility is shared with the 10th Separate Special Brigade of the GRU and is officially owned by the Russian Ministry of Defence. The connections between the Wagner Group and GRU are further corroborated by the training and equipment provided to Wagner recruits during their stay in Molkino, including heavy weapons used by the Russian Armed Forces.

Immediately after intervening in the Donbas, the Wagner Group was dispatched to Syria to help the Assad Regime in its fight against DAESH. Wagner's Syrian Campaign showed the extent to which the Group was intertwined with the structures of the Russian Armed Forces. While Wagner troops reached Syrian battlefields via civilian flights, their passports were issued by the Moscow office that provided false identities to GRU agents on missions abroad, and their equipment was transported via Russian military ships and aircraft.

Around this point, international public opinion started to take a close interest in the action of the Wagner Group and see the strong links connecting it to the highest spheres of Russian state power.

In the following years, Wagner Group's activities began to grow exponentially, with the company's business network across African, South American, and Asian continents. Through the Wagner Group, the Kremlin has managed to expand its influence in countries that were usually beyond the reach of its formal diplomacy, relying on a certain degree of plausible deniability about the actions undertaken by Wagner troops.

Thus, despite all the measures adopted to maintain the greatest possible confidentiality regarding the activities of the organisation, the notoriety of the group has spread across the international scene, with its activities becoming a priority for policy-makers all over the world.

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## WHERE DOES THE WAGNER GROUP OPERATE?

Our open-source analysis identified Wagner Group presence in a total of 16 countries worldwide: Mali, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Mozambique, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ukraine, Belarus, CAR, DRC, Zimbabwe, Angola, Madagascar, Chad, Venezuela. See the summaries below:

### I. MALI

Mali has become the protagonist of a profound geopolitical shift during the last few months. Parallel to the progressive French military and political detachment from its former colony, owing mainly to worsening relations between the government of Paris and the military junta in Bamako, there has been rapprochement between Mali and the Russian Federation. Via the Wagner Group, Russia was able to establish a military presence in Malian territory, while securing access to the nation's resource wealth.

### 2. SUDAN

Sudan was one of the first targets of Russia's recent push into Africa. The use of the Wagner Group as a 'diplomatic tool' has allowed Moscow to forge a strong bond with the Sudanese leadership, transforming the nation into a base for further paramilitary operations across the continent, as well as for power projection through more conventional means.

### 3. GUINEA BISSAU

Rumours regarding the presence of the Wagner Group in Guinea-Bissau have so far remained unconfirmed.

## 4. SYRIA

The Wagner Group's activities in Syria can be seen from two perspectives. From a political point of view, there has been a strong relationship between Russia and Syrian President Asad. Therefore the presence of the Wagner Group can be seen as allowing Russia to strengthen the relationship and extend its influence in the region. Secondly, the Wagner Group's presence possesses an economic dimension, rooted in an agreement between Wagner and President Asad, under which ¼ of oil and gas profits goes to the Group. In 2018, the Wagner Group was found guilty of torturing and killing deserters from Syrian army. The Wagner Group also played a role in securing the Covid situation in Syria.

## 5. LYBIA

The Wagner Group has been actively operating in Libya since 2019, supporting Marshal Khalifa Haftar in his fight against the government in Tripoli. The Wagner Group's goals are economic and geopolitical; the Group seeks to secure Libya's natural sources, especially oil and gas, and establish a Russian foothold on the Mediterranean coast. A Samsung tablet was found near an unknown body in Libya, full of crucial information regarding the activities of the Wagner Group, including its hardware, its presence in oil-rich regions, and its ties to Russia.

## 6. MOZAMBIQUE

The Wagner Group's presence was first registered at the end of 2019. The Wagner Group troops flew to the country to wipe out the Islamist insurgency in the northern region of Cabo Delgado. However, the operation failed, and Wagner troops left the country a few months later, in early 2020.

## 7. GUINEA

In the African context, the Wagner Group is usually present in countries where Russia or Russian companies have strategic and economic interests. Although Guinea matches these criteria, rumours regarding the involvement of Wagner Group paramilitaries in the country have so far remained unconfirmed.

## 8. UKRAINE

The disintegration of Yanukovych's regime in 2014 spurred Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine, with the Wagner Group acting as an extended arm of the military. Wagner troops carried out auxiliary operations in Crimea to secure key access points and disrupt lines of counterattack. In the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, the Wagner Group eliminated dissenting warlords, entrenching the power of Russian proxies. Wagner troops played a key role in the occupation of several strategic strongholds across the Donbas, mounting autonomous combined arms operations which saw extensive use of heavy weaponry.

The employment of Wagner troops provided Russia with plausible deniability regarding its presence, complementing its disinformation campaign. In reality, the Wagner Group is subordinate to Russian military command, as underscored by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which saw Wagner troops forward-deployed deep in Ukrainian territory and tasked with enacting sabotage and political assassinations. The shift towards conventional conflict heralds a transformation in Russian hybrid warfare. Wagner troops are being withdrawn from far-flung battlefields and increasingly subordinated to Putin's regime. The war in Ukraine will likely result in a reframing of Wagner's role; the Group will either be more tightly integrated into the Russian military or transformed into an internal security force.

## 9. BELARUS

The only proven presence of Wagner's Group in Belarus is dated in the summer of 2020. It was announced by Belarusian state media, that 33 Wagner's mercenaries were arrested. Initially, they were accused of coming to Belarus to interfere in the presidential election and to destabilise the situation in the country. Later it turned out that Belarus was only a transit country in this case. According to some analysts, their transit was related to Wagner's missions in Sudan, Syria or Libya. Other analysts claim that their appearance in Belarus was a part of the operation in Ukraine.



## 10. CAR

The strengthening of diplomatic ties between Russia and CAR was linked to the emergence of Wagner Group presence. Wagner troops carry out a range of combat and security tasks for Touaderá's regime: garrisoning the capital, reconquering peripheral areas, and allegedly serving as the President's bodyguard. The Wagner Group props up the business interests of its oligarchic benefactors; the enlistment of Wagner troops coincided with the issuing of mining rights to Prigozhin-aligned entities, and Wagner operations focus on liberating resource-rich areas enabling commercial exploitation. The Wagner Group's presence is associated with severe human rights violations, stoking the flames of ethno-religious violence, hardening resistance among anti-governmental guerillas, and attracting international scrutiny. The Wagner Group cooperates with Russia's semi-private apparatus of hybrid interference, aiding Touaderá's proto-authoritarian consolidation and undermining Western diplomatic presence. The world community grows progressively more reluctant to back Touaderá's regime, driving CAR further into the arms of the Kremlin. CAR's intense dependence on foreign aid means that Touaderá is faced with a dilemma; security guaranteed by Russian PMCs or continued Western support.

## 11. DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The Democratic Republic of Congo faces armed conflict, violence, and displacement. Economic, social, and humanitarian aid from overseas fails to address the nation's crises. No official records of Wagner presence in DRC exist. However, Russia is moving to exploit the shortcomings in foreign assistance, and establish a military presence in the country. Diplomatic ties emerged between Russia and DRC's authoritarian government.

## 12. ZIMBAWE

Russia interfered in Zimbabwe's 2018 elections, ensuring the establishment of a pro-Kremlin government. The absence of Western involvement in Zimbabwe means that Russia and China constitute the country's main diplomatic partners. Despite this, Russia's presence in Zimbabwe has so far remained limited. However, as Russia continues to expand its military ties to Africa, it will likely assume a more active role in Zimbabwe, particularly with regards to modernising the Zimbabwean army.

## 13. ANGOLA

The relationship between Russia and Angola is based on military cooperation. Angola's army is equipped with Russian weapons, forming a lasting basis for long-term cooperation. Russian diamond mining companies, such as Alrosa, operate in Angola and the neighbouring countries. The combination of economic and military ties provides Russia with the leverage to spread its influence in Sub-Saharan Africa and rekindle Soviet-era relations. Russian power is set to increase over the years, as its companies will gradually displace Western firms. Russian presence in Angola is especially significant, given that the country constitutes a key part of the international supply chain for Russian business entities.

## 14. MADAGASCAR

There is no doubt about the activities of the Wagner's Group mercenaries in Madagascar. There is evidence that mercenaries have been active in Madagascar since 2018. The governments of Russia and Madagascar signed an agreement on military cooperation in October 2018; however, Russian mercenaries have already been present and active in Madagascar before this point. Their activities are primarily focused on training domestic military forces, protecting mines, and guarding political advisors against Russia, whose aim was to interfere in the presidential elections.

## 15. CHAD

There is no definitive evidence of the activities of Wagner Group's presence in Chad, with all accounts coming from anonymous sources. The only concrete evidence of Wagner Group activity in Chad is indirect, with confirmed reports of Russian PMCs on the borders of neighbouring countries, Libya and CAR. However, some sources claim that the Wagner Group uses Chad as a base to provide military equipment to Russia-aligned groups in Libya. Given Chad's geopolitical significance, it is likely that the Wagner Group has either already sought to extend its influence into the country, or will attempt to do so in the future.

## 16. VENEZUELA

Few unnamed sources have claimed that the Wagner Group was providing security services to Venezuelan president Maduro. These allegations are in line with Russia's long-running support for Maduro's regime. The Russian state-owned oil company owns several offshore gas fields in Venezuela. Although the Wagner Group's role in guarding these sites remains unconfirmed, it is likely given the patterns of Russian involvement in other countries.

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## CONCLUSION

The complex research and analysis have shown rather interesting outcomes and results. First of all, it has proven the connection with Russia through the military perspective concerning its use of military equipment and technologies coming from or developed by Russia, but also through an economic perspective, especially in terms of natural sources and agreements with local companies resulting in profit sharing.

From the geopolitical point of view, the Wagner Group has been strengthening the position of Russia on a global level by positioning itself across strategic countries, which has allowed the Wagner Group and, therefore, Russia to obtain access to the Mediterranean sea or other African countries. Moreover, the presence of the Wagner Group and its influence and connection to the government or officials have proven the political interference of Russia.

As the US has also been using those regions as strategic places for obtaining its interest, and as there cannot be a direct interaction between these two global actors, the activities of the Wagner group can also be perceived as a proxy war between the Western countries and the US.

From the research perspective, we have found difficulties regarding the validity of data and information, which unofficial sources have often provided. We strongly recommend continuing the surveillance and analysis of the Wagner Group activities and educating society about its existence. Lastly, we have proved that even with unofficial information concerning the detection of the Wagner Group, it can signify its existence in more than the regions mentioned above.

