

State, non-state, or chimera? The rise and fall of the Wagner Group and recommendations for countering Russia's employment of complex proxy networks



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Executive summary

Over the course of a decade, the Wagner Group grew from a small band of war fighters to a vast and rapidly evolving network of organizations, including a private military corporation (PMC), that simultaneously conducted political, economic, and military operations around the globe. At its peak between 2017 and 2023, the Wagner Group had between 35,000 and 45,000 fighters and generated hundreds of millions of dollars for itself and the Russian government, largely but not entirely through extractive industries, including oil, diamonds, gold, and forestry. The Wagner Group also bridged and seamlessly moved between the status of state and non-state actor by operating as a network of private and civil society organizations, while officially engaging in diplomatic activities and conducting negotiations with clients, including state leaders, on behalf of the Russian government. While the West attempted to disrupt the ability of the Wagner Group to operate, primarily through economic sanctions, these interventions had little impact. When the end finally came for the Wagner Group, it originated from an unexpected source – the inside. Driven by a hatred of the senior leadership of the Russian military, director of the Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin mounted an ill-conceived mutiny that resulted in the deaths of numerous Russian military personnel and ultimately challenged Vladimir Putin's hold on power. Within two months of the mutiny, Prigozhin was dead and the vast network of organizations comprising the Wagner Group were annexed and divvied up by the Russian government. The group that was ostensibly Russia's greatest and most successful foreign policy tool of the contemporary period was no more. This Working Paper summarizes the rise and fall of the Wagner Group, detailing its emergence and transformation from a non-state to a state actor, and discussing a range of countermeasures that can be applied against the Wagner Group and similar organizations.

Introduction

At its zenith between 2017 and 2023, the Wagner Group was a vast and dynamic network of organizations, including a private military corporation (PMC) with an estimated 35,000 to 45,000 fighters, that not only played a distinctive role for the Russian government but was unique amongst its contemporaries (e.g., the Night Wolves, Redut, Patriot, and the Don Cossacks).¹ In essence, the Wagner Group was the only organization responsive to and, at times, under the nominal control of the Russian government that was able to force generate and deploy significant capabilities and simultaneously conduct comprehensive – military, political, and economic – operations in multiple countries across several continents.² Such operations, which required dedicated, experienced, and highly skilled personnel as well as significant organizational agility and deep financial resources, is not easily found or replicated. No other organization currently at the disposal of the Russian government, including the special services, has been able to match the ability and achieve the geopolitical success of the Wagner

Group, while at the same time providing the Russian government with sources of revenue and plausible deniability. Prior to the organization's seizure and dismantling by the Russian government after the mutiny in 2023, the Wagner Group was arguably Russia's most powerful, successful, and valuable foreign policy tool of the contemporary era.

This Hybrid CoE Working Paper seeks to answer two complementary questions. Firstly, in what ways did the Wagner Group expand and evolve its organizational structure, operations, and status between 2014 and 2023?; and secondly, what interventions or conditions led to the failure and dissolution of the Wagner Group? To answer these questions, the paper draws upon and examines a small but demonstrative set of Wagner Group operations and discusses the group's mutiny. In addition, the paper discusses potential countermeasures against the Wagner Group, and other similar organizations.

In the next section, the Working Paper looks at the Wagner Group and other private military

1 The Wagner Group included but was not limited to the Wagner Private Military Corporation, sometimes called PMC Wagner Group or Wagner PMC. In short, the Wagner Group was a network of businesses, commercial and non-commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations, professional associations, virtual collectives, and arms-length and seemingly independent financial and logistical support entities owned, operated by, or worked in support of Yevgeny Prigozhin.

2 The footprint of the Wagner Group was expansive. Components of the group were known to have operated in more than 20 countries around the globe, including but not limited to Belarus, Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, Mozambique, Central African Republic, Mali, Libya, Venezuela, Madagascar, Mexico, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Mauritania, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Congo, South Africa, Chad, and Kenya. Over the last three years, the Wagner Group expressed interest in expanding its operations to several additional countries, including Niger and Haiti. It is important to note that there is no standard blueprint for Wagner's deployed organizational structure as it often differed from operation to operation with entities created to address the needs specific to each country. For more information, see: Matthew Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption: Wagner Group Activities and State Capture in the Central African Republic', Defence Research and Development Canada, September, 2023; Matthew Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again? A brief examination of the Force Structure of the Wagner Private Military Corporation', Defence Research and Development Canada, January 2024.

corporations in the Russian context. The paper then depicts and analyzes the rise and fall of the Wagner Group. Lastly, the paper looks at possible countermeasures to the Wagner Group and other similar entities.

Characterizing private military corporations in the Russian context

The number of PMCs operating at the behest of the Russian government has expanded significantly over the last decade, particularly as the Russian military experienced force generation issues after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.³ As of February 2024, Western military analysts and news media outlets have identified more than 35 PMCs operating for the Russian government around the world.⁴ These PMCs offer a wide array of services, with some conducting offensive combat operations, while others focus on traditional security services, such as protecting critical infrastructure, mine clearance, or close protection. Additionally, Russian PMCs often utilize different organizational structures and have varying degrees of connectedness to the Russian government, with some owned by oligarchs and others under the direct control of state security services.⁵ When the constellation of Russian PMCs is considered, it is apparent that the organizations have little in common, apart from the fact that most are equipped by the Russian military – although the quantity and quality of equipment vary significantly between PMCs. In addition, many recruit from the Russian military, and all are illegal and do not officially exist under Russian law, implying that they serve at the grace of the state.

However, the Wagner Group was unique amongst its contemporaries. Beyond its sheer size, the Wagner Group was also more than just a PMC; it was a full-service civilian-military organization that could draw upon a variety of capabilities and assets to conduct comprehensive operations, much in the same way that a NATO Combined Joint Task Force is designed to do.⁶ Additionally, the Wagner Group was able to independently create and exploit revenue streams, generating significant profits for itself and the Russian government. Lastly, the core of the Wagner Group, including but not limited to key personnel of Wagner PMC, were recruited from the Russian government and military – particularly Spetsnaz and the Russian airborne units – as well as academia.⁷ The Wagner Group also hired highly skilled employees local to the area of operations, some of whom were educated at Russian universities.⁸ In other words, there was no shortage of talent in the group. The only analogue that comes close to the Wagner Group in terms of organizational structure and the ability to conduct comprehensive operations is the Night Wolves, but that organization is much smaller, did not generate revenue for the Russian government, and only conducted tactical armed interventions in

3 Ryan Bauer and Erik Mueller, 'Ukraine is a Breeding Ground for Russian PMCs', RAND, 14 June, 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/06/ukraine-is-a-breeding-ground-for-russian-pmcs.html>.

4 Ibid.

5 Nils Dahlqvist, 'Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies', FOI, January, 2019, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206653>.

6 A Combined Joint Task Force, or CJTF, is a multinational, interdepartmental military formation employed to conduct comprehensive operations across political, economic, social, and military domains. Tara Holton, 'Facilitating the Comprehensive Approach between Non-Government Organizations and the Canadian Forces', NATO, October, 2010, <https://www.sto.nato.int/publications/STO%20Meeting%20Proceedings/STO-MP-HFM-204/MP-HFM-204-07.pdf>.

7 Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption'.

8 Ibid.

Crimea and eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2015.⁹ The Wagner Group was, quite literally, in a league of its own.

9 The Night Wolves no longer conduct combat operations but focus on espionage and influence operations, as well as developing their criminal enterprises (e.g., smuggling networks, protection rackets). See Matthew Lauder, 'Wolves of the Russian Spring': An Examination of the Night Wolves as a Proxy for the Russian Government', *Canadian Military Journal*, Volume 18, Issue 3, (2018): 5–16, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol18/no3/PDF/CMJ183Ep5.pdf>.

The rise and fall of the Wagner Group

The birth of the Wagner Group and deployment to Ukraine in 2014–2015

On paper, at least, the Wagner Group came into existence on 1 May 2014 when Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin signed an agreement formally establishing the group and delineating their respective roles and responsibilities.¹⁰ Operationally, however, the Wagner Group first deployed as a formed unit to eastern Ukraine in mid-May 2014, with the first record of the organization conducting combat operations on 21 May 2014.¹¹ While the original size of the Wagner Group remains unknown, within a month the group had approximately 100 operators in eastern Ukraine, primarily conducting small-unit operations, including reconnaissance activities and limited tactical assaults.

It did not take long, however, for the Wagner Group to establish a reputation for success on the battlefield. By the end of 2014 and into early 2015, the group, which grew to more than two motor rifle companies – approximately 250 operators – directly supported numerous offensive operations executed by large pro-Russian separatist and Russian regular military formations. According to some reports, the group enjoyed a degree of autonomy that other

PMCs and pro-Russian militias did not and, by the time major fighting had ended, operated as a formed unit at the company tactical group level – upwards of 450 personnel – under the direct command of Utkin.¹²

The most intriguing and defining, if not infamous, role for the Wagner Group came as the lines of demarcation between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russian militias were formalized. The group was quietly rerolled into an internal security force and tasked with several highly sensitive operations. Dubbed “The Cleaners” and operating under the direction of Igor Kor-net, the Luhansk Peoples Republic (LPR) Interior Minister, and Oleg Ivannikov, a Colonel in the GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) responsible for all Russian forces and proxies in the LPR, the Wagner Group set about disarming Cossack militias and assassinating uncooperative pro-Russian militia commanders.¹³ The fact that the group was handed such a sensitive task was a clear indication that the organization was highly regarded and trusted by the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), but it also started to call into question its status as a non-state actor.¹⁴

10 Prigozhin would finance the Wagner Group and serve as the political interlocutor with the Kremlin and Putin, while Utkin, drawing upon his experience in the Spetsnaz and his short stint with the Slavnic Corps, would act as the operational commander.

11 UK Parliamentary Committee, ‘FCDO Written Submissions for FAC Inquiry on the Wagner Group and Beyond: Proxy Private Military Companies’, 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/113168/pdf>.

12 Jakub Ber, ‘From Popasna to Bakmut: The Wagner Group in the Russia-Ukraine War’, OSW, 28 April, 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-04-28/popasna-to-bakmut-wagner-group-russia-ukraine-war>.

13 Joshua Yaffa, ‘Inside the Wagner Group’s Armed Uprising’, *The New Yorker*, 31 July, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/08/07/inside-the-wagner-uprising>.

14 This trust likely stemmed from the fact that most of the operational side of the Wagner Group were recent retirees from the Russian military and special services.

Expanding the combat footprint in Syria: 2015–2023

Recognized by the Russian MoD as a reliable partner, the Wagner Group deployed to Syria under the direction of the GRU in early October 2015, less than a month after the Russian government announced that it would intervene in the civil war. Despite losing a handful of operators in a mortar attack almost immediately, the group implemented an extensive training programme to professionalize the Syrian army, along with its numerous local militias and proxies.

Overall, the Wagner Group deployment was considered highly successful by the Russian MoD.¹⁵ Over the course of its deployment, the group trained and professionalized the Syrian military and re-established its ability to conduct operations at the divisional level. Additionally, the Wagner Group recruited, trained, financed, and equipped the ISIS Hunters, a small special forces unit attached to the Syrian 5th Corps. More importantly, particularly for its reputation as a fighting force, the Wagner Group deployed highly specialized operators, including Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs), reconnaissance specialists, snipers, and air defence personnel, and played a critical role in several

offensive operations, including the retaking of Palmyra in 2016 and 2017.¹⁶ In fact, the highly specialized nature and lethality of the Wagner Group's combat capabilities, along with its ability to integrate joint fires and utilize precision munitions to cause maximum damage to the enemy, not only set it apart from other PMCs, but put the organization on a par with some of the best combat-ready units of the Russian military, such as the Russian Airborne Forces [VDV] and Spetsnaz.¹⁷

The Wagner Group's success in Syria was not limited to the battlefield, however. Syria also represents the introduction and formulation of the Wagner Group's economic exploitation model, which not only served to underwrite and expand Wagner Group operations, but also funnelled revenues to the Russian government. According to media reports, in return for the provision of combat and security services, the Wagner Group received approximately 25% of the revenues from all oil, gas, and mining production from the facilities it cleared and protected from Syria's enemies.¹⁸ For the Syrian and Russian governments, the deal was a win-win. For Prigozhin, the revenue stream was another way to advance his political standing with the Kremlin and demonstrate his utility.

15 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

16 The Wagner Group was able to deploy significant and highly specialized war fighting capabilities as the weapon systems and equipment were provided by the Russian military. In some cases, the Russian military worked with the Wagner Group to improve or develop new weapon systems and vehicles. Moreover, there is evidence indicating that the Russian military attached technical specialists to the Wagner Group for short periods to assist in combat operations. See Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

17 Ibid.

18 Amy Mackinnon, 'Putin's Shadow Warriors stake claim to Syria's Oil', *Foreign Policy*, 17 May, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/17/putin-shadow-warriors-stake-claim-syria-oil-energy-wagner-prigozhin-libya-middle-east/>.

Success breeds success in Libya: 2018–2023

Acknowledging the Wagner Group's achievements in the Syrian campaign, the Russian MoD once again called upon the organization to provide a range of security services, this time in Libya in support of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army (LNA). Operating under the GRU, a small contingent of Wagner Group personnel arrived in October 2018 to conduct a mission assessment and prepare facilities for the arrival of the main force. After a handful of meetings between Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, Haftar, and Prigozhin, a plan was devised to systematically seize control of oil production facilities and transportation nodes, and more than 300 Wagner Group operators were deployed to Libya.¹⁹ With such close strategic coordination between the Russian MoD, Prigozhin, and Haftar, it was apparent that the Wagner Group had become a hybrid threat actor, shifting between state and non-state actor status as needed.

It did not take long for the Wagner Group to be directly involved in combat operations. Within a couple of weeks of their arrival in March 2019, highly specialized and integrated combat teams, including JTACs, forward observers (FOs), air defence operators, and electronic warfare detachments, were deployed alongside Haftar's forces, supporting an offensive operation to eliminate the Government of National Accord (GNA) and take Tripoli. Despite

making significant territorial gains in the first few months of the offensive, advancing as far as Tripoli's suburbs, the operation eventually stalled and by June 2020 it was abandoned. Likely under pressure from the Russian government to secure new revenue streams, the Wagner Group teamed up with Sudanese and local militias to conduct an offensive explicitly designed to seize the oil fields in the south of Libya as well as the oil port of Sidra.²⁰ Again, it was another highly successful operation for the Wagner Group, at least as far as economic exploitation was concerned. Within less than a month of initiating the new operation, the Wagner Group, along with its attached militias, took control of most of Libya's oil production capability. While it is difficult to estimate the total amount of profit generated by the seizures, news media reporting indicates that, in 2023 alone, the Russian government exported more than \$2.6 billion (USD) worth of oil from Libya.²¹

The Wagner Group's political operations in Sudan: 2018–2023

The Wagner Group also expanded its operational repertoire to include a wide range of political activities, particularly by interfering in state elections on behalf of the Russian government. One of the first known instances of the Wagner Group deploying a team of political technologists to Africa was in Sudan in late 2018.²² Although preceded by a significant

¹⁹ Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David Fox and Sarah Holder, 'How Libyan Smuggling helps Russian Fuel Leak into Europe', *Bloomberg*, 7 February, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-06/how-libyan-smuggling-helps-russian-fuel-leak-into-europe-big-take-podcast>.

²² Jeremy Howell, Peter Mwai, and Grigor Atanesian, 'Wagner in Sudan: What have Russian Mercenaries been up to?' BBC, 24 April, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65328165>.

number of military trainers to work with the Sudanese intelligence community, as well as engineers to facilitate new mining operations, Wagner Group political technologists, under the direction of the so-called Africa Back Office, arrived to assist al-Bashir in addressing a rapidly deteriorating political situation.²³ Based largely on concepts developed to counter colour revolutions, the strategy proposed by the Wagner political technologists included expanding Sudanese government control over traditional and new media, establishing a power vertical, recasting al-Bashir as a hero and saviour of Sudan, and creating and exploiting an image of a collective enemy.²⁴ If the first strategy failed to ameliorate the situation, a second and more extreme strategy was proposed that included legalizing the suppression of opposition parties, introducing punishments for participation in unauthorized political rallies, and holding public executions to distract the protest movement and undermine the political opposition.²⁵

While al-Bashir implemented a handful of the recommendations, the pro-democracy movement continued to gain momentum and on 11 April 2019, the military, sensing that the tide had turned, removed al-Bashir from power, with General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan being appointed

as head of state and commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The Wagner Group was quick to embrace the new reality in Sudan and pivoted to provide support for al-Burhan while simultaneously deepening its relationship with General Dagalo, al-Burhan's deputy and commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group managed by the Sudanese intelligence community. The Russian government also signalled its unconditional support for Sudan's new military leadership when it blocked a draft resolution at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) criticizing al-Burhan for the deaths of political protesters.

Over the next three years, the Wagner Group pursued a three-pronged strategy in Sudan that involved expanding mining operations and extracting as much gold as possible, establishing relationships with Sudan's political and economic elites, and setting conditions for the Russian government to sign a series of bilateral agreements on trade and defence, including a deal to build a Russian naval base in Port Sudan.²⁶ Additionally, the Wagner Group was highly successful in navigating the deteriorating relationship between al-Burhan and Dagalo, maintaining a close working relationship with both sides, including during the outbreak of

23 Led by Petr Bychkov and operating from Prigozhin's Concorde offices in St. Petersburg, Russia, the Africa Back Office (later, Africa Politology) was a team of approximately 20 to 30 senior political technologists and social scientists, including contracted advisors from academia, working for the Wagner Group and tasked with designing and operationalizing strategies to manipulate and exploit political and economic conditions in Africa. Bychkov is the former public relations manager for the governor of the Pskov region, Russia, and was a close associate of Prigozhin. The Africa Back Office worked in close coordination with the Russian government, namely the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the MoD.

24 Declan Walsh, "'From Russia with Love': A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan', *The New York Times*, 05 June, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>.

25 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

26 Walsh, 'From Russia with Love'.

internecine fighting in 2023.²⁷ Again, the Wagner Group played a significant role in setting conditions for deepening diplomatic relations between Russia and Sudan, effectively exposing its state actor status.

The Wagner Group's political operations in Madagascar: 2018

The Wagner Group's political operations in Madagascar started in earnest in March 2018 when President Hery Rajaonarimampianina held an off-the-books meeting with Putin and Prigozhin during a state visit to Moscow, requesting assistance from the Russian government with his re-election campaign. Within two weeks of the meeting, a team of Wagner political technologists travelled to Madagascar to set the political operation in motion.²⁸

In a departure from previous political operations, the Wagner political technologists, working under the direction of the Africa Back Office and in coordination with the Russian government, developed a strategy that involved controlling the electoral field through the promotion of several spoiler candidates. In short, these spoiler candidates would split the vote in the first round and then drop out of the race, effectively leaving Rajaonarimampianina as the only viable candidate in a run-off election. According to media reports, upwards of eight spoiler candidates received financial incentives

and technical support from the Wagner Group.²⁹

In addition to spoiler candidates, the Wagner Group conducted activities along three complementary lines of effort.³⁰ Using AFRIC (Association of Free Research and International Cooperation), a front organization for the Wagner Group that purports to be a think tank and advocacy group, and Afrique Media, a pan-African media outlet funded by the Wagner Group, the first line of effort sought to elevate specific candidate profiles while promoting anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments. The second line of effort involved the deployment of fake election observers. Again, using AFRIC and coordinating with CIS-EMO (Commonwealth of Independent States – Election Monitoring Organization), the Wagner Group attempted to manipulate voter behaviour by releasing exit polls, which is illegal under Madagascar's election laws. The third line of effort involved targeted smear campaigns to undermine the credibility of the opposition party.

Things did not turn out as expected for the Wagner Group, as popular support for Rajaonarimampianina plummeted, forcing his early withdrawal from the election. Undeterred, and sensing an opportunity to advance Russian geopolitical interests elsewhere, the Wagner Group pivoted and threw its support behind Andry Rajoelina, the former President of Madagascar (2009–2014), who won the election with 56%

27 Mike Eckel, 'Sudan slips in Chaos: Russia lurks in the Background', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 18 April, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/sudan-civil-war-russia-wagner/32369273.html>.

28 Matthew Lauder, 'The Sword of No-Sword: Wagner Group Soft Power Operations in Africa', Defence Research and Development Canada, March, 2024.

29 Anton Shekhovtsov, 'Fake Election Observation as Russia's Tool of Election Interference: The Case of AFRIC', European Platform for Democratic Elections, 26 March, 2020, <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/fake-election-observation-as-russias-tool-of-election-interference-the-case-of-afric.html>.

30 Lauder, 'The Sword of No-Sword'.

of the vote.³¹ Although Rajoelina denied media reports that he had accepted support from the Russian government, the Wagner Group took credit for Rajoelina's election win.³²

While some analysts assert that the Wagner Group failed in Madagascar, primarily because Rajaonarimampianina was not re-elected, such assessments may be short-sighted.³³ While Rajoelina may not have been the Wagner Group's preferred candidate, the group demonstrated a high degree of agility by shifting support to and subsequently cultivating a close relationship with Rajoelina. As a result, Rajoelina has developed good relations with the Russian government, moving quickly to approve mining agreements with the Wagner Group as well as bilateral agreements on health, environmental, and military cooperation with the Russian government. Rajoelina has also steadfastly refused to endorse any criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine at the United Nations (UN) and has created an environment in which Russian companies are given a distinct advantage over Western counterparts.³⁴

Comprehensive operations in the Central African Republic: 2017–2023

The Wagner Group's foray into the Central African Republic (CAR) started in 2017 with a high-level meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Faustin-Archange Touadera, the President of CAR. Recognizing the achievements of the Wagner Group in Syria and Sudan, the Russian government decided that it would assist Touadera by donating weapons and mil-

itary equipment along with security personnel and trainers, including a national security advisor and close protection unit for Touadera, most of which was force generated by the Wagner Group.

By April 2018, the initial group of Russian military trainers were replaced with personnel from Sewa Security Services, a Wagner front organization locally registered in CAR. While much of the first year involved training Force Armée Centrafricaine (FACA) personnel on small unit tactics, the Wagner Group was quickly called into action when the situation in the country turned violent after rebel groups seized several towns and attacked Bangui in December 2018. FACA, backed by a battalion of Wagner operators, conducted a series of highly successful counter-offensives, pushing the rebels out of the recently seized towns, including Bangui. Despite suffering a handful of casualties, the counter-offensives helped to further establish the Wagner Group's credibility as a reliable security partner. Additionally, the group's success on the battlefield also undermined the reputation of the UN mission to CAR, which was generally seen as ineffective.³⁵ By mid-2021, it was evident that the Wagner Group had shifted from a training to a combat mission, including the planning and execution of large-scale offensive operations independent of FACA and any oversight from the CAR government. In essence, the Wagner Group was given free rein over the country by the CAR government.

Military operations, however, were only one component of the Wagner Group's broader

31 Shekhovtsov, 'Fake Election Observation'.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Lauder, 'Sword of No-Sword'.

35 Matthew Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption.'

effort in CAR. The group, in close coordination with the Russian embassy in Bangui, implemented a wide-ranging influence campaign designed to promote pro-Russian sentiment amongst the local population.³⁶ Using various businesses and other organizations, including the Russia House cultural centre, and employing local media specialists as well as Russian academics, the Wagner Group set about promoting the idea of the Russian government as the guardian of Africa.³⁷ The group also conducted an extensive social media campaign designed to promote pro-Russian CAR politicians, such as Touadera and former Prime Minister Firmin Ngrébada.³⁸ The social media campaign was also used to denigrate the UN and the French government and pushed a slew of anti-Western narratives.

The last component of Wagner's efforts in CAR was focused on securing market access, particularly regarding CAR's natural resources. Through a series of front companies, the Wagner Group secured the rights to some of the most lucrative gold and diamond mines in CAR, and later expanded to timber harvesting, the food and alcohol sector, and agricultural and livestock management. The group also established a highly profitable revenue stream by operating a smuggling network to and from Cameroon, which served as one of the

group's main transportation nodes to Russia.³⁹ For a short period of time, the Wagner Group assumed administrative control of the CAR customs and taxation services on the border with Cameroon. This not only allowed the group unfettered access to and movement across the border, but also created opportunities for the group to confiscate goods and levy heavy taxes, including temporarily seizing equipment destined for the UN mission in CAR.⁴⁰

Filling the security void in Mali: 2021–2023

Following increasing domestic hostilities, a military junta arrested several political leaders and assumed power in Mali through a coup d'état in May 2021. By September 2021, diplomatic representatives from the Russian government had held numerous meetings with their Malian counterparts to discuss security and economic concerns. During this period, it was also revealed that Malian government officials, at the behest of the Russian government, had signed a deal with the Wagner Group for the provision of security services. According to media reports, the group would receive approximately \$10 million (USD) a month to provide training and related combat and security services.⁴¹

By January 2022, the Wagner Group, supported by the 223rd Flight Detachment of the

36 Although the Russia House is a Wagner Group organization, there is evidence demonstrating that it provided operational direction to the Russian embassy in Bangui, particularly to manage fallout from the assassination of Russian journalists in 2018. See Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption'.

37 Entities used by the Wagner Group ranged from mining companies and private investment firms to news media organizations, a film production company, and professional associations. The Russia House was a Wagner Group front organization managed by Dmitri Sytyi, a former employee of the IRA and close associate of Prigozhin. See Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption'.

38 Lauder, 'Russian Strategic Corruption'.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

Russian air force, deployed a significant number of combat-ready personnel to Mali. According to reports, the group had three complementary tasks in Mali. The first was to train the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) in basic infantry skills, weapons handling, and small unit tactics. The second was to provide close protection for Mali's senior political leadership, and the last was to conduct offensive operations to eliminate Islamic extremist groups.⁴²

Within days of their arrival in Mali, Wagner operators conducted joint patrols with FAMa units outside of Bamako, and between late January and March 2022 the Wagner Group units conducted several limited offensive operations in support of FAMa, including several air-mobile operations and dismounted patrols. According to media reports, several of these operations were characterized by pervasive human rights abuses by both FAMa and Wagner operators, including incidents of assault, torture, and the illegal detention and execution of civilians.⁴³

In its first major offensive operation in Mali, the Wagner Group, along with a small FAMa detachment, conducted an air-mobile operation in the town of Moura on 27 March 2022. According to news media reports, the combined force, which was inserted into the town, was ambushed by up to 30 militants in the market square, resulting in the death of two Wagner operators.⁴⁴ An unknown number of civilians

were also killed after getting caught in the crossfire. Over the next four days, FAMa and Wagner operators rounded up and detained most of the men in the town, and by the time the operation ended on 31 March 2022, upwards of 500 civilians and militants had been killed.⁴⁵

The massacre at Moura was not an isolated incident, however. Over the next two years, Wagner operators, along with supporting FAMa units, were responsible for a countless number of civilian casualties and deaths. While human rights organizations have reported extensively on human rights violations and war crimes conducted by the Wagner Group and supporting FAMa units, the Malian government has shown no interest in ending its contract with the group, even after the implementation of sanctions and a warning by the US government. The Russian government has also dismissed complaints about human rights abuses, likely considering the civilian casualties nothing more than the cost of doing business.⁴⁶

The beginning of the end for the Wagner Group in Ukraine in 2022–2023

The Wagner Group's participation in Russia's war against Ukraine can be divided into three operational phases. The first phase took place prior to the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, with the pre-positioning of upwards of

42 Ibid.

43 Nick Turse, 'Wagner Group Disappeared and Executed Civilians in Mali', *The Intercept*, 24 July, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/07/24/wagner-group-mali/>.

44 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

45 Jason Burke, 'Russian Mercenaries behind slaughter of 500 in Mali village', *The Guardian*, 20 May, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/20/russian-mercenaries-behind-slaughter-in-mali-village-un-report-finds>.

46 Elian Peltier, Mady Camara, and Christiaan Triebert, "'The killing didn't stop.'" In Mali, a Massacre with a Russian Footprint', *The New York Times*, 1 June, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/world/africa/mali-massacre-investigation.html>.

400 operators in Ukraine to conduct acts of sabotage and to assassinate key political leaders.⁴⁷ Although it is not known whether the Wagner Group successfully completed any of its tasks, news media reports indicated that several Wagner Group teams had been arrested by Ukrainian security services immediately following the start of the invasion.⁴⁸

The second phase of the Wagner Group's operation in support of the war started in early March 2022 as Russian forces attempted to advance towards Kyiv. During this phase, Wagner elements deployed alongside Russian regular force units, conducted interrogations of captured Ukrainian soldiers, and detained civilians in the suburbs of Kyiv. In addition to Russian troops, Wagner operators have been implicated in the torture and execution of at least 73 civilians in Bucha.⁴⁹

By late April and early May 2022, particularly after the redeployment of Russian forces from around Kyiv to concentrate on seizing the entirety of the Donbas, the Wagner Group transitioned to a more conventional combat role. During this period, Wagner units played a critical part in a number of battles and assaults.

Building on a series of successful combat engagements, the Wagner Group participated in the battles for Bakhmut and Soledar in the summer of 2022, which saw some of the most intense

and bloody fighting of the war to date. Over time, the Wagner Group assumed responsibility from Russian regular force units for seizing and holding onto the two towns. Characterized by a devastated landscape and gruelling house-to-house fighting, it was a monumental task which clearly demonstrated the Russian military's faith in the combat abilities of the Wagner Group.⁵⁰

However, agitated by significant losses of personnel and equipment, Prigozhin took to social media and posted a series of expletive-laden tirades about a lack of ammunition and support from the Russian military.⁵¹ It was an astonishing public rebuke by Prigozhin, who had only recently acknowledged that he was the leader of the Wagner Group.⁵² Making matters worse, Prigozhin, while showing the bodies of dead Wagner operators, personally blamed senior Russian military leadership for a series of strategic failures in Ukraine, specifically naming Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov. When his outbursts ceased to gain attention, Prigozhin started to verbally insult Shoigu's family members.⁵³ Not only were Prigozhin's outbursts a clear sign of disrespect towards Russia's military leadership, but they also exposed deep divisions within the Russian government regarding the way that the war in Ukraine was being prosecuted. Although

47 Matthew Lauder, "'There is Enemy': Psycho-social effects of Dyversanti Rumours during the initial phase of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine', Defence Research and Development Canada, September, 2022.

48 Ibid.

49 Brenda Cole, 'Russia's Wagner Group Soldiers behind Bucha Killings, German Intel claims', *Newsweek*, 7 April, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/der-spiegel-russia-ukraine-troops-bucha-wagner-putin-1695974>.

50 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

51 Aleksei Aleksandrov, 'Russian Mercenary Leader's war of words with Moscow's Military Brass deepens amid fighting in Bakhmut', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 December, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-war-vagner-prigozhin-rift-military/32202407.html>.

52 Up to autumn 2023, Prigozhin had steadfastly denied any connection to the Wagner Group.

53 Lauder, 'From Boutique to Battalion and back again?'

Putin did not comment on the rift, there is little doubt that Prigozhin's invectives put him in an awkward position, potentially setting up a situation in which Putin would be forced to take sides.

The grinding battles of Soledar and Bakhmut also led the Wagner Group to initiate a prisoner recruitment campaign. With Prigozhin visiting penal colonies and making impassioned speeches about the defence of Russia and the success of the Wagner Group, and largely incentivized by the prospect of receiving a full pardon in return for six months of combat service, approximately 35,000 to 45,000 prisoners joined the Wagner Group between late summer 2022 and February 2023, when the prison recruitment programme was abruptly ended by the Russian MoD.⁵⁴ Although lacking military training and skills, the introduction of prisoners had a significant impact on how the Wagner Group conducted operations, including mounting a seemingly endless number of tactical assaults against Ukrainian defensive positions. Moreover, the introduction of prisoners permitted more experienced and skilled operators to be elevated to leadership positions or to be assigned to specialized teams, such as UAV operators or sniper detachments, thereby enhancing the group's operational effectiveness, including its lethality on the battlefield.⁵⁵ In the end, the prisoner recruits served the intended purpose, which was to create a critical mass of

expendable soldiers that could be used to shock and overwhelm Ukrainian defensive lines.

By May 2023, however, the Wagner Group was a spent force. After months of high intensity combat marked by significant equipment and human losses, and with a casualty rate estimated at more than 80%, the Wagner Group was ordered by senior Russian leadership to rotate off the front line and to spend the next few months reconstituting its forces.⁵⁶ Soon after its departure from the battlefield, the Russian MoD officially announced that the group would be formally incorporated into the Russian army. For both Wagner and Prigozhin, the Ukraine campaign was over.

The Wagner Group mutiny in 2023

The scenes of armed Wagner Group soldiers on the streets of Rostov-on-Don were remarkable and instantly drew comparisons by Western news media outlets to the attempted Soviet coup d'état in 1991 when Communist hardliners tried to seize the Kremlin.⁵⁷ But the apparent Wagner Group mutiny was not a power grab by the political opposition, nor was it an attempt to depose Putin. Rather, it was the culmination of a personal vendetta by Prigozhin against the leadership of the Russian military; and while the protest did not target Putin explicitly, it was clear that Putin was publicly exposed as weak and vulnerable.⁵⁸

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Nicholas Camut, 'Over 20,000 Wagner troops killed, 40,000 wounded in Ukraine: Prigozhin-linked channel', *Politico*, 20 July, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-war-over-20000-wagner-troops-were-killed-prigozhin/>.

57 Zoya Sheftalovich, 'Prigozhin's Wagner Mutiny is over. Now What?' *Politico*, 26 June, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/yevgeny-prigozhin-wagner-mutiny-over-what-happens-now/>.

58 Martha Raddatz and Matt Seyler, 'Prigozhin used False Pretext to lead Wagner Group's Armed Insurrection against Russia: US Official', *ABC News*, 27 June, 2023, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/prigozhin-false-pretext-lead-wagner-groups-armed-insurrection/story?id=100407313>.

Following unsubstantiated claims by Prigozhin that the Russian MoD had deliberately targeted a Wagner Group field camp in the Donbas region, killing several operators, elements of the Wagner Group moved across the Russian border from occupied Ukraine on the night of 23–24 June 2023 and seized key military facilities in Rostov-on-Don, along with the police station and airport. In an early morning announcement, Prigozhin was careful to state that the seizure of facilities would not disrupt the command of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine and that the protest, which he called a “march for justice”, was not a criticism or rebuke of Putin.⁵⁹ Instead, Prigozhin made it clear that he was angry with the leadership of the Russian MoD, specifically Shoigu and Gerasimov.

After calling out Shoigu and Gerasimov, Prigozhin announced that a Wagner Group convoy, including troop transports, armoured personnel carriers, and main battle tanks on flatbed trucks, was on its way to Moscow to arrest the senior leadership of the Russian MoD.⁶⁰ It was an audacious move by Prigozhin, and one that would ultimately seal his fate.

While there was an element of theatre to the mutiny, with armed Wagner soldiers drinking coffee and posing with adoring residents in Rostov-on-Don, the seriousness of the situation was quickly realized when the Wagner Group convoy came under fire from a Russian military helicopter near Voronezh, approximately

halfway to Moscow. Well-armed, the Wagner Group reciprocated with shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, destroying two Russian military aircraft. In the ensuing fracas, a fuel storage facility was also destroyed, sending large plumes of smoke into the sky. While it is unknown whether civilians were injured in the exchange, news media organizations later claimed that more than 20 Russian air force personnel had been killed.⁶¹ Undeterred, the Wagner Group convoy regrouped and continued towards Moscow.

Clearly sensing the gravity of the situation, the Russian security services quickly implemented several protective measures, including setting up roadblocks along the highway to Moscow, blocking online news aggregation services, and deploying security personnel to key intersections around the Kremlin. The Federal Security Service (FSB) also abruptly raided the headquarters of the Wagner Group in St Petersburg, confiscating more than \$47 million (USD) and announcing that it was opening a criminal investigation against Prigozhin for attempted mutiny (under Article 279 of the Russian Criminal Code). State broadcasters also interrupted television programming and warned Russians not to believe Prigozhin, claiming that his statements were part of an elaborate provocation. Putin also addressed the nation, declaring the actions by Prigozhin and the Wagner Group as a “stab in the back” and a “mortal blow” to

59 Joshua Yaffa, ‘Inside the Wagner Group’s Armed Uprising’.

60 Rob Picheta, ‘Wall Street Journal: Wagner Boss planned to Capture Top Russian Defence Chiefs’, CNN, 28 June, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/28/europe/wagner-prigozhin-rebellion-capture-attempt-intl/index.html>.

61 Matthew Lauder, ‘The Wagner Private Military Corporation mutiny: Observations and implications’, Defence Research and Development Canada, August, 2023.

Russia's war in Ukraine.⁶² Putin clearly framed Prigozhin's mutiny as a national betrayal.

The mutiny was over as quickly as it had begun. On the evening of 24 June, less than a day after it started and with the Wagner convoy approximately 200 kilometres from Moscow, Prigozhin ordered his troops to stand down. Later that night, Wagner Group personnel withdrew from Rostov-on-Don and returned to their field camp in occupied Ukraine. Although little information was available at the time, it was later revealed by various media outlets that Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko had personally intervened and brokered a peace deal, the crux of which was that Prigozhin and the Wagner Group would relocate to Belarus.⁶³ The deal also stipulated that all criminal charges against Prigozhin would be dropped, and all assets seized by state authorities would be returned. It seemed an utterly bizarre end to a remarkable series of events, but the crisis in Russia was over.

Elements of the Wagner Group relocated to Belarus by mid-July. At the same time, the Russian government implemented a wide-ranging smear campaign attacking Prigozhin's reputation to undermine his popularity amongst the Russian population. The effort to undercut Prigozhin, which included leaking seemingly

scandalous photos of Prigozhin's home and office to Russian tabloid news outlets, was complemented by attempts to rehabilitate Putin's faltering domestic image.⁶⁴

Although Prigozhin largely kept a low profile after the failed mutiny, he did make a handful of public appearances. The first was the release of a video on social media on 19 July showing him addressing Wagner Group personnel in Belarus. In his speech, Prigozhin thanked his troops and announced that the Wagner Group would no longer fight in Ukraine but would focus on Africa instead.⁶⁵ A couple of weeks later, Prigozhin met with several African political leaders on the sidelines of the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg. The following month, Prigozhin released another video on social media, this time from an undisclosed location in Africa. In the video, Prigozhin, who was dressed in camouflage and carrying an assault rifle, declared that the Wagner Group would make Africa "more free" and continue to advance Russian geopolitical interests around the world.⁶⁶ Prigozhin also implied that the group's new focus in Africa was an official task from the Russian government, although he did not elaborate on the details.

Within days of the release of the African video and two months after the mutiny,

62 Rich Booth and Holly Hales, 'Furious Putin calls Wagner Coup "Treason": "This is a stab in the back to everyone in Russia"', *Independent*, 24 June, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/putin-wagner-russia-treason-coup-b2363430.html>.

63 Matthew Lauder, 'The Wagner Private Military Corporation mutiny: Observations and implications'.

64 Ty Roush, 'Russia escalates a Smear Campaign against "Traitor" Prigozhin that includes Wigs and Weapons', *Forbes*, 8 July, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tyleroush/2023/07/08/russia-escalates-a-smear-campaign-against-traitor-prigozhin-that-includes-wigs-and-weapons/?sh=43ea93524606>.

65 Guy Falconbridge, 'Russia's Prigozhin: No more fighting in Ukraine but prepare for Africa – video', *Reuters*, 19 July, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/video-surfaces-purporting-show-russian-wagner-chief-welcoming-his-men-belarus-2023-07-19/>.

66 Mary Ilyushina, 'Wagner Mercenary Group to focus on Africa, Prigozhin says in new video', *The Washington Post*, 22 August, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/22/prigozhin-africa-wagner-russia/>.

however, Prigozhin was dead after his plane unexpectedly deteriorated and crashed in a field just outside Moscow. While some analysts believe that senior Russian military leaders decided to eliminate Prigozhin after he overruled Putin's plan for a change in Wagner Group leadership, subsequent media reporting pointed to Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, as being responsible for Prigozhin's death. According to media reports, it was merely a matter of time before Prigozhin was eliminated for his betrayal of Putin's trust.⁶⁷

67 Briar Stewart, 'It appears Prigozhin got the Punishment Putin vowed. What will the Russian leader do next?' CBC News, 24 August, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/prigozhin-crash-putin-russia-mutiny-1.6945996>; Holly Ellyatt, "'Loyalty alone is not enough': What Putin demands from his Inner Circle', CNBC, 5 October, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/05/russias-putin-demands-absolute-loyalty-from-his-inner-circle.html>.

Countering the Wagner Group

One of the West's most frequently used responses to the Wagner Group has been economic sanctions, particularly economic and travel sanctions against the group's leadership, as well as their business assets. However, while sanctions are meant to undermine the ability of designated individuals and organizations to function, there is little evidence showing that they work, or at least as well as intended.⁶⁸ The challenge is twofold.

First, there is a lack of international consensus on the implementation of economic sanctions. While the US, Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and the European Union (EU) generally implement complementary sanctions, quite often these sanctions are not applied by other countries or economic unions, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and BRICS. Moreover, there is a lack of enforcement on economic sanctions, even by the countries and unions that impose the sanctions in the first place.

The second issue is that the very nature of the Wagner Group, and similar organizations characterized by an emergent, dynamic, and evolving constellation of organizations, defies easy classification, making it difficult to apply normative frameworks. While there are some registered businesses, Wagner Group ownership is often obscured or unidentifiable, with some corporations periodically dissolving and reforming under new names and ownership.⁶⁹ Additionally, some elements of the broader Wagner

Group operate illegally, while others move between black and grey markets as well as the space between public and private sectors. In at least one case (e.g., AFRIC), a Wagner Group organization does not exist on paper – that is, it is not a registered or legal organization – but operates as a loose community association funded through cryptocurrency. As a result, economic sanctions are often unable to keep up with the evolving manifestations of the Wagner Group.

To designate or not to designate

Over the past year, several countries have designated the Wagner Group as either a terrorist group or a transnational criminal organization, particularly the UK and the US, whereas Czechia passed a resolution declaring the current Russian government a terrorist regime.⁷⁰ Additionally, the French parliament passed a resolution declaring the Wagner Group a terrorist organization and called upon the EU to do the same, although the resolution was non-binding and largely symbolic. Currently, the EU has not designated the Wagner Group or any of its associated entities as a terrorist organization, which would allow it to freeze the group's funds and other financial assets and resources. There is also a call for the Canadian government to officially designate the Wagner Group a terrorist organization, which would permit the government to use a range of legislative tools to counter the group, including banning the use

68 Joaquin Sapien and Joshua Kaplan, 'How the U.S. has struggled to Stop the Growth of a Shadowy Russian Private Army', *ProPublica*, 27 May, 2022, <https://www.propublica.org/article/wagner-group-russia-putin-private-army>.

69 Wagner Group organizations continued to generate significant revenues even when sanctioned by rerouting funds or creating new shell corporations.

70 It should be noted that, due to space limitations, a comprehensive discussion of the legal aspects and the application of normative frameworks against the Wagner Group is beyond the remit of this Working Paper.

or display of the organization’s logo, criminalizing participation in or support for the group, freezing assets and permitting civil action to be brought against both the group and its members, as well as anyone who facilitated Wagner Group activities.⁷¹

However, while there is a push by several countries to designate the Wagner Group as either a terrorist group or a transnational criminal organization, some scholars have expressed caution about taking this course of action. For example, components of the Wagner Group clearly operate under the auspices of the Russian government – that is, they function as a state actor – and provide support for various legitimate African military forces, and a designation may inadvertently restrict diplomatic relations with those countries. While there is no doubt about the atrocities committed by the Wagner Group, some scholars question whether the organization qualifies as a terrorist organization, arguing that the lack of political motivation and the fact that it operates in an official or semi-official capacity for the Russian state – rather than as a non-state actor – defy traditional conceptualizations of terrorist

organizations.⁷² Moreover, some experts argue that, even if implemented, such designations are meaningless unless there is consensus and commitment amongst international partners to ensure enforcement action against the Wagner Group and associated entities and individuals.⁷³

On the other hand, proponents of designation point to two benefits. First, designation sends a clear message to the Russian government that the West will not tolerate the criminal behaviour and atrocities committed by the Wagner Group and that Russia is not abiding by international agreements and norms.⁷⁴ Second, designation raises public awareness of the despicable and unlawful actions of both the Wagner Group and the Russian government, as well as how the Russian government intentionally exploits conceptual fuzziness between state and non-state actors to achieve geopolitical objectives.⁷⁵

Some suggestions for countermeasures

The question remains as to what can be done to counter the Wagner Group and similar organizations. There are no easy answers, but one potential strategy involves treating the group

71 While parliamentarians voted unanimously to declare the Wagner Group a terrorist entity in early 2023, an official designation must be made by the Governor in Council and only at the request of the Minister of Public Safety. Jessica Davis, ‘Canada Should Officially Designate the Wagner Group as a Terrorist Organization’, *The Globe and Mail*, 14 September, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canada-should-officially-designate-the-wagner-group-as-a-terrorist/>.

72 Henry Ridgwell, ‘West Mulls Designating Russia’s Wagner Group as Terrorists’, *Voice of America*, 11 May, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/west-mulls-designating-russia-s-wagner-group-as-terrorists-/7088702.html>.

73 Elena Pokalova, ‘The Problem with Designating the Wagner Group as a Terrorist Organization’, *Modern War Institute*, 09 August, 2023, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-problem-with-designating-the-wagner-group-as-a-terrorist-organization/>.

74 James Patrla and Phil Wasielewski, ‘It’s Time to Designate Wagner Group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization’, *Lawfare*, 30 June, 2022, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/its-time-designate-wagner-group-foreign-terrorist-organization>.

75 Dylan Gooding, ‘To Unmask Russian Gray Zone Tactics, Label Wagner a Terrorist Group’, *American Security Project*, 7 September, 2023, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/russian-gray-zone-tactics/>.

as a dark network and using social network analysis to simultaneously target various layers of nodes, using a range of policy, economic, law enforcement, and military tools. The objective would be to generate systemic shock to disrupt operations, even for short periods.⁷⁶ In other words, the Wagner Group needs to be conceptualized and dealt with as a non-hierarchical, decentralized, and dynamic organized crime or terrorist network requiring simultaneous and synchronized targeting at all levels of the organization.

Although not a definitive or comprehensive list of potential countermeasures to be implemented by the West, the following are a few suggestions for disrupting the Wagner Group, and similar organizations:

- Designate the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization or terrorist group.
- Establish international mechanisms to facilitate intelligence sharing and support coordination on enforcement activities, particularly between the EU and NATO.
- Create a multinational body, possibly as an adjunct to the International Criminal Court, to conduct investigations to expose Wagner Group activities, particularly but not limited to illegal activities and human rights violations.
- Implement economic sanctions against Wagner entities, as well as associated entities or support/enabler organizations and individuals, including frontline personnel – that is, close sanctions gaps.
- Implement and pursue a policy of sanctions enforcement, including the creation of a multinational body, possibly an adjunct to the International Criminal Court, to advise on and oversee enforcement actions.
- Implement international travel bans on Wagner Group employees, including frontline and support personnel.
- Pressure neutral or non-aligned countries into implementing and enforcing economic sanctions targeting the Wagner Group and associated entities and individuals.
- Seize financial assets and bank accounts of entities and individuals associated with the Wagner Group, along with Wagner Group enablers, support structures and organizations.
- Issue international arrest warrants for Wagner Group personnel implicated in illegal activity, including but not limited to war crimes and human rights violations.
- Set up international taskforces to coordinate enforcement operations and maritime security and counter-terrorism operations, particularly to enforce arms and weapons embargoes.
- Contribute personnel and resources to international operations focused on peacekeeping and security-force capacity building.
- Implement a strategic communications campaign focused on raising public awareness about the Wagner Group and highlight the organization's close association with the Russian government. It is important to challenge statements by Putin that attempt to disassociate the Russian government from

⁷⁶ Jorg Rabb and H. Brinton Milward, 'Dark Networks as Problems', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Volume 13, Issue 4, (2003): 413–439. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3525656>.

the Wagner Group, or that claim such organizations do not exist under Russian law. In other words, hold Russia accountable for the Wagner Group.

- Target and disrupt communications between operational and tactical components of the network, particularly during combat engagements.
- Amplify dissension and factionalism within the organization, particularly between various levels of leadership.
- Target and undermine the morale of Wagner Group personnel, particularly at lower levels of the organization functioning in combat zones.
- Increase awareness of Wagner Group atrocities and casualties amongst the Russian domestic population.
- Make client states aware of alternatives to the Wagner Group and encourage them to seek these alternatives.
- Increase diplomatic relations and investment in countries at risk of Wagner Group exploitation.

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