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Russia's State-Sponsored Killers: The Wagner Group

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Abstract

The importance of irregular military companies has been increasing for Russia since it began its war against Ukraine in 2014/15. These military companies act in coordination with the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the foreign intelligence service, and the presidential administration. Russia's mercenaries practice exterminatory warfare, and operate as parallel or shadow armies, which can rarely be held accountable.

The Wagner Group

Although the Wagner Group receives the most media attention, there are almost a dozen other Russian suppliers on the private military market. Known by name are the Wagner Group, the RSB Group, MAR, Shchit (Щит; En: "shield"), the Moran Security Group, Patriot, Redut-Antiterror (Center R), and Antiterror-Orel.

The Wagner Group was founded in the spring of 2014 by former Lieutenant-Colonel Dmitry Utkin. Utkin had already worked for the Moran Security Group and had previously been a member of the 2nd Special Reconnaissance Brigade of the Russian military intelligence service the GRU, and served as a commander of the private military company (PMC) Slavyansky Korpus in Syria. The Wagner Group came to be composed of former members of the Slavyansky Korpus, the GRU, the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV), various Spetsnaz units, and former Ministry of Defense staff. This force was initially assembled to provide military support to the separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region.

During the 2014–15 Ukrainian war, Utkin allegedly insisted that his troops wear helmets modeled on those worn by the *Wehrmacht* in World War II. The name "Wagner" refers to the German composer Richard Wagner, whom Utkin admires. Utkin was awarded the Order of Valor from the Kremlin on 9th December 2016, and a photo shows him with President Putin. In 2017, Utkin became general director of the Concord catering company, owned by the oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin, whose career began as a criminal in St. Petersburg. Prigozhin served a nine-year prison sentence for robbery, before founding a restaurant chain after his release, and later rose to become a catering supplier to the Kremlin via Concord, which is why he came to be known as "Putin's chef".

The Wagner group has been active in Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Libya, the Central African Republic, Madagascar and Mozambique, Botswana, Burundi, Chad, DR Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and the Comoros Islands.

It is controlled by the GRU, which equips, trains, and commands it.

In early 2016, the Wagner Group had about 1,000 operatives. In August 2017, this number had reportedly grown to 5,000, and in December 2017 it had risen to about 6,000. In total, approximately 10,000 men have already fought for Wagner. Currently, Wagner has an estimated 5,000 combatants, although exact numbers are difficult to assess, as mercenaries sign temporary contracts and rotate after deployments. Ukrainian intelligence identified 4,184 Wagner mercenaries by name as of December 2021. The Wagner Group's personnel also includes convicts, mostly felons, who since the summer of 2022 have been recruited directly from penal camps for deployment as part of the war on Ukraine, in exchange for the promise of exemption from punishment.

Wagner in Ukraine

Wagner combatants made up a part of the so-called 'little green men' who carried out the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and then fought in Donbas on the side of the separatists. The Wagner presence initially involved two units called 'Luna' and 'Steppe', each about 250 strong. One of the units consisted of the men around Dmitry Utkin. After the annexation of Crimea, about 300 Wagner personnel joined the separatists in Donbas and fought under the command of former GRU Colonel Igor Girkin (Strelkov).

In early May 2014, the Wagner Group helped separatist forces overcome Ukrainian security forces, capture local administrations, seize ammunition depots, control towns, and conduct reconnaissance. Wagner men helped enforce the monopoly on violence in the "Lugansk People's Republic" against wayward pro-Russian battalions. The presence of Wagner mercenaries meant that the often drunk and looting separatist forces were punished. In Ukraine, Wagner Group practices what it has learnt in Syria and Africa (see below): ruthless, indiscriminate murder. The Wagner Group was

involved in the shooting down of a Ukrainian military aircraft in June 2014, the storming of both Luhansk airport and Debaltseve, as well as, in 2022, the massacre in the city of Bucha.

Wagner in Syria

After Wagner “proved its worth” in Donbas, the Group joined Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015. In Syria, Prigozhin was involved, with his oil company *Evro Polis*, in recapturing occupied oil and gas fields on behalf of the Syrian Energy Ministry. Twenty-five percent of the profits from the oil and gas fields went to *Evro Polis* after their liberation from Islamic State (IS) control.

The Wagner Group operated with over 1,000 fighters in Syria, playing a significant role in capturing Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor. Wagner still operates in Syria; its fighters are brought to Syria in military aircraft, treated in military hospitals in Russia, fight with regular Russian troops, and are awarded official army medals. Equipped and armed by the Russian Ministry of Defense and supported from the air by Russian fighter aircraft, the Wagner mercenaries did the “dirty work” against IS on the ground. The Wagner Group trained two Syrian military companies and then operated with them. In 2017, a Syrian army deserter, Muhammad Taha Elismail Alabdullah (Bouta), was tortured and cruelly murdered with a sledgehammer on camera near the Syrian city of Homs. Four Wagner men were involved in the murder.

Wagner in Libya

In 2020, Wagner fighters, financed in part by the United Arab Emirates, supported General Khalif Haftar’s forces in Libya. According to information provided by the chairman of the Libyan “High Council of State” Khalid al-Mishri in December 2021, at times as many as 7,000 Wagner fighters have been in Libya, with 30 combat aircraft at their disposal. However, these figures should be treated with caution. A UN investigative report covering the period from March 2021 to April 2022 proved that the Wagner Group violated international law in supporting Khalif Haftar by indiscriminately deploying mines in civilian areas. By the spring of 2022, approximately 900 of the previously 2,200 Wagner combatants were said to remain in Libya—the rest have been withdrawn to fight in Ukraine.

Wagner in Sub-Saharan Africa

PMCs are part of a broader strategy to reclaim Russian influence in Africa. Between 2014 and 2019, Russia became the largest arms supplier in Africa, accounting for 49 percent of all arms sold on the continent. Wagner mercenaries had been deployed to Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Madagascar, Libya, Mali, and

Mozambique as of 2017. By the end of 2019, the Wagner Group already had an office in 20 African countries. In September 2019, Wagner sent between 160 and 200 of its personnel to Mozambique to contain the insurgency of the so-called Central African Province of the Islamic State (IS-CAP) on behalf of the incumbent government. However, the inability of the Wagner force to combat the IS-CAP insurgency led to a humiliating withdrawal in December 2019.

After a 2017 meeting between President Putin and Omar al-Bashir, then president of Sudan, in Sochi, security cooperation between Russia and Sudan picked up steam. In late July, 500 Wagner fighters appeared on the border between Sudan and the CAR. The 2021 military coup in Sudan that had replaced the interim civilian government was supported by the Russian government. In Sudan, one of Prigozhin’s companies was allowed to export gold from a Sudanese mine.

In March 2018, the Kremlin said that 170 “civilian advisors” had arrived in the CAR to train government forces. Back in 2017, the UN Security Council had suspended an arms embargo on the CAR and approved the deployment of 175 Russian trainers for the local military. With the exception of five soldiers, all were Wagner mercenaries. In the CAR, the Wagner Group served as a security advisor to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Since December 2020, an additional 300 soldiers from the Russian Army have reportedly supported the president against opposition rebels. Russian Special Forces, Wagner mercenaries, and the CAR’s pro-government military protected President Touadéra during his presidential election campaign in December 2020 and undertook joint military operations in the Bangui area against insurgent groups.

A UN working group on human rights violations by mercenaries accused the Russian mercenaries in the CAR of committing serious human rights violations along with the pro-government army, including rape, summary executions and targeted killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and murders. The Wagner Group has increasingly come to operate independently of the CAR government army, even as it continues to train and coordinate them. The presence of the Wagner Group makes it considerably more difficult for the UN mission MINUSCA to operate in the CAR, because they restrict the mission’s freedom of movement.

Since the capture of Boda, the Russian-controlled company *Bois Rouge* has been exporting precious woods from the CAR to Russia on a large scale. The importer in Russia *Broker Expert* is based in St. Petersburg and is a trading partner of Prigozhin’s empire. Companies from Russia, such as *Sewa Services*, *Midas Resources*, and *Lobaye Invest* were granted long-term mining licenses by the CAR government, particularly

for gold and diamond mines in Bambouri, Bornou, and Adji.

Wagner in Mali

For Russia, Mali is the beginning of its military power projection in West Africa. President Macron's political defeat in Mali marked the entry point for Russia. The Wagner mission in the CAR can be interpreted as a 'role model' for its operations in Mali. While French units and UN missions have been unable to demonstrate success against Islamist groups for years, Wagner mercenaries claim to "solve" conflicts with insurgents within weeks. Approximately 1,000 Wagner Group fighters have been operating in Mali since the fall of 2021. Wagner was only able to gain access against the backdrop of the failure of the EU training mission in Mali. During the EU mission, the security situation in Mali deteriorated continuously.

The Wagner Group offered Mali five helicopters on behalf of the Kremlin (which the EU mission lacked), but most importantly, the Wagner Group was willing to carry out massacres in Fulani villages. It also enjoyed a comparatively good reputation among Malian soldiers—a group of military officers had seized power in Mali in August 2020—because Wagner provided material and food, and its personnel went out on combat missions with Malian troops. The Malian soldiers' human rights abuses did not raise any concerns among their Russian partners.

Over time, however, Malian troops became increasingly disillusioned with the Wagner force as it dominated joint operations. Moreover, one consequence of the Wagner forces' indiscriminate killing operations was that relatives of villagers who had been arbitrarily killed began to join jihadist groups, increasing their numbers. At the end of March 2022, a massacre in Moura, a Malian village with inhabitants from the Peul and Fulani ethnic groups, killed between 200 and 400 people, and showed that the army and Wagner do not seek to distinguish between jihadists and civilians.

Since Mali cannot pay Russian mercenaries, they are either paid by Russian sources or draw income from Mali's gold mines. Many Malian officers have enjoyed training in Russia, and cooperation with the Soviet Union remains a good memory for many. On the ground, Wagner is dependent on logistics, enemy recon-

naissance by the Malian military, and the Malian military's knowledge of the local language and culture, which makes its forces quite vulnerable, in a way that was evident in Mozambique. The Wagner Group's approach is similar to the one it has employed in Ukraine and Syria: it deploys ruthless killer troops, but certainly does not solve any of the challenges that have led to the rise of jihadist groups.

Wagner's Shock Troops

The importance of Russia's irregular military companies has been increasing since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in the Donbas between 2014 and 2022. They have become the regime's agents of influence, war profiteers, and an auxiliary force for state security agencies. Russian irregular armed groups interact with the Russian Ministry of Defense, especially the GRU, as well as the FSB, the foreign intelligence service (SVR), and the presidential administration. They complement but do not replace regular security organs.

Wagner's combatants specialize in capturing cities and positions held by irregular troops from the other party in a conflict. They provide agile ground forces for reconnaissance, sabotage operations, and the indiscriminate "liquidation" of people attributed to the opposing side. At the same time, there are repeated complaints from Wagner combatants that Russia's regular army puts them at a disadvantage when providing them with weapons, ammunition, vehicles, food and other supplies, or sends them on high-risk missions without providing support.

Russia's military companies are an instrument of Russia's foreign and security policy. They can be deployed flexibly and covertly, they cannot be held accountable for crimes, or only to a limited extent. Within their missions, business interests and military objectives are intertwined. Russia's military companies serve to destabilize pro-Western, and stabilize anti-Western, governments. They prepare for, support, and complement the deployment of regular forces and are likely to operate at a lower overall cost than regular forces. Deaths and injuries among irregular combatants are officially invisible. The exploitation of lucrative gold, diamond, oil or gas deposits is an expression of the economic and political fusion of oligarchic and military interests that lie behind these private military companies.

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Wagner PMC and the Semi-Privatisation of Russian State Security

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Abstract

This article traces the increasingly significant role played by the Wagner Group private military company (PMC) within Russia. Wagner PMC's prominent, if not officially acknowledged, role in the offensive on Ukraine has accelerated a process by which it has semi-privatised certain functions of state security. This is likely to have an impact on the nature of the Russian state in the years ahead.

Wars tend to reconfigure states. The Russian government may have thought that its “special military operation” could be completed quickly and without major blowback, but ten months on, it is clear that this will not be the case. Dynamics of reconfiguration are increasingly emerging within the Russian state as it takes incremental steps to reorient its economy and society to serve the war effort. In this context, one notable shift has been towards the greater privatisation of state security functions and the accumulation of political power by a key figure within this shift, the now self-declared founder of Wagner PMC, Evgeny Prigozhin. Although it remains uncertain how the Russian state, and its prevailing political-economic elite networks, will develop in the coming years, it seems plausible that Wagner PMC and Prigozhin will play an increasingly influential role therein. This short article aims to provide a summary of how this role and influence have grown, as well as of the ways in which at least some Russian state security functions have been semi-privatised.

Pre-War Emergence of Wagner PMC and Prigozhin

The mythology of “Putin’s chef” and Wagner PMC was already a factor in Russian security and elite dynamics prior to the launch of the offensive in Ukraine. Such dynamics were, however, generally oriented towards what the Russian PMC community frequently refers to as the “far abroad.” In the years prior to February 2022, Wagner PMC had been heavily promoting itself to various governments in central and western Africa as a counterinsurgency provider for hire, following on from ongoing deployments in Libya and Syria that began in the second half of the 2010s. This promotion resulted in a significant expansion of Wagner PMC’s presence and role in the Central African Republic from December 2020, as well as a new contract for a deployment in Mali from autumn 2021. In parallel, both countries’ governments have expanded their military, economic, and diplomatic cooperation with the Russian government. In this way, Wagner PMC’s business pitch to incum-

bent governments facing the threat of an insurgency has become a component part of the Russian state’s efforts to increase its influence and role in Africa, albeit one that is not formally acknowledged.

Indeed, Wagner PMC operations in the “far abroad” are undertaken via a logic of deniability—or, perhaps more aptly, a logic of suspended disbelief. Even when discussing Wagner PMC operations that have been relatively openly covered by media and social media outlets associated to the group, Russian state officials and mainstream state media outlets continue to avoid direct references to the Wagner Group, often describing its contractors using amorphous terms such as “Russian instructors”. This approach is likely due both to a clause in the Russian criminal code expressly stating that all mercenary activity is illegal and to the state’s desire to retain plausible deniability regarding its connection to these operations. In parallel, Prigozhin and associated media sources frequently herald the successes of these counterinsurgency operations—even though they do not directly name Wagner—as well as espousing a wider anti-colonialist, and especially anti-French, narrative line similar to Russian state discourse on western and central Africa. Some of the more prominent media outlets and personalities associated with Wagner have trumpeted the group’s contribution to Russian state foreign policy, sometimes emphasising its advantages over other, more traditional foreign policy actors.

Wagner PMC and the Russian War on Ukraine

The way in which the early months of the Russian military’s “special military operation” in Ukraine played out seemingly created the conditions for a change in how the Wagner Group and Prigozhin sought to operate. The attempt by the formal Russian military to conduct a multi-vector advance on central and eastern Ukraine did not go according to plan, and heavy losses impelled a shift to a more limited geographical focus. Wagner PMC did not feature in these early months of the war, underscoring its complex relationship with Russia’s for-

mal military structure. According to the rumour mill, Prigozhin refused to deploy Wagner forces due to ongoing personal feuds with members of the presidential administration and the senior military command.

Within a few months, however, Wagner PMC entered the war in Ukraine, quickly becoming central to the advance in northern Donbas. Prigozhin and Wagner PMC-linked media and social media heavily promoted the battlefield successes of Wagner PMC forces, although some of these gains have since been lost. In so doing, these sources frequently praised the effectiveness of Wagner PMC, frequently situating such praise in terms of either an explicit or implicit comparison to the conventional Russian military. Indeed, some sources have promoted Wagner PMC as offering better service conditions and more opportunities than the Russian military for anyone seeking to join up. These service conditions come alongside a large-scale PR effort—developed over many years—that has sought to build Wagner PMC as a brand via clothing, comic books, and a general glorification of life as a PMC member. In this respect, while Wagner PMC works in concert with—and, to a significant extent, under the control of—the formal Russian military, it seems to regard the formal military as a peer competitor for resources, recruits, and status. This, in combination with Prigozhin’s public criticism of senior military commanders, has produced an uneasy relationship between Wagner and the Russian military.

At the same time, the Russian military has not been averse to copying the perceived successes of Wagner’s approach. According to some sources, in late spring and early summer, the Russian military turned to Wagner PMC, hoping to use its brand to recruit more personnel for the war without formally declaring any form of mobilisation. Wagner’s associated social media networks then began recruiting actively for Ukraine, while Prigozhin—as has been well-publicised—began visiting Russian prisons and offering inmates with long-term sentences the prospect of exoneration in return for serving in Ukraine. Subsequently, Russian law has since been changed to allow the Russian military to recruit prisoners serving long-term sentences, seemingly aping the Wagner Group’s approach.

Against the backdrop of its significant role in the war on Ukraine, the practice of referring only ambiguously to Wagner PMC has begun to fade away in some segments of the Russian information landscape. While Russian officials and state media still do not refer directly to Wagner PMC, Prigozhin’s public statement in September that he founded a PMC called Wagner in 2014 represents a major shift away from using veiled allusions to refer to Wagner operations. His statement came in a context of increasingly open references to Wagner and its role in Ukraine within non-state and social media

coverage of the war. Thus, Wagner’s role in the war on Ukraine seems to be driving a shift towards more open recognition of the PMC.

Privatising Russian State Security Functions

The war on Ukraine has also seemingly accelerated the trend of the Russian state becoming increasingly dependent on Wagner PMC in some areas of domestic and foreign policy. This has resulted in Prigozhin’s transformation from a self-styled caustic observer operating from the shadows to a personality whose voice carries weight in public and state security discourse and who is interpreted as having at least some influence within the elite networks that undergird the Putin regime. This is not to say that he is a new leader in waiting: Prigozhin is unlikely to garner sufficient public or elite support to play such a role. Furthermore, he does not seem to be seeking a formal position in politics. Instead, his increasingly diverse business interests—anchored by Wagner PMC in the security sector, but extending to management consultancies, media holdings, precious-metal mining, business centres, and residential property—suggest that Prigozhin is motivated primarily by economic opportunity.

For Prigozhin, the Russian security apparatus’ contracting out of an increasingly large portion of its functions help establish the conditions for economic opportunity. In this respect, Prigozhin’s approach and interests are somewhat different from other members of the security elites within the Putin regime. The so-called *siloviki*—elites who come, by and large, from security and intelligence agency or military backgrounds—are less entrepreneurial and more statist in mindset. By contrast, and irrespective of any pronouncements they may have made on the need for and value of a strong state, Prigozhin and Wagner PMC have worked to establish a parallel—and at least semi-private—security organisation that operates under the auspices of the Russian state. Wagner PMC undoubtedly remains dependent on the Russian state’s willingness to allow it to operate and to create the conditions for it to do so. However, this relationship seems to be evolving into one of mutual interdependence, with the Russian state ever more reliant on Wagner PMC to fulfil certain functions and, ultimately, to stave off further retreats on the front lines in Ukraine.

Not only do Prigozhin’s background and aims set him apart from the *siloviki*, but he also seems relatively unconcerned with maintaining good public relations with senior members of the Putin regime. For their part, many in the Putin regime do not seem to find Prigozhin’s ambitions to their taste. To take just one example, Prigozhin has been embroiled in a three-year public and legal spat with the mayor of St. Petersburg, Alexander Beglov, in part due to the latter’s attempt

to prevent the former from opening the Wagner PMC Business Centre in a large office building in the city—or at least this is the version of the story that appears in pro-Prigozhin accounts. Prigozhin eventually got his way: the Wagner PMC Business Centre held an opening ceremony opening in November. Its stated aim is to provide security entrepreneurs with the workspace and opportunities to develop new projects to support “national security”. It is difficult to gauge how significant this centre may become, but at least on a surface level, its opening suggests that the Wagner PMC brand is moving into the defence R&D sector, adding yet another element to the Wagner PMC portfolio—and thus to Wagner PMC and Prigozhin’s growing influence within the Russian security sector.

Conclusion

With many factors at play within Russian elite politics and society as the war on Ukraine continues into 2023,

the trajectory of the Russian state seems uncertain. However, assuming that the Putin regime endures but is driven to reconfigure itself due to the impact of the war, its new configuration will likely entail a greater role for private actors in the provision of traditionally state-directed security functions. As it stands, this would mean a greater role for Wagner PMC and Prigozhin. In light of Wagner PMC’s semi-competitive relationship with the Russian state’s formal military and security agencies, as well as Prigozhin’s sometimes open conflicts with members of the prevailing security and political elites, this new regime configuration may well prove more tense and prone to internal oscillations. As the competition between private and state security actors over resources begins to extend to control over particular security functions, an enhanced rivalry seems likely. While a greater role for security actors that formally operate outside the state would inevitably impact on the regime’s capability to maintain centralised control.

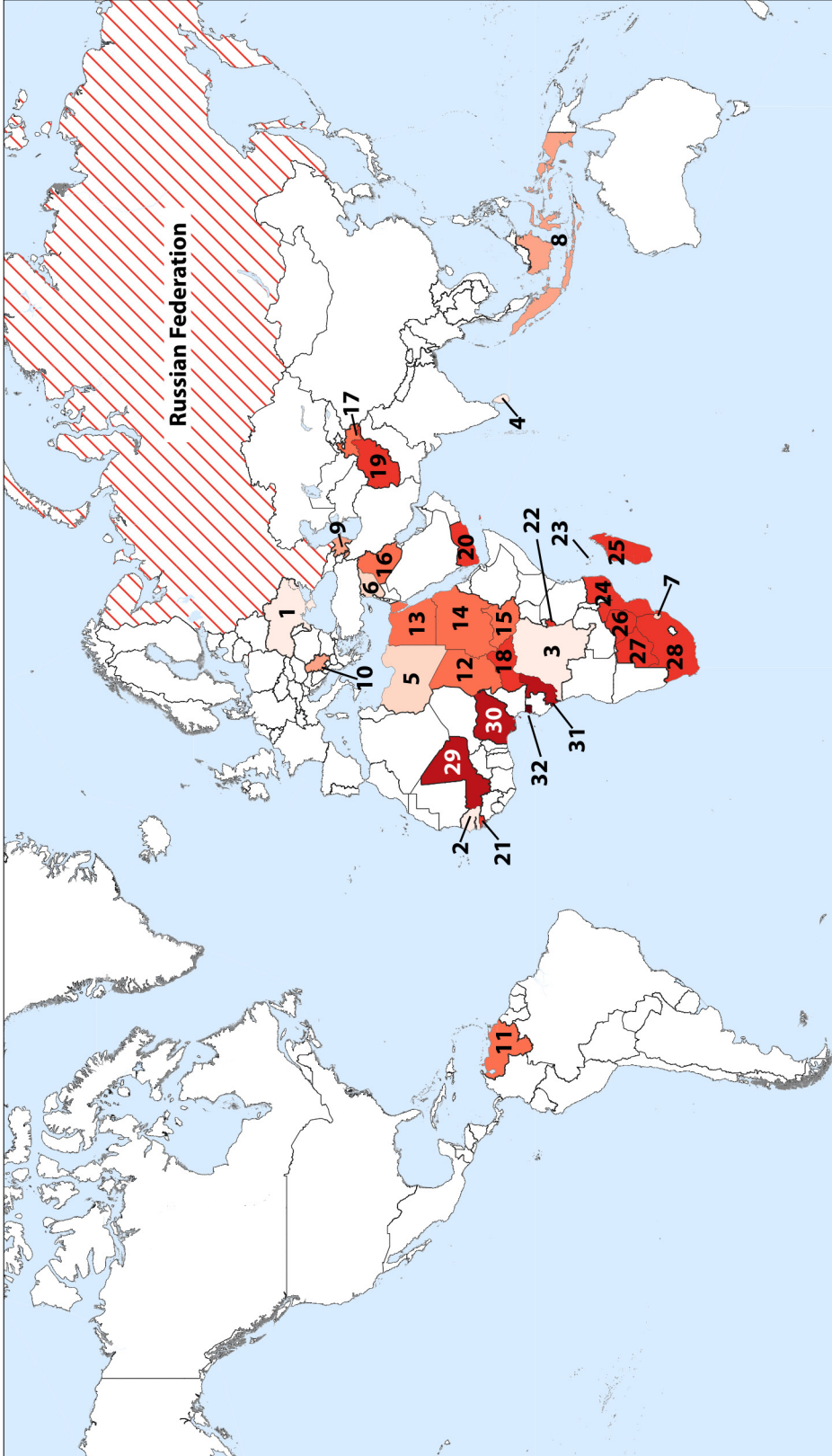
About the Author

Stephen Aris is a co-editor of the *Russian Analytical Digest*.

MAP

Activities of Russian Private Military Corporations since 2014

Map 1: Activities of Russian Private Military Corporations (PMCs) since 2014



since 2014: 1 = Ukraine, 2 = Senegal, 3 = Democratic Republic of the Congo, 4 = Sri Lanka; since 2015: 5 = Libya, 6 = Syria, 7 = Eswatini (till 2018: Swaziland); since 2016: 8 = Indonesia, 9 = Azerbaijan, 10 = Serbia; since 2017: 11 = Venezuela, 12 = Chad, 13 = Egypt, 14 = Sudan, 15 = South Sudan, 16 = Iraq, 17 = Tajikistan; since 2018: 18 = Central African Republic, 19 = Afghanistan, 20 = Yemen, 21 = Guinea-Bissau, 22 = Burundi, 23 = Comoros, 24 = Mozambique, 25 = Madagascar, 26 = Zimbabwe, 27 = Botswana, 28 = South Africa; since 2019: 29 = Mali, 30 = Nigeria, 31 = Republic of the Congo; since 2020: 32 = Equatorial Guinea

* Dates represent the earliest credibly documented PMC presence in each country. Not all PMC deployments are ongoing.

Source: Katz, B. et al., *Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*, September 2020. Center for Strategic & International Studies; <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>; map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen in QGIS, with geodata von https://gadm.org/download_country_v3.html

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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With a unique archive on dissident culture under socialism and with an extensive collection of publications on Central and Eastern Europe, the Research Centre regularly hosts visiting scholars from all over the world.

One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular e-mail newsletters covering current developments in Central and Eastern Europe.

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The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy. The CSS promotes understanding of security policy challenges as a contribution to a more peaceful world. Its work is independent, practice-relevant, and based on a sound academic footing.

The CSS combines research and policy consultancy and, as such, functions as a bridge between academia and practice. It trains highly qualified junior researchers and serves as a point of contact and information for the interested public.

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The Elliott School of International Affairs, The George Washington University

The Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies is home to a Master's program in European and Eurasian Studies, faculty members from political science, history, economics, sociology, anthropology, language and literature, and other fields, visiting scholars from around the world, research associates, graduate student fellows, and a rich assortment of brown bag lunches, seminars, public lectures, and conferences.

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