



DISCUSSION PAPER

# The Rise of Wagner in Russian Politics

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## Introduction

**P**ivate military companies (PMCs) have carved out a niche for them in warfare. Some governments resort to them to avoid higher political and military costs. PMCs in the US and Europe offer services such as supporting the military with logistics, safeguarding convoys, securing facilities, and training personnel. (Foley & Kaunert, 2022, pp. 179-180). They also carry out specific assignments, such as rescue missions and intelligence-gathering operations in certain overseas locations.

PMCs fall under the legal jurisdiction of the countries where they are registered. Therefore, they are compelled to act in accordance with the laws of those countries. In Russia, the situation is different. Although the Kremlin utilises PMCs in other countries, they are not legally recognised within the Russian Federation. Another difference is that, unlike its international counterparts, Wagner, the most prominent Russian PMC, does not solely aim to maximise profits. It occupies “an equal position with regular army units in the battlespace” (Sukhankin, 2018, p. 5), a position confirmed in the Ukraine War. Such a status is significant as it means Wagner is essential in advancing the Kremlin’s interests.

Hybrid warfare is a type of war in which state and non-state actors act jointly with a coherent strategy for achieving a common political purpose (Mansoor, 2012, p. 2). In this type of warfare, irregular forces commonly use terrorist acts and irregular tactics to gain physical and psychological dominance in combat (Hoffman, 2007, p. 8). Wagner conducted false flag operations and all sorts of psyops, targeting critical infrastructure in Ukraine’s Crimea and Donbas regions (Foley & Kaunert, 2022, p. 174).

In addition to being specialised in hybrid warfare, PMCs are often used as proxies to provide plausible deniability to certain states. Peltier (2005, p. 13) argues that conducting an operation on behalf of another fits the definition of surrogate and proxy. As seen in the Russian-Ukrainian war, PMCs, such as Wagner, have occupied a sovereign country’s territory.

The Kremlin uses PMCs to strengthen its international position (Marten, 2019). Many experts believe that the Russian leadership aspires to restore Russia to its Soviet era-hegemonic position. The country’s interventions in Georgia, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine reflect such a strategic posture. The fact that PMCs have an ambiguous legal status paves the way for the Kremlin to use them in areas deemed part of its sphere of influence.

Therefore, these PMCs’ modus operandi and role, whether in the Russia-Ukraine war or other theatres, offer important hints at the complex political and military web that the Kremlin is weaving.

# The History of PMCs

Mercenaries, proxy wars, and PMCs are interconnected concepts. PMCs act as proxies in conflict zones while offering financial opportunities to their employees, also called contractors. In this respect, PMCs, in many ways, are reminiscent of mercenaries or soldiers of fortune. Mercenaries were first used in the Ancient Egyptian Civilization. Subsequently, several empires used mercenaries for political and military purposes (Singer, 2001, p. 190).

The resort to mercenaries declined over time due to the rise of nationalism. With the French Revolution, nationalist movements spread to the world. As a result, countries established their national armies, and mercenaries lost their importance. However, with the Industrial Revolution, the colonial race between European countries accelerated, and many powers used mercenaries to build a sufficient fighting capacity (Kalkan, 2022, p. 155). Mercenaries continued to operate, albeit in the shadows.

Concerns about mercenaries increased, and serious legal restrictions restricted their utilisation. According to the Geneva Conventions, which regulate the international law of war, mercenaries are not counted as military personnel. This restriction has put mercenaries in a precarious position. They do not deserve even the minimum laws of war, which are shown to military personnel during conflicts. In addition, 46 countries signed or ratified the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries<sup>1</sup>, adopted on December 4th, 1989 and entered into force on October 20th, 2001. While Ukraine is among these 46 countries, the Russian Federation has not signed this convention.

A surge in the use of mercenaries took place after the 1990s. A change in semantics occurred, and the term "Private Military Companies" became mentioned in the media instead of mercenaries. In reality, PMCs represent merely a more corporate and sophisticated model of mercenary service. The Montreux Document<sup>2</sup> defines Private Military (Security) Companies as *"private business entities that provide military and/or security services irrespective of how they describe themselves"*. PMCs provide protection, military training, consultancy, manpower, logistics, intelligence, crime prevention, ammunition supply, protection of strategically important facilities, and counter-operation

in exchange for financial gain (Beyhan, 2020, p. 24). Therefore, PMCs are used by authorities that need to fill gaps in these areas. Kalkan (2022, p. 157) asserts that PMCs have been performing activities not part of the conventional mercenaries' job description.

Meanwhile, there is no international mechanism regulating the work of PMCs, i.e., there are numerous legal loopholes. Some countries do not have laws legislating the work of PMCs, while others prohibit them. However, several governments legalise them entirely. Such legal grey areas and a lack of supervisory bodies allow PMCs to act with impunity.

From the point of view of the Russian government, PMCs are used to close the gaps faced by the Russian army. The informal practice of hazing and abuse of junior conscripts (also known as *Dedovschina*<sup>3</sup>) in the Russian army and several other factors created a reluctance to join the army. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, avoidance of military service became even more widespread. Thus, the Russian authorities used PMCs to address existing shortcomings.

Volunteering is another loophole that Russian PMCs use. While mercenary service is prohibited under Russian law, there are no restrictions for voluntary military service. The concept of volunteering in the ranks of the Russian army is a legacy of Tsarist Russia. Since then, it has been considered a tool that inspires social unity. Through volunteerism, a symbolic link can be seen between Tsarist Russia and Putin's Russia (Killioglu, 2022, p. 641).

<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/34 [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg\\_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=XVIII-6&chapter=18&clang=en) (access date: 03.02.2023)

<sup>2</sup> The Montreux Document, [https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc\\_002\\_0996.pdf](https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0996.pdf) (access date: 03.02.2023)

<sup>3</sup> *Dedovschina* (Russian: *дедовщина*) is the informal practice of hazing and abuse of junior conscripts in the Russian armed forces, Internal Troops, and to a much lesser extent FSB, and Border Guards. The abuse is undertaken by senior ranked officers and often includes violent physical and psychological abuse.



President of Russia Vladimir Putin (C), Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu (Center L) as Chief of the General Staff of Russia Valery Gerasimov (Center R) stand by them during a meeting on 'Improvement of Armed Forces' in Sochi, Russia on November 10, 2015 (Kremlin Press Center - Anadolu Agency)

## The Perspective of International Law

International regulations have very limited clauses recognising mercenaries. Most legal constraints targeting PMCs exist at the national level. These entities are companies, and thus, they must act per the legal requirements of the country in which they are registered. According to the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols, only the French Legionnaires, the Swiss Guard in the Vatican, and the Gurkhas are exempted from the restrictions on the mercenary status. Mercenaries other than those listed are excluded from the protection of international law of war (Guc, 2007, as cited in, Beyhan, 2020, p. 4).

The Geneva Conventions and their Commentaries in 1949 and the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries in 1989 are the most important international conventions on mercenary service. Article 47 of the Geneva Convention<sup>4</sup> defines a mercenary and says that a mercenary “shall not have the right to be a combatant or a prisoner of war”. The UN International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries is a convention that prohibits mercenary work and has 17 signatories and 37 parties as of 2023. While Ukraine is among the countries that prohibit mercenary work, the Russian Federation is

not a party to this international convention. Another important agreement concerning PMCs is the Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies.<sup>5</sup> However, the Montreux convention is not legally binding. It merely encourages adherence to international humanitarian and human rights law in situations involving private military and security companies in armed conflicts.

Meanwhile, Russian domestic law considers private military companies illegal. However, no laws or regulations in Russia concern PMCs registered in other countries. This loophole increases the probability that private military companies may participate in actions that could be viewed as war crimes. In other words, international agreements do not bind them. Thus, they have no obligation to respect international laws. However, this situation is a double-edged sword. If PMC troopers are taken prisoner, international conventions do not apply to them, leaving these detainees with no rights.

According to Article 13 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation<sup>6</sup>, “the creation and activities of public associations whose aims and actions are aimed at ...setting up armed units ... shall be prohibited. Thus, PMCs are banned in Russia. Additionally, according to Article 359 of the Rus-

<sup>5</sup> The full text of the Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies is available here: <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0996-montreux-document-private-military-and-security-companies>

<sup>6</sup> The full text of the Constitution of the Russian Federation is available here: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>



Russian President Vladimir Putin observes the Zapad-2021 military exercise at Mulino range in Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, Russia on September 13, 2021. Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, Valery Gerasimov along with other military officials accompanied the president. (Kremlin Press Office - Anadolu Agency)

sian Criminal Code,<sup>7</sup> any actions related to the “recruitment, training, financing, or other material support” of mercenaries, as well as their use in armed conflict or military operations, are punishable with a prison sentence of up to 15 years. The same law states that mercenaries are individuals who act with financial interests. (Sukhankin, 2019a) states that PMCs recruits fall under the definition of “voluntar” work to avoid accusations, and he mentions Igor Girkin’s claim that “voluntar” personnel working for PMCs cannot be accused of being mercenaries and, therefore, cannot be held accountable under Russian law.

The legal status of private military companies is debatable. While the Russian Federation’s constitution (Article 13) and Criminal Code (Article 359) ban private armed groups, there has been significant popularity in the use of mercenaries by Russian PMCs in recent years. However, since these laws are only implemented within the borders of the Russian Federation, the use of these groups in other countries like Libya, Syria, and Ukraine does not pose a legal problem for the Kremlin, and PMCs even support the Russian army in operations (Chifu & Frunzeti, 2020, p. 47). If PMCs are declared legal within the borders of the Russian Federation, this may decrease the power and influence of Russian security services. This situation explains why the current illegal status of PMCs within the country increases Russian security operational capabilities, according to Dyer (2018), as cited in Bryjka (2019). In addition, the legal declaration of PMCs may spread the perception that the

Russian army is insufficient and unsuccessful in its operations in foreign countries.

The Wagner example shows that some PMCs can operate in foreign countries without being registered in their home country, where their employees may come from various countries. Wagner avoids complying with Russian law by not conducting business within Russia, benefitting from the high echelons’ political support. According to Putin, the actions of the Wagner Group abroad do not violate the Russian constitution, as they can work in any country (Nikolskaya & Ivanova, 2018).

When it comes to human rights, it is difficult, if not impossible, to control their operations during conflicts. Countless incidents showed that PMC personnel engaged in activities breaching the laws of war. International agreements and conventions regulate the actions of regular armies. However, PMCs are not subject to these rules. Thus, they cannot be held accountable for any potential violations of human rights or the laws of war in international courts of justice. Such a loophole leads to widespread unethical practices in warfare.

The most well-known PMCs in Russia are Antiterror-Orel, Antiterror, Redut-Antiterror, Ferax, Phoenix, Moran Security Group (Centre-R), and RBG Group. However, Wagner has received significant attention from the international community, especially after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea.

<sup>7</sup> The full text of the Russian Criminal Code is available here: [http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_10699/a9e28227f557dc1e6659c1d88613790bb3d4db5b](http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_10699/a9e28227f557dc1e6659c1d88613790bb3d4db5b)

# Wagner: A Factsheet

Since 2015, Russia has started to use PMCs as an active tool to achieve its foreign policy goals (Cabelka, 2021). The Russian authorities aimed to preserve its economic and political gains through PMCs (Jones et al., 2021, p. 1). Since the beginning, the Russian state supplied the Wagner group with heavy weapons left from the Soviet Union era, and the Russian army taught Wagner elements of engineering and artillery tactics.

The Wagner group is registered in Argentina and has an office in St. Petersburg (Quinn, 2016). The establishment of Wagner was completed from May 2014 to early 2015 (Sukhankin, 2019b). The founder of Wagner is considered to be former GRU<sup>8</sup> lieutenant colonel Dmitry Utkin (Vaux, 2016). The choice of Wagner as a name for the group comes from the fact it used to be the military code name of Utkin. Having served in the First and Second Chechen Wars, Utkin also participated in the Syrian civil war by leading the Wagner troops. Utkin is believed to be one of the most experienced and charismatic PMC leaders in Russia (Sukhankin, 2018).

The Wagner management team consists of former KGB agents, retired soldiers, and key figures with ties to the Kremlin (Jones et al., 2021, p. 1). There are strong claims that the Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has close ties to Vladimir Putin, is the owner of the Wagner Group (Sukhankin, 2019d). Prigozhin owns a catering company in Petersburg that provides catering services to the Russian army (Marten, 2019, pp. 196-197). Prigozhin is also known as "Putin's Che" and built his wealth via a catering company that provided services to the Kremlin. There are also allegations that Wagner uses Russian army facilities, and some Wagner employees are former Russian military officers (Marten, 2019, p. 182). Utkin was invited to the Kremlin in 2016 for a medal ceremony honouring more than 300 soldiers and civilians that showed courage and heroism (Korotkov, 2016).

It should be noted that PMCs attract far less attention in conflict zones than regular army units. This invisibility reduces possible international reactions. A case in point is the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the reactions from the international community. The latter was unprepared and weak and could not dissuade Russia from the occupation. PMCs also conduct risky military operations without any reputational costs to the states. For instance, the "little green men" who wore unidentified military uniforms,

helping the separatist takeover of Crimea and the Donbas region, were likely PMC troopers.

After the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the Wagner group gained worldwide attention. Subsequently, Wagner supported separatist movements in Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk regions and exerted pressure on the anti-Russian Cossacs (Sukhankin, 2018, p. 5). In addition to Ukraine, Wagner is active in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Sudan. In addition, Wagner provides bodyguarding services to Maduro, the president of Venezuela (Roth, 2019).

Another advantage achieved through the PMCs is the lack of public outcry in case of heavy losses in conflict areas. While the army and government are directly responsible for the losses of army personnel, they are not responsible for PMC losses. In addition, there is no obligation to disclose the number of casualties. Casualties during a conflict or war can be minimised and downplayed (Kalkan, 2022, p. 160). This point gives the government flexibility and reduces public pressure in case of a military blunder. The most striking example took place in Syria in 2018. According to the document obtained by *The Times*, the US Special Forces attacked the Wagner group in Deir ez-Zor, killing between 200 and 300 members of them. However, the Kremlin did not issue a reaction to the attack, preferring to distance itself (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). In addition, many Wagner fighters come from poor socio-economic families. After their deaths, many families do not apply for death compensation. Hence, their deaths can be hidden from the public (Beyhan, 2020, p. 40).

Since 2014, Wagner has played an important role in supporting separatists in Ukraine and has been a direct threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia used Wagner forces to support the separatist militias in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Ukraine. Wagner is an instrument of Russian military strategy because of its ties to the Russian Ministry of Defense and because it acts in line with Russia's foreign policies (Higgins & Nechepurenko, 2018).

Wagner conducts disinformation activities and psyops in line with Russian government policies. It also provides artificial stability in some African countries and develops strategies that further Russian national interest. Wagner obtains some privileges in the field of mining activities in return for PMC services and secures payments (Parens, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> GRU is an abbreviation for Main Intelligence Directorate. It is presently called the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.



Russians residing in remote and underdeveloped areas of the country, who have faced economic struggles, particularly after the 2014 financial crisis, are the primary recruits of the Wagner Group. Their primary motivation is financial gain, while a desire for freedom is also a factor. Prisoners released from prisons with the grant of freedom have volunteered to be deployed in conflict zones. Prigozhin recruits personnel from prisons to join Wagner, offering them a remission for their punishments (Faulconbridge, 2023). These prisoners constitute the majority of Wagner forces in Ukraine.

## Wagner in Ukraine

The Wagner Group's first activity was to support the Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula as a *fait accompli*. Afterwards, they carried out activities to destabilise the Donbass region in Ukraine. Wagner is behind many war crimes in these regions between 2014 and 2022. Before February 2022, Wagner was estimated to have around 5000 fighters (Kaskanis, 2023). There are allegations that Wagner transferred its fighters from Africa to Ukraine to assassinate Ukrainian state officials. In early March, the Ukrainian army came across some corpses of Wagner fighters (Colchester, 2022). National Security Council spokesman John Kirby cited in Hernandez (2023), estimates that as of January 2023, the number of Wagner's staff in Ukraine is about 50000, of which about 40000<sup>9</sup> are recruited inmates from prisons. Some Ukrainian sources claimed that approximately 29000 Wagner personnel have been killed, wounded, captured, or have gone missing since the beginning of the war (Tsikhanenka, 2023).

The Kremlin uses Wagner as a hybrid warfare tool of the 21st century. The experience of Wagner forces in Africa and Syria over the past ten years made them oblivious to war crimes (Tondo et al., 2022). They have become accustomed to international norms. This private military formation is a tool Russia can use plausible deniability to reject any organic affiliation while also achieving its national strategic goals (Siegle, 2019).

It is observed that Wagner jointly operated with the Russian army in the Zaporizhyya, Volodymyrivka, and Klynove regions. This military activity was shared on many pro-war telegram channels. The Russian army used Wagner forces in the occupation of Soledar and Klynove, as well as encircling Bakhmut (Trad, 2022). The Russian public wel-

Last, the Wagner Group creates an *esprit de corps* through ideological symbols. The Russian public often discusses the Russia-Ukraine war over "neo-Nazi" symbols. Russia continues its war on Ukraine by claiming that this is a continuation of World War II and the war against fascism and neo-Nazis. This ideological discourse also motivates Wagner troopers.

comed the pro-war Telegram channels' announcement of Wagner's victories on the ground. Many Russians, who embarked on patriotic gung-ho, overlooked Wagner's unlawful actions and considered them appropriate during the war. Samuel Huntington explains in his book *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* that people can glorify military violence for nationalistic purposes.

Wagner has been involved in sovereign territories abusing human rights since the beginning of the war. For example, at the beginning of the war, three Wagner mercenaries were identified in the Motyzhyn massacre near Kyiv, and 15 other Russian soldiers were accused of being involved in war crimes (Tondo et al., 2022).



A view of destroyed military vehicle at Kherson International Airport after Russian forces retreat from Kherson, Ukraine on November 17, 2022. (Metin Aktaş - Anadolu Agency)

<sup>9</sup> For more details refer to the press briefing: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/01/20/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-nsc-coordinator-for-strategic-communications-john-kirby-8/>

# Wagner's position in Russian Politics

At the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, many Russian politicians and some military experts believed that the "special military operation" would only last three days, assuming that the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian government would quickly surrender. Vladimir Solovyov, a presenter on the Russian state television channel Rossiya-1, frequently stated<sup>10</sup> that Ukraine is not a real country but rather an artificial state. He suggested that invading Ukraine would be as simple as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and claimed that the Motherland monument in Kyiv was within sight. However, these claims proved to be a pipe dream. The Russian military struggled to gain superiority on the battlefield and suffered significant losses. The extremely optimistic and arrogant claims turned out to be a disappointment for many Russians. The Russian army lacked coordination and faced enormous logistical problems in the early stages of the war (Gressel, 2022). Additionally, there was a lack of motivation, leading to high casualties and loss of equipment among the Russian combat units (Lohsen, 2022).

The role of armies is to serve as a deterrent and to achieve victory in the event of war. As of February 2023, there is no clear winner in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which means things did not go as planned for Russian Strategists. Some pro-war bloggers attribute this failure to mistakes in military strategy. Meanwhile, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's manager, regularly criticises the Russian military commanders. The growing popularity of PMCs is also problematic. It may reduce the motivation of military personnel and result in the transfer of more government resources toward them instead of the regular army. Overreliance on PMCs over time can also pose national security concerns. Russian authorities have been using the Wagner Group since 2014, and this nexus has extended to other countries over eight years, reaching its climax in the current war in Ukraine.

Thus, the dynamics between the Russian army, the Wagner Group, and political decision-makers are worth examining. Apart from the Wagner leaders, a few more names are of interest. Sergei Shoigu took on the role of Defense Minister in 2012, and Valery Gerasimov, who was part of Shoigu's team, assumed the position of military general of Ukraine on January 11th, 2023. Gerasimov is known for his doctrinal statements regarding Russia's defence strategy on changing circumstances and the evolution of warfare.

Gerasimov's speeches provide insight into how Russia might act in potential conflicts (Galeotti, 2016). Gerasimov says<sup>11</sup> "wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template". The same article also mentions new forms and methods of warfare, including asymmetric and indirect operations.

The events in Eastern Ukraine between 2014 and 2022 and Russia's involvement can be studied through the prism of Gerasimov's statements. Gerasimov mentions using special forces in enemy territories as part of asymmetrical actions. This scenario is optimal for PMCs, given their versatility on the battlefield. Similarly, PMCs offer the state an edge at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Gerasimov's doctrine is not merely an article about the use of asymmetrical actions but also aims to safeguard the connections with the Russian-speaking population residing in the former Soviet Union, particularly in Ukraine.

Russia's foreign policy is currently centred on re-establishing links with the strategically significant regions of the former Soviet Union. These regions serve as a buffer between Russia and the West, and Moscow wants to maintain strong military, political, and economic ties with these countries as part of its sphere of influence. However, the NATO expansion plans have created unease in Moscow. The latter feels threatened by this agenda, which was considered a new containment strategy. Conversely, the Kremlin used NATO expansion as a key pretext to pursue an expansionist agenda, allegedly to ascertain the Russian state's survival. The Wagner Group should be viewed in this context.

During the first 11 months of the conflict, the Russian army faced strong criticism. The exaggerated claims by the higher echelons of power that the war would end quickly fueled public disapproval. The Russian army suffered losses at the beginning of the war and had to retreat from Kyiv led to even more public disappointment. Although the Russian army occupied a large area and held it for a long time, it has not been transparent about its casualties. Following the so-called referendums held from September 23-27, 2022, Putin announced the annexation of four regions (Trevelyan, 2022).

From the Russian perspective, Ukraine's Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions are considered

<sup>10</sup> See more: <https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1577369748517568522> (access date: 01.02.2023)

<sup>11</sup> Gerasimov's article is available here: [https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview\\_20160228\\_art008.pdf](https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf)

Russian territory. However, the reality on the ground did not align with expectations, and Ukraine regained control of the western side of the Kherson oblast after a full-scale counteroffensive on November 9th, 2022. From the Russian point of view, Kherson, an officially recognised Russian territory, has been lost. This military failure is Russia's biggest loss since World War II, leading to heightened criticism of the Russian army and more demoralisation. Many pro-war Telegram channels criticised army officials relentlessly. The head of Wagner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, openly denigrated Sergei Shoigu for the setbacks and embarrassing losses on the fronts during the war, claiming that the army was corrupt and incompetent (Lister, 2023).

As a result of military failure in the field, military commanders were demoted and transferred several times. Sergei Surovikin was appointed as the head of the combat army, and during his time, he ordered the targeting of civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. Prigozhin approved of this change in leadership and praised Surovikin as the most talented commander in the Russian army (Ellyatt, 2023). The lack of progress in the Russian army led to Wagner's successes being highlighted, causing discomfort in the Russian military and government.

Meanwhile, Prigozhin continued to heavily criticise the Russian army and its leaders. Such constant criticism, combined with Wagner's popularity from a few key victories, caused discomfort in the military and political spheres. Prigozhin's efforts to polish his reputation and the Wagner Group show that he has political ambitions. Putin's choice to appoint Gerasimov, who has a close relationship

with Shoigu and serves as his Deputy Minister, to lead the Ukrainian war, may trigger a new major offensive by the Russian army, which is expected to occur right before the first anniversary of the war. A successful outcome on the battlefield would result in a favourable public perception in Russia and restore the pride of the regular army.

Furthermore, Putin's swift appointment of Gerasimov to replace Surovikin after only three months sends a clear message to Prigozhin. Gerasimov has a long history of loyalty to Putin and has held the position of chief of the general staff for many years. The appointment aims to improve command and control within the army and is seen as a major victory for the military establishment over outsiders who sought to gain influence, including Kadyrov and Prigozhin, who are influential and shape the war narrative (Sharafutdinova, 2022).

Through this appointment, Putin aims to prevent individuals like Kadyrov and Prigozhin from undermining the Ministry of Defense rather than changing the war's course. Both personalities have ambitions for high-level positions in Russian politics. While Kadyrov's ethnicity as a Chechen may limit his political rise, Prigozhin is seen as a strong candidate to lead Russia post-Putin. Although Gerasimov's appointment did not go as per Prigozhin's wishes, the Russian army still required the support of the Wagner Group. Prigozhin, in turn, knows he needs to obey Putin to preserve his political prospects. Meanwhile, Prigozhin's populist push and efforts to shape the public perception raise concerns among the highest political and military spheres about its amenability.

## Conclusion

Mercenaries operated for centuries at the service of different powers. They can play a crucial role in conflicts. For Russia, NATO's expansion in neighbouring countries was considered a threat to Russia's national security. The Gerasimov doctrine was developed to address this issue, including using PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, as part of the Russian strategy in modern warfare.

However, mercenaries are self-serving and have ulterior motives that do not always align with their country's values or priorities. PMCs, like Wagner, can be involved in war crimes outside of public oversight and evade accountability under international law, leading to massive human rights violations. In addition, PMCs see no value in peace as it goes against their business models. Thus, they can

escalate violence in conflicts, making peace an elusive prospect.

Furthermore, PMCs have peculiar dynamics in the politico-military sphere. As seen in the Ukraine War, Wagner's leader, Prigozhin, is opportunistic and seeks to gain more power by undermining the military and political leaders leading the war. Putin's appointment of Valery Gerasimov, who is close to Sergei Shoigu, suggests a respite for the existing politico-military status quo, though the future remains unclear.

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