

Training Veil: *How Russia's strategic use of paramilitary and commercial vehicles in Africa impact illicit trade*

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The Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary group, with deep ties to the Russian government, continues to increase its activities in politically volatile but mineral and resource rich regions of Africa. In coordination with political influence efforts and Russian commercial ventures in foreign environments, this paramilitary group has the capacity to drastically increase revenue from both licit and illicit activities in Africa. The activities and objectives of an external paramilitary group like the Wagner Group develops and shapes trade sectors that meet the strategic interests of the Russia government. However, the ways in which they operate, and the aggressive seizure of both formal and informal markets throughout the region, exacerbates illicit trade with a nexus to many of the sectors in which they are pursuing commercial interests. This largely includes precious minerals, like gold and diamonds, as well as energy deals. The ways in which various Wagner Group entities operate also exacerbate corruption, inflame violence, and discourage other foreign interest and competition in the regions where they operate. There are cascading implications of these paramilitary activities in Africa, in terms of both illicit trade and in terms of political and economic stability.

This monograph will examine the impact of Wagner Group activities in Africa, to capture how the utility of Russian paramilitary groups in Africa exacerbate illicit trade. To examine this issue, this monograph will begin with a discussion on the background of Russian paramilitary groups and the employment of them as a tool of statecraft. Discussion will reference how the Wagner Group was employed in Syria to re-gain control over oil sites and generate revenue for the Russian state. This provides clarity as to how the same model is being utilized in various parts of Africa as a tool to pursue materials of strategic interest on that continent. This monograph will then go on to address the “training veil” model in section one, and how the Wagner Group applies a model developed in Syria to pursue financial gains and achieve political

influence in Africa. The second section of this paper will address how the Wagner Group model is being executed in Africa, which will illuminate successes, shortfalls, and limits of how they do business in foreign environments. The third and final section of this paper will address how Wagner Group activities, and the political, economic, and commercial prongs of their model impact illicit trade in Africa. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to really scrutinize the serious economic development issues associated with Wagner Group activities, discussions on implications for illicit trade will certainly illuminate the serious long-term consequences of their activities.

### **Background**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russian paramilitary groups became a tool of statecraft. This began to generate first, for practical reasons. Employing paramilitary groups versus conventional forces are much cheaper, decreasing the Russian Federation overhead cost of pursuing its foreign policy in arduous environments like the Middle East and Africa. As Candace Rondeaux explains, following the Cold War, the Russian Federation decreased its military but still needed a way to sustain its capabilities while post-Soviet Russia pursued modernization of its armed forces (Rondeaux 2019, 7). Russian Intelligence and Security Services (RISS) assumed the role of recruiting special operations members and shaping paramilitary groups that could answer Russian Federation requirements (Rondeaux 2019, 7). Both GRU and the FSB have been particularly involved in these roles (Rondeaux 2019, 8; Jones et al. 2021, 13). Dmitry Utkin, a 20-year GRU veteran with sustained ties to the intelligence organization founded the Wagner Group, a spawn of the Slavonic Corp, that largely established itself through operations in Ukraine (Jones et al. 2021, 13). Although this was a significant post-Cold War factor, there are four major drivers of Russian paramilitary activities in the Middle East and Africa.

First, the Primakov doctrine continues to greatly influence Russian strategy in both the Middle East and Africa. Yevgeny Primakov was Vladimir Putin's predecessor in the KGB, who placed a significant emphasis on Russia's diplomatic relationships in the Middle East and North Africa (Rondeaux 2019, 8 & 18-20; Johnson 2020, 8). As Candace Rondeaux explains, this doctrine remains one of the central components of Russia's grand strategy, which emphasizes power projection on Russia's southern flank (Rondeaux 2019, 8; Johnson 2020, 8). Relationships throughout these regions create invaluable economic and diplomatic opportunities for Moscow to gain access to lucrative mining agreements, and to generate stronger influence in areas the US has significant foreign policy objectives. As Mark Katz points out, similar to Primakov, Putin's agenda in the Middle East and Africa also includes developing and bolstering relationships with countries hostile or distrustful of Washington, because they could be leveraged against US or remind Washington of Russia's global reach (Katz 2006, 144).

Second, Russian paramilitary groups have the capacity to secure lines of revenue for the Russian state. The Middle East and Africa are rich with financial opportunities the Russians excel at seizing: arms sales, energy agreements, and mining of precious minerals and resources (Rondeaux 2019, 8); this paper will focus almost exclusively on energy and mining. In terms of energy, the Russian Federation is deepening ties in Africa through energy agreements. Consumption needs do not define energy deals between Russia and Africa. Instead, it is an avenue for Moscow to exercise control over Europe, which relies heavily on Russian and African energy sources (Pham 2014). The Russians are well poised to take advantage of energy opportunities in Africa due to China's predatory loan failures in the region, and the western model to apply strict conditions to agreements, rendering African nations more amenable to Russia (Pham 2014). China offered significant loans in the region as part of the Belt and Road

Initiative. Countries in dire need of infrastructure development and an injection of economic support were susceptible to Beijing's emphasis on non-interference in Africa's internal affairs (Gbadamosi 2021). Amidst the pandemic, Zambia defaulted on a 6.6 billion USD loan, and Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are amongst several African nations increasingly suspicious of Chinese funding (Gbadamosi 2021). This has the unintended consequence for China, of making other external agreements more attractive.

The model for Russia's approach in Africa is largely to cultivate and support the success of a central government with favorable perceptions of Moscow, and then pursue agreements that satisfy Russian economic or military agendas (Hedenskog 2018, 2). In 2019, there was an inaugural Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, in which Vladimir Putin asserted they were "not going to participate in a new 'repartition' of the continent's wealth; rather, we are ready to engage in competition for cooperation with Africa (Smith 2021)." Both military cooperation and energy agreements on the African continent were priorities at the summit (Gupte and Griffin, 2019).

Another economic opportunity Russia is seizing in Africa, which relies significantly on Paramilitary Companies (PMC) activities, are mining operations. The 21<sup>st</sup> century ushered in a deepening of trade relations with Russia. Although the 1990s were a post-Soviet era period of disengagement, since 2000, there has been a significant upward trajectory of economic engagement (Pham 2014). Between 2005 and 2015 alone, there was a 185% increase in trade which included an uptick in coltan, cobalt, gold, and diamond mines (Adibe 2019), which contributes to the employability of the Wagner Group in Africa. Although Russia has raw minerals and precious stones, mining is cheaper in Africa and there are fewer challenges to sustain labor on the African continent than in Siberia where many Russian mines are located

(Pham 2014). The implications on labor issues and trafficking in the region will be discussed later in this paper.

Third, Russian PMCs are an ideal tool in today's global security environment, which is increasingly defined as a "grey zone." This means interstate conflict and engagement will increasingly occur somewhere in the middle, on a continuum between war and peace (Barno and Bensahel 2015). This is largely characterized by provocative activities that violate norms or even laws in pursuit of military and political objectives through methods that include but are not limited to proxy wars and information operations (Barno and Bensahel 2015; Hicks et al 2019). A priority of grey zone activities is also to avoid an escalation toward a direct interstate engagement between nation-states. Experts in Russian PMCs concur they are covert action tools used to reach objectives in today's environments (Rondeaux 2019, 6). Russian PMC's are designed to thrive in the grey zone where the emphasis is on: plausible deniability, agility, adaptability, and where local and regional leaders have more to gain than to lose from employing them.

Fourth, plausible deniability is a primary currency in the utilization of paramilitary companies. There are many reasons for Russia to leverage PMC's in a range of pursuits of political, military, and economic objectives. In operations that have a nexus to illicit activity, in foreign operations that may require a UN resolution or international community condonation at the very least, or that involves intelligence collection that a federal government does not want to be openly associated with, plausible deniability is critical. It avoids escalation between world actors if these activities are discovered or attributed. It can also help avoid reactions from other internal or external actors whose interests are challenged or even degraded through Russian activities.

## **I. Evolution of the Training Veil Model**

There are many ways in which the Wagner Group provides some form of military training on the African continent while pursuing a greater political, military, or economic agenda that aligns with Russian Federation priorities. Although the Wagner Group is largely considered to have been incubated in the Russian invasion of Crimea (Makinnon 2021), the model we are seeing in Africa was largely refined in Syria. The Wagner Group involvement in Syria was the Russian Federation's greatest role in foreign operations since the end of the Cold War (Jones et al 2021, 32). In 2016, the presence of this PMC emerged in Syria to facilitate the return of oil fields to the Assad regime (Mullin 2020). It was not originally Russia's intent to leverage a large contingent of PMCs in Syria. Instead, Russia's initial approach was to provide training and support Shia and Syrian militias in their support to the Assad Regime (Jones et al. 2021, 32). When they were losing ground and failing to meet operational objectives, Russian PMCs who were initially deployed to provide support functions such as logistics to the battlefield were transitioned to provide reinforcements in direct action (Jones et al. 2021, 32).

The transition in role and responsibilities of Russian PMCs in Syria eventually resulted in rising casualties and confrontations with American forces. In the summer of 2014, ISIS control throughout Syria was aggressively expanding and the US responded with political pressure on the Assad regime to concede control, concurrent with US military strikes against a metastasizing terrorist group (FPRI 2020, 1). In 2015, Russia began increasing its military strength in Latakia province in northern Syria, and their operations began interfering with US and Turkey combined operations until deconfliction was agreed upon through a UN resolution (FPRI 2020, 2). This divided the region into US in the east and Russia in the west, with the Euphrates River as a natural boundary in many areas of the region (Weiss and Ng 2019). However, in the February

2018 Deir al-Zour incident, Russian speaking militants crossed the Euphrates into US controlled zones and attacked US and Kurd outposts, with the support of Russian air and ground support (Marten 2018). Following these Russian militant operations in a US zone near a Conoco plant, the US military contacted Russia's command in Syria, but they rejected Russian military involvement in activities resulting in 200-300 casualties (Marten 2018); at least 100 were estimated to have been Wagner Group members (Asymmetric Warfare Group, 73).

Many questions and assumptions about Wagner Group surfaced regarding the February 2018 operations in Deir al-Zour. Despite the prevailing understanding that Wagner Group is a Russian entity subordinate to the state, questions surfaced as to whether this PMC pursued operations near the Conoco plant independent from Russian government direction (Weiss and Ng 2019). This challenge has largely been dismissed because US intelligence reporting indicates Yevgeniy Prigozhin coordinated with the Russian government responsible for missions in Syria (Weiss and Ng 2019). Moreover, regaining control of oil and gas resources in Syria was the nexus of military, political, and economic objectives in the region.

At this juncture, a Russian model that enabled paramilitary activity to achieve political, economic, and strategic objectives, and that relied heavily on commercial entities became clear. Obshchestvo Ogranichennoi Otvetstvennostyu Evro Polis (Evro Polis OOO), a Prigozhin controlled company, was the commercial vehicle for Syrian government-security services contracts; this one specific to energy sites (Weiss and Ng 2019; US Treasury 2018). The contract awarded 25% revenue from production to the Evro Polis (Mullin 2020; Weiss and Ng 2019). The success of the Evro Polis contract hinged on the operational success of the Wagner Group. Besides re-gaining control over oil and gas sites in Syria, and returning them to the Assad regime, both entities have Prigozhin in common. Prigozhin was identified as the owner and

controller of Evro Polis and is believed to be the financier of the Wagner Group (US Treasury 2020). Pursuant to EO 13661, the US Treasury individually designated Prigozhin for contracts he operated associated with the Russian invasion of Crimea (US Treasury 2020), and pursuant to EO 13848 and 13694, for his operation of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a vehicle for malign influence operations in the 2016 elections (US Treasury 2018; US Treasury 2020).

There are numerous additional associations between Prigozhin, the Russian government, and commercial enterprises that tend to consistently surface in “grey zone” activities. The Russians use commercial relationships to obfuscate associations to the Russian government and use alternative military relationships to conceal their primary objectives in a region. As Jones et al. point out, Russia’s leveraging of PMCs allows them to remove themselves one, two, or even three steps from the activity (Jones et al. 2021, 16). Considerations like limiting military casualties and reduced operational costs of PMCs vice conventional forces exist (Jones et al, 16-17). In this case, avoiding escalation with the US military where deconfliction between zones on each side of the Euphrates was an intense and very dangerous point of contention.

Even five years after the Wagner Group arrival in Syria, and the amount of information, analysis and debate about the group that has evolved, there are many things unclear in available reporting about the relationships between this PMC and the Russian government. The piece of the picture most clear, however, is that Prigozhin is the common denominator in Wagner operations where Russian political, economic, and strategic objectives are glaring. At the intersection of Wagner operations and commercial enterprise, is Prigozhin. In the case of Syria, it is widely assessed that between 2015 and 2020, Concord Group and Evro Polis were the commercial vehicles used to finance much of the Wagner Group operations (See **Appendix A**). Prigozhin is believed to have been the financier for Wagner Group operations in Syria during its

initial support in the region (US House of Representatives 2020, 8). This was exercised through his holding company, Concord Group, or its subsidiary: Concord Management and Consulting. During the 2015–2016-time frame, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) provided operational control over the Wagner Group activities in Syria, along with conventional air and ground support (Asymmetric Warfare Group, 67-68).

By 2017, the dynamics within the security contract for the oil and gas fields significantly changed. The arrangement had emphasized a relationship with Concord, but then shifted to a direct relationship between Evro Polis, a Russian registered company, and General Petroleum Corp, a Syrian government owned company (Satter 2017, 2; Vasilyeva 2017). Evro Polis is another Prigozhin connected company registered in Russia (Asymmetric Warfare Group, 71). However, during this period, the Russian Minister of Energy was at the helm of operations and coordinating security contracts with the Syrian government, while the Ministry of Defense (MoD) seemed to have faded into the background (AWG, 71). It is rumored that Prigozhin fell out with the MoD over lack of support, and by the end of 2016, Russian Energy Minister, Aleksandr Novak, became central to its relationships (AWG, 71 and 74). Despite sustained relationships and employability of the Wagner Group, the material military support observably deteriorated (AWG, 70-73). By the time Wagner Group encountered US Special Forces in 2018, the composition of their forces was different, along with their weapons, and most certainly, their morale.

Training has always been a function of many Russian PMCs, including the Wagner Group (US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service 2020, 1). Despite the role of commercial enterprise, the need for a training veil is not going to deteriorate any time soon for two glaring needs. First, plausible deniability indeed had its limits. While it may succeed in

contributing to a lack of escalation toward interstate conflict, it will not obfuscate or at least add ambiguity to the true nature of PMC activities either. This remains important given the objectives Wagner Group pursues, and the level of attention this is continuing to draw from the US Government and other actors in the international community. Although emphasizing military to military training will not reverse the association between Wagner Group and the attention gained for these activities, it can be leveraged as a reason to be operating in a country, it detracts a focus on Russia's true political or economic priorities, and it could be used to manipulate a narrative.

Russian actors providing training in conflict zones to counter terrorism like ISIS or protect valuable infrastructure or resources puts their activities in good light. Although the Wagner Group is not a conventional force, it operates under the umbrella of Russian military objectives as well. Since 2015 alone, Russia has signed over 20 military cooperation agreements in Africa (Hedenskog 2018, 1; See **Appendix B**), attracting increasing notice over the past few years. Although this acceleration in military integration in Africa has been concurrent with increased visibility and involvement of Wagner Group, Russia has rejected any affiliation to the PMC and its operations. Military cooperation agreements can function as a political temperature between governments, they provide a reason for the influx of weapon leaders and military in country, and they can become a storefront for additional activities to occur behind the curtain.

The second reason stemmed from the first. It provides a long and enduring reason to maintain security forces in a region, without triggering an intervention from the international community. A way to respond to foreign scrutiny as well as sanctions, is to employ a front for activities that seem noble, not contrary to UN objectives, and that require security, weapons, and large financial transactions. Russia's activities, requiring bullets, beans, and band-aids, evolved

as an ideal reason to be in the country, and a good excuse to have resources necessary to perpetrate or respond to violence. Amassing military strength, conventional or paramilitary, draws attention. An influx of training related resources creates an ideal distraction.

## **II. The Wagner Group in Africa**

The activities seen in Africa now are largely in line with historical ways the Russians have approached engagements there. During the Cold War, its engagements in the region were largely characterized by educational and humanitarian engagements, bilateral military support activities, and economic assistance (Sukhankin 2020). Although Russia significantly drew down its presence in Africa following the Cold War; a presence is revamping now. Although it has been nearly three decades, there are still cold War era ties the Russians can leverage. This allows the Russians to achieve political, economic, and military gains through soft power approaches, and it delivers benefits to local leaders, whether it is in form of support to reinforce power and control in a region, counter terrorist or insurgent activity, or to re-gain control over industries a critical priority to governments, like mines or oil and gas resources.

The Syrian model, integrating Wagner Group efforts and commercial vehicles like Evro Polis, became a model that we are now seeing applied to the African continent. In 2017, the Wagner Group arrived in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Sudan, and Libya. In the CAR and Sudan, the Russian model emphasized training and utilized both commercial enterprise and Wagner Group activities to gain access they needed to achieve objectives. Libya was different. Perhaps given the level of its relationship and baseline presence there, political influence did not need to be cultivated to the level necessary further inland. Wagner Group failures in Mozambique and Madagascar expose the limits of this model, and what components of it are critical to successful results. Despite outcomes, these examples demonstrate Russia is pursuing

local and regional political end-states that benefit Russian strategic objectives (See **Appendix C**).

In 2017, the Russian government successfully lobbied the United Nations for an exemption to the arms embargo to deploy civilian trainers to the CAR (Searcey 2020). As early as 2017, the Wagner Group started to arrive in country by invitation of the President Faustin-Archange Touadéra (Bax 2021; Searcey 2020), an independent party member who came to power in 2016 and was re-elected in 2020, following many politically volatile in a country not strangers to coups (CIA World Factbook: CAR, 2021). The arrival of the Wagner Group, to provide training to CAR security forces also came with the installation of a Russian spy, Valeriy Zakharov, to serve as the President's security advisory (Searcy 2020). Although the Wagner Group has been credited as securing increases in licit trades in minerals, there are also reports of Russian operatives engaging violent rebels to facilitate trade from mines outside of agreements and where trade is outlawed (Searcey 2020). In the face of blame for exacerbating violence in the CAR, Prigozhin connected companies have endeavored to soften these edges with the sponsorship of hospitals and sporting events, and pro-Russian public relations campaigns through billboards and social media (Searcey 2020). When asked about activities in the CAR, currently sanctioned under UN Arms Embargo, pursuant to resolution 2127 (2013), the Russian Foreign Ministry response asserted they were not involved in combat operations (Smith 2020; UNSC 2013, 1-2).

With a political in-road, the financial opportunities for foreign exploration in the CAR are significant. Along with forestry and subsistence farming, mines are the centerpiece of the CAR economy (CIA, World Factbook: CAR 2021). The CAR, which lags behind Angola and the Congo in diamond exports, has historically exported more diamonds than gold (Matthysen and

Clarkson 2013,6). Despite anti-corruption efforts and initiatives like the Kimberly process to address blood diamonds, experts warn that numbers are inadequate due to the smuggling of these minerals. It estimated that as high as 86% of diamond production and as high as 95% of total gold production leave the CAR through illicit channels (Matthysen and Clarkson 2013, 7 & 18-19; De Jong 2019, 6). The routes, at least for gold, are often smuggled overland to the Cameroon and then to foreign markets in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe often via commercial airlines (Interpol 18 & 25). Private jets or even helicopters are used depending on the resource capacity of criminal organizers (Interpol, 25).

In October 2017, Prigozhin affiliated companies, Lobaye Invest SARLU and Sewa Security Services, were registered in the CAR (Searcey 2020). They are subsidiaries of M-Finans, a Russian company with some association to Concord Group, the parent company of a set of Prigozhin's entities (Lister et al. 2018; US Treasury, Sep 2020). A UN working group found in 2021, that these three entities are interconnected and associated with violence in the region (UNHCHR 2021). While Wagner and Sewa are heavily involved in training and government security activities, M-invest is utilized to facilitate extraction agreements with local leaders (Narayanan 2019). This triad of influence is deeply entrenched now in the CAR. Until there was an international outcry, the Russians had become involved in customs collection in the CAR and maintained a presence on the border with Cameroon (Bax 2021).

In the Sudan, the Russians pursued basing rights that would give them Red Sea access, along with mining agreements between the President Omar al-Bashir government and M-invest, a Prigozhin connected Russian company (Katz et al 2020). The Russian base has not been established yet, but the opportunities in gold markets in the meantime are significant enough to draw focus. Sudan is the Russian largest gold producer in the world, and third largest in Africa;

50-80% of gold leaves Sudan through smuggling routes (IPIS 2020). This market has only escalated in importance because the succession of the South Sudan also resulted in the loss of a majority of the oil wells, and the increased reliance on gold as a form of revenue (IPIS 2020). This ushered in an emphasis on counter-smuggling activities. In 2021, Sudan doubled its gold revenue, reaching over \$86 million (38.2 billion pounds), after years of lost income due to smuggling activities and conflict (Markets Insider, 2021).

Facilitating mining as well as providing training and security, produced a glaring opportunity to Russia. Following a 2017 meeting between al-Bashir and Vladimir Putin in Sochi, a deal was struck granting M-invest, a Russian company, access to gold reserves in the Sudan that Meroe Gold, a Sudan organized subsidiary, went on to operate (Ramani 2019; US Treasury July 2020). Although al-Bashir has since been ousted from power, the transitional government has agreed to honor mining, energy, and military contracts (Ramani 2019). Prigozhin company narratives disparaging opposition to al-Bashir as well as the transitional government that came later, is a soft power tool that has likely been invaluable in this arena as well. Particularly given that smuggling routes from the CAR sometimes go overland through the Sudan, and a Russian presence in mines along the Sudanese border and in restricted areas beyond agreements have been observed (Searcey 2020). It would be difficult to numerically capture the benefit to Russia. Returning this much revenue to the government through Wagner Group security paves the way to the construction of its naval base and gives them continued access to formal and informal gold markets.

Besides similarities in Russian models used to pursue objectives in Africa, there are indications of shared interest between African countries. Leaked documents indicate in 2017, Sudan based M-invest paid for the travel of a Russian professor, Nikolai Dobronravin, to travel

to the CAR (Harding 2020). Dobronravin completed his travel with Prigozhin company employees; an entourage that included Dmitry Sytii, the Lobaye founder (Harding 2020). This sphere of influence extended much beyond lateral interest in CAR and the Sudan. There was a nexus to international level influence as well. In 2018, Dobronravin gained UN approval to serve on a Sudan expert panel (Harding 2020; Colum Lynch 2018). Analysts observe the US-Russia proxy wars unfolding within the UN, but also an intent for Russia to undermine sanctions through strategic relationships (Colum Lynch 2018).

In Libya, Russian interests are largely energy, since Libya is a large energy provider to Europe, although Russia also benefits from a legacy of infrastructure projects as well as access to Libya's air and naval base (Brian Katz et al. 2020). Al Jufra is a site inland that Russia could amass ground forces, but it has also served as a lily pad for air operations (Brian Katz et al. 2020). Russia delivered MiG-29 and Su-24 platforms to Libya, establishing a new level of training engagement Wagner Group has not been observed conducting anywhere else in the world (Craigin and Mackenzie 2020). Perhaps the kinship between Libya and Russia elevated these contributions. The level of strategic priority seems to be proportionate to the level of priority as well as the level of Russian MoD involvement (Asymmetric Warfare Group, x). Although Wagner provided training, they were largely focused on military operations to support the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar (Brian Katz et al), which is opposite the General National Accord (GNA) the international community recognizes as the leaders of Libya. There seemed to be less emphasis on using commercial vehicles. The Russians do not need the Wagner Group to achieve energy influence in Libya, they just need them to protect its interests.

Despite the success associated with above noted examples, the Russians have not always been tactically, politically or strategically successful with this model either. In late 2019, the Wagner Group entered Mozambique with only a couple hundred of its members (Balestrieri 2020). Early that year, Vladimir Putin negotiated an agreement with Filipe Nyusi, Mozambique President, to provide training and additional support to Mozambique military (Balestrieri 2020). The agreement, of course, was laced with energy objectives: natural gas concessions (Balestrieri 2020; Brain Katz et al 2020). The Cabo Delgado province has significant gas resources discovered in 2010 and was found to be 14<sup>th</sup> in the world for natural gas deposits (Sukhankin 2020). Corruption and insurgency activities were barriers to launching the industry, so during Putin's visit, a debt forgiveness agreement was presented, and the doors of Russian energy companies were opened (Sukhankin 2020). The model discussed was the same as Syria: Wagner Group security in exchange for a cut of the revenue (Sukhankin 2020). However, ISIS had the home court advantage. The Wagner Group arrived in late 2019, and within a month, was in a retreat that resulted in an early 2020 departure (Brian Katz et al 2020).

There is no room for political failures in this model. In 2018, the Russians tried to apply the same model to Madagascar, but after support for a Russian connected political candidate failed, the pathway to their objectives in country deteriorated. Russian actors tried to offer support to at least six candidates of the 2018 election, but when that did not work, anti-Russian sentiment ignited (Fowler 2019). Gaining influence in a country that is the world's largest vanilla producer, and which has the largest cobalt, nickel, and uranium, was a loss (Fowler 2019). Particularly after the success in other countries. Russia tried to cling to its commercial in-road, Ferrum Mining, which had gained a 70% share in Kraoma, a state-owned chromite mining

company (Fowler 2019; Brian Katz et al 2020), however, Kraoma employees rebelled demanding Russia's departure.

Wagner Group did not go into Mozambique and Madagascar until after the other countries. Perhaps they were emboldened by their success in other countries, and so motivated by the potential gains in these additional countries that their calculus was not realistic. Given sustained Wagner Group presence in other parts of the region, perhaps they were just spread too thin to succeed there. Some argue that Russia's ability to exert influence in Africa may be capped. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observes, Russian operations in Africa have more opportunistic than strategic qualities (Weiss and Rumer 2019, 3). Although the Russians have been able to leverage some former Cold War era relationships, they observe that their influence is constrained by risk aversion and modest military power which overall limits what groups like the Wagner Group can achieve in the shadows (Weiss and Rumer 2019, 1-3). Indeed, the failures of China and the prudence of western loans and agreements in Africa leave plenty of opportunities for Russia to expand influence in Africa. However, a criticism is that their business approach is short sighted and has failed to secure lucrative deals like the nuclear agreement recently pursued with South Africa (Weiss and Rumer 2019, 15).

In terms of challenges to strategic success, a series of sanctions targeting Prigozhin connected companies has been challenging. In 2020, the US Treasury sanctioned Lobaye and M-Finans and certain of its officers (US Treasury Sep 2020), as well as M-invest in Sudan (US Treasury July 2020). This has certainly not shut down this network of companies, but it does challenge decision makers in African countries that have or would like to have western partners to consider the expense of doing business with some of these companies. Particularly in cases like Mozambique where the Wagner Group was not tactically successful. Now the European

Union is also ramping up to execute sanctions against these actors. Against the backdrop of Russia amassing troops on the Ukraine border again, the EU is pursuing sanctions against Wagner Group for extrajudicial killings and human rights violations (Barigazzi 2021).

### **III. Impacts on Illicit Trade**

There are many aspects of this problem. Indeed, this is a clash of irregular warfare, organized crime, survival of the state, great competition, proxy wars, corruption, and greed. However, through the fog of this new brand of war, it is important to understand that PMCs and organized criminals in the commercial state are collective tools of statecraft. Ones highly reliant on the success of each other. Although Mozambique exposed the tactical limits of paramilitary forces, overall, the Wagner Group has demonstrated an ability to offer the state something its conventional forces do not: dynamic and quick reaction forces that can operate nearly anywhere. Just as, or even more importantly, it offers these capabilities that can generate revenue to fund their own operations, as well as return this investment of personnel to the Russian state when operations yield financial gain from securing oil and gas fields or mines. Conventional forces, by contrast, are large and clumsy giants that are less likely to achieve the relationships a smaller force can in country, especially in the commercial sector. The political and financial cost of conventional forces are also not attainable or not sustainable, because they involve carrying a flag to war where the international community is not going to tolerate.

As for organized crime run commercial entities, these are the lifeblood of the Wagner Group. Prigozhin, known colloquially as “Putin’s chef,” went from running a hot dog stand in Russia to operating one of the most high-profile transnational networks (Harding 2019), capable of facilitating military operations, paramilitary services, achieving political end-states. Prigozhin has also done so while being pursued by the American government. Although the strength of

Russian organized crime actors rose over 400 years, the dynamic feature they offer the state today really evolved in the post-Cold War (Finckenauer and Voronin 2001, 4-5 & 8-9). Over the last three decades, privatization in the Soviet Union gave commercial entities political latitude as a result of their financial holdings, and networks of corporations and their holding companies increased in capacity to generate political and economic influence abroad (Finckenauer and Voronin 2001, 4).

The more transnational organized criminals became, the greater the resources they could generate abroad. After Russia faced increased economic struggles due to sanctions following the 2014 invasion of Crimea and for meddling in western politics, a model seen in Syria and evolving in Africa has only grown in importance. This places the Russian government in an ideal position where they can leverage plausible deniability, financially benefit from PMC activities, but also use the system of punishment and rewards to control groups whose true associations are known to them. PMCs are considered illegal under Russian law, as does participating in foreign wars for profit (CRS 2020, 1). The Russian government is rumored to have imprisoned mercenaries that served in Syria to protect oil companies from ISIS pre-Wagner Group arrival (US House of Representatives 2020, 6). Even if that was the case, however, there was a departure from this later. Current activities indicate so long as they are meeting military, economic, and strategic objectives of the Russian state, there are few reasons for the government to pursue a PMC legally. An expert on the matter asserts that maintaining the illegal status of them reinforces the Russian governments assertions they do not condone nor are they affiliated with PMCs or their foreign operations (USHR 2020, 5).

At the international level, Russia's employment of PMCs like the Wagner Group has significant implications for dynamics and security in the regions they operate within. At the

regional level, the implications for security and on various forms of illicit trade are just as intense. PMC activities undermine political and economic growth at the roots through the rewarding of corruption, disregard of industry standards, monopolization of industries, and the meddling in political arenas. The training veil model also exacerbates violence. The 2017 UN exemption to the CAR embargo was laced with a weapons deal. This ushered an influx in weapons sales, along with the contingent of trainers (Marten 2019). Since then, Russian paramilitary instructors and CAR troops have been accused of grave human rights abuses, that include but are not limited to extrajudicial killing, kidnapping, and torture (Reuters 2021). In December 2021, the EU began executing sanctions against Wagner and certain of its commanders for human rights violations in the CAR, which they assert reiterates the nature of its activities in other African countries, Syria, and the Ukraine (Emmot 2021).

The nature of Wagner Group connected violence in Africa has drawn international attention, increased weapons sales, and impacted informal and formal mining operations. However, it has also ignited the illicit trade in IED materials. Rebels in the CAR, which Russian paramilitary groups and CAR troops have been fighting, includes marginalized Muslims and 3R (Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation), a rebel alliance fighting for control of territory in the region (Losh 2021). Rebels began employing PRB-M3 landmines and IEDs in their fight, which has ignited a black market for these explosives now being used to threaten vehicle traffic and lines of communication through the CAR (Losh 2021). The PRB-M3 is a Belgium made anti-tank mine from the 1970s and 1980s, that violence in the CAR is placing in higher demand, and which are being harvested from other battlefields or brought in from cache sites in Libya (Losh 2021; Hughes 2011). These UN banded explosives intensify the violence but add additional dimensions to a violent environment even less likely to attract international partners to compete

with Russia. Although largely considered an insurgency, this strand of violence is likely to evolve as religious based violence with the potential to draw fighters from other parts of Africa which will continue to intensify violence as supply chains to support the fighting evolve with changes in rebel group members.

Overall, this training veil model intensifies violence. However, they also set countries back from achieving development goals. When corruption indexes remain high, the ability for countries to attract investment and generate financial value through formal channels, undermines growth. In 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a report examining the use of “corporate veils,” which emphasized how commercial vehicles undermine anti-corruption efforts (OECD 2001, 13-14). Twenty years later, the reliability of this study prevails. In the case of Wagner Group activities, it reinforces the strength and boldness of Russian organized criminals as well as exacerbates corruption in Africa (OECD 2001, 13-14, US House of Representatives 2020, 4). Despite the rising awareness of these concerns, the ability to counter these activities in the corporate space remains a challenge. Commercial vehicles used in concert with PMCs may adhere to the laws and regulations of jurisdictions they operate within (OECD 2001, 13). Even so, OECD also points out there are enabling regulatory features or privacy laws in many jurisdictions that foster an ability to obfuscate true ownership, shareholders, and directors of companies (OECD 2001, 13-14). Registration of entities in these types of locations, the use of holding companies to spread assets out in hard-to-reach jurisdictions, makes associations ambiguous and difficult for foreign governments to identify and respond to threats.

Although Russian activities in Africa since 2017 have increased the volume of mining production through formal production, it is also highly likely that there has also been an increase

in informal production. However, the size of illicit economies associated with illegal mining have always been difficult to quantify. The International Peace Information Service (IPIS) continues to analyze the gap in trade by examining export data with the import data of its partners (IPIS 2020). Although it is well known that there are many jurisdictions in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, where both licit and illicit transfers of gold and diamonds converge, a baseline in the distinction between informal and informal economies is lacking. The IPIS gap analysis focuses on the Sudan. However, what will be especially challenging is production from mines in other parts of Africa converging in the Sudan before being sent on to global markets. Conducting an accurate gap analysis would also require another gap analysis from other African countries from which minerals are originating.

Anytime there is illicit trade, there is also money laundering. In the case of Russian actors, there are almost certainly front companies. Although the utility of them tends to add another layer of obfuscation, a nexus to them does also reinforce assessments about the nature and nexus of activities. In the case of Wagner Group activities, Prigozhin's network of companies tended to use front companies based in Hong Kong and Thailand. In July 2020, the US Treasury announced sanctions against: Shine Dragon Group Limited, Shen Yang Jing Cheng Machinery Import and Export Company, and Zhe Jiang Jiayi Small Commodities Trade Company Limited (US Treasury July 2020). In 2018 and 2019, they facilitated over 100 transactions in the excess of 7.5 million USD, with most of these transactions moving between Shine Dragon Group Limited, and M-Invest in the Sudan (US Treasury July 2020). Given the region these organizations were located in, it is likely there are many additional transactions not identified or substantiated. Many times, transactions are a transfer of financial value to settle books between money launderers or facilitators in many parts of the world. Hong Kong

especially, is growing as an offshore financial haven ideal for accommodating front companies. It ranks 4<sup>th</sup> on a global financial secrecy index (Tax Justice Network 2020), which combined with competence in managing large accounts, makes it an ideal location to organize fronts that require access to formal as well as informal financial markets.

Illegal mining not only has implications for development, but it also becomes a catalyst for other types of crime that may not be as immediately apparent. As Interpol points out, “Illegal gold mining has severe long-term environmental impacts, whether from mercury or cyanide pollution, or destruction of natural flora and fauna (Interpol 2001, 5).” Besides negative immediate impacts to the ground, it also has cascading implications for an entire ecosystem. Illegal mining degrades habitats even more than formal mining operations. It degrades arable land and can also exacerbate poaching and logging (Interpol 2001, 5). These latter impacts are largely because land may need to be cleared, and groups are hired to clear areas so the ground can be mined. Although many African countries are heavily reliant on the mining of precious stones, they are also dependent on farming to generate income and for consumption. Degraded health of land exacerbates poverty and food insecurity.

## **Conclusion**

Russian PMC’s thrive in a grey zone environment, as well as the lawless backroads of African nations with poor economic performance and leaders desperately clinging to some semblance of control, at odds with other regional actors, insurgents, or lines of foreign influence. They can generate influence in these places, but also know the laws and regulations of the places they influence or operate in so they can use that to their advantage or avoid capture. Often acting in plain sight, weaving between formal and informal trade sectors as well as between licit and illicit avenues, this bold group of actors is unlikely to be deterred. Attempts to apply the rule of

law to these organizations have not been successful. To date, US legal tools have been demonstrated to have minimal impact against these types of Russian actors. Concord Group, and its subsidiaries, are Russian organized entities with no physical or corporate presence in the United States (US District Court, Washington DC, 2018). Although Prigozhin and the two Concord companies were named in indictments for involvement in election interference, the US dropped the criminal case against them in 2020 given the lack of extradition treaty between Russia and the United States, and the fact that Prigozhin would never attend court on his own in the US (Sarah Lynch 2020).

Despite the futile future of a legal pursuit of Wagner Group, or key individuals that foster its success, there are still cracks in its armor. As illuminated in this paper, there are a number of shortfalls in the Wagner Group's training veil model. As great conventional armies learned many times over the centuries, it is difficult to impossible to accomplish tactical victories in brush and jungle. Even so, the real Achilles heel in Africa is failing to achieve political influence. The Russian approach in Madagascar crumbled without a political ally, and in the face of a workforce choosing to strike which brought mining operations to a halt without local buy-in. Countries like the Sudan, who have doubled performance in their formal mining sector can afford to divorce itself from the Wagner Group, if provided an alternative to its security. If the international community wants to limit or counter its influence, then world actors also need to find ways to compete in countries like the CAR and the Sudan, where violence intensifies but the control of the government of the day is certainly not guaranteed by relationships with Russian government proxies.

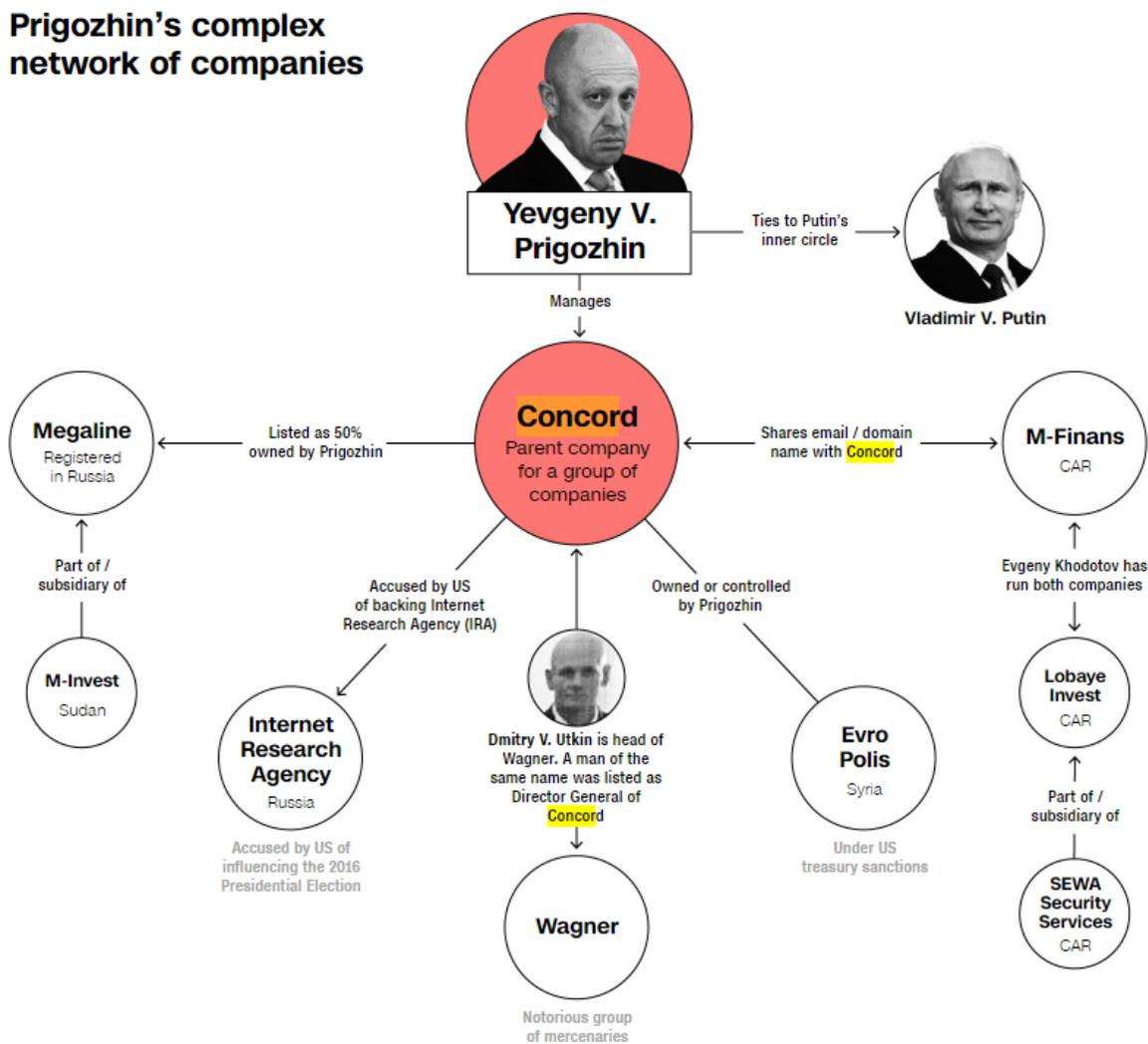
At the industry level, foreign companies, besides Russia, need to be able to compete and win mining concessions. In cases where the environment has deteriorated, and the presence of

IEDs and landmines have metastasized, western companies are unlikely to be open to operating there. However, in instances perimeters can be set up and maintained around formal mining sites, reinforced with their own private security, the success of a public-private sector approach to mining could be attainable. Unfortunately, in many African countries, conflict has been intensified by rebel groups operating throughout the region vice limited to the periphery of its industry, pitting governments against diversifying insurgencies. Unless western governments agree this has become a human security issue, necessitating a military response, the only actors to thrive in those spaces will be organized crime groups and paramilitary forces.

This paper considered many aspects of this problem set. However, there are many additional aspects of Wagner Group activities in Africa that deserve considerable attention. To really do this problem justice, will also require evaluating the training veil model in more places in Africa. The Wagner Group operates in more than a dozen countries; only five, in addition to Syria, were discussed here. Further addressing Wagner Group impact on arms sales and its convergence with other illicit trade sectors like illegal logging as well as poaching are major illicit trade sectors in Africa. Logging could be another lucrative area of activity to which Wagner Group actors are associated. Additionally, addressing whether Russian PMC activities have a nexus to uranium extraction is important. The CAR and Madagascar have uranium, and the Wagner Group is also involved in a nuclear contract in the Sudan. Whether there are efforts to pursue uranium extraction through these relationships is an important international security question.

Appendix A

Prigozhin's complex network of companies



(Lister, Shukla, and Ward 2019)

## Appendix B

Country	Date	Note
Botswana	August 2018	Peace-keeping and military training.
Burkina Faso	August 2018	Cooperation on countering terrorism. Deal not yet in force.
Burundi	August 2018	Cooperation on counter-terrorism and joint training of troops.
Cameroon	April 2015	Military and technical cooperation.
Central African Republic	August 2018	Training of armed forces.
Chad	August 2017	Anti-terrorism cooperation and joint training exercises.
Egypt	November 2017	Deliveries of equipment and weapons for counter-terrorism operations.
Eswatini (former Swaziland)	February 2017	Supply of weapons, maintenance and other military assistance.
Ethiopia	April 2018	Training and cooperation on peace-keeping and counter-terrorism and anti-piracy efforts. Deal not yet in force.
Gambia	September 2016	Training of armed forces, deliveries of military equipment.
Ghana	June 2016	Military and technical cooperation. Deal not yet in force.
Guinea	April 2018	Cooperation on peace-keeping, counter-terrorism, search and rescue at sea. Deal not yet in force.
Mozambique	January 2017	Deliveries of military equipment, spare parts and component.
Niger	August 2017	Working meetings of military experts and cooperation on military education.
Nigeria	August 2017	Cooperation on military training, peace-keeping and efforts to counter-terrorism and anti-piracy.
Rwanda	October 2016	Supply of weapons and other military equipment.
Sierra Leone	August 2018	Supply of weapons and other military equipment as well as the provision of other military technical assistance.
Sudan	February 2018	Develop the Sudanese armed forces
Tanzania	January 2018	Arms shipments as well as joint training and research and development.
Zambia	April 2017	Provisions for the supply of weapons and delivery of spare parts.
Zimbabwe	October 2015	Supply of weapons and cooperation on producing military products.

Sources: Reuters, Jeune Afrique, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.

(Hendenskog 2018, 4)

## Appendix C

**Training Veil: Wagner Group Related Activities in Syria and Africa**

Country	Wagner Group Arrival	Strategic Interest	Operational Gain	Training (Wagner)	Military/Security Deals	Energy	Other Gains	Nexus: Nuclear Materials	Relevant Contract Vehicles	Wagner Force Strength	Sanctioned
Syria	2016	Political Influence (Assad)	Port Access (Mediterranean); regional influence (AZAD)	Yes	Secure oil and gas resources	Energy deals (profit scheme for recaptured oil)	Reconstruction contracts	No	Evo Polk; Wagner	1000-3000 (combined with other PMCs)	Yes
Sudan	2017	Political Influence (regime preservation)	Red Sea Access; regional influence	Yes	Arms exports	Processing	Weapons deals; exploit natural resources	Yes (power contract)	M-Invest; Mercoe Gold; Wagner	Unknown	Yes
Central African Republic	2017	Political Influence	Regional influence	Yes	Arms exports	N/A	Gold/diamond concessions; construction contracts	Yes (uranium)	Lobaye Invest SARLU & Sewa Security Services (CAR based); M Finans (Russia based)	1200-2000	Yes
Libya	2017	Political Influence (Haftar)	Port Access (Mediterranean); Al Jufra Air Base (central Libya); regional influence (AZAD)	Yes	Arms exports	Crude oil deal	Infrastructure development contracts	No	Wagner	1000-1200	Yes
Madagascar	2018	Political Influence	Regional influence	Yes	Airbase Access	N/A	Vanilla, nickel, cobalt, chromite, gold	Yes (uranium)	Ferum; Wagner	Unknown	No
Mozambique	2019	Political Influence	Countering ISIS influence and threats to mines	Yes	Port Access	N/A	Chromite	No	Wagner	200	Yes

**Sources:** Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim 2021; Pauline Bax 2021; Anna Borshevsckaya 2020; Brian Katz et al 2020; Jakob Hedenskog 2018; Seth Jones et al 2021; Kim Cragin and Lachlan MacKenzie 2020; Sean McFate 2014; Emily Mullin, 2020; Matthieu Olivier 2021; Alexander Rabin 2019; Nathaniel Reynolds 2019; Diane Searcey 2019; Anushi Singh 2021; US Treasury 2018; US Treasury 2020.

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