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## WHAT IS THE WAGNER GROUP, AND WHAT THREATS DOES IT POSE TO GEORGIA?

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

# 199

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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*The aim of this expert opinion is to describe the goals, approaches, and tactics of the Wagner Group (WG), a paramilitary organization that is effectively used by the Kremlin to achieve its goals outside the country. The publication also focuses on the operations in which the units of WG have been involved, the recruitment methods, and the ideological origins. The added value of this analytical paper is its aspiration to examine a topic that is poorly studied in our reality: What risks does the Wagner Group pose to the national security of Georgia?*

## **What is the Wagner Group?**

Officially, while there is no legal entity connected to the company, and as such, it is not publicly recognized as a private security firm, it consists of a network of organizations that supply contract fighters. Despite having no official ties to the Russian state, the Wagner Group is a tool used by the Kremlin to achieve its military and political goals.

The origins of the group date back to the 1990s, when the Russian energy giants, privatized following the collapse of the Soviet Union, began to acquire their own security forces. These were surveillance services that immediately began to absorb resources coming out of the regular army of Moscow, attracted by the higher salaries of the private sector. The first real structured body of this type was the Anti-Terror Orel, which offered its supervision abroad, in particular in Iraq, where Russian companies were engaged in the exploitation of underground oil. Another such team was the Moran Security Group, continuously engaged in the defense of Russian companies in crisis scenarios, from which the Slavonic Corps division then broke away and instead directly recruited personnel to be sent to war zones to fight in defense of the interests of local governments, with the aim of receiving something in return (Mastrodonato, 2023).

When the Slavonic Corps was dismantled, one of its men, former colonel of the intelligence service of the Russian Federation Dmitry Utkin, created a new private military unit, the Wagner Group (WG). Where the operational guide from the beginning was that of Utkin, the man who financed the machine in economic terms was Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian restaurant magnate known as “Putin’s Cook.”

The militia’s name comes from Utkin’s passion for the German composer Richard Wagner, whom he approached after learning he was Adolf Hitler’s favorite artist. On the body of the man and his affiliates, there are several tattoos that refer to Nazism. Utkin has always been particularly fond of the

battlefield and has had himself portrayed with a helmet like those used by the German army during the Second World War.

“The ideology of the Wagner Group has been called an ‘esoteric form of Nazism,’ and this refers in particular to Heinrich Himmler, the founder of the SS, the Nazi protection squads,” explains Andrea Molle, a sociologist from Chapman University (Mele, 2023). “Swastikas, runes, and other symbolism of Wagner affiliates, which are similar to that of the Nazi battalions are used. To unite the two realities, there is also profound anti-Semitism seen, which in the case of the militia led by Utkin, originates from Russian neo-paganism. This thought was born in the nineteenth century in particular, and has evolved over the decades, settling on an ideal opposition between Russian Christian-Orthodox society—a sort of Aryan race in Muscovite sauce—and the liberal decadence of the Western world.”

For such a murky reality, it is essentially impossible to have reliable numerical data, but the most recent estimates by the Washington Post speak of about 5000 operatives on a permanent basis. These tend to be recruited from former Russian military and security personnel, but not only (Berger and Taylor, 2023).

### **The Wagner Group “Services”**

The Wagner Group forces are used for a wide range of operations: Training friendly armed forces, combat operations, intelligence and sabotage, personal protection services, site and infrastructure security, even propaganda operations. Moreover, the semi-legal limbo in which they operate ensures their loyalty to President Putin’s leadership.

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), private military companies (PMCs) play an essential role in pursuing Moscow’s goals. Technically, they would be illegal under the Russian Constitution, but these instruments are too attractive for the Kremlin: They are not officially traceable to the Russian state, they can operate following very loose rules of engagement (to put it mildly), the opaqueness that surrounds them makes it very difficult to estimate their real capabilities, and they can be deployed in distant theaters (Katz, Jones, Doxsee and Harrington, 2023).

There is no evidence that the Wagner Company receives support or intelligence from the regular armed forces, but it is likely that this is the case based on the fact that the two training camps in Russia are located

next to the base of the 10th Special Operations Brigade of the Special Forces (GRU) in Molino, Krasnodar Region (Marten, 2019).

Moscow uses this type of military instrument to operate in areas with little statehood, carving out areas of influence, possibly to the detriment of its US competitor, with whom Russia continues to measure itself. The operations described in this article show what kind of challenge the Russian Federation wants to present in the coming years. Although the war in Ukraine has to date shown the limits of what is no longer the Soviet Union, the threat posed by hybrid wars should not be underestimated.

In the midst of the Syrian civil war, Wagner played mainly assistance roles, but they were no less important. The Wagner Group has trained and advised a number of Syrian, Palestinian, and Iranian pro-government entities (Leviev, 2019). It has used its specialists to protect critical infrastructure, collect intelligence on the battlefields, and conduct various types of reconnaissance, all of which are critical to ensuring the effective use of Russian aviation (the latter was critical in turning the tide of the conflict, which Bashar Al Assad was losing) (Jones, 2020).

Syria was an opportunity for Moscow to study how to best use its mercenary companies and how to export the hybrid warfare model to other scenarios.

Wagner arrived in Libya in 2015, where the group trained Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army while also taking part in the assault on Tripoli (Ledler, 2020). The militia was then deployed to protect energy infrastructure in Tobruk, Benghazi, Derna, and Sirte. In Libya, the company also played a role in promoting media campaigns through media funding that echoed messages from Russia Today and Sputnik (Turato, 2022).

The Wagner company has even reached the "backyard" of the United States. In Venezuela, it has been responsible, at least since 2017, for the security of President Nicolas Maduro and the infrastructure of the Russian energy giant Rosneft (Turato, 2022).

In many African countries, according to Sergey Sukhankin, an analyst at the International Center for Policy Studies in Kiev and the Jamestown Foundation, Wagner Group soldiers are sent to protect diamond and precious metal mines, just as in Syria they protect oil pipelines and oil facilities (Nazzi, 2022).

In 2019, Wagner militiamen were in northern Mozambique to fight against the jihadists, but the operation proved unsuccessful. Their presence was later reported in the Central African Republic, where they joined President

Faustin-Archange Touadéra's men in the war against rebel forces. In that case, Russia admitted that it had sent about 100 civilians to the country to train the troops.

Even in Mali, where they support government forces against the jihadists of the Sahel, the Wagner mercenaries have left traces of unjustified killings and torture. According to a UN report, the mercenaries likely participated, with the Malian soldiers, in the killing of numerous civilians, who they doused in gasoline and burned alive (Akinwotu, 2022).

## **The Wagner Group in the Russo-Ukrainian War**

Wagner Group militants have become an important part of the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine. A Ukrainian military intelligence document obtained by CNN shows how effective they are being around the city of Bakhmut—and how difficult it is to fight them (Lister, Pleitgen and Butenko, 2023).

Wagner has been very visible on the front lines in recent weeks, and is always quick to take credit for Russian advances. Wagner's fighters were heavily involved in the capture of Soledar.

A Ukrainian military intelligence report (dated December 2022) states that Wagner poses an exceptional threat at close quarters, even having suffered extraordinary casualties. "The deaths of thousands of Wagner soldiers have no meaning for Russian society," the report states. "Shock groups do not withdraw without an order..." "Unauthorized withdrawal from the group is punishable by execution on the spot" (Lister, Pleitgen and Butenko, 2023).

Intercepted phone calls obtained by a Ukrainian intelligence source and shared with CNN also indicate a ruthless attitude on the battlefield. In one conversation, you hear a soldier talking about another who tried to surrender to the Ukrainians.

"The Wagnerians caught him and cut off his body parts," says the soldier.

Wounded Wagner fighters often remain on the battlefield for hours. "Assault infantry cannot take the wounded off the battlefield alone, because their mission is to continue the advance until the objective is reached." "If the assault fails, evacuation of the wounded is only permitted at night" (Lister, Pleitgen and Butenko, 2023).

An analysis of Ukrainian military intelligence shows that Wagner's tactics "are quite effective compared to the approach of the Russian army."

The analysis suggests that the Russian army may even be adapting its tactics to resemble Wagner's. This would be a significant change from the traditional Russian reliance on larger, mechanized units.

The Ukrainian report says Wagner deploys its forces in mobile groups of about 10 soldiers or less, using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and utilizing drones, which the report describes as a "key element."

Another tool Wagner soldiers have, according to the document, is Motorola communications equipment.

Motorola told CNN it had suspended all sales to Russia and had ended its operations there.

Convicts—tens of thousands of whom Wagner recruited—often make up the first wave of the attack and suffer the heaviest casualties—as much as 80%, according to Ukrainian officials.

The group also seems to be able to obtain weapons in other ways. US officials said that Wagner was sourcing weapons from North Korea. "Last month (December 2022), North Korea delivered infantry rockets to Russia for Wagner's general use," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

Captured fighters have described how they were recruited into the Wagner Group. According to their accounts, in August and September 2022, Yevgeny Prigozhin flew by helicopter to the prisons where they were held and offered them six-month contracts in exchange for a pardon. It was a tempting offer, especially for prisoners who had long sentences. After Prigozhin's visits, hundreds of prisoners were transported by bus and plane to a training ground in the Rostov region. The interlocutors say there was a strict ban on the consumption of drugs and alcohol, and that the training was short and basic, mainly showing them how to use weapons. "They didn't say anything about any danger," one of them said. They also explained that they had no idea what was happening in Ukraine: They thought that the Ukrainian army had left the country. "We thought we would fight with Poles and various mercenaries, including Germans. We did not think that anyone was left in the Ukrainian army. We thought they had left the country," they said. "It quickly became clear that they were lying only to get us to fight the Ukrainians. No-one really thought that the Armed Forces of Ukraine would actually fight for their country and for their relatives. We only found out about it when we went to the front," explains one of the interlocutors (Onet, 2023).



## The Wagner Group in Georgia

In addition to the military component, the Wagner Group is actively involved in intelligence activities and the collection of secret information. Members of this organization work undercover as businessmen, representatives of NGOs, diplomats, and even tourists in countries of strategic interest to Russia. These “strategic interests” unite NATO and EU member states, their partners, Japan, Australia, Latin America, and Africa – and Georgia is no exception.

Before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, various Georgian television stations began claiming that former soldiers of the elite units of the Russian Ministry of Defense had emigrated to Georgia and started up businesses. When they entered Georgia, they were already members of the Wagner Group (ტვ ფორმულა, 2021) (მთავარი არხი, 2021). According to the same sources, their task was to provide financial support to pro-Russian NGOs in Tbilisi and to collect secret information about Georgia’s strategic infrastructure.

But the topic quickly lost relevance: Opposition parties and the political spectrum (including think tanks and NGOs) began to turn their attention to other politically sensitive issues, leaving the Wagner challenge unresolved.

The issue resurfaced following last year’s large influx of Russians into Georgia. With the arrival of tens of thousands of Russians, it is most likely that the number of Wagner Group members has increased on the territory of this Eastern European country. Of course, there is no empirical evidence for this, but Georgia can surely not be an exception to the Kremlin’s universal tactic, used in every country where Russians immigrate en masse.

The Wagner Group members carry several passports, have fake accounts on social networks, use only cash, carry out specific missions, use the Hawala system\*, and more. They also actively monitor the activities of fugitive Russian oppositionists and political dissidents. Among the many questions they seek to answer are: Where do they live? With whom do they cooperate? and What do they do?

Another challenge is control. It is very difficult to monitor where they go, which places they visit, what communication networks they use,

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\* A feature of the Hawala system is the speed of transfers, anonymity, transferring small amounts at a time, the lack of any formalities, and remaining completely invisible to the official banking system. Hawala transactions are made immediately after accepting cash from the intermediary and entering a password. The intermediary, accepting cash from the payer, immediately orders the payment of funds in another country via fax, e-mail, telephone conversation, chat, social networking site entry, Internet announcement, or another way that does not raise any suspicions. The accepted money does not travel through any banking system.

what organizations they finance (with cash), and what narratives they disseminate to ordinary citizens of Georgia.

Among the several thousand Russians living in Georgia, there are certainly former soldiers. Of course, their exact mission is unknown to us (experts, research organizations, think tanks) but most likely they have quite good living and working conditions in Georgia. Based on the Ukraine experience, it can be assumed that they will be used for sabotage activities if Moscow demands it.

After analyzing the above-mentioned cases, it is clear to us that the Wagner Group is one of the most effective mechanisms operating under the direct control of the Russian Federation, able to conduct not only successful military campaigns but also complicated intelligence and propaganda operations. Thus, it is not surprising that it poses a direct threat to the national security of Georgia. These risks are doubled if we take into consideration the liberal immigration policy of the Georgian government, which allows hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens to freely enter the country, and then stay for a long time.

In conclusion, in order to deal with these challenges, it is fundamentally important to develop a unified, pragmatic security strategy that will significantly limit the effectiveness of groups like Wagner in the country, and to follow the recommendations that leading Western state actors have elaborated in this regard.

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