



HOUSE OF COMMONS

## Foreign Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: The Wagner Group and beyond: proxy Private Military Companies, HC 1248

Tuesday 19 April 2022

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Neil Coyle; Alicia Kearns; Bob Seely; Royston Smith.

Questions 1-65

#### Witnesses

I: Dr Sorcha MacLeod, Associate Professor, University of Copenhagen and Chair, UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries; Christo Grozev, Executive Director and ex-Russia investigator, Bellingcat; and Dr Sean McFate, Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council and Professor, National Defense University.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Sorcha MacLeod, Christo Grozev and Dr Sean McFate.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are talking about the Wagner Group and private military companies this afternoon. We have seen their work around the world, notably in places such as Mali and Libya, and of course most recently in Ukraine. We are lucky to have three extremely impressive witnesses with us. I will ask them to introduce themselves briefly. Dr Sorcha MacLeod, will you kick off as you are in the room?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** Thank you, Chair. I am Dr Sorcha MacLeod, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen, but I am here today in my capacity as chair of the UN working group on the use of mercenaries, which is a mandate under the Human Rights Council's special procedures. I have a short statement that I have to make before I say anything else.

**Chair:** Do you want to do that now?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** If I can get that out of the way, that frees me up. I am an independent human rights expert member and chair without remuneration of the United Nations working group on the use of mercenaries, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 42/9. My attendance here today is on a voluntary basis, and I will give an unsworn oral briefing to the Committee on the topic of "The Wagner Group and beyond: proxy Private Military Companies". Nothing in my oral remarks and any subsequent written briefing should be understood to be a waiver expressed or implied of the privileges and immunities of the United Nations or its subsidiary organs under the 1946 convention on the privileges and immunities of the United Nations. Furthermore, the views I express today are made in my capacity as an independent expert member of the UN working group on the use of mercenaries. I have not sought or received authorisation from the United Nations or any Government for these views.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much; the usual UN caveat. Christo, do you want to introduce yourself very briefly as well?

**Christo Grozev:** Sure, I am Christo Grozev, executive director at Bellingcat, the open-source investigative platform. Before I became executive director, I was for many years the lead Russia investigator for the collective.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Sean, over to you.

**Dr Sean McFate:** My name is Dr Sean McFate. I am currently a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a professor at Georgetown University and the National Defense University. I am the author of many books on this topic, but like my colleague from the United Nations, my views do not represent the US Government or the Department of Defense.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you and with all caveats fully applied, maybe we can start.



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Sorcha, if I may, I will start with you and then go to Sean. What trends have there been in the use of private military companies over the last decade?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I should say first of all that the term “private military company” does not have any legal meaning. The only word that is legally defined that we might be discussing today, depending on how the discussions go, is the term “mercenary”, which I can expand on later. What we have seen happening in recent years is an increasing use in the number of mercenary actors and mercenary-related actors in a variety of armed conflicts around the world. Some of them are what we call “proxy actors”. They appear to have close links to particular states. To that extent they are different from the traditional idea of a mercenary.

The impact of these types of actors on armed conflicts means that they have a tendency to prolong the armed conflict, because they are motivated by financial gains, so they have no incentive to end the conflict. They tend to be very heavily armed and we see resulting asymmetric warfare, which has an impact on civilian populations, and we tend to see an increase in violence. For both those reasons, we see increased human rights risks and violations of international humanitarian law and, in some cases, possible war crimes being committed when these types of actors are deployed.

That is something we have certainly been seeing in recent years, and the working group has documented that in a variety of different countries. I will be happy to share examples of that as we go through today.

Q5 **Chair:** Thank you. If there are examples that you think of later or you want to bring up a longer example, feel free to write to us afterwards. If you want to refer to that as a way of addressing the questions in a shorter way, you are very welcome to do that. Sean, at what point does a PMC become a proxy for a state actor? We have seen discussion over the Wagner Group being simply another way of the Russian military being employed in conflict. What is your view?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I differ from my colleague in a few ways. I do not take an international legal approach. I look at functions of the groups on the ground. I think the definition of the difference between a private military company and a mercenary is quite squishy. If you have the skillset to do one, you can do the other. It really depends on market circumstances and individual will. When it comes to being a proxy, one could argue with that in mind that Blackwater was a proxy of the United States of America in the Iraq war. Whether they are a mercenary or not is up for some academic or legal debate. It is really a question of market circumstances and pay cheque. This is not new—we saw it in the thirty years’ war. You would have mercenaries aligned with one side or the other, but they could easily flip or do all sorts of things. They respond to the laws of supply and demand more than they do to political allegiance.

Q6 **Chair:** Perhaps I can push you on that slightly, Sorcha, and then ask: are the Swiss Guard of the Vatican State mercenaries?



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**Sorcha MacLeod:** What you have to understand is that the working group on the use of mercenaries is a human rights mandate. As I've already mentioned, we get our mandate from the Human Rights Council, so that is what we are focused on.

We are not a court or tribunal, so it is not for us to determine whether an individual or group are mercenaries. That is for the appropriate authorities to determine. What we can say is that, in certain circumstances, it appears that certain actors meet the international legal definition of mercenary, and that their activities have violated human rights standards or international humanitarian law standards.

If you look to Central African Republic, for example, we see so-called Russian instructors, as the Russian Government calls them. It is perfectly legitimate for a country to send instructors or trainers to a country to train the armed forces, which is what the bilateral agreement between the CAR Government and the Russian Government was designed to do.

But from our perspective, what we saw happening with these so-called trainers and instructors was that, for a start, there were substantially more than the 500 Russia says are present in CAR. There are anywhere up to perhaps 2,000—estimates differ—and we have seen that they are actually participating in the hostilities offensively.

They are engaged in the armed conflict, and that is what takes them into mercenary territory. They are also engaged in very widespread grave human rights abuses: extrajudicial killings, torture, forced disappearances, kidnappings, looting, sexual and gender-based violence and indiscriminate targeting of civilians, which takes us into war crimes territory. From our perspective of a human rights mandate, that is what we are particularly interested in.

**Q7 Chair:** I absolutely see the legitimate point you are making, that mercenary activity tends to lead into human rights abuses more than regular state military activity. I am not trying to be flippant when I ask about the Swiss Guard of the Vatican State, and perhaps the foreign legion that various countries—most famously the French—operate. There are many different examples. The UK Government have Gurkha soldiers, and we would argue strongly that they are part of the regular British Army. How do you draw lines and identify? What are the factors that you would look at?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I think you are asking me for the international legal definition of a mercenary. The key definition is extremely complex. There are essentially six different elements that have to be cumulatively satisfied to determine whether someone is a mercenary under international law. We look to the Geneva Conventions, Additional Protocol 1, article 47. The purpose of that provision is not to criminalise being a mercenary. It is important because it determines whether someone gets prisoner of war status. That is all that article 47 does. It says that, if you are mercenary, you are not automatically considered a combatant and you do not automatically get prisoner of war status and protection.



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In order to be defined as a mercenary, you have to have been specifically recruited, either at home or abroad, for the purpose of fighting in an armed conflict. You directly participate in the armed conflict, so you are engaged in the hostilities. The third criterion is that you are motivated by private financial gain, and that the financial gain is substantially more than you would earn if you were a member of the regular armed forces. That is the key thing.

The final three categories or elements are excluding elements. If you are a national of a party to an armed conflict and you are participating in that armed conflict, you are not a mercenary. If you have been sent on official duties, generally you would not be a mercenary. So, the mention of and reference to trainers or instructors would exclude that, and peacekeepers, for example. You have those different elements. Peacekeepers would fall within the final category, where if you are sent on official duty, for example as a peacekeeper, you would not be a mercenary. That is a difficult definition to satisfy. It is cumulative and elements are subjective. How would you prove what somebody's motivation is? How do you prove on what basis they were recruited? That is extremely difficult.

There are other international instruments that criminalise mercenary activities; I am happy to talk about those, but I don't want to hog the debate.

**Q8 Chair:** We will probably come back to that, but thank you for giving us an idea of exactly what we are talking about, which I think is useful. Can I ask more specifically about one area of this—the Wagner Group, which we have started looking into? Can you tell us a little about them, Christo? We have touched on some of the areas in which they operate, but can you give us an overview of what it is, where it operates and what we should be thinking about as we consider this group?

**Christo Grozev:** Sure. Historically, it is a private military company that cannot exist under Russian law, and therefore it does not legally exist in Russian law—

**Q9 Chair:** Under Russian law?

**Christo Grozev:** Russian law criminalises mercenary activities abroad, and article 359 of the Russian criminal code makes any activities similar to what Wagner does, and has been doing for a decade, illegal, but the group does, in fact, exist.

The origins of the Wagner private military company go back to about 2012 or 2013, when a predecessor of the Wagner organisation was launched by people close to the military establishment in Russia—people close to military intelligence, actually—having taken inspiration from Executive Outcomes, the South African private military company, the owner of which lectured a group of select siloviks or military officers in St Petersburg several years earlier.

In 2013, it was launched as a private military company operating in Syria, guarding oil wells and fighting with the Free Syrian Army at that time, but



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that was a for-profit operation where it did not act on behalf of or as a proxy of the Russian Government. It was really a profit-making operation run by people close to the Russian military establishment.

After the launch of the Ukrainian invasion in 2014, the idea of having a proxy actor on behalf of the Russian state that does not have the responsibilities that the Russian official army would have, and that would have deniability in case of failure or of excesses, was considered a very strong argument in favour of restoring or launching something that is more structured. Thus, what we know currently as the Wagner private military company was organised.

Contrary to misconception, it was not active in the early days of the Ukrainian invasion, but came into the picture late in 2014, and it was most active at the beginning of 2015. At the peak of its Ukraine deployment, it numbered about 4,000 to 5,000 people, and at the peak of its overall deployment across several countries—in Africa, mostly—it numbered about 15,000 people.

The interesting concept here is how it was structured, because that is many thousands of people. They cannot just be paid under the table in cash, so how does that work? Well, as we know by now, it works through a number of structures that have historically been linked to a sprawling commercial complex run by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the St Petersburg chef, who is well known as Putin's chef. He has the catering contracts for a number of Government entities, including the military and the police. Essentially, his companies are the entities with the funding and some of the control over this army, which has been functioning for nearly a decade now.

- Q10 **Chair:** The way you talk about their wider work is interesting. To come specifically to what they are doing in Ukraine, that is why I was pressing Sorcha on the definition. Having nationals engaged in a national conflict challenges that status of mercenary. These are, as far as I am aware—you will correct me if I am wrong, Christo—Russian nationals by and large, normally with at least some connection to the Russian military; it is not always entirely clear that their period of service in the Russian military is formally finished, but they have some connection to the Russian military. So those who are fighting in Ukraine, in which Russia is a party, would not under your definition—I know it is not your definition, forgive me—or the definition you just gave, Sorcha, necessarily count as mercenaries. Would that be correct?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** That is exactly correct. Under the definition, in terms of the Geneva conventions, Russian nationals in Ukraine who are potentially fighting for some sort of private military company would not meet the international definition of a mercenary. Having said that, the working group does not have a position on Ukraine at present. We are closely monitoring the situation. You see different definitions under national law—for example, some countries automatically ban mercenaries. You mentioned Switzerland earlier; we did a country visit to Switzerland in 2019. Under its military code of justice, it has an absolute prohibition on



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anyone fighting for a country other than Switzerland, so you don't have these cumulative elements that are required to be met. Quite a few other countries have that.

Q11 **Chair:** That is not an unusual restriction.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** No.

Q12 **Chair:** But this is why it is interesting for us, because bizarrely the Wagner Group operating in Ukraine is operating under a different status from its operating in Libya, for example. Would that be fair?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** Libya is a complex situation, because you have mercenaries, or what appear to be mercenaries, fighting on both sides of the conflict. So you have mercenaries being recruited by both Russia and Turkey, and the working group has received information of human rights allegations relating to both sides. Individuals have been recruited from Syria by both Russia and Turkey, and from Sudan, for example, so there are multiple nationalities involved in the conflict in Libya.

Q13 **Bob Seely:** Do you mind if I ask a couple of follow-up questions on this theme, probably for Sean and Christo, to set the scene — obviously, Ukraine is very much the issue of the moment— not only regarding the Wagner mercenaries but potentially the Syrian mercenaries, because we know they are recruiting out of about 14 offices in Syria, one suspects with the Alawite minority but maybe elsewhere as well. How many mercenaries or paid non-official or unofficial fighters are we expecting from Wagner and Syria in Ukraine? Where are they? Christo specifically, are you looking for them? To both Sean and Christo, what do you expect from them on the battlefield? To what extent are they there as cannon fodder to lower the overall death toll to make the war more politically acceptable for Putin in Russia and less embarrassing to have to cover up the very significant deaths? Christo, do you want to go first, and then we will come to Sean afterwards?

**Christo Grozev:** I will start with some assessments of numbers, and then I will be able to pass on to Sean. We have developed contacts within the Wagner private military company. That is the result of many investigations into their operations, including into one failed sting operation that the Ukrainian authorities ran against Wagner a couple of years ago. Some of these sources have validated to us a striking participation by Wagner officers in the war at the moment—close to 8,000, which is much higher than we expected. More importantly, they have also given us a sense of a very high casualty rate among the Wagner private military mercenaries, which is about one third of these people. It is about 3,000 people out of a total, alleged by the Ukrainians, of 20,000 casualties—a more conservative estimate is about 16,000 to 17,000. About 3,000 of those are, in fact, people from private military companies, of which the majority come from Wagner.

Keep it in mind that Wagner is not the only private military company from Russia that is taking part in this conflict. On the eve of the war, several other entities were launched, with smaller numbers of mercenaries. They



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are all recruiting from the same pool of about 20,000 eager-to-be-employed mercenaries, some of whom have been idling away in their villages. Seeing the profitability that this operation has shown for its nominal owner, Prigozhin, a lot of other people close to the military establishment have decided they can take a piece of the available funding for this war. At this point, we are talking about at least three differently named and differently run organisations, of which the largest one is Wagner. So yes, about—

**Q14 Bob Seely:** What are the other ones called, just for the record? Sorry to interrupt you.

**Christo Grozev:** One of them is called Liga, and it largely runs off Wagnerites, so it's essentially a new reincarnation of Wagner. There is the original Wagner. And there is an unnamed one, which is very small in numbers and—again, according to sources in the Wagner organisation—is owned and run by people close to the head of the GRU, of military intelligence.

**Q15 Bob Seely:** So there are 8,000 and the casualty rate is 3,000—it's a very high casualty rate—and there are three companies. Are there any specific locations? Sorry to push you on this, but are there any specific locations or are they just generally on the eastern front?

**Christo Grozev:** Some that we know—I'm sure that this is incomplete. The first echelon, the first dispatch, of Wagnerites was sent before the war started in the direction of Kyiv. That was about 200 only, and their task was to scout out and assassinate political figures—a project that failed, as we know. A large number were deployed with the convoys that were advancing from Belarus towards Kyiv. The Chechen convoy was accompanied by about 400 Wagner mercenaries as well. We know of presence in the Kharkiv area, and we know of presence in the Bucha area, where we have some of the worst evidence of war crimes, or likely war crimes, at this point.

**Q16 Bob Seely:** Christo, thank you. Sean?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I cannot add to Christo's assessment on the ground, but I can say that historically this group has been used for fifth-column activities ahead of the advance. They have kill-or-capture lists for political leadership, as Christo mentioned. Lastly, they are brutal. I believe that is one of their selling points. If you are looking at Bucha and other places, it is the same pattern we saw with them in Syria, where they would interrogate, torture and behead people. Again, one reason why I think this has become one of Putin's weapons of choice is that it allows some plausible deniability between excesses on the ground, failures on the ground, and policy. Those in this room would not be fooled by that, but I don't think that is who they are trying to fool. They are trying to appeal to international media, human rights groups, and so on, although "appeal" is the wrong word.

**Q17 Bob Seely:** I was in the southern HQ in Odesa last week, and their assessment was that although the fifth columns in many areas of Ukraine





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had failed, there had been some success from the Russian fifth columns in Kherson, Berdyansk and Melitopol, which explains the faster progress of the Russian troops breaking out of Crimea than elsewhere. Whether that was mercenaries or GRU and the various GRU units, is that an assessment that the pair of you share?

**Chair:** I think we are going to stick to the Wagner stuff.

**Bob Seely:** Sorry. Is there anything from either of you on that?

**Christo Grozev:** I will jump in very quickly. We do agree with that assessment. They were not necessarily paramilitaries and mercenaries, but in these three areas the sort of political fifth column that was developed by the FSB, by the fifth department of Russia's security operators, which meant local political activists, bloggers and journalists that expressed some sympathy for the Russian so-called denazification campaign, was seen much more than in other places. I am not sure that that was accompanied by the actual presence of mercenaries or a successful operation by mercenaries.

**Bob Seely:** Thank you very much.

**Chair:** Can we come back to the Wagner Group?

Q18 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you all so much for coming today. Dr MacLeod, your working group has been looking at Wagner, particularly in Libya, the CAR and Syria. Have you identified any particular patterns that you think are really important for Governments to be aware of when they are looking at how to tackle the challenge of the Wagner Group?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I have already alluded to some of the patterns. We are seeing increasing use of them. We are seeing them being used not just by Russia but also by other countries, and it is extremely concerning to the working group that that trend is emerging. We published a report in 2020 that was submitted to the UN General Assembly. We highlighted the new manifestations, the proxy actors and a lot of the points that I made earlier. From our perspective, the biggest concern is the insertion and deployment of these types of actors into armed conflicts where they do not help the situation. They make the situation worse, particularly for the civilians on the ground.

Q19 **Alicia Kearns:** Surely they have never made a situation better at all. So it is not just "They often make it worse". They have never improved a situation where they have been deployed. Unless you are Russia, of course.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I think that historically that would be the conclusion, certainly from the working group's perspective. We have looked at the deployment of actors in a variety of different countries. We looked at a British company, Keenie Meenie Services, which was involved in human rights violations and war crimes in Sri Lanka back in the '80s, but we dealt with it very recently because there had not been proper access to justice for the victims, and that is a pattern that we still see happening.



If you look at these types of actors, they are different from regular armed forces. It is not that the regular armed forces don't violate human rights or commit war crimes; of course they do, but in the regular armed forces you have systems of accountability, clear chains of command, military codes of justice and courts martial. You have soldiers wearing a consistent uniform, insignia and numbers; they are identifiable. So when it comes to accountability for the types of human rights violations that we see in armed conflicts, to a certain extent it is easier to identify them.

With mercenaries and mercenary-type actors, it is the complete opposite. The chains of command are not clear. There is opacity and lack of transparency around these types of actors—deliberately so. They operate in the shadows for good reason. They do not wear clear uniforms or clear insignia. It is very difficult to identify who they are, so if you are a victim or the family of a victim or a human rights defender and trying to hold these kinds of actors to account, it becomes almost impossible.

To go back to the Central African Republic, for example, the people on the ground, the civilian population, will talk about the Russian guys, the white guys, but in terms of holding somebody to account, it is practically impossible.

**Q20 Alicia Kearns:** Is there any evidence of members of these mercenary groups, particularly of the Wagner Group or the organisation itself, ever being held accountable? In which case, in what settings? And what can we learn from those efforts to hold people accountable?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** There is one example I can give you that the working group has addressed in relation to the torture and murder of a civilian in Homs in Syria. The family of the victim sought to bring a claim in the Russian courts, and they brought the case to the investigative committee and asked for the situation to be properly investigated. States have an obligation under international human rights law and under international humanitarian law to investigate and, if appropriate, prosecute and sanction an individual or a group. The investigative committee delayed and ultimately did not investigate the case. It went to the Basmany district court and, ultimately, to the Moscow city court. The decision not to investigate was upheld at all levels. That is one example where we can say that the working group is extremely concerned about the delays and obstacles that were put in the path of access to justice for the family of the victim.

**Q21 Alicia Kearns:** Somebody from Homs will not have had many opportunities or access to the international community. What should leading members of the UN Security Council and others be doing to make sure that victims and survivors are able to get justice? What reform do we need of the international system so that we see individuals, or ideally the group itself, being held to account? How do we get justice for people?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** The first thing that the working group would always urge states to do is to become parties to the UN convention on



mercenaries, which, in contrast to the Geneva convention that I talked about earlier, criminalises being a mercenary. The definition is slightly different—there are only five cumulative elements instead of six. You do not have to prove that somebody did, in fact, directly participate in the hostilities. States that are a party to that convention are required to put in place legislation at the domestic level that would ensure investigation, prosecution and sanctioning of anyone who was found to be a mercenary. That is one of the key elements to ensure that these kinds of actors do not operate with impunity, because that is what is happening at the moment.

**Q22 Alicia Kearns:** In terms of the legal settings available to get justice, for example in the Homs case, were there choices? Was it essentially Syria or Russia, or were there other avenues that could have been pursued?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I do not know if I can speak to that.

**Q23 Alicia Kearns:** Let us talk around it. Let us say that atrocities were committed in Ethiopia. Would the only avenue available be Ethiopia, where the crime took place? Say it was Wagner Group, therefore Russia? Is there an alternative way? Clearly, if a country has allowed the Wagner Group to enter and to operate, they will not allow them to be prosecuted, or they will do everything they can to limit that. Moscow, Russia, Putin will absolutely not allow that, either. Where do people go to seek the justice they need?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I think that comes back to the point I was making that under international human rights and humanitarian law, if it is applicable, the home state of the national who has been accused could have jurisdiction. That is why it was brought in the Russian courts. Christo mentioned earlier that Russia prohibits mercenarism under its criminal code. I agree with that assessment. Russia's responses to our numerous allegation letters in relation to the case brought on Libya, and on the Central African Republic, were that mercenaries are prohibited under the Russian criminal code, as are private military and securities companies. They say that none of those are possible under Russian law.

**Q24 Alicia Kearns:** That takes me to a question for Christo about the funding structures, which I suspect will show that Russia cannot say that there are no mercenary groups that emanate from Russia. You mentioned the group operating from Britain in the '80s that committed atrocities. Are there any mercenary groups connected to Britain in any way?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** From the working group's perspective, we have not issued any allegation letters relating to British mercenary actors other than Keenie Meenie Services in relation to Sri Lanka.

**Q25 Alicia Kearns:** Have you investigated any organisations based in Britain that have not led to the issuing of letters?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** We do not have an investigative mandate. We receive submissions from civil society or victims. They send us the allegations; we receive that information. The standard of proof that applies to our mandate is credible evidence. If there is credible evidence of allegations and we can corroborate it, we write to the relevant actors—that



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could be states but it could also be private actors. As Christo mentioned, we can't write to Wagner, for example, because Wagner doesn't legally exist—it doesn't have a corporate body—but we have written to other corporate actors connected to Wagner. It comes back to the point that it is very difficult to hold them to account.

- Q26 **Chair:** Can I jump in quickly? What is Wagner, then? What entity does it have? Does it have an address? Does it claim to be something else? Does it have any form of existence at all or is it entirely a myth?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I am sure Christo can come back on this. From the working group's perspective, we have noted that it does not have a legal existence. It is not registered as a corporate actor in any jurisdiction, which is why I said at the beginning that to call it a private military company is not necessarily helpful terminology.

- Q27 **Chair:** Maybe you can tell us, Christo. Does it claim to be anything other? I know Prigozhin is described as Putin's cook—I think that is a somewhat euphemistic term. Does it have any form of existence that you would recognise?

**Christo Grozev:** It has many forms of existence. It is a chameleon. Actually, Wagner is not even the name that the members of Wagner refer to one another with. The name they usually use to refer to the sort of fluid organisation they belong to is "the Orchestra", and Wagner is the name of, let's say, the elite commander historically, or the nickname that he has adopted.

It has many corporate entities because those are needed for paying salaries for the Wagnerites, at the very minimum, but those change over time. For the longest time, one of the most fruitful collections of data on these people came from payslip records of an investment company affiliated with Mr Prigozhin, which paid salaries to thousands of them. As I said, the leak of the salary records gave us the greatest understanding of how many people there were, and the passport numbers and everything of many of these people.

But for any operation outside of Russia, they have local subsidiaries, and many of these subsidiaries are paying the salaries for the assignment of the mercenaries. In the Central African Republic, for example, these would be Lobaye Invest, Sewa and several other companies. Overall, I would say we are talking about dozens and maybe hundreds of companies that are almost like project SPVs for each particular operation.

- Q28 **Alicia Kearns:** If anyone wanted to provide any evidence of any companies that could be British-related, the Committee would obviously welcome that.

On the funding structure, Christo, was there anything else that you wanted to tell us in terms of potential links to the Kremlin, demonstrating that this is not just a company that happens to emanate from Russia, but is one that is inherently linked to the state itself?



**Christo Grozev:** The shortcut to understanding the funding comes from our interviews—our long debriefs—with a former deputy director of the Russian Ministry of Defence’s logistical unit, who defected from Russia. He described the initial funding that came to Wagner, which was after the Ministry of Defence chose Yevgeny Prigozhin as the most trusted of many possible options to be the corporate veneer for this organisation. After that decision was made, he was brought to the gentleman that we spoke with, and the gentleman that we spoke with was told, “You have to find a way to essentially donate to Mr Prigozhin real estate, and find a funding opportunity, so that we, in a deniable way, provide funding for what would become a private army that is a proxy army for us.”

The initial investment into what we call Wagner came in the form of a very large real estate—a former military training base that was turned into a joint venture operating a so-called patriotic education park, which is near Krasnodar in southern Russia. That is in the area of Molkino, which is the main base for the private military contractors in Russia; 18,000 people have passed through training at that compound so far.

Following that initial investment, the rest of the investment, at least until 2016, came mostly from the corporate structures—the catering companies run by Prigozhin—overcharging for their services to the state by approximately 20%. So this 20% surcharge in fact funded the operation of the military company, but after 2016, a hybrid funding model has appeared, where Prigozhin and his entities are allowed to keep a lot of the spoils of war; in the context of the Central African Republic, this would be concessions for diamond mining, and in the context of Syria this would be access to oil wells and a quota from oil well production.

Q29 **Alicia Kearns:** Sean, I know you have interviewed a number of former Wagner fighters. Can you give us anything more around that funding and how they receive payment? Also, do Wagner mercenary fighters and other such fighters know what they are signing up for and know which theatre they are going to be deployed to? Can you give us a bit of insight into that at the same time, please?

**Dr Sean McFate:** First, to confirm what Christo was saying, they get paid or remunerated through these other companies, usually a mining company or something like that—local ones. To my knowledge, there has not been a UK-based one, but that could be proven otherwise.

It is not a legal organisation, but it is an illicit association of warfighters, not just from Russia but from the Soviet republics, who are trained in Soviet-style warfare. They generally don’t know formally where they are going, but there is a rumour mill in the organisation and those who need money try to get on the proverbial war train, if you will—it is a bad image.

I guess part of the question is, “Why do people join Wagner?”, because that might be an opportunity that you could press on to diminish their power. A lot of people join it because they need the money. After every deployment they say they’ll not do this again and then they do it again, and they kind of get stuck in this world. Some of them do it—this is a



minority—because they are very pro-Russia, very pro-Russian nationalism and pro-Putin, and they view this as another way to serve, as if they are still somehow part of the Russian military. There are others who do it because they are romantics or adventurers and they are seeking adventure. Lastly, there are people who do it because they don't know what else to do with their life. They are soldiers, they get out, they don't want to bag groceries at Aldi or something, and they decide, "I want to do something."

These motivations, with the exception of the pro-Putin nationalism, are very consistent across the mercenary world, whether you are talking to mercenaries from Colombia—the types who killed the President of Haiti—to American mercenaries operating in the Middle East or whatever. You get these camps. To me it is consistent with a mercenary versus a national military soldier, but they don't know exactly where they are going. They have a rumour mill and it is usually worse than they expect when they get there. They say they would never do it again, and then here they are, doing it again.

**Q30 Alicia Kearns:** It is interesting that the profiles you have set out are not that dissimilar from those of foreign terrorist fighters who went to join ISIS, or those who fought in the Spanish civil war, or those who have gone to join any other terrorist group. It is interesting seeing the analogies of the types of profiles that you have.

I have two final questions, which I will ask together because I am aware that colleagues want to come in with other questions. First—I think this is particularly for you, Dr MacLeod—my instinct is that Governments are particularly bad at mapping the architecture of these sorts of organisations, and I would not be easily convinced that Governments would have specific strategies for dealing with such paramilitary groups and the work they do. It would be really interesting to know from all three of you whether there are any Governments who you think are particularly effective at this sort of mapping and understand the command and control functions. Obviously, we cannot have accountability and we cannot have genocide prevention and atrocity prevention strategies if we do not do the work at the start on the architecture. Who can we learn from as the UK? Is anyone doing it well, in the assessment of the UK?

My second question goes back to some of what Sean was saying earlier about fifth column work, but also the work around where else they operate in the world. I have a particular interest in the Balkans, particularly Bosnia—I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group. There is some evidence that the Wagner Group is already operating in the Balkans, one could say laying the ground, essentially ready to cause a problem when they are ready and when Putin might want to see that activated, recruiting ethnic Serbs in particular. It would be really interesting to understand from all three of you if you have any evidence or knowledge particularly of what is happening in the Balkans and how the Wagner Group might currently be operating.



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Those are two very different questions, but I thought I would give everyone a chance to go where they want between the two of them. Christo, do you want to kick us off?

**Christo Grozev:** Yes, I will kick off with the assumption of Government incompetence, which in this case I have to agree with. I will give you an example: when we started trying to find the identity of one of the most fearsome representatives of the Wagner Group, operating in several African countries, primarily the Central African Republic but also Mozambique, he was a known persona—a very feared colonel, as he was referred to by the locals—both interfering in the local political process and supervising some cruelties performed on the local population, and nobody seemed to know who he was. It took our team about two weeks to identify him. Not only did we identify him, but we found out that he had been travelling through European airspace and stopping at airports in western Europe for years on behalf of Wagner, and nobody ever bothered him. He had been issued visas multiple times by European Governments. That is an example of how nobody has really mapped out the whole structure and kept tabs on it.

To answer your question about which countries would be running against this trend, Ukraine is the only country that actually tried to have a holistic view, mapping the whole organisation, but Ukraine has been fighting its own war for eight years now and obviously does not have the resources. Any other country that wished to have a complete mapping might be able to do it at a much better rate. That would be my answer to your first question.

**Dr Sean McFate:** I would agree with that. The Five Eyes have not taken this issue seriously until maybe very recently—as in, this year. If you went to an intelligence agency in the United States of America, they are tracking China, Russia, North Korea, Iran and terrorists, but no mercenaries and no Wagner Group, which is one reason why it has become the Kremlin's weapon of choice. If you are looking to expand in the Middle East and Africa, as they have in recent years, you want to do it in the shadows using plausible deniability. It is very convenient for them to have an entity that the US and, I assume, the UK choose not to track, and this has emboldened them to use this as a stratagem for national expansion and national interests.

One way not to defeat but at least to hamper their operations is to shine the light of transparency on those operations, which is what Bellingcat and others do, and maybe, in similar ways, some of the prebunking that was going on before the invasion of Ukraine. If you take away the plausible deniability aspects of Wagner, they become of diminishing utility to the Kremlin. So my answer is that we have not done a good enough job in tracking them, because we see them as cheap Hollywood villains but, in fact, they are not.

Q31 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. I thought two points there were interesting: the choosing not to track and that essentially, by choosing not to track, we are enabling them and giving them the freedom to operate, so



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choosing not to act is having meaningful consequences. That is really helpful; thank you.

Dr MacLeod, let me come to you—particularly on the Balkans point, in case you want to add that in at the end.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I would like to come back to a couple of points, if I might just abuse the microphone for a moment. When you were asking about holding to account, I was a bit muddled in my response, so I just wanted to say that states could exercise universal jurisdiction over grave human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law, and could ensure that that is made possible at the domestic level.

I would also like to add another category of mercenary to the list that was mentioned by Sean and Christo, which would be individuals who have been, in some senses, victims of predatory recruitment. We have seen this particularly in Syria, where we have seen Russia and Turkey taking advantage of the ongoing conflict and the dire socioeconomic circumstances that people find themselves in there to recruit men of all ages. Some of them genuinely do not know that they are being recruited as mercenaries; they think they are being recruited as security guards and that they are going to go and guard some sort of oil installation or infrastructure, for example, in Libya.

We saw this in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Syrians were recruited by Turkey to fight on behalf of Azerbaijan. They often do not have any fighting experience. Some do—there are real concerns about those who do who may have committed human rights violations or war crimes in the past—but a significant number are the victims of predatory recruitment.

In terms of mapping the architecture of mercenaries, if I come back to the UN convention on mercenaries, there are only 37 state parties to that convention, which I think tells you a lot about the international community's response to mercenaries. Having said that, some countries do criminalise mercenarism without being a party to that convention. I mentioned Switzerland earlier; Russia would also be an example. The UK is not a party to that convention, before you ask.

Q32 **Alicia Kearns:** Has the UK ever justified why it is not a party to that?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** That would be for the UK to answer.

Q33 **Alicia Kearns:** Sean, is the US a party to the convention?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod** *indicated dissent.*

**Alicia Kearns:** So the UK and the US are both not party to the convention against mercenaries.

**Dr Sean McFate:** No.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** There are only 37 state parties. I think that gives you a sense of the level of seriousness applied by the international community.





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Another thing I could point to is that the working group has been drawing attention to Wagner in particular since 2018, when we did our first allegation letter in relation to human rights violations in the Central African Republic, in particular the murder of Russian journalists allegedly by Wagner operatives in CAR. We have issued numerous allegation letters on Wagner since then—another two in relation to the Central African Republic, in relation to Libya, and in relation to Syria—and we are where we find ourselves today.

**Q34 Chris Bryant:** Thank you to all of you for joining us. Can I ask about the relationship with the Russian state? It sounds a bit as if, basically, a contract is bought by somebody for a piece of work in a particular area, and there may be lots of contracts in any one year, but is there a single point of contact in the Russian Federation?

**Christo Grozev:** Despite the fact that the contract is assigned to a corporate entity, which may be a fluid corporate entity called something—Wagner—in fact the line of command does not go to anybody within the Prigozhin-run organisation; it goes directly to Russian military intelligence. The point of contact on behalf of the Government is a general or colonel from the GRU, depending on each operation.

In cases where multiple vectors of operation, including Wagner but also Government-run armies, have to be co-ordinated, such as was the case in 2016 in Syria, then a general command by a Russian—not military intelligence but just a regular commander, such as was the case with Dvornikov, who is now assigned to Ukraine—will be run jointly on Wagner and on the Russian state troops. In the particular case of Syria, he was also the commanding officer over the Syrian state army. It is always somebody with an official current position in the Russian military.

This may be changing of late, because the Russian military intelligence has not shown a lot of efficiency and some of its functions in supervising the private armies have shifted away from it and towards the FSB and another agency that is directly controlled by Putin, the FSO, the secret service of Russia. But generally speaking, it is a direct line of responsibility to a Government militarised entity.

**Q35 Chris Bryant:** To follow up on that, will somebody in the GRU say, “Can you please take Avdiivka?”, broadly speaking?

**Christo Grozev:** Yes, absolutely. We actually have literal intercepts with almost that verbiage. A GRU general will yell at Wagner commanders, saying, “You are not to make decisions on your own. I am telling you what to do today. Go and take Avdiivka.” That would be very standard verbiage, from what we have heard.

**Q36 Chris Bryant:** What is your assessment of the state of play in the GRU at the moment? We have read that 20 senior people have been sacked, arrested or imprisoned. I know that Shoigu is separate—is he still alive?

**Christo Grozev:** Yes, he is alive. I don’t subscribe to conspiracy theories, but there is no question that there is a reshuffling and a purge at the top.



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That is a topic for another four hours—I don't think we have time for that. However, there is no question that there is a purge and that there is an understanding of deficiencies. The GRU has generally been losing its credibility with the Kremlin over the last year or so, with the FSB taking more of its functions. Again, this war has shown that the FSB is equally incompetent; the Fifth Service, which was supposed to deliver Ukraine politically on a plate to Putin, turned out to be completely off track from its own expectations. I really do not know whom Putin trusts in terms of security services at this point.

**Q37 Chris Bryant:** When we were in Kyiv in February, we were told—including by an American military attaché, whose first name I can remember, but not surname, I'm afraid—that everybody in the intelligence community was fairly convinced that the Russian generals had quite good information of what would happen if they went into Ukraine and were, therefore, rather hesitant about doing so, but that they couldn't get that information through to Putin. Is that your impression as well?

**Christo Grozev:** Absolutely. Back in December, we were talking to sources—former Russian military intelligence officers—who shared their expectations that the war would start mainly because everybody was afraid of telling Putin how bad a state the Russian army is in.

**Q38 Chris Bryant:** Going slightly off-piste, very briefly, is Roman Abramovich a good person or a bad person? Should he have been sanctioned?

**Christo Grozev:** I will give you a completely uninformed but analytical assessment. I think he was a bad person, but he may be becoming a reverse dark knight, having been exposed to the cruelty on the ground in Ukraine, as one of the few people close to Putin who actually sees it with his own eyes. He may now, candidly, be trying to put an end to this war, at some risk to his own safety.

**Q39 Chris Bryant:** Sean or Sorcha, do you want to comment on any of the things I have been asking about?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I would make one point about something beyond contractual relationships that we have seen. Again, in the Central African Republic, we saw a bilateral agreement between the CAR and Russian Governments to provide instructors and trainers, which then gets pointed to as the justification for Russians being on the ground in the Central African Republic. As I said at the beginning, the problem is that they weren't necessarily doing a lot of training; in fact, they were doing a lot of fighting and committing human rights violations and potential war crimes.

I talked earlier about the lack of transparency and the opacity around the organisation. It is very clear, when you try to find out about that bilateral agreement, that we do not know what it says. We do not know how the Central African Republic is paying for those "trainers". As Christo mentioned, we have information that they were being paid in access to mining concessions and to the natural resources in CAR. We simply do not know what is contained in that document.



**Q40 Chris Bryant:** Just going back to Ukraine, we have all seen, read and heard of horrific things going on in Ukraine. Those include the targeting of civilian buildings, rape, people with hands tied behind their backs and being shot in the head. Those are all things that most of us would presume and hope would eventually end up in a court of law, in a war crimes tribunal. Do you think Wagner personnel are any better or worse than Russian troops? Go on, Christo, you nodded fastest.

**Christo Grozev:** I will give a one-minute answer, and then maybe Sean will add something. When Sean listed the different profiles that make up the Wagner HR department, I would say that he missed one, which comes directly from a description of an actual Wagnerite. He said that about 10% to 15% are sociopaths, people who go there just because they want to kill. They are bloodthirsty—not just adrenaline junkies—they are real sociopaths.

Obviously, in a state-controlled military army, there is a court martial, to put it bluntly. There is no court martial in a Wagner-like organisation. That allows for much more freedom of cruelty, within such a private operation.

Coming back to your question, what we see in Ukraine, even people who are members of the army, not conscripts but the contract members of the army, are given a free hand to conduct cruelty at this point. They are encouraged to do so through brainwashing and dehumanising the Ukrainian enemy, which is a Government-run campaign in Russia on Ukrainians.

Relatively speaking, Wagnerites are more prone to violence but, in this particular war, we see significant violence also from members of the Russian army. The violence that we saw in Bucha primarily comes from members of the Russian army. You can imagine what the Wagnerites are able to do, because there will be more of that among them.

**Q41 Chris Bryant:** If I get you right—I'll come to you, Sean, in a moment—it is not just convenient for the Russian state: it is a deliberate ploy to use organisations where there is an element of deniability, and where there might be grossly excessive violence, as part of your intimidation strategy towards the whole of the rest of Ukraine. Christo, you are nodding.

**Christo Grozev:** It comes back to the basic logic. Because we have heard the intercepts that the Russian commanders are encouraging violence as an intimidation tool, and because that fear of violence coming from Wagnerites is much more widespread, it is logical that they will weaponise that.

**Dr Sean McFate:** To lay all the atrocities at the feet of Wagner at this point is inaccurate. We have seen the Russian army shelling Mariupol. What is happening is that Putin used a conventional war strategy to take over Ukraine. He thought it would take a few days. It didn't work at all, and now he is shifting to unconventional warfare. Russian unconventional warfare is massacring civilians and is coercive in nature. It is what Putin did in Grozny, too, and Aleppo. It is what I think they are doing now. Yes,



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Wagner may be a leading actor, but it is also Russian policy with their armed forces today, as well.

Q42 **Chris Bryant:** Sorcha, do you have a view?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I cannot speak specifically to Ukraine, as I have already said. What I can say is that we have certainly seen patterns and trends of widespread violence and grave human rights violations in various countries when Wagner has been operating there. They do so with impunity.

Another important thing to note is that they operate with impunity because they know they will not be held to account. I am sorry that I keep going back to the Central African Republic, but we have seen there deliberate attempts to harass and violently intimidate victims, families of victims, human rights defenders and journalists, when they have tried to report the abuses and the violations. They simply cannot do it. They turn up at the local police station, and Wagner operatives are there. Even though the CAR Government has set up a commission of inquiry, it says, "Yes, but we haven't received any reports of human rights violations." Well, there is a reason for that: it is because people are terrified of reporting any violations, so a culture of fear is cultivated around this organisation.

Q43 **Chris Bryant:** Which is terrorism, in essence. I was amused, Christo, when you used the term "HR", like there is a HR department.

**Christo Grozev:** There is.

Q44 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, but it is not really focused on enforcing decent standards.

**Christo Grozev:** You are right.

Q45 **Chris Bryant:** Just one tiny thing. I am the MP for the Rhondda, and I remember going ages ago to the exhibition about the International Brigaders who fought in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39. Roughly 50% of the Brits who were killed fighting in Spain were from my constituency. A passionate engagement in favour of what people believe to be just and true and so on is one thing, but I just wonder how we make sure lots of British sociopaths aren't joining up. Incidentally, I'm not saying—sorry—that anybody who joined the International Brigades in the 1930s was a sociopath; quite the reverse. I think that was a campaign for—

**Alicia Kearns:** Your constituents are writing their letters already.

**Chris Bryant:** Many times over. You see the point I am making. When Liz Truss came on and said, "Yes, I would encourage people to go out and fight," I was thinking, "I'm not sure that is a very wise policy."

**Dr Sean McFate:** It is interesting to note that Ukraine is trying to create a foreign legion. Putin seems to be doing something similar, although we think he is paying his legionnaires. If you look at the Spanish Civil War and the war tourists, as they have been described, I would think that they are



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more motivated by politics than by money—I'm sure I could be wrong—but the Wagner Group is more transactional, by and large. Yes, there are sociopaths and pro-Putin people, but the internationalisation—

Q46 **Chris Bryant:** How much money do they get?

**Dr Sean McFate:** They get about 160,000 to 180,000 roubles a month, depending on their skills and where they are at. It is coded by green, amber and red. If you are going to a green area, largely you are doing easy defence stuff. Amber is there is a chance of conflict, and red is you are going into Ukraine, but as the people I have talked to in the group have told me, you can go green to red very quickly and unexpectedly.

Q47 **Chris Bryant:** And how much do you get if you get killed?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I don't know how much you get. You get money from the organisation if you list your next of kin. If you don't, they don't tell you. Christo, do you have some info on that?

**Christo Grozev:** The expected payments have been up to about \$25,000. It is not always paid, and that has been one of the main grudges among Wagnerites. Something to keep in mind is that there are a lot of grudges within the organisation. It is not like they love their employer. Most of them do not like their employer. Even the ones who are there for ideological reasons are not necessarily pro-Putinist. They are pro-greater Russia—pro-imperialist—but they sometimes believe that Putin does not go far enough. Many of them are actual Nazis.

One of the conspiracy theories that spread among them after the 2018 massacre, when several hundred of them are likely to have been killed by the American airstrikes, is that the Russian Ministry of Defence placed them in harm's way in order not to pay their salaries. Some of them are basic people, and they are easily manipulable. That might be something that should be taken advantage of by Western Governments.

Q48 **Neil Coyle:** Continuing that discussion about the UK and international policy response, this is to Christo first. The UK sanctioned the Wagner Group. Do you think the UK sanctions have had any effect?

**Christo Grozev:** Not really. The sanctions on the top of the Wagner Group have maxed out already. Mr Prigozhin cannot travel, and has not been able to travel for a long time, other than to locations that do not honour UK sanctions—he does go to Africa, to some countries in the Middle East, and to east Asia. Unless the UK Government can put some pressure on those countries to ban him from travelling, the direct sanctions do not have any effect on him. He does have a British helicopter pilot though, so that is an area you can work on.

Q49 **Neil Coyle:** That would stop one man. Would that stop wider activities of the group? Even if the UK Government were influencing other Governments to take action against one man, would that be enough?

**Christo Grozev:** I would say that a mapping of all of these people would show that at least 5%-10% of them do travel internationally—on holidays



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with their families—and the knowledge that they do is actually a cause of ridicule about western sanctions, because that spreads through the rumour mill. Stopping all of those people from being able to travel internationally—at least to the western world—might, incrementally, have a much bigger impact than slapping one more sanction on Prigozhin.

**Q50 Neil Coyle:** Sorcha, you mentioned the Central African Republic and the human rights violations, and that that led to further EU sanctions against the Wagner Group. However, we are still seeing their malign influence. What would more effective sanctions look like, either individually, from the UK, or more widely, from the international community? What would it take to try to reign in their atrocities?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** From the working group's perspective, I cannot speak to sanctions. From our perspective, we want to see states not financing, recruiting, using, deploying or training mercenaries at all. That is our red line, if you like. However, parallel to that, we want to see states putting in place effective domestic legislation that will effectively hold these kinds of actors to account and ensuring that there is proper investigation, prosecution and sanctions, if appropriate, and that, ultimately, remedies are provided for the victims and their families.

**Q51 Neil Coyle:** You have already said that the UK is not signed up to that—nor the US or others—so that is a sea change in how individual countries address this issue.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** As I have already mentioned, there are many countries that simply prohibit being a mercenary, without being a party to that convention. A state can very easily put in place domestic legislation to ensure that that happens.

**Q52 Neil Coyle:** But that is where enforcement falls, isn't it? In your example about Homs, you said that there is a requirement for an investigation to take place, but there is no means of enforcing that requirement, so what is the next step for the UN to ensure either that there is a compulsion to deliver on that requirement, or that it is taken out of the state's hands and into the international community's hands to investigate an individual state's failure? How does that happen?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** It is for states to take their human rights obligations seriously.

**Q53 Neil Coyle:** But what about where they have proven not to? If it wasn't for the invasion of Ukraine—the second invasion of Ukraine—Russia would still be a member of the Human Rights Council, so what was happening, between the failure to investigate the Homs case and the invasion of Ukraine, to take action against Russia? What was in the process? What was in the pipeline?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** You must remember that the international human rights system is a system created by states for states. Of course, it is problematic in every area of human rights when states do not uphold their obligations. It is for us, in the working group, to shine a light on the



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situation when they do not meet their obligations and when they allow such actors to commit human rights violations with impunity.

- Q54 **Neil Coyle:** Can we do our bit if we do not sign up—is our house in order, in effect, if we do not sign up to the mercenary definition, and so on, for example?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** As I said, the UK could put in place legislation that would ensure proper investigation, prosecution and sanctioning of mercenary activities. If we talk about foreign fighters, as we were earlier, many of them may find themselves in violation of domestic rules if they go and fight for another country. The legislation is there, in many countries, but it is a question of how it is applied.

- Q55 **Neil Coyle:** So is that the case in some countries where there may be domestic law, but internationally it is ineffective currently. Sorry, Christo and Sean, did either of you want to come in on these points?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I am sceptical about the power of domestic or international law or sanctions. Prigozhin and the Wagner Group have been under US, EU and UK sanctions for several years. It does not seem to retard any of their behaviour or aggressiveness. Countries such as South Africa had some of the strictest anti-mercenary laws on the books anywhere. It did not stop South African mercenaries from going to Nigeria in 2015 to kill Boko Haram.

Ultimately, even if you had good international laws against criminalising mercenaries, who is going to go into Ukraine and arrest all those mercenaries? Mercenaries can shoot your law enforcement dead, which is why they are the second oldest profession in the world. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to regulate them, and there are maybe more effective ways to curtail this market using market mechanisms and some other tools as well.

**Christo Grozev:** If I could jump in, I slightly disagree with Sean. If we take the large body of Wagnerites and if we sanction them all, which is not unthinkable, or sanction all that can be attributed to Wagner, I know that a lot of the smarter ones among them, a lot of the more educated among them, are looking at this tenure in Wagner as a transitional part of their life. They are hoping for a better time when they can, for example, even go up and serve as security officers that are much higher paid in a western security organisation. Them being sanctioned would totally deplete that hope. Therefore, it might be a deterrent to start doing that for all of them.

The second thing we have not done is to name and shame the GRU operatives that run them. We have only gone through the sanctioning of the corporate structure above these people, but not the actual officers and generals who are known and who can provably be shown to be in the chain of control. It does not cost much to do these additional sanctions and I think that, incrementally, it would add something.

- Q56 **Neil Coyle:** Coming back to some of the points made earlier, is it fair to say that international law is just ineffective on private military



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companies? Is it because of that ineffectiveness that there is a growth in their use?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I believe that is the case. I think there are other instruments and other factors as to why this industry is growing. However, the impotency of international law is a contributing factor, a causal factor.

Q57 **Neil Coyle:** Sean, you are also saying that you do not think regulation would help. So, what is the solution?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I think regulation does not help because this is an industry, like illicit narcotics, that is designed to evade Government scrutiny, even if it is used by the Government. It is ironic that one way Russia keeps order or OpSec in the ranks is that it threatens to arrest these guys as mercenaries if they talk to journalists, which is a very Kafkaesque solution. However, I think there are a couple of things that we could do that are not around regulatory, per se, although, yes, you can do that, and perhaps it is a good idea. One is that you shine a light on them so you create implausible deniability and you name and shame, as Christo was saying, so they become a less attractive tool to autocracy.

There are other things that the British Government could consider—I am not advocating them. For example, if they are operating some place and Russia says, “There is nothing there; there is nothing to see”, who would miss them if they got disappeared? Does that make sense? I am not advocating that that should happen, especially not in front of the UN working group member, but there are other ways to consider how we neuter the industry.

**Christo Grozev:** I agree. It is within the prerogatives of Government to look at what measures other than sanctioning can be put in place. I agree completely with Sean that this is the industry that can be least affected by sanctions—maybe other than the drugs industry, but still, it is not with zero impact. These are people getting their visas—or the chance of them getting a visa to any country—yanked forever. In particular, if we can also get Turkey to play along, that would be a deterrent, because for many of these lower income-class people in Russia, Turkey is the place to hope to go on a vacation.

Q58 **Neil Coyle:** Did you want to add anything?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I think I have said everything. I would just say that states need to stop using them.

**Neil Coyle:** So it is a combination of individuals—ex-forces in particular—the individual companies and individual states, when there is not necessarily an appetite at the moment for that to happen. States are not signed up, but the atrocities continue.

Q59 **Royston Smith:** Can I pick up on that? I was going to ask about what countries could do. If we are to neuter these organisations and we are saying sanctions are not the answer, do Governments have any tools at their disposal that they can use to disincentivise countries from using their services? If we cannot regulate them, perhaps we should be trying





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to stop countries using them.

**Dr Sean McFate:** It is a good question. All these potential policies have a lot of risks as well, so again I am not advocating, but to Christo's point, when I talk to members in the Wagner organisation, almost all of them do not like the Wagner organisation. Many of them would rather be working for the rich Kuwaitis or the UAE for more money and less risk and work. One way we could do this is just find a pathway for them to do that, but of course if you do this, you are also risking enlarging the labour pool of mercenaries. Any market mechanism we try to use risks enlarging it, but maybe we can shift its focus. Then there are other, more clandestine ways that also have a lot of risks as well.

**Christo Grozev:** On a silver note—this is a gruesome silver note—Ukraine is doing part of the job for all of us now, because, as I said, 3,000 and probably more have been killed on the battlefield in Ukraine, and a lot of these were members of Wagner recalled from Syria and other places, because they did not have enough on the ground. There may be a shortage of people to go back after the war.

Q60 **Royston Smith:** Sorcha, you may have answered this when you answered Alicia's question, but do any of these organisations perform any sort of valuable service for anyone? Are there any examples of organisations that do perform a valuable service, as opposed to the ones we are talking about today?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** To come back to the previous question, if you look at the countries where these types of actors are being used—Libya, Central African Republic—these are countries that are engaged in internal armed conflicts. Of course, there are UN peacekeeping forces in those countries, so one way that states can support countries is to support the peacekeeping operations, because one of the reasons why countries are using these types of actors is in response to perceived insurgencies or terrorist activities, for example. Support for the UN peacekeeping operations in those countries is a really important aspect.

The answer to your second question, quite simply from the working group's perspective, is no. We see increased violence; we see prolongation of armed conflicts; we see substantial human rights risks, including risks of war crimes, increasing; we see destabilisation on a regional level, not just within one country; and we see undermining of peace processes. For example, in Libya the general elections were supposed to take place in December 2021. They did not take place, and part of the reason for that was that part of the principle underlining the ceasefire was that mercenaries from both sides should leave the country. That did not happen, and it is one of the reasons why the general elections did not take place in Libya. We see there a very clear example of a peace process being destabilised by the presence of these actors—among other reasons, but that is a very strong reason.

Q61 **Royston Smith:** I am going off-piste a bit, but take something like Iraq, when that was a military operation; afterwards, some of the people who



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were involved in that military operation who were no longer in the military were signed up to security companies, as they called themselves, and went back to Iraq, doing things such as ferrying people from the airport to the green zone. They were working almost in tandem with military who were left on the ground after the Iraq invasion. Are they in the same category—I mean, for making things worse?

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** We have a mandate to look at mercenaries, mercenary-related actors, and private military and security companies. When we look at PMSCs—private military and security companies—we look at the services that they are offering.

It is helpful perhaps to think about these kinds of actors on a spectrum or continuum. I know that Sean has a different perspective on this from the working group, but if we come back to the legal definition of mercenary, we see that the legal definition is that someone has been specifically recruited, for substantial private gain, to participate directly in the hostilities.

We could get into a debate about what is direct participation in hostilities, but we could generally say that these types of actors—PMSCs—do not participate directly in the hostilities, in the mercenary sense. They have the potential to do so, but they are not automatically doing that, and I think that is where we have to draw some distinctions.

There are clear overlaps and there are some companies which are literally companies. We have done some work on Dyck Advisory Group in Mozambique, for example, which is a company that offers military services, including fighting and directly participating in fighting. There is an overlap, and there aren't clear distinctions between the actors; it depends on the services that they are offering.

Q62 **Royston Smith:** Sean, talking of the spectrum, you have got a slightly different view. Where do you see those companies versus mercenaries in the way that we are talking about them?

**Dr Sean McFate:** I do have a slightly different view, and it is basically that it is all fine and good to try to create an immaculate typology, but in truth it's a messy blob. If you have the skillset to do one thing, you have the skillset to do the other; actually, it is more about circumstance and the will of the individual mercenary.

Historically, mercenaries, as they are today, have been like fire; they could burn your house down, but if used well they can also power a steam engine. Could a mega-church or a rich NGO hire a group like this to do humanitarian intervention in, say, Ukraine? Yes, they could. To categorically deem mercenaries as evildoers or whatnot—I think we have to be a little bit more sophisticated and try not to differentiate PMCs from mercenaries. The Wagner Group considers itself a PMC, but that doesn't make it so. If we get too wedded to words, we can lose the meaning.

Q63 **Chair:** Christo, could you mention the generals who you referred to earlier and just say a little bit more about them? You were citing some



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generals who had been involved—

**Christo Grozev:** There are a number of them. The general in Syria was the same person—Dvornikov—who is now the head of the operation, or theatre, in Ukraine. The general who ran most of the Wagner activities in the first invasion of Ukraine, and continued working with them in Syria until 2016, is called Oleg Ivannikov. He is a major general from the GRU. The person who is currently the top military officer within the organisation Wagner, and liaison with the GRU, is Andrey Troshev, and he has been sanctioned by the UK, as far as I know.

Q64 **Chair:** Just before I close, I wondered if we could briefly touch on a couple of the other PMC-type outfits that we see in Russia. One is E.N.O.T. and another is a Cossack outfit. What can you tell us about those? Sean, do you want to start us off?

**Dr Sean McFate:** Christo, if you are tracking this at Bellingcat, you would be better than me at responding to this.

**Christo Grozev:** I have done some research on the Cossack movement. That comes back to an earlier question about involvement in the Balkans—that is where they have excelled. We noticed them for the first time in 2014. In September 2014, a Cossack group of essentially paramilitaries or mercenaries was brought there to interfere with local elections, in particular with elections in Republika Srpska. They played a significant role in intimidating the local population into voting for the Kremlin-favoured candidate. It was an interesting case of a private military company not having to do anything other than walk down the streets of a small republic and essentially be there. That was enough for them to have an impact on the population.

A lot of the same people were actively engaged in warfare in eastern Ukraine and some of them ended up in the Central African Republic as part of Wagner. We see that these different incarnations of private military companies in Russia are fluid—they flow from one another—simply because they are not companies, they are proxies for the state.

Q65 **Chair:** How do you expect PMCs to evolve in the next five years? Sorcha, you have looked at this a lot.

**Dr Sorcha MacLeod:** I think if we see them continuing to operate with impunity, we are going to see continued expansion of them. We issued a statement a few weeks ago expressing our serious concerns about the ever-expanding use of these types of proxy actors in a variety of armed conflicts around the globe.

As long as states continue to use them, finance them, recruit them, train them and deploy them, that trend is going to continue. We see no reason for that to stop, unfortunately.

**Chair:** I will leave it there. Thank you very much indeed to all three of you. It has been a fascinating session—very useful. There is clearly a lot more work on this.



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I know people will be watching and following the session. If you have views or if you have evidence of Wagner Group or other private military company activity that you think would be of interest to the Committee, please do write to us. To the three of you, if there is anything you remember later that you forgot today, please do drop us a note so that we can include it. Thank you very much indeed.