

Written Evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into

The Wagner Group and beyond: proxy Private Military Companies (WGN0020)

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About the Author

Stepan Stepanenko received his BA (Hons) and MA by research from the University of York and went on to complete a PhD at Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes of Paris Sciences et Lettres with a focus on Ukraine. In his academic career Stepan presented at a multitude of academic conferences and authored publications in peer reviewed journals, individually and in collaboration.

Stepan has appeared on national television and radio, commenting on the war in Ukraine, and has written for the Express, Jerusalem Post, CapX, politics.co.uk, and other UK and international media.

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The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.

Summary

- The submission addresses the section on how private military companies financed and where their support really come from.
- Wagner group has been repeatedly misidentified by the media as a private military company. Associated with Vladimir Putin's ally, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the organisation has been active in the MENA region, in Ukraine, South America and elsewhere, where it has become the de facto extension of the Russian armed forces.
- In fact, the group is not a registered private entity.
- The presented evidence points to the fact that the identification of the organisation as a private military company is a misnomer. It is a group that operates under the direction, supervision and protection of the Russian state.
- Confusion surrounding the name of the group, its true leaders and origins of funding are an apparent ploy to divert attention from the group's deployment and real affiliation.

- The group is a part of the Russian security services and is a perfect representation of the inseparability of the Russian state, the interests of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and the Russian political and economic elite that act as proxy agents of the Russian state and president.

Evidence

1. **Russian private military companies (PMSc) are state run** extensions of the Russian army and special forces. Russian PMCs are not registered legal entities, have intrinsic and structural connections to the Russian state and should not be regarded as private organisations.
2. The **intrinsic link between the state and Russian PMCs**, be it Wagner or others, is demonstrated by the recruitment of convicts to join the Russian war in Ukraine. Videos of Vladimir Putin's associate, Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin, giving a recruitment speech in the federal public institution Correctional Colony no. 6 of the department of the Federal Penalty Service in the Republic of Mari El have surfaced on the internet in mid-September 2022¹. Reports have also come out identifying a person similar in appearance to Yevgeny Prigozhin giving similar speeches in other Russian penitentiary institutions. The presence of a member of the public within a Russian prison is a highly regulated event, and according to the The Penal Code of the Russian Federation, Article 24.3, dated 01/08/1997 N 1-FZ (as amended on 06/11/2022) "representatives of the media and other persons have the right to visit institutions and bodies executing punishment, with the special permission of the administration of these institutions and bodies or higher bodies."² There is no procedure that allows for an open address, let alone recruitment, of prisoners. Such an event could only have been organised in violation of regulations and with the support of higher-ranking officials of the Federal Penalty Service than the immediate management of the Correctional Colony no. 6 in the Republic of Mari El.
3. **PMC recruitment in Russia is illegal** and any such activity either means it is implicitly supported by the state or the units identified as PMCs are actual elements of existing armed forces and intelligence forces operations. The recruitment speech by the individual thought to be Yevgeny Prigozhin at the Correctional Colony no. 6 in the Republic of Mari El makes clear calls to join a mercenary force and a PMC as "stormtroopers". This rhetoric falls under article 359.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation that states "Recruitment, training, financing or other material support of a mercenary, as well as his use in an armed conflict or military operations - shall be punishable by imprisonment for a term of twelve to eighteen years, with or without restriction of liberty for a term of one to two years³." A person openly

¹ "‘Putin's chef’ Prigozhin recruits 150 inmates to Wagner PMC in one swoop," The Insider, 15 September 2022, <https://theins.ru/en/news/255089>

² Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossijskoj Federacii. "Ugolovno-ispolnitel'nyj kodeks Rossijskoj Federacii ot 08.01.1997№ 1-FZ (red. ot 11.06.2022) [Собрание законодательства Российской Федерации. Уголовно-исполнительный кодекс Российской Федерации от 08.01.1997№ 1-ФЗ (ред. от 11.06.2022)]

³ UGOLOVNYJ KODEKS Rossijskoj Federacii, Stat'ja 359 UK RF. Naemnichestvo (dejstvujushhaja redakcija).

recruiting for a PMC on the premises of a prison is by definition committing a crime, and has to be accepted that that person is being supported by the prison administration and the state.

4. **It is illegal to serve in a PMC in the Russian Federation.** Article 359.3 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation states “Participation of a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities (in the absence of signs of a crime provided for in part three of Article 208 of this Code) is punishable by imprisonment for a term of seven to fifteen years, with or without restraint of liberty for a term of up to one year.⁴” In effect, the person who is advertising for positions within a PMC during a speech at the Correctional Colony no. 6 in the Republic of Mari El is both perpetrating a crime and soliciting others to commit a crime. Such actions on the premises of a prison, while observed by prison guards, who operate under the Ministry of the Interior, would not be sanctioned without state approval.
5. **Association of the Wagner PMC with the state** was suggested through their use of Russian passports issued by the same office of the department of the Federal Migration Service (Upravlenie Federalnoj Migracionnoj Sluzhby - UFMS) as other known passports issued for the staff of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate. This fact was reported by a Bellingcat investigation⁵ that identified UFMS 770-001 as the passport issuing authority that provided documents to the Russian agents involved in the attempt to poison the Skripal family in Salisbury, passports issued for Western celebrities that obtained Russian citizenship, such as Gérard Depardieu, and for PMC Wagner members for their travels to Syria.
6. The British Government needs to approach all Russian armed groups as under direct command of the Russian President. The appearance Yevgeny Prigozhin of as a recruiter for a PMC is further evidence of the blurred line between the Russian state and armed forces, the Russian president, Russian oligarchs and Putin’s circle and private individuals.
7. The **connection between Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner group** is best illustrated by the mocking reply from Konkord, Yevgeny Prigozhin’s company and his oft preferred means of communicating with journalists, to a request by Dmitriy Nikitin of RTVI. A VKontakte (Russian social media) statement of the company read: “Thank you so much for your inquiry and the video information received. Indeed, we can confirm that the man in the video bears a monstrous resemblance to Yevgeny Viktorovich. Judging by his rhetoric, he somehow deals with the implementation of the tasks of the Special Operation, and it seems that he is successfully doing this. In addition, you quite rightly emphasized, dear Dmitriy, that the person in the video has a very well-delivered speech, just like Evgeny Viktorovich. And a man who looks like Yevgeny Viktorovich very

[Уголовный Кодекс Российской Федерации, Статья 359 УК РФ. Наемничество (действующая редакция)].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Наемники «Вagnera» с паспортами от GRU [Наемники «Вагнера» с паспортами от ГРУ], Bellingcat, 7 February 2019, <https://ru.bellingcat.com/novosti/russia/2019/02/07/wagner-gru/>

intelligibly explains simple understandable things to ordinary people. Thank you for the information provided and in the future we will be grateful if you share similar facts with us. ”⁶.

8. **Links between Prigozhin and Russian GRU and FSB security services** were reported by an Investigation of the Insider, Der Spiegel and Bellingcat⁷. The investigation found clear links between Prigozhin and the Russian military and security services through telephone records and communication between Prigozhin and Russian military officials.
9. The **connection between the Wagner group, GRU and Russian security services** was made public after a in investigation into the Wagner deployment in Ukraine in 2014 and the communication between the PMS leader, Utkin, and Russian intelligence officer named Oleg Ivannikov⁸, Identified to be a Russian GRU officer⁹. Further connections include communication and direct orders for Utkin and the PMC from Andrey Troshev, a former Russian police colonel, and Major General Evgeniy Nekiforov, then chief of staff and now commander of the 58th Combined Arms Army. The connection was further supported by frequent airline journey between Utkin and GRU officers¹⁰. The Insider, Der Spiegel and Bellingcat show that the Wagner group takes its directions and orders from Russian military and intelligence services.

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⁶ Press-sluzhba kompanii "Konkord" [Пресс-служба компании "Конкорд"], VKontakte, 15 September 2022 at 8:10 am, https://vk.com/wall-177427428_1156

⁷ "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed", Bellingcat, 14 August 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "MH17 - Russian GRU Commander 'Orion' Identified as Oleg Ivannikov", Bellingcat, 25 May 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/05/25/mh17-russian-gru-commander-orion-identified-oleg-ivannikov/>

¹⁰ Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed", Bellingca.