



Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas

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Executive Summary

- The 2011 Arab Spring and the ensuing civil wars in Libya and Syria compelled Russia's military-political leadership to reassess the role of irregular forces and non-state actors (as well as the principle of tactical and highly maneuverable groups) in so-called new-generation ("hybrid") conflicts, triggering the creation of both Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the founding of the Slavonic Corps Limited private military company (PMC).
- Russia's first attempt to use irregular formations/non-state actors in a non-linear conflict of the new type (both independently and in conjunction with regular military units) can be traced to the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of instability in the Donbas region in 2014.
- The transformation of poorly organized irregular formations lacking a clear-cut structure into the notorious Wagner Group PMC occurred following the outbreak of violent clashes in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, in late spring–early summer of 2014.
- Ukraine became Russia's "polygon" (training ground) for exploring the capabilities of PMCs in real-time conditions, eliminating the mistakes of the past and preparing PMCs for future missions in Syria.
- During the 2014–2016 interim, several Russian PMCs operated in Ukraine. While some of them disappeared/became invisible, Wagner Group successfully went through the "natural selection" process and assumed a dominant role.

- While in Ukraine, Wagner Group performed a number of diverse missions, ranging from frontal attacks on Ukrainian forces and urban fighting to intelligence gathering, information-psychological operations and sabotage/subversive operations against local actors, showcasing growing independence.
- Military-patriotic training of youth (both in Russia and abroad) is yet another function performed by Russian PMCs (E.N.O.T. Corps) as a means to expand Russia's version of "soft power" abroad.
- The pool of candidates to join Wagner Group (and similar entities) is broad and not limited to former members of the military from Russia's economically depressed regions. Other irregulars, such as (pseudo)Cossacks, members of various veteran organizations, or residents of Russian-occupied regions (Donbas, Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia), should not be ignored.

Introduction

The EuroMaidan in Kyiv (late 2013–early 2014) resulted in a major political and security crisis, eventually precipitating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin's (denied) involvement in a conflict in southeastern Ukraine. In both cases, Russia's state-sponsored information outlets purposefully called the anti-Kyiv and pro-Russia militants "volunteers" (*dobrovotsi*) or a "People's Militia" (*Narodnoye Opolcheniye*) to conceal the real actors Moscow was using in the theater as proxy forces. This paper will discuss the main actors employed by the Russians at the height of the war in Ukraine, between 2014 and 2015. Specifically, the paper will look into three main groups: the Special Operations Forces (SOF), private military contractors; and (pseudo)Cossack formations.

What follows is a detailed examination of the role the above-mentioned categories of Moscow-backed irregular forces had in the early phases of the hostilities in Crimea and Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk provinces of eastern Ukraine). Moreover, this study will describe the impact of these irregular operations on the transformation and maturation of Russian private military contractors and other paramilitary formations.

Inception: The 'Fateful Year'

Initial discussions regarding the possibility of integrating Private Military Companies (PMC) into Russia's regular Armed Forces date back to at least 2010. At that time, the idea was reportedly supported by Army General Nikolai Makarov (then-chief of the General Staff), who was fascinated by the prospect of using private military contractors "for 'delicate missions abroad'... to avoid the humiliation of 2004."¹ Makarov was alluding to the assassination of former acting president of the breakaway Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, on February 13, 2004, in Qatar, which resulted in the arrest of three Russian citizens (from the special security services) implicated in the affair. The general went on record to suggest that "mercenaries [if they had been used to carry out the assassination] would not have needed any advocacy from above [i.e., directly from the Kremlin]," and thus, the Kremlin could have had an additional layer of deniability.²

The following year (2011), the eruption of civil wars in Libya and Syria magnified Russian military strategists' focus on PMCs due to the changing nature of warfare as reflected in:

- The diversification of “non-typical tasks” faced, but no longer performed by regular armed forces;
- Emphasis on (para)military operations conducted by tactical-level, highly maneuverable groups trained for guerilla/partisan or anti-partisan warfare; and
- The commercialization of war.

In 2012, President Vladimir Putin pointedly remarked that PMCs “could potentially become an important tool of foreign policy without the state’s direct participation.”³ And yet, his comments did not result in any tangible legislative changes to the legal status of PMCs in Russia⁴; and further public discussion of these issues seemingly halted. However, the year 2013 witnessed two important developments suggesting that the idea was not entirely forgotten:

First, Moscow established the Special Operations Forces (SOF), a tool of Russian power politics (subordinated to the General Staff) fully commensurate with the realities of non-linear confrontation of New Type (“Hybrid”) Warfare.⁵ Designed as a force capable of performing “reconnaissance, sabotage, subversion, counter-terrorism, counter-sabotage, counter-intelligence, guerrilla, anti-partisan and other actions,”⁶ the SOF are able to collaborate with local military formations.⁷ This is a unique characteristic lacked by both the Soviet (especially visible during the Afghan war) and the Russian armed forces. Another distinctive feature of the SOF is premised on their ability to operate in tactical groups/smaller formations, *de facto* following in the traditions of the Soviet *Spetsnaz*;⁸ yet unlike the latter (such as Alpha Group or Vypel *Spetnaz* units), the SOF are “large army-type structures comprised of professionals of the highest quality” that require no “nod of approval from other Armed Forces branches.”⁹

The second key development was the emergence of the Slavonic Corps Limited private military company as an attempt to commercialize warfare through the use of *de facto* private armies.¹⁰ Russia’s experience in the realm of PMCs between 1991 and 2012 demonstrated general unpreparedness to effectively compete with their Western counterparts, which were mainly employed in non-combat, auxiliary roles such as providing security to vulnerable sites/facilities or providing training. The only option for Russian private military contractors was to try to challenge Western PMCs not by competing via existing rules, but by changing the principles of the game itself. The Slavonic Corps Limited exemplified this (initially unsuccessful) attempt.¹¹

The Arab Spring gave impetus to the idea of using PMCs/irregular formations in regional conflicts. And when the crisis in Ukraine exploded several years later, the country became a training ground (polygon) where Russia managed to test this model of non-linear conflict, using both private military contractors/irregular formations and the SOF.

The Debut: ‘Operation Crimea’

Russia's annexation of Crimea (March 2014) exemplified a "hybrid operation" of a new type, whose information-propaganda outcome may have profoundly exceeded initial expectations of the Russian military-political leadership.¹² It would not, however, be entirely accurate to think of it as an offhand decision by the Russian leadership, influenced by sudden developments in Kyiv. As noted by Colonel General (ret.) Vladimir Shamanov, the head of the State Duma defense committee, "The Kremlin started to prepare military-strategic operation [on recapturing Crimea] several years ago, when [then-Ukrainian president Viktor] Yushchenko first [November 2008] raised the question of moving Russia's Black Sea Fleet military base from Sevastopol to Novorossiysk."¹³

The success of the Crimean operation was premised on a combination of interdependent factors. First, strategic blunders committed by the Ukrainian military¹⁴ and intelligence services¹⁵ as well as individual politicians/civil activists were instrumental.¹⁶ The second crucial factor was premised on Russia's exceptionally skillful employment of so-called *maskirovka* (i.e., doctrinal deception, disguise, camouflage, denial, etc.) techniques. As noted by Russian military expert Colonel (ret.) Viktor Baranets, Russian maneuvers in the Arctic region and the decision to "send a great number of empty military rail carts to the Urals... became a perfect cover-up for the real mission."¹⁷ The third factor was based on Moscow's decision to use both regular and irregular forces in an integrated manner, "merging elements of linear, small and cyber/information war."¹⁸

It should be noted that the preparatory stage of the annexation operation was carried out by Russian irregulars and was marked by extensive use of strategic deception techniques. The cover-up—a delivery of the "Gift of the Magi" relic to Crimea (and Kyiv) in early January 2014—was jointly executed by three actors: the "Orthodox oligarch" Konstantin Malofeev (who secured the financing required), the Russian Orthodox Church (providing the information-ideological element), and an "irregular formation" headed by Igor "Strelkov" Girkin, who at the time served as the head of Malofeev's security (Strelkov/Girkin's outfit was tasked with intelligence collection and reconnaissance).¹⁹ The Gift of the Magi showcase ruse allowed the Russian side to prepare the ground for the next phase, which began on February 25–28.²⁰

Key roles during phase two of the Crimean annexation operation were assumed by the following actors:

'Little Green Men'

Also known as the "Polite People" (based on an early offhand description of them by President Putin), the infamous masked but insignia-less "Little Green Men," who overran major strategic sites across the Crimean peninsula, were (mostly, if not all) Russian SOF members. They carried out major operative tasks, including blocking/disabling locally stationed Ukrainian armed forces. Visual imagery evidence would later reveal that the first groups of these SOF units were transported to Crimea on February 25, aboard the dock landing ship *Nikolay Filchenkov*. Rapidly deployed on site, the SOF took control of key objects/sites (including the building of the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea)²¹ and locations where Ukrainian forces were positioned.²² As Russian militant Strelkov/Girkin admitted, one of those sites secured by the SOF/"Little Green Men" was a military airfield in Belbek.²³ A distinctive feature of the operations carried out by the SOF was their effective use of radio-electronic warfare (EW) techniques,

including disabling of radio and cellphone communication. These skillful EW tactics almost completely paralyzed the Ukrainian forces present in Crimea.

Private (Para)Military Contractors

As noted by Russian investigative journalist Denis Korotkov, “Members of the Wagner Group [PMC] were present in Crimea during the annexation [...] but, of course, they definitely were not the ‘polite people’ that are now portrayed on various banners [propaganda posters].”²⁴ In contrast, the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU) stated that “PMC Wagner was responsible for the annexation of Crimea,” and asserted that the “so-called ‘Polite People’ without any insignia were in fact members of the Wagner Group.”²⁵ This contradictory information can be neither corroborated nor dismissed, although it needs to be pointed out that the Wagner Group as an actual operating company was most likely not formed until early summer of 2014—weeks or months after the Crimean annexation operation. What is known for a fact is that private military contractors and other irregulars were not represented solely by Wagner. Rather, more attention should be paid to the Strelkov/Girkin formation (given its links to Malofeev, this force can be defined as a mercenary group), which was composed on the territory of Crimea and later re-deployed to Donbas (the city of Sloviansk). Consisting of “members with significant military experience [...] who fought in Chechnya and Central Asia [...] as well as] Iraq and Yugoslavia [...] some have even fought in Syria,”²⁶ this group had formed a part of the aforementioned “People’s Militia.” The name deliberately alluded to the liberation of Moscow from the Polish army (1612), during which an extremely diverse group of people (including local marginals—mainly former criminals) called the “people’s militia” primarily performed auxiliary functions.²⁷ In the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the People’s Militia did not play a central role, however. Acting mainly as an auxiliary force, its members rendered necessary support to the SOF, thereby facilitating the process of maintaining control over already-occupied/overtaken objects.

Cossacks

As argued by multiple Russian sources,²⁸ Cossacks (primarily from neighboring Krasnodar Krai)—whose number (depending on the information outlet) oscillated between 2,000 and 5,000 men—played “one of the most crucial roles in the preliminary stage of the reunification of Crimea with Russia.”²⁹ Analysis of various news outlets and commentaries points to two important details. First, the Cossacks’ role was primarily a supporting one, concerned with blocking the administrative borders of the Crimean Peninsula, thereby cutting off overland access from the north. The second aspect pertains to the recruiting and organizational principle. Despite the narrative of independent volunteerism presented by Russian mainstream information outlets, Russian state-related/controlled bodies had a key role in organizing and assembling the Cossack “volunteers” in Crimea.³⁰ Indeed, the Russian government had been purposefully sponsoring and sanctioning an “artificial quantitative accretion of various Cossack organizations [the Council of Atamans of Crimea, the Union of Crimean Cossacks, the Feodosia Cossack Regiment]” on the territory of Crimea. As events of the early-2014 “Russian Spring” would demonstrate, this was not a coincidence; it was part of a plan elaborated by the Russian authorities in conjunction with the Russian Orthodox Church (under whose patronage the Cossack action was done),³¹ thus creating a smokescreen of “spiritual rejuvenation.”

Other Irregulars

The presence in Crimea of other irregular groups added ostensible notions of “spontaneity” and “wide public support” to the local uprising sparked by Moscow. These other forces included:

- The Night Wolves motorcycle gang.³² Its primary responsibility consisted of blocking and maintaining control over administrative buildings in Simferopol and Kerch.³³
- Berkut special forces. As noted by the then-governor of Luhansk Oblast, Hennadiy Moskal, starting from February 27, highways and roads connecting Crimea with the Ukrainian mainland were being blocked by Ukrainian Berkut riot police units that defected after having been outlawed by the provisional Ukrainian government. According to Moskal, activities of these forces led to “Crimea becoming completely blocked and cut off from Ukraine by road.”³⁴ However, as it would become known later, in some cases Russian military units transported to Crimea would purposefully wear Berkut uniforms³⁵ to give the impression of widespread support for Crimean so-called self-defense forces.
- “Heroes with baseball bats.” Though portrayed by Russian information outlets as “ordinary protesters,” “self-defense” squads or members of “Voluntary People’s *Druzhina*,”³⁶ these lightly armed gangs were, in fact, well-organized groups of middle-aged men (some of them would later appear in Donbas). Many were Afghan War veterans (recruited via various veteran organizations) and sportsmen (MMA fighters and boxers), initially assembled in Russia. The first such group of “special tourists” (*spetsturisti*) was transferred to Crimea from Chkalovsky military airport (Moscow Oblast) and personally accompanied by Frantz Klintsevich³⁷ (at the time, a deputy chairman of the Russian upper chamber’s defense and security committee).
- “Cyber Warriors.” The first squads of so-called hacktivists and online trolls specifically tasked with securing the “informational” side of the operation were created in the city of Kharkiv and Sevastopol under the name *Kharkov News Agency* (NAH). Its main objective was to incessantly promote the idea of “Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state.” Later, the NAH members focused on disseminating the narrative of “the Anti-Terrorist Operation being the revenge of Nazi forces against the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine.”³⁸ Perhaps the most interesting detail about this group is the connection between the NAH and the Internet Research Agency (the so-called St. Petersburg Troll Factory), owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin³⁹—a person who reportedly stands behind Wagner Group.

This stirring up of public discontent and channeling it into a confrontation (first tested in Crimea) was later used by Russia as a template while it sought to destabilize Donbas. However, one crucial difference separated the “successful” operation in Crimea from the ultimate stalemate in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk: irregulars and private military contractors would replace the SOF as the main driving force in Donbas.

Anabasis: The ‘Donbas Debacle’

The Donbas crisis, which entered its violent phase in the second half of April 2014, became a landmark case in the transformation of Russian irregular formations into “quasi-PMCs”⁴⁰—that is, effectively, private armies. The Donbas chapter offered Russia a unique opportunity to test the offensive and counteroffensive capabilities of its irregular forces against a relatively weak opponent and to eliminate the mistakes of the previous unsuccessful experiment (the Slavonic Corps Limited), which could not commercially compete against Western PMC analogues. At the same time, the war in Ukraine’s east became integral in the “natural selection” process that allowed to test the effectiveness of Russian PMCs/private armies that would later form the “core” of militant forces dispatched in more important (lucrative) future missions, such as in Syria.

Among the broad swathe of irregular groups and formations that took part in hostilities in Donbas, two categories deserve closer examination: Private Military Companies and (pseudo)Cossacks.

Private Military Companies

Among the Russian PMCs operating in the Donbas warzone, the main roles were played by Wagner Group, PMC MAR and E.N.O.T. Corps.

Wagner Group

As noted earlier, Wagner (or, more likely, individual members) might have taken part in the annexation of Crimea; yet, as of April 2014, it had yet to acquire a definitive shape. Various sources mark May 2014—when two company-tactical groups (nicknamed “Luna” and “Step”) formed in the city Rostov-on-Don (Russia), crossed the Ukrainian border, and moved to Luhansk Oblast—as the PMC’s actual inception. The “cores” of both Luna and Step consisted of former members of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GU—still often popularly referred to by its Soviet acronym, GRU); they were assembled in the Krasnodar Krai city of Togliatti.⁴¹ Later, the formation was reinforced by the “Karpaty” group (approximately 300 militants), primarily consisting of Ukrainian citizens (some of them Cossacks).⁴² It is important to note that “Karpaty” was conceived as a tool of subversive operations in the rear of the Ukrainian army, but it allegedly did not prove particularly successful. Thus, in 2017, it was reformed into “Vesna,” which, aside from ethnic Ukrainians, also included Russian Cossacks and “15–20 Chechens.” Reaching close to 150 militants in size, Wagner’s “Vesna” units would ultimately be sent to Syria.⁴³

According to the data provided by the SSU, Wagner Group was dispatched to Luhansk Oblast in order to stir and further destabilize the situation there as well as “help things slip from political confrontation to a phase of direct violence and hostilities.” As noted by the Ukrainian security service, the choice of region for deployment was stipulated by two main factors: First, the above-mentioned model had already proven its effectiveness in Donetsk Oblast (where Strelkov/Girkin’s group of irregulars carried out a similar mission). Second, Luhansk may have been chosen by the GU because “the Donbas became an arena of competition between the FSB [the Federal Security Service—in Donetsk Oblast] and the GU [Luhansk Oblast].”⁴⁴ Initially numbering between 86 to 250 men (data varies considerably), Wagner Group would swell to 1,500 within several months. After a year of engaging in combat activities, its rank and file would reach (according to the SSU) up to 5,000 militants.⁴⁵

The main missions carried out by Wagner in Ukraine between 2014 and 2015 (until the PMC's official formation and prior to its main forces being relocated to Syria) were a combination of diversion-sabotage operations, elements of partisan warfare, and frontal attacks/counterattacks that, among others, included the following operations:

- The Battle of Luhansk Airport (April 8–September 1, 2014), where approximately 72 members of the group took part (15 were killed).⁴⁶
- The Il-76 shoot-down (Luhansk Oblast, June 14, 2014), causing 49 casualties (including 40 Ukrainian paratroopers from the 25th Separate Dnipropetrovsk Airborne Brigade).⁴⁷ The attack was reportedly performed with a 9K38 Igla man-portable infrared homing surface-to-air missile (SAM). Importantly, various sources have argued that the aircraft was shot down by a “highly maneuverable group of militants using an off-road vehicle.”⁴⁸ This information appeared in other sources as well, demonstrating Wagner Group's general operative pattern (this element will be discussed later).
- Clashes near the village of Sandzharivka and the Battle of Debaltseve (January 14–February 20, 2015), where 205 members of Wagner Group took part in the hostilities (21 were reportedly killed). The battle marked a decisive turn in the war, signifying a military defeat of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and leading to the Minsk Agreements. The participation by Wagner Group and other Russian irregulars was corroborated by numerous video materials.⁴⁹ As noted by Strelkov/Girkin, the Battle of Debaltseve signified “the process of the genuine transformation of Wagner Group from a ‘private security company’ to a genuine shock-troop formation, which would be fully completed only in Syria, where it would be re-deployed in the summer of 2015.”⁵⁰
- Purging (including physical liquidation) of the so-called “opposition forces” confronting Igor Plotnitsky, the then-head of the self-proclaimed “Luhansk People's Republic” (late 2014–early 2015). Ukrainian sources have claimed that Wagner Group was responsible for the “liquidation of opposition leaders, as well as militants from ‘unlawful military groups,’ Cossacks and other military formations,” including many well-known separatist leaders (*[noms de guerre]* ‘Foma,’ ‘Kosogor,’ ‘Batman’).⁵¹ It is also known that Wagner Group conducted disarmaments of whole (para)military units, with the best-known case being the disarmament of the “Odessa” formation, which was securing control over strategically important Izvaryne⁵² (an urban-type settlement located in Luhansk Oblast and a central transit point on the Russo-Ukrainian border). After his withdrawal from occupied Donbas, Strelkov/Girkin offered an extremely far-reaching assessment of Wagner Group and its role in the above-mentioned capacity by so-called “cleaners” (*tchistilshiki*). Speaking on the prospect of his return to the area, the Russian militant asked rhetorically, “Where do I return, straight to the basement [prison]? Or should I repeat the fate of [Aleksey] Mozgovoy [the leader of the pro-Russian Prizrak Brigade], assassinated by the ‘unknown Ukrainian subversive group’? Although [...] every idiot knows that Mr. Plotnitsky has something to do with this. As well as this amazing PMC Wagner.”⁵³
- Constant/continuous attacks on Ukrainian military outposts along the line of hostilities.

In his later recollections, Igor “Strelkov” Girkin presented an interesting description of other specific elements of Wagner Group.⁵⁴ Some of these facts and other themes were developed further by Evstafii Botvinyev, a militant who fought in Luhansk alongside Wagner commander Dmitry Utkin.⁵⁵ Based on these two sources (and supplemented by some additional data), the following important elements comprising the so-called “Ukrainian chapter” of Wagner Group’s history can be ascertained:

- Command-and-control (C2)/organizational patterns: In his writings, Strelkov/Girkin openly calls Wagner Group a “private military structure” that “is not directly subordinated to any ‘constitutional’ [i.e., Russian state] security ministry.” Yet, he also argues that “such a decision [to organize the group] must have been taken ‘at the very top’ of the Russian power structure [...] otherwise, none of the ‘official *siloviki*’ would have ever agreed on the creation of a ‘competitor’ that is *de facto* much more professional, aside, perhaps, from the GU and FSB *Spetsnaz*.” Botvinyev provided closely similar information, adding that his formation (Vypel), Wagner Group and Plotnitsky “were subordinated to a single person, who had no pertinence to the local [Luhansk] structures.”
- The personality of the group’s commander: Both Strelkov/Girkin and Botvinyev have argued that Dmitry Utkin—whose rise to the position of chief commander of Wagner Group started in 2013 in Syria (as a member of the Slavonic Corps)—is a strong personality with a high level of professionalism and utmost courage. Utkin’s background goes back to the GU *Spetsnaz*, where he achieved the rank of lieutenant colonel. Incidentally, it has been frequently argued that Utkin had initiated the idea to reform the remnants of the Slavonic Corps into a new (para)military formation—and this idea found much support among his donors and sponsors. Another interesting detail pertaining to Utkin is related to his other-than-military activities: Ukrainian sources have argued that he is an ardent proponent of neo-Nazism.⁵⁶ This information, however, does not comply with other facts pointing to Utkin being a follower of the Slavic Native Faith (*Rodnoverchestvo*)—a neo-pagan cult that traces its origins to pre-baptized Rus (before 988 CE).
- Fighting tactics/techniques: As noted by Botvinyev, Wagner Group operated in small units practicing shock-troop techniques, specifically utilizing jeeps (or off-road vehicles) equipped with machine guns. This tactic allowed Wagner units to successfully use “hit-and-run” tactics. Yet, it is unclear whether these tactics directly stemmed from Soviet deep operation theory (*glubokaya operatsiya*) and Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong’s understating of partisan warfare. It is also possible that some of these tactical elements were picked up in Syria, where similar fighting techniques were pioneered by *jihadi* groups (such as the former al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State).
- Competence and professionalism: According to Strelkov, Wagner “is no different from ordinary Russian contract soldiers [*kontraktniki*] [...] in fact, Wagner Group is an ‘unofficial formation of the Russian armed forces’ [...] guys that fought in Ukraine were much better prepared than those being sent to Syria now. They were well equipped and perfectly trained [...] they were the only ones who had night-vision devices and thermographic cameras.”⁵⁷

- Composition: Strelkov has noted that, during its Ukrainian campaign, Wagner Group primarily consisted (approximately 90 percent) of “Russian people”—although, in his mind, this group includes not only ethnic Russians but also Ukrainians, Belarusians and Cossacks). Of these individuals, 100 percent had previously served in the military, with approximately three-fourths of the personnel having taken part in various regional conflicts.
- Casualty rates: Botvinyev has argued that, despite figures frequently appearing in Russian and Ukrainian journalist investigations, the real casualty rates suffered by Wagner Group is between 15–20 percent. In other words, “more than 80 percent survived, which should be seen as a success,” particularly given the nature of the operations performed and experimental character of the enterprise, the militant asserted.
- Financial stimuli: In terms of payment policies (including the sponsors/donors), much more information is available on the post-2015 period of Wagner’s history. However, it has been argued that at the height of hostilities in southeastern Ukraine, “a private soldier connected to [what would eventually become Wagner Group] operating in the Luhansk region was entitled to 180,000 rubles [at the time, around \$2,500] per month.”

Based on the available information, the core of Wagner Group originally sent to Luhansk Oblast was arguably comprised of militants whose general level of training and military preparation was higher than that of regular Russian contract soldiers, but lower than the SOF and the GU and FSB *Spetsnaz* (valuable forces that Russia would not waste on the Ukrainian southeast). Yet, later, as Wagner’s ranks continued to swell with new volunteers, the general level of professionalism, as well as equipment and training techniques, experienced a downward trajectory. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that operations involving shock-troop tactical units capable of a broad range of operational tasks (from frontal battles to intelligence gathering) against a relatively poorly organized and technologically close-to-median⁵⁸ opponent were positively assessed by the Russian side. As a result, even though other Russian irregular formations also operated in Donbas, Wagner Group specifically was chosen as a model for the “Syrian adventure.”

Importantly, the year 2017 was marked by the return of Wagner Group (the numbers did not exceed two to three tactical groups) to Luhansk.⁵⁹ As was noted, “[T]he SSU confirms the arrival of additional forces of Wagner Group from Russia to the temporarily occupied parts of Luhansk region, in order to provide military assistance to ‘LPR [Luhansk People’s Republic] Interior Minister’ Igor Kornet,” who, in 2015 (with the help of Utkin), was “disposing of some of the ‘LPR’ armed groups that had previously been their allies.”⁶⁰ In 2018, the SSU reported that elements of the group had deployed on the territory of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR),⁶¹ which (with the exception of the Debaltseve battle) had heretofore not been the case.⁶²

PMC MAR

Created in 2014, after the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas, PMC MAR presents a case study wholly different from Wagner Group. The activities, mission and specialization of this private military grouping can be ascertained from three main sources: a long interview from 2015 given

by the head of this PMC, Alexey Marushenko; the company's webpage; as well as an in-depth profile of PMC MAR member Andrey Vladyshev.

As Marushenko contended in his September 2015 interview with *Voyennoye.rf*, PMC MAR did take part in Russia's annexation of Crimea nor in the initial developments in the Donbas region. Indeed, his group's participation did not go beyond rendering various logistical/auxiliary support—primarily, cargo delivery (approximately 40 tons per month as of 2015). The second major function regularly performed by this PMC is “evacuation from zones of hostilities: Libya, Syria, Donbas... If your relative has joined the ‘Islamic State,’ we could pull him out of it.”⁶³ This information is corroborated by data listed on the company's webpage, stating that “the main tasks are to provide physical security to both people and material objects, render support for evacuation from zones of military hostilities, as well as providing necessary force support for humanitarian convoys.”⁶⁴ From Marushenko's interview, it is unclear whether the company has ties to the Russian *siloviki* or not. However, some bits and pieces assembled from other sources suggest that such ties might, in fact, exist. Namely, PMC MAR's head has noted that, “in the future, the company is planning to create a youth wing—a military-patriotic organization.” And given Russia's current efforts (explicitly coordinated from the top of the governing power vertical⁶⁵) in the realm of youth military-patriotic upbringing, any action in this sphere would seem entirely unrealistic without the explicit consent from the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

A rather curious case study of this Russian PMC can be deduced based on a profile of militant Andrey Vladyshev (born in 1975, the city of Krasnoyarsk), published in 2017 by the Ukrainian investigative platform *Informnapalm*. In 1993, Vladyshev served in Chechnya and Tajikistan as a naval infantryman and, later, as a member of a *Spetsnaz* unit. Upon his retirement, in 2006, with the rank of major, he spent some time in the French Foreign Legion. In May 2014, he headed a 12-person unit in Donbas (no information on the pertinence of this group or its possible subordination is known). The functions of his team were primarily concerned with purging (including physical elimination) “adverse groups among the separatist forces.” It is worth mentioning that many of his subordinates had been instructed at a training camp established in the city of Novosibirsk. In September 2015, Vladyshev unsuccessfully tried to join Wagner Group, and because of that failure ended up making contact with PMC MAR.⁶⁶ His activities while employed by the latter PMC are unknown; but in 2016, upon his return to the Russian Federation (Krasnoyarsk), he became the head of the East Siberian branch of the Union of Donbas Volunteers.⁶⁷

Given the fact that the PMC MAR is headquartered in St. Petersburg (from where Slavonic Crops Limited originated), this force might be used by Russian authorities for tasks/functions that are not commensurate with (para)military missions as such. It instead may be serving as a smokescreen recruitment tool for large entities.

E.N.O.T. Corps

This PMC emerged in 2011, out of the regional Russian public organization “United Public Communal Comradeships.” From its inception, E.N.O.T. Corps was closely tied to the FSB (for instance, many of its members were officially employed as “technical specialists of the FSB”) and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation (Moscow branch). Reportedly, the Russian *siloviki* established E.N.O.T. to be able to use its members as an auxiliary force in various

capacities, including search-and-rescue missions, operations against organized criminal groups and (even) counter-terrorist operations. Another essential aspect to consider is that the emergence of E.N.O.T. Corps was inseparable from the military-patriotic club “Rezerv” (formed in 1979, in the city of Bryansk, by retired Soviet military personnel), which is part of the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF) network.⁶⁸ This aspect granted E.N.O.T. an ability to closely work with Russian youth and, as will be demonstrated later, to be actively involved in “international projects” pertaining to the promotion of the Russian World (*Russkiy mir*) ideology through paramilitary training of young people.

As one of the leaders of E.N.O.T. Corps, Igor Mangushev, noted in a 2015 interview, during his PMC’s pre-2014 activities, “We were actively used by the police in anti-migrant raids... [and] we intensively worked with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church [of the Moscow Patriarchate], acting against the Uniates [members of The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church]... By the way, I was the one who transported Strelkov to Ukraine. Back then, he was working for Malofeev as the head of his security and was supposed to supervise the delivery to Ukraine of some important religious relics. I gave my guys to Strelkov because he had virtually no people.”⁶⁹

After the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, members of E.N.O.T. took an active part in both stages of the unraveling conflict. In Crimea, members of the group (along with Russian Cossacks and members of Berkut) actively participated in stirring public discontent and performed auxiliary operations related to mass mobilization and keeping under control main points and locally stationed critical infrastructure. In Donbas, E.N.O.T. Corps performed both military and non-military operations. The latter included armed supervision of so-called “humanitarian convoys” sent from Russia (14 missions in all); whereas, the former component included active military operations on the territory of Luhansk (Chornukhyne) and Donetsk oblasts (including the Debaltseve battle). As noted by Mangushev, the liquidation (on February 1, 2015) of Isa Munayev (commander of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion) was executed by members of E.N.O.T. during the Battle of Debaltseve.

The end of the most active phase of military confrontation in Donbas (the second half of 2015), combined with changes in the structure of the Moscow-backed self-proclaimed DPR/LPR entities, marked a fateful turn in the development of E.N.O.T. Corps. On the one hand, the PMC fully switched its focus to youth military-patriotic upbringing (financed by “sponsors from Donbas”). As noted by Mangushev, international military-patriotic youth camps organized by E.N.O.T. were attended by “Bulgarians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Belarusians... [The PMC oversaw the] whole first year of military academy studies in the LPR. Everything was legal, all actions were agreed upon at the highest level; both the FSB and the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation] were perfectly aware of this. Then our guys [...] were helping [Alexander] Borodai [the “prime minister” of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic] in the creation of the Union of Donbas Volunteers.”⁷⁰

However, subsequent developments showed that, in their policies, E.N.O.T. Corps (and more importantly, its leadership) picked the wrong side. Namely, after Igor “Strelkov” Girkin’s departure from Donbas (August 14, 2014), the PMC openly took up his idea that the completion of the “Novorossiia project” was more important than other Kremlin enterprises. Moreover, E.N.O.T. then helped him to organize his first press conference in Moscow upon his return to

Russia.⁷¹ In 2017, these developments took an even more acute form, when E.N.O.T. published an open letter challenging the way “Donbas-related issues were being handled”:

Two years ago, when we were among the first to announce the creation of the so-called Union of Donbas Volunteers, the domestic audience and people close to us among the political and security services treated this idea with a great deal of ambivalence... It is common knowledge that one of our most important lines of activity is youth military-patriotic upbringing... This has yielded noticeable results—our pupils have not only continued their careers in the military, many of them are now serving their Motherland as volunteers. None of this has been demonstrated by any of the “Kremlin-backed” military-patriotic groups and movements... Nevertheless, it should be admitted that this glorious period has come to an inglorious end, in many ways thanks to the “skillful” guidance of those people who are forming illusory patriotic movements. An attempt to level down natural urges of the people for self-determination and consolidation with colorful mottos without any practical realization could end in tragedy, in comparison with which the “surrender of Novorossiya” could be a trifle.⁷²

This declaration manifested an explicit demarche against Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov and his vision of the future of Donbas. As such, the open letter effectively signaled that the E.N.O.T. leadership had turned against Russia’s ruling elites close to Vladimir Putin. That same year, E.N.O.T. walked out of the Union of Donbas Volunteers.

Those developments, however, did not halt E.N.O.T. Corps’ activities related to military-patriotic training of youth in Russia and abroad. Illustratively, on November 24, 2018, E.N.O.T. supervised the 9th Military-Tactical Exercises of Saint Michael the Archangel (carried out since 2009), in Moscow Oblast, on the premises of one of the local monasteries.⁷³ The exercises were attended by a considerable number of participants (including Cossack youth) and endorsed by the local branch of the Russian Orthodox Church. And regarding the PMC’s involvement in youth training camps abroad, the infamous “Zlatibor affair” is a particularly telling example. This military-patriotic youth camp in Serbia, run jointly by members of E.N.O.T. and Serbian war veterans, taught Serbian adolescents a range of paramilitary skills, including wilderness survival techniques, first aid, martial arts, and basic handling of various weapons and explosives. The Zlatibor training camp was financed by local (overtly pro-Russian) Serbian entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the organizers of the camp later revealed that all information regarding the project was “well-known to the Serbian Ministry of Defense,” while “the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs rendered support for the enterprise.” Ultimately, the program was shut down in the summer of 2018 by the local police. But the affair raised such a media uproar that it required the personal involvement of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to calm public discontent.⁷⁴

In February 2019, E.N.O.T.’s leadership announced its decision to dissolve the organization due to “growing pressure from above” and multiple criminal cases opened against some of its members. This information, however, requires a disclaimer. The key question that should be asked for now is whether this truly means the end of the PMC or simply a new beginning, likely under new leadership. As far as the facts are concerned, E.N.O.T. continues to enjoy substantial support from the Russian Orthodox Church and some military-conservative circles within Russian society. One interesting detail: in early January 2019, it was announced that a “Zlatibor 2019” military-

patriotic youth camp (similar to the one that had been closed down in Serbia in 2018) would be held in the summer of 2019, from July 11 until August 11, and that E.N.O.T. members would serve as instructors. The camp's stated goal was "to boost friendship, mutual understanding, brotherhood and cultural ties between Slavic people." As declared by the organizers, "various youth organizations from Russia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Macedonia, Belarus, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina" expressed interest in sending students to attend.⁷⁵ It appears that the camp did, indeed, take place—and evidently, judging by the flags and instructor's speech on the video, again in Serbia. Although it is unclear whether E.N.O.T. personnel were actually involved in training the participants. A YouTube video from the youth camp, posted on the site *Srpska.ru*, shows only one military instructor.⁷⁶

(Pseudo)Cossacks

Various so-called Cossack groups played an important role in multiple stages of the Ukrainian crisis: from its inception (the annexation of Crimea) all the way to the most acute phase of military confrontation (May 2014–February 2015). Although none of these Cossack groups have formed PMCs of their own, preexisting private Russian military firms ended up recruiting many Cossacks due to the significant military experience they acquired fighting in southeastern Ukraine

The active phase of recruitment of Cossack fighters to Ukraine was launched in the Kuban region, in early March 2014. This effort received an information boost through the local mass media (primarily newspapers) after the Kuban Cossacks Army published open appeals to local men to "gather and head to Crimea to defend local Russian speakers against anti-Russian oppression." At the same time, local newspapers and information outlets reported on "dozens of ferries packed with Russian military personnel and armed Cossacks heading to Crimea."⁷⁷

The overall number of Cossacks that took part in military hostilities in Donbas remains unknown for two reasons. First, there is the difficulty connected to the very term "Cossack," since many of those who defined themselves as such were barely (if at all) related to the true Cossack community. Second, the reported numbers were repeatedly exaggerated or suppressed. Data from June 2014, obtained from Russian media sources, suggests that, on the territory of Luhansk Oblast, between 3,000 and 4,000 Cossacks controlled the areas of Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, Antratsyt, Krasnyi Luch, and Alchevsk (which *de facto* constituted two thirds of Luhansk Oblast).⁷⁸ Conservative Russian media noted that, in early December 2015, the overall number of Cossacks taking part in hostilities on the territories of both Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts was close to 19,000. Major (ret.) Nikolay Dyakonov (of the Union of the Don Cossacks and a deputy head of the Union of the Cossacks–Warriors of Russia and Abroad) explained, "almost all of them [Cossacks] have served in the army, many are officers, some come from other security services." He also noted the particularly strong influence of Cossacks on the territory of the so-called LPR, where, "for now [2015], approximately 80 percent of locally operating Cossacks are serving in the local People's Militia."⁷⁹

At this juncture, it would be relevant to briefly discuss Nikolay Kozitsyn—the leader of several pseudo-Cossack militarized formations in Luhansk Oblast—who played one of the most controversial roles in the conflict. Kozitsyn's biography embodies a "classical" case study of a Russian "militant-volunteer": his rise to prominence was driven by (a) growing instability in the

post-Soviet area and the former Yugoslavia; and (b) the reconstruction of the Cossack movement in the (rather peculiar) form of militarized groups that were frequently unrelated to genuine historical Cossack hosts.⁸⁰

Kozitsyn was born in 1956. Since 1990, he became involved in the “recreation” of Don Cossack traditions, which led to his first “adventure” in Transnistria, where he fought against Moldovan forces, closely cooperating with the Russian 14th Guards Army. Later, he participated in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (fighting for Abkhaz independence), where he met Chechen militant Shamil Basayev (who was involved in multiple crimes against civilian Georgians) and Sergei Shoigu (who at the time headed the Ministry of Emergency Situations but, as one investigative report argued, during the conflict “was in charge of supplying [unknown with what] Cossacks and Chechens”).⁸¹ Another quite paradoxical episode in Kozitsyn’s biography is related to his activities during the First Chechen conflict (1994–1996): on August 24, 1994, a Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation between the Almighty Don Army and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was signed. This was a *de facto* treaty on mutual military support (Articles 18–19) and paramilitary cooperation (Article 17),⁸² which forged a period of cordial ties between Kozitsyn and then–Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev. During the second Balkan conflict (with the participation of NATO), Kozitsyn maintained close contact with then–Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, acting as a representative of the Don Cossack Army. Apparently, his involvement in this process (which secured Russia’s participation in regional affairs without the Kremlin’s direct involvement) was highly appreciated by the Russian ruling elite. According to *Informnapalm*, Kozitsyn received the State Prize of the Russian Federation of Georgy K. Zhukov in 2002; then, in 2007, he received an award from the head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev.⁸³ Later stages of his biography until the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis remain unknown.

On May 2014, Kozitsyn, accompanied by a number of his supporters, illegally crossed the Ukrainian border and assumed control over Antratsyt. Kozitsyn and his pseudo-Cossacks imposed a military-terrorist regime (extortion, theft, forceful extraction of humanitarian aid and its further redistribution) on the territory under their domination. Their ability to hold on to this territory hinged on their significant military capabilities and superior equipment, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and even means of anti-aircraft defense. This allowed the militants to successfully confront both Ukrainian land forces and aviation. According to Kozitsyn, the Cossacks under his command shot down 11 Ukrainian aircraft.⁸⁴ Some evidence even exists that Kozitsyn and his gang were involved in the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, on July 17, 2014 (amidst the Battle of Shakhtarsk, July 16–August 26). First, audio materials retrieved by the SSU suggested that the shootdown of the airliner might have been carried out by Cossacks controlled by Kozitsyn.⁸⁵ Second, in a November 2014 interview, Kozitsyn confirmed that the audio materials were genuine; and when asked about the downed aircraft, he stated that he had openly warned the Ukrainian side and the public about the dangers related to flying over the war zone, claiming that MH17 “was shot down by a missile.” He refrained from further comments on the matter.⁸⁶

Despite his repeated claims about “utmost loyalty to God and Putin”⁸⁷ Kozitsyn managed to come into confrontation with:

- The nascent LPR military-political administration, likely due to growing frictions over pecuniary-related issues (control over the coal mines, transportation, smuggling of metals, and redistribution of economic help/financial means pouring from Russia);
- Strelkov/Girkin-linked militants operating in the Donbas region. In his above-mentioned interview, Strelkov/Girkin evaluated the activities of the Kozitsyn-subordinated militants in the following way: “all of them fled from the *krasnohimankoi* direction [Krasnyi Lyman Raion]. We will be able to hold positions on our own. We have enough forces. I am only wondering what the hell are these ‘Don and Kuban heroes’ doing here in the first place? Who are they fighting with in Antratsyt? With local poultry and liquor storages?”⁸⁸

Between November 2014 and January 2015, the confrontation between the LPR authorities and the pseudo-Cossacks took an overtly acute form, which escalated into open (though, limited-scale) military confrontation. First military engagements between pro-Kozitsyn and pro-Plotnitsky forces occurred in Antratsyt—allegedly, over the redistribution of financial means sent from Russia.⁸⁹ The confrontation ended in the latter’s favor by November 28, with the disarmament and eviction of the Cossacks.⁹⁰ In a video (addressing President Putin),⁹¹ one of the Cossack leaders from the city of Stakhanov, Pavel Dremov, accused Plotnitsky of purging LPR-based Cossack forces (primarily, so-called Cossack National Guard “Rome”) and using “PMCs [apparently, Wagner Group] as a weapon.”⁹² After this démarche, Dremov received the “black mark,” when one of his closest associates, Alexander Konkin, was arrested in the coal-mining city of Rovenky (Luhansk Oblast) by the LPR “prosecutor’s office.”⁹³ On December 12, 2014, Dremov was killed, when his car exploded on the highway close to Stakhanov.⁹⁴ The way the assassination operation was executed suggested a high level of professionalism—thus, pointing to either the Russian military or (more likely) Wagner Group.

Conclusion

According to Ukrainian journalist and military expert Yuri Butusov, “Russian private military companies [made up] the core of the Russian aggression in Donbas... This was the first test [...] later, these same elements were transferred to Syria.”⁹⁵ Indeed, this assessment captures the essence of the “Ukrainian chapter” (its role, mission, and the impact) of Russian PMCs and irregular formations. The period from early 2014 until late 2015 witnessed several crucial transformations.

First, Russian PMCs proved effective in carrying out (para)military operations, including frontal attacks, guerilla and anti-guerilla warfare, as well as sabotage. Of course, this “effectiveness” was conditional: Russia’s opponent—the Ukrainian Armed Forces—were demoralized and profoundly weakened by internal transformations experienced by Ukraine as a result of the EuroMaidan and subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea. It appears, therefore, that Moscow saw these PMCs not as a possible tool of military confrontation with the West (indeed, later developments in Syria would prove this point), but more effectively as an instrument of pressure against a weaker opponent. Furthermore, Ukraine arguably became a “testing ground” for a mission of greater lucrativeness—Syria—where the experience gained in Ukraine would prove of crucial importance.

Second, the “Ukrainian chapter” vividly demonstrated a high level of effectiveness of PMCs (in conjunction with other irregulars) in conducting information-psychological warfare and non-military operations—in other words, “hybrid confrontation”—including the ability to stir public discontent and ignite tensions. This mechanism was first tested within the scope of Russia’s preparation to annex Crimea (January–March 2014). Specifically, the appearance of ostensibly widespread public discontent, the rapid seizure of key buildings/infrastructure and the ensuing control thereof would not have been possible without Russia’s extensive reliance on paramilitary formations. In this regard, another essential quality demonstrated by Russian irregulars—intelligence gathering, which ushered in the first phase of the annexation of Crimea in January 2014—proved critical during Russia’s subsequent involvement in southeastern Ukraine.

Third, the SOF, whose capabilities were tested for the first time in Crimea, also proved to be an extremely effective tool of this new-type warfare. These units combine the best qualities of *Spetsnaz* formations with Soviet practice of non-linear operations.

In the final analysis, between 2014 and 2015, Russia successfully managed to replicate different stages of non-linear new-type warfare (observed by Russia’s military-political leadership in the Middle East) by using Ukraine as a testing ground. At the same time, the operations in Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas prepared Russian PMCs and irregulars for involvement in the Syrian mission.

Notes

¹ The incident was marked by the personal involvement of Vladimir Putin and serious diplomatic scandal.

² Irina Malkova, Anton Bayev, “Chastnaya armiya dlya presidenta: istoriya samogo delikatnogo porucheniya Evgeniya Prigozhyna,” *The Bell*, January 29, 2019, <https://thebell.io/41889-2/>.

³ Aleksey Zakvasin, “My podnimem imidzh strany” RT, January 25, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/article/473941-chvk-rossya-zakon>.

⁴ Private Military Companies remain in a legal “gray zone” inside Russia: technically forbidden by a law punishing involvement in mercenary activities, but freely operating more or less out in the open in countries and warzones around the world.

⁵ Sergey Sukhankin, “Russian Special Operations Forces: Image Versus Substance,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 16 Issue: 43 (March 27, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-special-operations-forces-image-versus-substance/>.

⁶ “Formy primeneniya Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii,” *Minoborony Rossii*, accessed March 30, 2019, <http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14014>.

⁷ This quality of the SOF has been tested in Syria, where these forces were closely interacting with Hezbollah and the Syrian military.

⁸ “SSO Rossii – elitnye voiny Generalnogo shtaba shtaba RF,” *Russkoe Agentstvo Novostey*, February 28, 2019, <http://новости-россии.ru-an.info/новости/ссо-россии-силы-специальных-операций-элитные-воины-генерального-штаба-рф/>.

⁹ “Den Sil specialnykh operatsiy v Rossii,” *RIA Novosti*, February 27, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190227/1551334701.html>.

¹⁰ This formation will be paid greater attention in a paper dedicated to Russia’s actions in Syria.

¹¹ Sergey Sukhankin, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow’s Interests,” *War by other means (special project)*, Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests/>.

- ¹² Viktor Murakhovskiy, “Krymskaya operatsiya – ochevidnyj marker kachestvenno novogo urovnya razvitiya Rossiyskoy armii,” *Natsionalnaya oborona*, (№4) April 2019, <http://oborona.ru/includes/periodics/maintheme/2014/0623/113513418/detail.shtml> .
- ¹³ Andrey Serenko, “Shamanov: v 2014 godu Rossiya obmanula americantsev v Krymu,” *Realist*, March 19, 2019, <http://realtribune.ru/news/world/1787>.
- ¹⁴ The Ukrainian MoD allowed military formations stationed in Crimea to use weapons only on March 19, which was too late. For more information see: Valeriy Shyryaev, “‘Vezhlyvye lyudi’ v Krymu: ka keto bylo,” *Novaya gazeta*, (№ 42) April 18, 2014, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2014/04/17/59255-171-vezhlyvye-lyudi-187-v-krymu-kak-eto-bylo>.
- ¹⁵ Tatyana Urbanskaya, “Operatsiya ‘Krymnash’,” *UNIAN*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.unian.net/politics/10017257-operaciya-krymnash.html>.
- ¹⁶ Such as threats by Ihor Mosiychuk (a Ukrainian politician and nationalist) to send “trains of friendship” and dispatch units of the Right Sector to Crimea to punish the pro-Russian audience. For more information see: “‘Pravyy sektor’ sformiruyet ‘poezd druzhby’ i ne dopustit raskola Ukrainy, - Mosiychuk,” *112.ua*, February 25, 2014, <https://112.ua/politika/pravyy-sektor-sformiruyet-poezd-druzhby-i-ne-dopustit-raskola-ukrainy-mosiychuk-26132.html> .
- ¹⁷ “Sekrety vezhlyvosti: kak rossiyskaya armiya svila s tolku amerikanskuyu razvedku,” *TV Zvezda*, March 16, 2015, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201503160810-ntv6.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Vladimir Zuyev, “‘Zelenye chelovechki’ na gibridnoy voyne,” *Nezavisimoye Voyennoe Obozreniye*, April 3, 2015, http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2015-04-03/10_green.html.
- ¹⁹ “Dary volkhvov pribyli v Krym,” *Pravoslavie.ru*, January 31, 2014, <https://pravoslavie.ru/68048.html> .
- ²⁰ Tatyana Derkach, “Kazaki-razboyniki: ChVK na sluzhbe u UPC MP? Chast 9. ‘Krymnashy’ eparkhii,” *Petr i Mazepa*, November 13, 2017 <https://petrimazepa.com/churchandmercenaries9.html>.
- ²¹ Yaroslav Mezentsev, “Blokada Kryma i dalneyshye boyevye deystviya chernomorskogo flota – istoriya Rossii,” *Istoriya Rossii*, August 3, 2018, <https://valdvor.ru/periody/blokada-kryma-i-dalnejshie-boevye-dejstviya-chernomorskogo-flota-istoriya-rossii.html>.
- ²² Ilya Kramnik, “Vezhlyvo I tikho,” *Leta.ru*, March 14, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/03/14/crimea/>.
- ²³ “Aerodrom ‘Belbek’ v 2014 zakhvatyvali voyennosluzhashchie VS RF – terrorist Girkin,” *Censor.net.ua*, February 21, 2019, https://censor.net.ua/news/3112941/aerodrom_belbek_v_2014_godu_zahvatyvali_voennosluzhaschie_vs_rf_terrorist_girkin.
- ²⁴ Aleksandr Gostev, Andrey Sharogradskiy, Mark Krutov, “Rossiyskaya ‘chastnaya voyennaya kompaniya’: piraty, Krym, Palmira,” *Krym. Realii*, March 31, 2016, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/27644530.html> .
- ²⁵ “Slidchi SBU vypysaly povidomlennya pro pidozru kerivnyku rossiyskoi PVK ‘Wagnera’ Dmytru Utkinu,” Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy, October 8, 2017, <https://ssu.gov.ua/ua/news/1/category/2/view/3989#.EAHLJmPL.dpbs> .
- ²⁶ Tatyana Ivzhenko, “Donetsk i Lugansk ne podchinyatsya Poroshenko,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, une 9, 2014, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2014-06-09/1_donetsk.html.
- ²⁷ Yelena Removskaya, “V ‘opolchentsy’ nabirali kogo popalo: chto zhdet ‘samooboronu’ Kryma,” *Krym. Realii*, February 25, 2019, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/chto-zhdet-samooboronu-kryma/29789620.html> .
- ²⁸ Kristina Kors, “Aleksandr Bochkarev: ‘Ya blagodaren kazakam za vozvrashcheniye Kryma’,” *VI.ru*, May 7, 2014, <https://v1.ru/text/gorod/56965051/>; Aleksey Drobotov, “Stavropolskikh kazakov nagradili za vozvrashcheniye Kryma,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.stav.kp.ru/online/news/2049191/>; “Chernomorskiy flot RF, diversionnyye gruppy I ‘kazaki’. Nalivaychenko rasskazal o zakhvate,” *TSN.ua*, February 7, 2018, <https://ru.tsn.ua/politika/chernomorskiy-flot-rf-diversionnyye-gruppy-i-kazaki-nalivaychenko-rasskazal-o-zahvate-kryma-1105947.html>.
- ²⁹ Ivan Torgovkin, “Rossiyskoe kazachestvo v operatsii po vossoedineniyu Kryma s Rossiyey,” *IA Russkoye kazachestvo*, March 18, 2017, http://ruskazaki.ru/news/kartina_dnya/rossiyskoe_kazachestvo_v_operatsii_po_vossoedineniyu_kryma_s_rossiey/.
- ³⁰ Torgovkin, “‘Rossiyskoe kazachestvo,’” March 18, 2017.
- ³¹ “Medzhlis: Krymskoye kazachestvo – proekt rossiyskikh spetssluzhb,” *Censor.net.ua*, February 17, 2011, https://censor.net.ua/news/156689/medjlis_krymskoe_kazachestvo_proekt_rossiyiskih_spetsslujb; Sergey Yurchenko, “Obyedineniye kazakov Kryma,” *Russkaya narodnaya liniya*, May 26, 2007, http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2007/05/26/ob_edinenie_kazakov_kryma/ .
- ³² The Night Wolves is a motorcycle club with at least 5,000 active members. It has branches and representatives in more than 30 Russian regions and abroad. The gang is known to enjoy the full support of Vladimir Putin. Incidentally, the gang has repeatedly chosen Ukraine for its “patriotic actions.” Namely, in 2010, a massive

motorcycle show was carried out in Sevastopol (attended by Putin). Interestingly enough, during his visit to Ukraine in 2012, the Russian president first met with the local representatives of the Nigh Wolves, and only then with Ukraine's then-president Viktor Yanukovich.

³³ Svetlana Samodelova, "Khirurgicheskoye vmeshatelstvo" 'Nochnye volki' brosilis na oboronu Kryma," *MK.Ru*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/article/2014/02/25/990125-hirurgicheskoe-vmeshatelstvo-nochnyie-volki-brosilis-na-oboronu-kryima.html> .

³⁴ "Pod Armyansk styanulis siloviki iz 'Berkuta'" *Armyansk Informatsionnyj*, February 27, 2014, <http://armyansk.info/news/news-archive/120-2014/4592-pod-armyansk-styanulis-siloviki-iz-berkuta> .

³⁵ "Rossiyski desantniki u formi 'Berkuta' zahoplyuvaly Krym, dekhto teper na Donbasi," *Ukrainska Pravda*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2014/09/3/7036657/> .

³⁶ Voluntary People's *Druzhinas* were Soviet-era civilian detachments tasked with maintaining local public order—somewhat akin to a "neighborhood watch."

³⁷ Valeriy Shyryayev, "Krym. God spustya. Chto my znayem teper," *Novaya Gazeta*, February 19, 2015, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/02/20/63128-krym-god-spustya-chno-my-znaem-teper>.

³⁸ Galya Sklyarevskaya, "Kak kremlevskiye boty vydayut sebya za kharkovskikh zhurnalistov," *Detektor M*, February 3, 2017, <https://detector.media/medialife/article/122799/2017-02-03-kak-kremlevskie-boty-vydayut-sebya-za-kharkovskikh-zhurnalistov/> .

³⁹ "Krymskiy porebrik god spustya. Detali rossiyskoy spetsoperatsii po anneksii Kryma," *Informnapalm*, February 21, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/6146-krymskiy-porebrik-god-spustya-detaly-rossijskoj-spetsoperatsyy-po-anneksyy-kryma/> .

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⁴⁸ Mikhail Zhyrokhov, "Zabytaya bitva leta 2014 goda – srazheniye za Luganskiy aeroport," *Svoboda.fm*, March 21, 2016, <http://svoboda.fm/crime/events/244672.html> .

⁴⁹ "Video pokazalo rol 'ChVK Wagnera' v boyakh na vostoke Ukrainy" *Bellingcat.com*, July 18, 2018, <https://ru.bellingcat.com/novosti/russia/2018/07/18/wagner-debaltseve/> .

⁵⁰ Igor Strelkov (Girkin), "'Chastniki' Chast 1-4," *Vbloknot.com*, July 14, 2018, <https://vbloknot.com/18446-igor-strelkov-chastniki.html>.

⁵¹ "Rossiyskiy spetsnaz zachishchayet 'dobrovoltsev LNR.' Sliv Novorossii ili podgotovka k voyne?" *Informnapalm.org*, January 10, 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/4491-rossijskiy-spetsnaz-zachyshhaet-dobrovoltsev-lnr-slyv-novorossyy-ily-podgotovka-k-vojne/>.

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⁵⁴ Igor Strelkov (Girkin), "'Chastniki' Chast 1-4," *Vbloknot.com*, July 14, 2018, <https://vbloknot.com/18446-igor-strelkov-chastniki.html>.

⁵⁵ Evstafii Botvinyev graduated from the Leningrad Higher military-political college of Andropov (specialization "military advisor," majoring in the organization of partisan movements). He fought against the Ukrainian Armed

Forces on the territory of Luhansk Oblast with Utkin. For more information see: “Intervyu rossiyskikh naemnikov Botvinyevykh: ‘Wagnera’ na Donbasse trenirovali nashy kadrovye voyennye iz ‘Vympela.’ Ryadovoy ‘Wagnera’ poluchal 180 tysyach rubley,” *Censor.net.ua*, May 18, 2018, https://censor.net.ua/resonance/3066311/intervyu_rossiyiskih_naemnikov_botvinevyh_vagnera_na_donbasse_trenirovali_nashi_kadrovye_voennye_iz.

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⁵⁷ This assessment, however, should be treated with a share of caution, given Strelkov’s overtly negative posture on Russia’s involvement in Syrian affairs.

⁵⁸ “A close-to-median” opponent is one that is defined as wielding structured armed forces but with a level of operative and tactical skills as well as weaponry/equipment that is much lower than Russia’s. In other words, an opponent more skillful than the majority of non-state actors (such as the Islamic State, or partisans).

⁵⁹ “Igor Girkin (Strelkov): K vlasti I v Donetskoj, i v Luganskoj respublike Surkov privel banditov,” *The Insider*, December 8, 2017, <https://theins.ru/politika/83281>.

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