



## **Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond**

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### **Executive Summary**

- Slavonic Corps Limited became Russia’s first and, in many ways, rather experimental “new type” private military company (PMC), concerned with tasks typically performed by private armies, such as frontal attacks and combat operations—in contrast with Western PMCs, which are mainly assigned auxiliary or training roles. Slavonic Corps suffered a quick defeat in Syria; however, many of its members (including its leader, Dmitry Utkin, *nom de guerre* Wagner) would later reassemble under the umbrella of a new organization—the Wagner Group. Participation in the wars in Syria and Ukraine helped the Wagner Group achieve valuable experience and modernize its organizational (army-type) structure.
- While engaged in Syria, the Wagner Group demonstrated four essential qualities: First, it showed it could be successfully employed in military-related tasks (assuming a relatively weak opposing force). Second, it could be used jointly or in conjunction with regular formations (the Special Operations Forces and the Aerospace Forces) for intelligence gathering and reconnaissance. Third, this force could be used to protect objects/critical infrastructure. Fourth, another useful area of application for Wagner has been training local military personnel. The latter two functions are regularly performed by Western PMCs, which may signify a certain transformation that Russian PMCs are currently undergoing in Syria—gradually, and at least partially, becoming more like their American and European counterparts.
- Russian PMCs can certainly be an effective tool of power politics. However, when confronted by technologically superior militaries and/or if operating in difficult terrain, formations of this type lose effectiveness.

- The Wagner Group’s overwhelming defeat by US-led forces in early February 2018, in Deir ez-Zor province, stemmed in part from the PMC’s inferior arms/munitions and lack of any aerial support. But the deadly incident also demonstrated the exceedingly poor level of Wagner’s coordination with the regular Syrian Army and affiliated militia formations. Nevertheless, Wagner’s involvement importantly offered Russia plausible deniability, which helped Moscow avoid both domestic and international repercussions of this massacre of Russian mercenary forces.
- Syria has become a crucial training ground for Russian PMCs. And Moscow is now (successfully) duplicating this model in other theaters of the world—notably, Libya and sub-Saharan Africa.
- The Syrian campaign has arguably demonstrated that all of the main Russian PMCs appear to be tightly linked to a powerful triad composed of oligarchs, the military and the government. However, deeper research and more concrete, fact-based data will be required to ascertain the whole structure with necessary precision and accuracy—and the acquisition of such information could prove a rather onerous task.

## Introduction

Russian private military companies’ (PMC) first attempts at entering the global commercial military/security market came in 1996, marked by the emergence of FDG Corp., which conducted several small-scale operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>1</sup> This was followed in the late 1990s–early 2000s by other groups that ultimately failed to achieve any visible success for a variety of reasons,<sup>2</sup> including foremost the saturation of the PMC market by mainly Western players. After seemingly on the decline, Russia’s interest in PMCs was reborn following the outbreak of the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, both of which highlighted the role non-state actors (including PMCs) could play in such conflicts. Russian experts like Aleksandr Ageev argue that mercenary companies are a useful tool for achieving both geopolitical (including regime change) and geo-economic (“power economy”—*silovaya ekonomika*)<sup>3</sup> objectives in the interest of state or state-related structures/actors but, crucially, without the state’s direct participation. Thus, when Russian private military companies proved unable to openly compete with their Western counterparts, Russia reverted to strategies and patterns commensurate with practices from the 17<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries: when (proto)PMCs acted as *de facto* private armies of sovereign states and/or powerful individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The following study discusses the phenomenon of the Slavonic Corps Limited as an illustrative manifestation of the above-mentioned phenomenon. And second, it traces the evolution of Russia’s quasi-PMCs industry by focusing on the telling example of the Wagner Group. The chronological scope of this study (2013–2019) encompasses Russia’s developing involvement in the Syrian crisis and the commensurate transformations experienced by its PMCs as a result.

## Slavonic Corps Limited in Syria: A Valuable Defeat

Slavonic Corps Limited—which was registered on January 18, 2012, in Hong Kong—was born of an attempt by the Russian firm Moran Security Group to increase its competitive advantage in the

market by forming a *de facto* private army. Slavonic Corps' personnel would consist of "retired military officers [as well as] professionals of the highest quality who wield unique military skills and have experience from various missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Africa, Tajikistan, North Caucasus, Serbia and other places"<sup>5</sup>; these individuals would be ready to perform military missions abroad.

The timing of this PMC's establishment may be linked to what was then happening in the Syrian civil war. One theory suggests that, by 2013, Moscow decided (allegedly as recommended by Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov) to provide military support to the embattled regime of President Bashar al-Assad by sending a quasi-PMC to fight without Russia's direct involvement.<sup>6</sup> The group was to conduct offensive military operations against al-Assad's enemies and to simultaneously take control of areas endowed with hydrocarbons (a backbone of the Syrian economy). A second theory proposes that, during the summer of 2013, Moran Security Group received a proposal from the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources (allegedly conveyed through figures affiliated with the ruling regime) to assemble a group of "professionals capable of physical protection of critical infrastructure related to extraction, transportation and processing of hydrocarbons."<sup>7</sup> Yet, Moran's top management—having grown suspicious of this enterprise and unwilling to involve itself in a potential hoax—decided to act through a proxy force, thereby creating the Slavonic Corps as a "pilot project" to test the ground. Thus, that October, two former managers of Moran, Vadim Gusev and Yevgeniy Sidorov, assembled 267 militants and promised them \$5,000 per month for providing "protection of oil and natural gas facilities" as well as a \$20,000 payout for serious wounds (including potential disability) and \$40,000 to the fighter's family in case of death.<sup>8</sup> The group arrived to Beirut (by plane) and, after being transported to Damascus, headed to Syria's Latakia military base. There, the Slavonic Corps detachment was organized into two sub-units—one consisting of Cossacks from the Kuban region, and the other composed of ethnic-Russian mercenaries (incidentally, this latter group was reportedly headed by Dmitri Utkin, later known by his *nom de guerre* "Wagner").

In retrospect, the Slavonic Corps' mission was doomed from the start due to a number of initial organizational blunders:

- Inadequate equipment and outdated weaponry—which consisted of a number of infantry fighting vehicles (produced in 1979), aging T-72 main battle tanks (that refused to work due to their poor condition), several Hyundai buses and JMC jeeps (fortified with armor), a number of mortars (dating to 1939). The PMC members were additionally equipped with machine guns, rocket launchers and small mortars manufactured in 1943.
- Poor coordination with the Syrian Armed Forces—reflected in a number of aspects, including lack of shared information about potential adversaries, no aerial support, as well as poor coordination on the battlefield once forces engaged in combat.
- Erroneous goal setting—the primary task was declared as "preserving control over oil facilities in Deir ez-Zor," which sharply contrasted with reality since, at that time, a major part of this area was controlled by anti-al-Assad forces that first had to be destroyed/pushed back (the Russian forces were not prepared for this mission). In effect, the mercenary formations had to conduct medium-scale combat operations against an opponent that far

outnumbered (between 2,000 and 6,000 militants) the couple hundred Slavonic Corps fighters. Worse still, the Syrian government for some reason never shared with the PMC that there were that many militants operating in the area.

As a result, the Slavonic Corps' first serious military engagement, near al-Sukhnah (eastern Syria, close to Homs), led to a retreat of the mercenary formations. And yet, despite this seeming failure, the operation demonstrated this Russian PMC members' high fighting qualities, good orientation on the ground (despite the engagement taking place in the desert), and high operational skills (reportedly, only six men were wounded despite having fallen into an ambush while on the march).<sup>9</sup>

An interesting assessment of the enterprise was presented by Oleg Krinitsyn (the head of the PMC RSB Group), who argued that “among the guys [...] there were some of our former employees who were fired for low moral qualities [...] former criminals. This, once again, confirms that the recruitment process was not concerned with bringing in top-notch specialists; rather, they [the recruits] were simply needed to fill the gap with cannon fodder as soon as possible.” He also noted that the contracts signed by the PMC members “looked like suicide contracts. The recruits had agreed to have their bodies buried in Russia, or (if impossible) in the country of death.” In Krinitsyn's words, “[T]he contract was signed not with a legitimate governmental structure/institution but with some Syrian oligarch, allegedly upon al-Assad's approval... They [mercenaries] went to defend the oil fields, but upon arrival, it turned out that those had yet to be taken under control [...] I think that someone from Moran Security Group deliberately started this adventure to deal with financial difficulties faced by the company.”<sup>10</sup> Despite the lack of success, members of the Slavonic Corps (including one of its leaders, Dmitry Utkin) would later appear in Ukraine, during the summer of 2014, as part of the Wagner Group PMC.

### **The Wagner Group: From Palmyra to the ‘Russian Ilovaysk’<sup>11</sup>**

Between May 2014 and February 2015,<sup>12</sup> the Wagner Group emerged, formed and evolved into a well-organized paramilitary formation fighting in eastern Ukraine. After that, it was re-deployed to Syria to fight on the side of al-Assad. The following survey of Wagner's organizational and operational attributes spans the period of 2015–2018.

#### *Leadership*

Among the publicly known leaders of the Wagner Group, the following personalities deserve special attention:

- Dmitry Utkin (*nom de guerre* Wagner)—a professional soldier (retired with the rank of lieutenant colonel) who took part in two Chechen wars and commanded the Military Intelligence (GRU) *Spetsnaz* unit located in Pskov Oblast. Upon retirement from service, he joined Moran Security Group.<sup>13</sup> He is known to have taken part in hostilities in Ukraine and Syria (2013–2016). According to images captured during a 2016 gala in the Kremlin, Utkin has been decorated with four Orders of Courage (*Orden Muzhestva*)<sup>14</sup>—usually awarded for bold and decisive actions while carrying out military or civil duties under conditions involving a risk to life.<sup>15</sup> In 2017, he joined Concord Management and

Consulting (owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, who also reportedly control the Wagner Group) and was appointed its director; yet, in 2018, he signed a letter of resignation.<sup>16</sup>

- Andrey Troshev (Sedoi)—a former member of the Soviet/Russian armed forces (fought in Afghanistan and Chechnya) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs *Militsia* (retired with the rank of colonel as head of the *Spetsnaz* Special Rapid Response Unit, or SOBR, in the North-Western Federal District of the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), awarded two Orders of the Red Banner (*Orden Krasnogo Znameni*), two Orders of Courage, and a Hero of the Russian Federation medal (allegedly received for the takeover of Palmyra in 2016).<sup>17</sup> Since 2016, he has been in charge of the “League of Protection of Interests of the Veterans of Local Wars and Military Conflicts” organization (in St. Petersburg).<sup>18</sup>
- Alexander Kuznetsov (Ratibor)—a professional Russian soldier who served (with the rank of major) as the head of a unit of Special Forces stationed in Solnechnogorsk (Moscow Oblast). As noted by Russian sources, that facility would become home to the command center *Senezh*—a platform that would eventually give raise to the Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF).<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, in 2016, Kuznetsov, then a member of Moran Security Group, was spotted together with the Wagner Group’s Dmitry Utkin at the Kremlin during the aforementioned awards gala, where he and other individuals were decorated with medals for the capture of Palmyra.

### *Training Techniques*

As has been established and reconfirmed by various Russian and Western sources, the Wagner Group was allotted the Molkino training ground or “polygon” (Krasnodar Krai), which is also used by the 10<sup>th</sup> Separate Special Brigade of the GRU (consisting of four main subunits, the 85<sup>th</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup>, 104<sup>th</sup>, and 551<sup>st</sup>).<sup>20</sup> According to available video footage taken at Molkino, this training center offers participants extensive practice with the following types of weaponry and equipment:

- BM-27 Uragan self-propelled multiple rocket launcher systems<sup>21</sup>;
- 2S19 Msta-S, SO-152 Akatsiya and 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled guns<sup>22</sup>; and
- Tornado-G multiple rocket launchers.<sup>23</sup>

Regular training that takes place at the polygon aims, in part, to develop the following military/fighting skills:<sup>24</sup>

- Advanced use of various up-to-date means of Electronic Warfare (EW);
- Coordination of actions between land and air operations<sup>25</sup>; as well as
- Partisan/guerrilla-type subversive activities, *maskirovka*, sabotage, and recruitment (*verbovka*) of foreign agents.

Wagner personnel completing preparatory comprehensive training courses at Molmino (until 2017, these courses reportedly lasted for up to two months but were later shortened)<sup>26</sup> are allegedly able to utilize GRU facilities and training techniques. At the same time, given that some personalities close to Wagner (such as Boris Chikin and Andrey Troshev) are top-notch experts in mountainous warfare or marine operations, it logically follows that Wagner’s preparation techniques may, in effect, combine the techniques of the GRU and the SOF.<sup>27</sup>

### *Command and Control (C2)*

According to the online investigative platform *InformNapalm* (as well as other sources), the cumulative number of Wagner personnel who went through the PMC between 2014 and 2018 exceed 5,000 men.<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, this required the creation of a well-structured, army-like C2 system with clearly pronounced divisions of functions and responsibilities. The general opaqueness of this group and increasing levels of secrecy associated with it means that the fullest information regarding the inner workings of Wagner is mostly limited to the period between 2016 and 2017.

During this time, the Wagner Group PMC (reportedly having deployed 2,349 personnel to Syria) had a well-organized, multilayered C2 structure:

- a) The upper level, consisting of the commander-in-chief and a managing director;
- b) A middle level of command, which included an administrative group (388 personnel), a general staff (19 persons), and a control group (36 persons).
- c) A bottom level (approximately 1,904 men).<sup>29</sup>

As pointed out in various sources, “Wagner places special emphasis on coordination of the ‘military part’ of the group, where the key role is ascribed to the Department of Military Preparation. Various subunits within the Department of Military Preparation are responsible for firearm training (*ognevaya podgotovka*), engineer training (*inzhenernaya podgotovka*), tank and infantry fighting vehicle crews (*ekipazi tankov i BMP*), tactical training (*takticheskaya podgotovka*), as well as artillery and anti-air defense (*artilleria i PVO*).”<sup>30</sup> An investigative report by *Fontanka* notes that, until late 2017, “the Wagner Group’s clear division of functions and responsibilities as well as its well-established C2 system follow a template drawn from the structure of the Russian Armed Forces.” This structure allowed Wagner to carry out offensive military operations typically performed by the regular Armed Forces—such examples were observed in Ukraine (2014–2015) and Syria (since 2015) against “unfriendly” forces to the Russian and Syrian regimes.<sup>31</sup> In late 2017, however, Wagner was said to have become closely integrated with the Syrian Armed Forces, which may have resulted in a partial impairment of the previously established system of C2 (this aspect will be examined below).

### *Financing and Recruitment*

Wagner’s financial schemes are opaque, and many details still remain unknown. However, some available data provides a cursory understanding of figures as well as highlights the transformations that occurred between 2014 and 2018:

## Payment Policies

The Wagner Group's payment policies have changed several times. During the "Ukrainian chapter" (the period of formation), each contractor was entitled to 80,000 rubles (\$1,200) per month while undergoing a two-month training course at the Molkino polygon. After crossing the Ukrainian border, the militant's monthly salary reached 120,000 rubles (\$1,800). However, participation in para-military operations on the territory of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) would bump payments up to 180,000 rubles (\$2,800); military engagements with the Ukrainian Armed Forces gave militants an additional 60,000 (\$900) per week to their basic monthly salary.<sup>32</sup> In comparison, the "insurgents" from the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics" were making approximately 15,000 rubles (\$240) per month.<sup>33</sup>

The "Syrian chapter" should be sub-divided further into two interims. Between 2015 and 2016, the salary earned by Wagner employees (on average) reached \$3,800 per month; while in early 2017 (the most intense period of hostilities), some Russian sources reported that the monthly wages may have gone up to \$8,000. This figure (apparently, exaggerated) was contradicted by other sources that suggested more realistic salaries of \$4,000–\$4,800 per month.<sup>34</sup> As noted by one (anonymous) Wagner fighter, he signed a contract for \$4,000 per month but was receiving *de facto* less than \$4,000; later, however (upon proving his qualifications), he would receive an additional 150,000 rubles (\$2,300) per month and special *premia* (bonuses) for successful operations performed, which oscillated between 30 to 100 percent of his basic salary. Thus, it would be fair to say that Wagner's salary policies varied depending on the particular fighter/employee's experience and level of qualifications as well as the nature/complexity of the mission. Differentiation was also visible in compensation for families of casualties: a standard payout for a Wagner member's death varied from 3,000,000 (\$46,000) for members of a security squad (i.e., the individual did not take part in military operations)<sup>35</sup> to 5,000,000 rubles (\$80,000) if killed in combat.<sup>36</sup> It is, however, unknown whether relatives did indeed receive the sums they were entitled to. Interestingly, according to Russian military expert and member of the Public Council at the Ministry of Defense Colonel (ret.) Viktor Baranets, "[S]alaries of members of the illegal formation [Wagner Group] are in fact much higher, since the risk of being killed is high," He also argued that Wagner members earn considerably higher wages than regular Russian contract soldiers and officers. Namely, he stated that "an acting colonel [in the regular Russian Armed Forces] who is currently stationed in Syria earns approximately 210,000–250,000 rubles [\$3,100–3,700] per month."<sup>37</sup>

In 2017, financing of the Wagner Group allegedly become the sole responsibility of the Syrian government, which resulted in "chronic delays in payment, disputes and growing discontent."<sup>38</sup> Russian sources claimed that only top-notch specialists still enjoyed relatively high monthly wages of approximately 240,000 rubles (\$3,300); whereas lower-ranked fighters were paid \$2,200. These changes have had a profound influence on both the training and equipment available to Wagner units fighting in Syria. At the same time, it has resulted in a lower quality of new recruits. Changes in the payment policy still remain unclear and subject to debate and speculations. These changes are frequently attributed to a struggle that allegedly took place between Wagner's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu over the redistribution of economic means,<sup>39</sup> although the lack of precise data has prevented conclusive answers on the matter. Alternatively, changes in the payment policy might be attributed to the large number of available cadres willing

to join the Wagner Group, given the lack of opportunities in Russia's economically depressed regions. Indeed, based on analysis of biographies of Wagner fighters killed in Ukraine and Syria, the typical profile of a person who joined the group is a middle-aged (35–47 years old) man with a family, often an unsuccessful businessman and pending bank loans, from an economically depressed area, but with a rich military past who has either been unable to adjust to civilian life or is unable to deal with a challenging economic situation.<sup>40</sup>

The sense of opaqueness regarding Wagner's finances is amplified by the fact that, as noted by one anonymous high-ranking military officer, "members of the Wagner Group are always paid with cash... [while] all expenditures are defrayed by the Russian government and some 'high-ranking businessmen' [Russian or Syrian not specified]."<sup>41</sup>

## Recruitment

The PMC's recruitment patterns are a "hybrid" consisting of different layers both directly and indirectly related to the Russian state and private figures. The main (potential) sources of recruitment (based on the available information) are:

- *War veteran societies/organizations.* Two main players in this category stand out. First is the Union of Donbas Volunteers (created in 2015), which is said to be directly connected with Kremlin aide Surkov.<sup>42</sup> This organization—closely related to another Russian PMC, the ENOT Corps, which fought in Donbas and was involved in military training of Balkan youth<sup>43</sup>—is said to also serve as a recruitment tool for a number of other Russian PMCs, including Wagner. The second such group is Organization "Combat Brotherhood," which was founded in 1997. One of its prominent members, Georgy Tsurkanu (who previously fought in the Yugoslav war)<sup>44</sup> was captured (and apparently killed) by the Islamic State, in 2017, in Syria, near Ash-Shula. Though the veterans organization acknowledged Tsurkanu's membership with the group, it then rapidly denied its involvement in recruiting volunteers to fight in Syria.<sup>45</sup>
- *Cossack organizations.* Readiness to recruit Cossacks *en masse* to suppress Ukrainian protesters against then-president Viktor Yanukovich was first voiced in January 2014, by Russian Duma deputy and Cossack General Ataman Viktor Volodatskii.<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, Cossacks took an active role in the annexation of Crimea and ensuing hostilities in southeastern Ukraine. The operative theater, however, was not confined to Ukraine: in 2017, Roman Zabolotny (a member of the Almighty Don Army) was also, along with Tsurkanu, captured by the Islamic State in Syria. Interestingly, the press-service of the Don Army, having acknowledged Zabolotny's membership, also shrugged off its knowledge of or involvement in the recruitment of Cossacks to fight in Syria.<sup>47</sup>
- *The Volunteer Society for Cooperation With the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF).* The deputy director of DOSAAF, Nikolay Staskov, argued that he discussed the issue of the creation of PMCs on the basis of his organization with "the General Staff, the Minister of Defense [...] it was concluded that DOSAAF is an ideal foundation for creating and preparing personnel for PMCs [...] we know how to do that. We know how to prepare an individual soldier [to join] a military unit, and prepare the whole unit for operations with

specific types of weaponry and munitions.”<sup>48</sup> Incidentally, in 2017, the previous DOSAAF deputy director, Colonel General Alexander Kolmakov, argued that “an engineering company consisting of retired members of the Armed Forces [*de facto* a PMC] tasked with sapper works in territories of former military conflicts is already being created in Russia on the basis of DOSAAF.”<sup>49</sup>

- *Military commissariats.*<sup>50</sup> Numerous reports have identified military commissariats (*voyenkomati*) as points of recruitment for the Wagner Group. As clearly flows from such journalistic investigations, the recruiters are specifically looking for reservists with a background that includes combat experience in various conflict zones (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Chechnya, South Caucasus), and priority is given to those whose served in *Spetsnaz*, Airborne Forces (VDV) and Signal Troops units.<sup>51</sup>
- *Ethnically non-Russian regions.* Perhaps several hundred Wagner Group fighters come from such territories, including Crimea and the LPR-DPR.<sup>52</sup>

A particularly interesting viewpoint on this matter came from a veteran of the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Purpose Unit of the Internal Forces “Vityaz,” Petr Fefilov, who argued that “currently, there is a kind of competition between 2–3 structures that want to be in charge of this process [recruitment and controlling the PMC business] in Russia.”<sup>53</sup> Another (unnamed) source from one Russian PMC stated that, in terms of training, recruitment and the selection of fit candidates for PMCs, DOSAAF could become subordinated to the VDV; various voluntary (apparently, military-patriotic and veteran) organizations are controlled by the Federal Security Service (FSB), whereas the Wagner Group is subordinated to the GRU.

### *Logistics*

Based on available data, Wagner Group fighters were transported to the Syrian theater along one of two main transportation methods:

- By sea, with Sevastopol and Novorossiysk<sup>54</sup> playing the key role. Importantly—as confirmed by the director of the Russian foreign ministry’s Department of Nonproliferation and Arms Control, Mikhail Ulyanov—this transportation method was already tested in 2013, when Russia sent to Syria several vessels carrying armored personnel carriers and radio-electronic warfare equipment.<sup>55</sup> By 2015, Russia intensified its transit of Syrian-bound military cargoes via these established sea-based routes. On August 20, for example, the Alligator-class landing ship *Nikolay Filchenkov* delivered military equipment to the port of Tartus<sup>56</sup>; and in the second half of September, two Russian landing ships, the *Korolev* and *Novocherkassk*, as well as BDK-64 *Caesar Kunikov* arrived loaded with weaponry for the Syrian Armed Forces.<sup>57</sup> Despite the crucial role played by the Black Sea Fleet in this so-called “Syrian Express” mission, it was the big landing ship *Kaliningrad* (of the Baltic Sea Fleet) that “became the champion in crossing the Bosphorus.”<sup>58</sup> This said, the sea route—even though arguably capable of transporting members of PMCs to the theater—was apparently primarily employed in transporting not personnel but heavy weaponry, military equipment and other types of cargo.

- By air—the main transportation route employed for bringing Russian private military contractors to the theater. In September 2015, the number of flights by military-transportation aviation (from Moscow only) to Syria reached two per day; however, as noted by independent journalists and Russian bloggers, flights were primarily made from “Mozdok, Ryazan, Ivanovo and other cities, where VDV units are located.”<sup>59</sup> According to one journalistic investigation into the matter, an essential aspect of the Wagner Group’s success has been Russia’s commitment to provide it with the logistical resources of the entire Southern Federal District (SFD). In particular, Rostov-on-Don has played a strategic role in terms of the development and functioning of Wagner. The city, located in the southern part of the SFD, is effectively one of the key logistical venues in southern Russia. The surrounding Rostov Oblast plays a pivotal function in the eastern Ukrainian conflict, serving as the main artery for technical-material support for the Donbas separatist forces. At the same time, the city of Rostov has been allocated the primary role of transferring Russian servicemen (both privates and contract soldiers) to Syria via the Cham Wings air company (which also flies civilian Airbus A320s).<sup>60</sup> Most likely, members of the Wagner Group were transferred to Syria via the same scheme, using the Platov International Airport (also in Rostov Oblast).

Unlike during the Soviet period, when the transportation of so-called “military advisors” was done by sea (due to large numbers of personnel and the lack of modern-day transport capabilities), it seems that today’s air-based transportation has been given priority primarily due to concerns over maintaining mission secrecy and discreetness.

### *Ownership*

As stated previously, figures close to the Russian *siloviki* (security services and other so-called “power” ministries) and associated with the PMC industry have pointed to a “hybrid” ownership structure of the Wagner Group that includes both state- and non-state actors. The former element will be discussed in the next segment of the research, whereas this part will concentrate on non-state actors and individuals.

One of the figures who is said to be directly related to the Wagner Group is Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman with a criminal past (he was sentenced in 1979 and 1981 for money laundering and procuring prostitutes, and spent nine years in jail). Russian sources claim that Prigozhin (born in 1961 in Leningrad) is close with Viktor Zolotov—a former bodyguard of St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak as well as the current director of the National Guard of Russia and a member of the Russian Security Council, who has been close to Putin since the late 1990s.<sup>61</sup> Since 2010, Prigozhin (who by then had established a network of lucrative catering businesses) has enjoyed personal support from Vladimir Putin; the latter attended the opening ceremony of Prigozhin’s newest enterprise in St. Petersburg, Concord-Catering.<sup>62</sup> This attention from the Kremlin has apparently translated into a growing number of various “delicate errands” that Prigozhin looks to be in charge of. One of them—information-psychological operations against foreign and domestic “enemies” of Moscow—was reflected in the creation of the Internet Research Agency (a.k.a. the Olgino Troll Factory), an organization that was ascribed an important role in anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western information campaigns carried out after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis.<sup>63</sup> It was also accused of involvement in election interference in the United States

during the 2016 presidential campaign. Multiple investigative reports have disclosed that Prigozhin's Concord-Catering was heavily involved in financially supporting this structure (*de facto* stood behind the whole enterprise).<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, according to the Russian investigative platform *The Bell*, starting from 2013, Prigozhin-related organizations started to work on the creation of a PMC that could be “capable of carrying out various—including military—tasks abroad.” Russian journalists also noted one interesting detail: roughly during the same period, Prigozhin-related companies, primarily Concord-Catering, received lucrative contracts (the exact sum is unknown, but the cumulative sum between 2014 and 2019 may have reached up to \$2.2 billion) from the Ministry of Defense (for cleaning, construction, catering, supplies delivery) and the Moscow City Council (somewhat similar services but at public schools and hospitals). As argued in authoritative Russian sources, part of the financial means allocated to Prigozhin's companies “may have been used for the organization and financing of the PMC [the Wagner Group].”<sup>65</sup>

Another important link between Prigozhin-related companies and the Wagner Group appeared toward the end of 2016. By then, this PMC had already been successfully operating in Syria (as noted by one former member, he signed a contract with EvroPolis<sup>66</sup> as a “technical specialist”). The company EvroPolis (also owned by Prigozhin) concluded an agreement (signed by Ali Ghanem, the Syrian petroleum and mineral resources minister, and Alexander Novak, the minister of energy of Russia) with the Syrian government that *de facto* allowed the firm to take control over a quarter of Syrian oil and natural gas resources (though a large part of those resources, at that point, still needed to be recaptured).<sup>67</sup> Since 2017 (when leadership of the company was taken over by Oleg Erokhin, a former member of the Special Rapid Response Unit, or SOBR, and later a head of the Russian Ministry of Interior in the North-Western Federal District), EvroPolis was said to have actively embarked on the “liberation” of Syrian oil and gas fields. Some estimates suggest the company's net profits could have reached \$100 million per month<sup>68</sup>—a sum that is hardly out of reach for the Russian budget, but quite sizable if redistributed among individuals. Moreover, aside from hydrocarbons, EvroPolis is now actively involved in other branches of the Syrian economy, including, for example, being “fully in charge of the Syrian electrification program.”<sup>69</sup>

Another interesting detail that draws on existing ties between Prigozhin and the Wagner Group appeared in the summer of 2018, when a chapel<sup>70</sup> commemorating Wagner members killed in Syria was erected near the town of Goryachy Klyuch (Krasnodar Krai), located 20 kilometers from the Molkino polygon—i.e., Wagner's main training center. As noted by Russian sources, construction works on the chapel were performed by the OOO Megalain construction company—another enterprise owned by Prigozhin.<sup>71</sup>

### *Wagner and the Russian State*

Clear evidence that Russia's ruling elites are well aware of the existence and missions undertaken by the Wagner Group dates to December 9, 2016. Namely, bloggers and investigative journalists captured images of Wagner leaders among some 300 other guests during a special ceremony in the Kremlin. The Wagner commanders were being decorated with Orders of Courage, allegedly for their contribution to the successful capture of Palmyra.<sup>72</sup> Russian presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov confirmed (after the images appeared on the Internet) that Dmitry Utkin (as well as Andrey Troshev and Alexander Kuznetsov, who stood alongside Putin) participated in the

Kremlin gala (*Den Geroyev Otechestva*): “[O]n this day, Heroes of Russia and recipients of the Order of Courage were convened.”<sup>73</sup>

And in December 2018, at a large press conference, Putin finally *de facto* admitted the obvious existence of the infamous Wagner Group, by then long known to have taken part in conflicts in Ukraine and Syria: “They [Wagner] can work and pursue their business interests anywhere in the world” as long as they are not violating Russia’s domestic norms and regulations.<sup>74</sup>

### *Operative Tasks and Main Battles in Syria: From Triumphs to Tragedy*

One former member of the Wagner Group described tasks of the PMC in the following succinct, yet straightforward and comprehensive (fully complying with other assessments) manner: “What are we doing there [in Syria]? Dashing forward in the first wave. Helping the aviation and artillery forces, pushing the enemy. After we are done, the Syrian *Spetsnaz* appears, and later *Vesti-24* [Russia’s major information outlets] and *ORT* [apparently, *Channel One* television] follow with cameras to interview them.”<sup>75</sup>

Prior to February 2018 (the destruction of the Wagner Group that opened a new chapter of its history), Wagner’s “Syrian campaign” could be divided into three main phases:

- “Ground Reconnaissance” (September 2015–early 2016): This phase did not involve any major military operations, as it was limited mostly to the original deployment and some initial military encounters with anti-al-Assad forces.
- “Baptism by Fire” (April/May–December 2016): Throughout this phase, Wagner mercenaries experienced intensified exchanges of fire as well as their first serious military confrontations. The main operation involving Wagner during this period was the liberation of Palmyra. As such, Wagner Group units suffered their first serious losses: according to Russian sources, 32 were killed and approximately 80 were heavily wounded at this time. On the other hand, the number of Wagner members deployed to Syria may have risen to 1,500–2,000 men.<sup>76</sup> Judging by the available information, Wagner’s Syrian activities during the discussed period primarily boiled down to frontal military attacks (resembling functions typically performed by shock wave troops). Apparently, those missions were meant to demonstrate to the Syrian regime the PMC’s high fighting skills, thereby convincing the government in Damascus to assume part of the financial burden. During this time, the group utilized the best possible (given the circumstances) types of weaponry/munitions and, as far as the majority of recollections go, acted independently from the Syrian Armed Forces and groups loyal to al-Assad.
- “Deep Involvement” (January 2017–February 2018): This phase was characterized by the gradual evolution of the functions performed by the Wagner Group as well as its mode of operation. The key transformation—after demonstrating a sufficiently high level of operative skills—was reflected in a visible evolution of its tasks from *de facto* military operations (especially visible during the recapture of Palmyra) to more paramilitary-style missions, primarily concerned with recapturing areas endowed with hydrocarbons, including oil and gas fields near Palmyra (Shaer), Latakia, and Aleppo. Interestingly, as

noted by one anonymous Wagner member, “The PMC is not conducting full-fledged military battles there [Syria], its functions are primarily concerned with expanding control over zones/areas endowed with oil and natural gas, and their protection. This is what they are paid for... But it is impossible to control an oil field with the militants [anti-al-Assad forces] being 500 meters away from you—you will have to drive them away by force.”<sup>77</sup>

This period also witnessed a growing number of casualties (between 40 and 60 mercenaries killed, according to Russian sources), worsening weaponry and equipment allocated to the Wagner Group by the Syrian government, a degrading quality of Wagner personnel, as well as a changed system of payment and benefits (not in the Russian mercenaries’ favor).<sup>78</sup> Mainstream Russian (and some Western) sources ascribe these trends to the already-mentioned alleged “conflict” between the Russian Ministry of Defense and Prigozhin-linked organizations (some refer to a personal antipathy between Defense Minister Shoigu and Prigozhin).<sup>79</sup> However, a closer look at the post-2018 developments, the expanding operative theater for Russian PMCs around the world (specifically, the Wagner Group) suggest that this scenario (even if real) does not seem to be of crucial importance. More likely, the transformations in the Wagner Group stemmed from: a) a growing link between pro-Syrian (and Syrian government) formations and Wagner, which could have undermined the PMC’s lines of communication with its Russian curators as well as somewhat decreased its freedom of action in Ukraine and in the initial two stages of the Syrian campaign; or b) a growing pool of potential recruits, effectively lowering the need to focus on enlisting top-notch professionals (thus, cutting expenditures).

An opinion worth noting was expressed by Igor Girkin (a.k.a. Strelkov—a Russian mercenary in Donbas who served for a time as the Donetsk “People’s Republic’s” “minister of defense”). Specifically, he argued that, toward 2018, Wagner Group forces consisted of: five permanently deployed squads (300 men each), one armored group, one artillery squad, one separate reconnaissance unit, and various auxiliary services. As he explained in mid-2018,

Each squad is, in effect, a sort of a shock wave force that can be used—both separately and in conjunction with other forces—for performing tactical and operative missions during direct combat. Their main tasks were offensive military operations, presented [*raspiarennyye*] by the media as ‘victories of the Syrian army.’ The liberation of Palmyra, the T-4 Airbase [Tiyas Military Airbase]—this was done by Wagner. The whole bulk of the efforts to unblock and storm Deir ez-Zor, the siege and liquidation of large groups of ‘foreign’ (including those who came from the Russian Federation and the CIS) militants of the Islamic State [...] the capture of territory on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River—this is also the Wagner Group. Right now, when on TV and on the Internet we can see ‘pompous photos of the victors’—all these ‘tigers’ [Quwwat Al-Nimr], ‘hawks’ [Liwa Suqur al-Sahara] and other ‘brave Syrian warriors’—those were our ‘privateers’ (along with Hezbollah), who, suffering visible losses, are destroying the enclaves of radicals near Jordan and the Golan Heights.<sup>80</sup>

An alternative opinion regarding this phase of the Wagner Group's involvement in the Syrian civil war was presented by Ruslan Leviev, from the Conflict Intelligence Team investigative platform, who argued that a closer inspection of Wagner's actions in the Latakia region highlights that "there was no ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—a former name for the Islamic State terrorist group] in the area, just the militants acting against al-Assad,"<sup>81</sup> which drew on the fact that the fight against IS was not the main goal of this Russian PMC. Indeed, one may argue that, toward early 2018, Wagner's main goal became fighting anti-al-Assad forces (rather than exclusively against IS) that occupied strategically important zones of hydrocarbons extraction in Syria.

*The 'Russian Ilovaysk': What Happened at Deir ez-Zor and Why?*

On the night of February 7–8, 2018, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the US military encountered pro-al-Assad armed formations near Deir ez-Zor, a city located on the banks of the Euphrates River, northeast of Damascus. The battle resulted in the decimation of the pro-al-Assad forces and, in particular, heavy losses reportedly suffered by the Wagner Group. This episode—better known by its aftermath than the details of the battle itself—requires a brief explanation and some background information. To understand Wagner's presence in the area, it is important to first discuss the developments that took place in the summer of 2017. During that period, the defeat of locally operating Islamic State–linked groups led to the US and Russia agreeing on the creation of so-called "de-escalation zones," with the Euphrates river becoming a natural border separating the SDF and pro-al-Assad forces). That demarcation left important Syrian natural resources—namely, oil and gas fields—coming almost entirely under the control of the SDF (as well as the Syrian Kurds). The main challenge for the al-Assad regime thus became to retake control of those oil/natural gas–endowed regions, which have historically played a crucial part in providing revenues for the Syrian state budget. As noted by the director of the Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts (within the Russian Academy of Sciences), Alexander Shumilin, "[W]ithout these resources [oil and natural gas], it would be extremely difficult for Damascus to start reconstruction on the territories under its control."<sup>82</sup> From his side, an expert with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Anton Mardasov, stated, "Damascus has been actively trying to lure and even buy the loyalty of leaders of the Arabic tribes on the 'Kurdish side' of the Euphrates."<sup>83</sup>

Russian sources claim that the attack on February 7–8, 2018, by pro-al-Assad forces was to target the Conoco oil field and linked infrastructure (a natural gas processing factory), which "could be used as powerful leverage by both the Syrian opposition and the Kurds during potential negotiations on the [local area's] prospective autonomy [vis-à-vis Damascus]."<sup>84</sup> Thus, allegedly for the purpose of establishing control over the area by force, the Syrian regime deployed a diverse armed force, in which the Wagner Group was to play an essential role. As such, this episode signified the ultimate transformation of the Wagner PMC from an independently acting army-type force (Ukraine–early Syrian campaign) into a tool of President al-Assad's domestic power plays and an important element of Russia's shady quasi-business machinations. Importantly, it has been argued that the operation was not discussed ahead of time with the Russian military command, and it "resulted from the will of the businessmen loyal to the regime of Bashar al-Assad."<sup>85</sup> Incidentally, this argument was tacitly confirmed by the Russian Ministry of Defense: while refraining from mentioning the true purpose of the February 7–8 mission involving Wagner

fighters, the defense ministry admitted that the “Syrian *opolchentsy* [volunteer militias] did not coordinate their actions with the headquarters of the Russian operative group located in al-Salihiyah [administratively part of the Deir ez-Zor Governorate].”<sup>86</sup>

Details of the resulting “massacre” can be found among numerous testimonials given by Russians close to the Wagner Group. For example, one of the PMC’s former members stated,

[T]hat day [the early hours of February 8], a detachment of approximately 600 men, including members of the Wagner Group, armed with light firearms, some artillery and main battle tanks, was destroyed in an attempt to cross the Euphrates River. The larger part of the group consisted of Russian-speaking fighters, and only a smaller share [was made up of] the so-called ISIS Hunters... This was a *de facto* fortified battalion of the Wagner Group... They had no man-portable air-defense systems [PZRK], no air support, which, to be frank, had not been promised anyway. The idea was to first carry out an artillery assault and then to dash on the Kurds, entering into a close battle. In this regard, the Americans would not have intervened [out of concern of] shooting their own allies.<sup>87</sup>

The planners behind this operation (apparently the Syrians) did not consider (or simply underestimated) the overwhelming technological superiority of the opposing party or the decisiveness showed by the US side. As a result, the fire exchange led to US forces employing the firepower of F-15E Strike Eagle fighters, B-52 Stratofortress jet-powered strategic bombers, MQ-9 armed multi-mission unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), Lockheed AC-130 gunships and AH-64 Apache helicopters<sup>88</sup>—combat platforms that made the pro-al-Assad forces virtually defenseless in the open desert landscape.

The reported number of casualties suffered by the Russian mercenaries varies dramatically depending on the source. According to *Reuters* (based on its sources among Russian military doctors), approximately 100 men died and 200 were wounded<sup>89</sup>; however, those figures were immediately dismissed by the Russian defense ministry.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, Andrey Troshev, one of the former alleged leaders of Wagner, claimed that the number of mortal casualties was 14 men.<sup>91</sup> Various ultra conservative Russian sources (bitterly opposed to the Russian intervention in Syria) identified the number of casualties suffered by the Wagner Group as “334 men from Russia and the Donbas region.” Similarly, Strelkov/Girkin has claimed that, according to his sources, the February night encounter in the Syrian desert resulted in “two Wagner Group tactical units destroyed by American aviation. One [was] almost fully decimated, the second—heavily hit. Two Kamaz trucks filled with corps [approximately 100 men] were evacuated from the scene... Some units of the Special Operations Forces may have been damaged, too.”<sup>92</sup> Yet, this assessment should be viewed with caution for two reasons: first, Strelkov/Girkin is known for his deep antipathy toward Russia’s Syrian campaign and, judging by his reaction, is keen to exploit every mistake committed by the Russian side (or the Syrian regime) to discredit Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian civil war; second, it seems highly dubious (virtually unrealistic) that the Kremlin would use elite formations such as the SOF for a mission of that nature. Aside from the fear of casualties *per se*, the Russian defense ministry would primarily have been fearful of losing its plausible deniability advantage in case of the death (and potential capture of bodies) of the SOF members; and relatedly, the authorities would want to avoid the potential domestic resonance of such deaths/capture (since the SOF members are active military).

A journalistic investigation carried out by *Der Spiegel* suggests that the forces that took part in the offensive consisted of a broad and diverse patchwork of different forces (including militia members, Syrian soldiers, and Afghan and Iraqi fighters under Iranian command) that included “a small contingent of Russian mercenaries.” These units advanced [...] toward the SDF base in Khusham,” causing “the Americans, whose special forces were also stationed there... [to open] fire.” According to the German investigation, the total number of pro-al-Assad casualties was “more than 200 men” of whom only between 10 and 20 dead were Russian mercenaries.<sup>93</sup>

This being said, given the strength of the US firepower, the longevity and intensity of the fire barrage (several hours), the lack of any air support and PVO-PRO systems, as well as geography not conducive to defense or finding shelter, Wagner’s mission was arguably doomed from the very beginning. It reflected adventurism and pure (irrespective of potential costs/casualties) profit seeking. As such, this “operation” was quite likely conceived by Syrian oligarchs/strongmen without necessary consultations with the Russian political-military authorities.

### *The Catastrophe and Its Reception: ‘Plausible Deniability’ in Action*

The outcome of the calamity at Deir ez-Zor counterintuitively demonstrated some key advantages of utilizing the Wagner Group PMC and similar formations.

On the domestic front, the Russian regime did not suffer any damage. Aside from some demands from political opposition groups “to launch an official investigation and explain the deaths of Russian citizens,”<sup>94</sup> the incident did not receive significant attention inside Russia. As noted by Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, the Russian public demonstrated broad indifference to these casualties, presuming that “these people [the Wagner Group] are paid, and they know exactly what they are getting into.”<sup>95</sup> Given the bitter Soviet/Russian experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya, this was exactly the kind of muted public reaction Moscow was hoping for.

As for the incident’s external implications, the Kremlin’s outward image also seems not to have suffered much. Russian officials simply denied the reports. Putin’s Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov announced, “The Kremlin does not have any information that could let us make any conclusions... [about whether] there might be Russian citizens on the territory of Syria. They do not belong to the Russian Armed Forces.”<sup>96</sup> Later, Maria Zakharova, the director of the Information and Press Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dismissed the information on the Deir ez-Zor battle as either “fake news” or “classical disinformation,” claiming that “those people were not Russian citizens.”<sup>97</sup> Some discontented elements (allegedly) close to various Russian PMCs have threatened to bring the issue of casualties to international courts,<sup>98</sup> but to date none of those pledges have resulted in any actual judicial cases.

Nevertheless, the battle of Deir ez-Zor has, in fact, potentially had some notable implications. For instance, after the Syrian massacre, Putin (who at that time was preparing his presidential reelection campaign) reportedly introduced some serious alterations to his working schedule and, allegedly, held an intense meeting with the Russian *siloviki*.<sup>99</sup> However, this information was not

officially corroborated (the altered work schedule was, instead, ascribed to the “President’s flu”) beyond what could be read in the mainstream media.

Another interesting development after the decimation of the Wagner Group was the replacement, in September 2018, of the commander of the Russian military forces in Syria, Colonel General Alexander Zhuravlyov—which multiple Russian information outlets accurately predicted as early as the second half February 2018.<sup>100</sup> To be fair, Zhuravlyov’s replacement could have been the cumulative result of a number of failures during his command, such as the temporary forfeiture of Palmyra, the drone attacks on the Khmeimim airbase, or the latest downing of an Su-25 in Syria. Furthermore, as reported by the anti-al-Assad investigative platform, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR—based in the United Kingdom), on February 15, another 15 members of Wagner died as a result of a munitions explosion in the Deir ez-Zor province.<sup>101</sup> Establishing a direct link between General Zhuravlyov’s replacement and the decimation of the Wagner Group, therefore, is rather difficult to ascertain. Most likely, the decision to remove Zhuravlyov stemmed from a number of episodes, with the incident involving the Russian mercenaries being one integral element.

### **Conclusion: Was Syria a Graveyard or a Springboard for Russian PMCs?**

Russian PMC activities in Syria should be considered against the background of Russia’s broader involvement (since 2015) in the Syrian civil war. Despite numerous prognoses that this endeavor would be a total failure—an “Afghanistan 2.0,” dragging Russia into a new bloody quagmire—it is now safe to conclude that these predictions turned out to be utterly wrong. One of the main (but never mentioned by Russian officials) preconditions that prevented the Russian intervention from descending into an unwinnable imbroglio was, in fact, the employment of PMCs—an “invisible” but rather effective force that delivered substantial results with minimal economic expenditures and with visible profits for “shareholders.”

The direct assistance Wagner Group units provided to the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad translated into *de facto* military operations in which Wagner fighters took on the role of shockwave troops in conjunction with other pro-al-Assad forces. These Russian mercenaries achieved some notable victories that, along with Russia’s extended air campaign, saved the al-Assad regime in the latter’s confrontation with both the Islamic State and opposition forces. At the same time, the Wagner Group engaged in training local pro-al-Assad armed groups and military formations, thereby effectively modeling one of the main responsibilities of the Special Operations Forces (SOF). Another task (coordination of operations) was tacitly corroborated by a former commander of the Russian forces in Syria, Colonel General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who stated that, “despite some difficulties, Russian specialists managed to establish coordination between the forces of Brigadier General Suheil, the Desert Hawks Brigade, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the 5<sup>th</sup> Storm Troops Corps of the Syrian Army, [and] units of Hezbollah and Fatimida.” He emphasized that the effectiveness of irregular autonomous groups increased dramatically when they were coordinated from a single center.<sup>102</sup> Lastly, Wagner units contributed to coordinating (together with the SOF) the airstrikes of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS)—a responsibility implicitly highlighted by Russian military expert Yuri Knutov.<sup>103</sup>

Wagner’s para-military activities provided “muscle” (against competing parties) to support various economic activities conducted by both local actors and certain Russian individuals. Even though the Wagner Group proved incapable of militarily competing with a technologically superior force on an open battlefield, the Syrian experience as a whole nonetheless explicitly demonstrated that the “cost-quality” balance characterizing formations of this type means they can be successfully used for so-called “power economics” (*silovaya ekonomika*) missions.<sup>104</sup> Therefore, there is every reason to believe that Syria—which is increasingly a target of Russia’s economic activities—will remain one of the main operative theaters for Russian PMCs for the foreseeable future. Aside from Wagner and other business entities linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin (who pioneered this commercial strategy), one of Russia’s most influential oligarchs and a close Putin associate, Gennady Timchenko, has also reentered the Syrian market. Notably, in April 2019, Timchenko’s energy firm Stroytransgaz signed a 49-year agreement with Damascus on the “exploitation and extension of the port of Tartus.” This deal *de facto* allows the Russian enterprise to become the main investor in the port. The project, which envisages the full renovation and reconstruction of the port’s facilities, is said to be worth \$500 million.<sup>105</sup> Russian media has also revealed that a new PMC, Shield (*Shchit*), apparently recently entered Syria. For now, information on this entity is scarce and does not extend beyond anecdotal evidence and rumors. Reportedly, Shield was created to protect the interests in Syria of Timchenko and individuals/companies close to him; but unlike Wagner, it is expected to perform primarily “security”-related functions.<sup>106</sup>

As for the Wagner Group itself, the “Russian Ilovaysk” prompted some important changes to this PMC. According to Igor “Strelkov” Girkin, the February 2018 battlefield calamity resulted in certain modifications to the PMC’s personnel makeup and recruitment policies. Namely, the selection criteria, primarily related to age and combat experience, have been raised for both Wagner veterans and aspiring members. Strelkov argued that this change has resulted in massive firings, while many members of the “old guard” were shifted to the “reserves”—reportedly, this policy affected one third of the total number of commanders. Consequently, Wagner has become “much ‘younger,’ ” and virtually all of its members possess “necessary fighting experience in Syria or Donbas,” Strelkov asserted. “However, the core of the leadership is still comprised of very experienced veterans, many of whom started their path in Afghanistan,” he stressed.<sup>107</sup>

These developments mean that, despite some negative setbacks, the Wagner Group and similar such formations proved their worth in (para)military operations. And since then, they have begun showing up in other theaters as well.

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## Notes

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- <sup>9</sup> Ibidem.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibidem.
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<sup>48</sup> "V DOSAAF rasskazali o vybere ploshchadki dlya podgotovki chastnykh voyennykh kompaniy," *RT*, March 3, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/russia/news/488250-dosaaf-minoborony-chvk>.

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