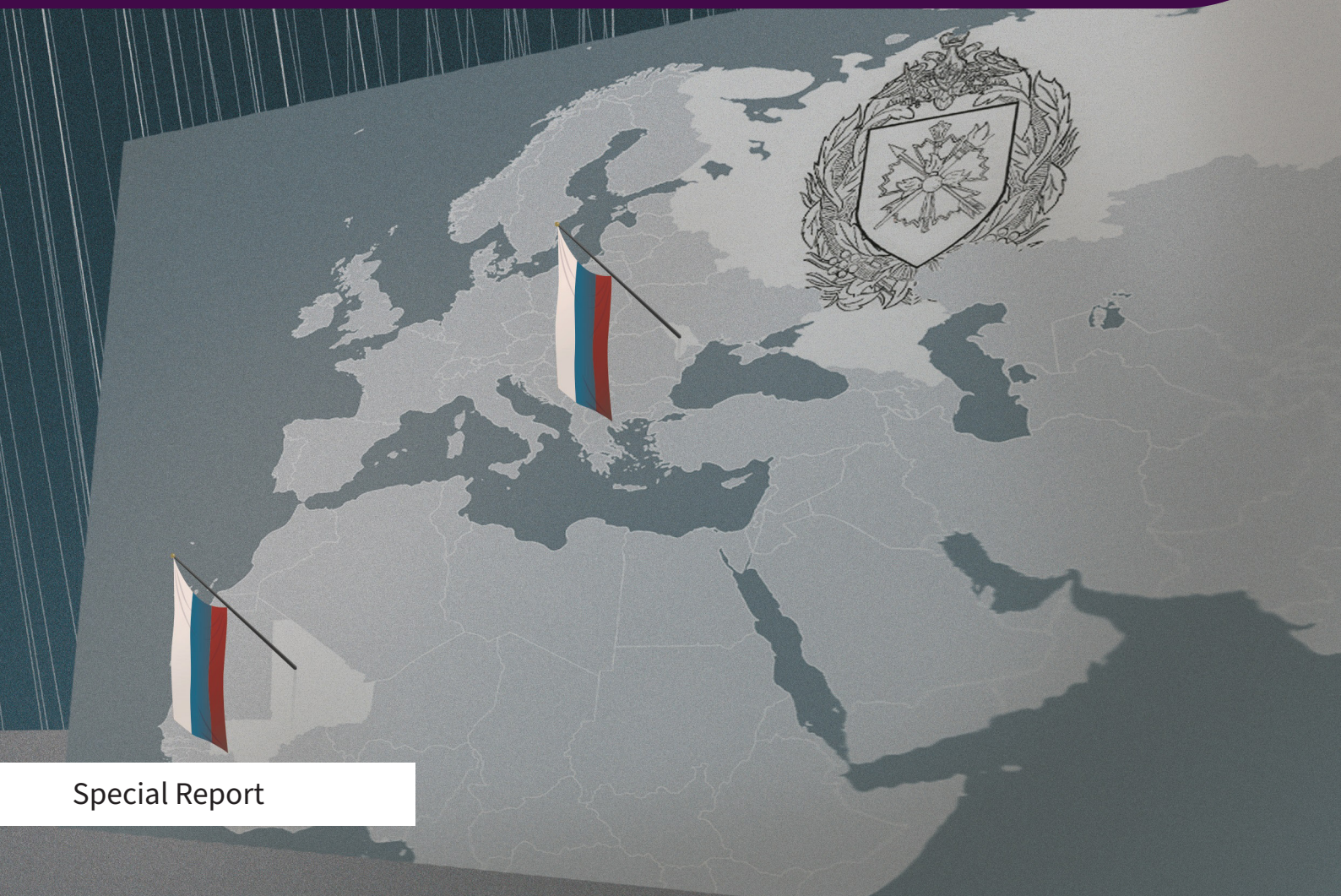


Special Report

The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24

Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk
and Nick Reynolds



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Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org
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Introduction

Western discourse about Russia's way of war has oscillated between emphasising the conventional and unconventional threat.¹ Up until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the emphasis was disproportionately on Russian unconventional warfare – the conduct of sabotage, subversion and destabilisation through undeclared Russian forces – carried out in the so-called 'grey zone'. This has since shifted to the conventional threat that Russia poses to NATO. The problem with this is that Russia considers both conventional and unconventional military means to be tools of national power and applies them in combination. It is the conventional threat of escalation that deters retaliation against unconventional activity, thereby expanding the scope of what Russia can get away with. Conversely, it is the unconventional operations of the Russian special services that aim to set the conditions for the successful application of conventional military force.² Both tool sets must be understood to appreciate the threat that Russia poses. Its unconventional efforts remain central to its theory of victory against Ukraine – and countering them is equally important.

In early 2023, the authors published a study of Russia's unconventional operations targeting Ukraine directly, prior to and during the first year of the full-scale invasion.³ This mainly focused on the activities of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) in recruiting and managing agent networks in Ukraine, its planning for the establishment of an occupation administration, and the eventual counter-intelligence regime in the occupied territories that emerged after the failure of the original invasion plan.

This report details Russia's unconventional military activities outside Ukraine, including efforts to prepare for destabilisation in European countries, expeditionary operations in Africa to seize control of critical resources, and outreach to target audiences in the Middle East. Influence operations supported by information

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1. Contrast the relative attention given in Lester W Grau and Charles K Bartles, 'The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of the Russian Ground Forces', Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016, <<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/hot%20spots/documents/russia/2017-07-the-russian-way-of-war-grau-bartles.pdf>>, accessed 19 December 2023 with Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving Beyond the Hybrid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019). This point is made rather well in Mark Galeotti, *Putin's Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine* (Oxford: Osprey, 2022).
 2. Sidharth Kaushal, 'The Grey Zone is Defined by the Defender', in Justin Bronk and Jack Watling (eds), *Necessary Heresies: Challenging the Narratives Distorting Contemporary UK Defence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 99 (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2021), pp. 24–33.
 3. Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, 'Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023', RUSI, 29 March 2023.

warfare and active measures exploited by agents of influence are core components of Russia's unconventional warfare concepts. This topic is amply tracked and reported on by others. There is also much extant writing on Russia's conduct of strategic intelligence collection by recruiting agents and penetrations in Western states.⁴ While acknowledging the significance of these wider activities, this report focuses on Russia's military unconventional activities, with a particular spotlight on changes within the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (the GRU). Recent changes in this organisation suggest an expanding threat that must be prepared for.

This report's primary conclusions are that Russia's special services actively seek to expand their capacity in several areas that pose strategic threats to NATO members. First, the GRU is restructuring how it manages the recruitment and training of special forces troops and is rebuilding the support apparatus to be able to infiltrate them into European countries. Second, the GRU has taken the Wagner Group's functions in house and is aggressively pursuing the expansion of its partnerships in Africa with the explicit intent to supplant Western partnerships. Third, the leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, is being used to build a broad network of influence among Chechen and Muslim populations in Europe and the Middle East, with the aim of contributing to the subversion of Western interests. These lines of effort should be countered.

This report is divided into three chapters. Chapter I considers the establishment and growth of the GRU's Special Activities Service, and the lines of effort being pursued to re-establish a support apparatus in Europe. Chapter II concerns the evolution of Russia's so-called 'Wagner Group', its successor Expeditionary Corps, and the strategy for Russia's expanding network of relationships in Africa. Chapter III examines Russia's use of its Muslim minority for diplomacy in the Middle East and Europe and, specifically, the role of the Kadyrovtsy as a vector of Russian influence.

Ukraine has a considerable body of material from the Soviet special services, including instruction manuals and operational reports that comprise an invaluable archive on the evolution of Soviet unconventional warfare techniques and structures. Furthermore, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there remained close liaison between the Ukrainian and Russian special services until the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. This means that Ukraine has a unique set of insights into the working level of these organisations. This report draws on these archives, as well as on the body of scholarship on Russian unconventional operations. These materials clearly do not provide information on current Russian operations. The sources for the subsequent chapters are a combination of documents obtained from the Russian special services and reporting on the activities of Russian

4. Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* (London: Abacus, 2023).

unconventional warfare elements, including human reporting observing Russian activities in Moldova, Mali, Sudan and further afield. The report also relies on interviews with the relevant official bodies in Ukraine and some European states, comparing data. Owing to the sensitivity of some of the materials, names of interviewees are not provided and interview times and locations are not specific. Many of the documents drawn upon are also described with a deliberate degree of vagueness.

This report's most important conclusion is that Russia is using unconventional methods to expand its influence, evade containment, and destabilise and disrupt its adversaries – and is making progress in several directions. Countering these efforts requires an appreciation of the threat that extends beyond Ukraine and the active collaboration of those states that are being targeted. Russian methods are often unsophisticated and there is a litany of failures. Nevertheless, they persist, and so there is a requirement for sustained vigilance.

I. Violent Subversion and Destabilisation

Violent subversion for the purposes of political destabilisation and even regime change has been a core element of Russian unconventional military operations since the Bolshevik coup of 1917. The very premise of Bolshevism as a political ideology was that the successful seizure of power, and later Moscow's control over states, was unlikely to be achieved through popular revolution, but must instead be instigated by a disciplined and covert revolutionary vanguard. It was via these means that the Bolsheviks achieved their coup against the Russian Provisional Government in October 1917.⁵ It was also via these means that the Bolsheviks sought to export their revolution abroad.

The Soviet intelligence services orchestrated an uprising in Hamburg in 1923 under the leadership of Hristofor Salnyn.⁶ In 1924, an uprising was organised under the leadership of Karl Trakmann in Estonia with the intention of overthrowing the government in Tallinn.⁷ That same year, Russian intelligence officers were instrumental in organising the Tatarbunary Uprising, which was intended to bring about a wider revolution across Romania after the establishment of the Bessarabian Soviet Republic.⁸ All of these efforts, and more besides, were preceded by sustained attempts at violent destabilisation, intended to create conditions of civic crisis that the revolutionary vanguard could exploit. These included acts of terrorism. For example, on 8 December 1920, an explosion in the Romanian Senate arranged by Soviet intelligence officer M Goldstein caused the deaths of the head of the Senate, General K Coanda, the minister of justice, D Grecanu, and several other senators.⁹

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5. Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London: Pimlico, 1997).
 6. N S Cherushev and Yu N Cherushev, «Расстрелянная элита РККА. Комбриги и им равные. 1937–1941» [‘Executed Elite of the Red Army. Brigade Commanders and their Equals, 1937–1941’], 2014, pp. 379–80.
 7. J Valge, «Подготовка Советским Союзом государственного переворота в Эстонии в 1924 г.» [‘Preparation by the Soviet Union of a Coup D’Etat in Estonia in 1924’], *Петербургский исторический журнал [Petersburg Historical Journal]* (No. 1, 2015).
 8. Institut Istoriî [History Institute], «Борьба трудящихся Бессарабии за своё освобождение и воссоединение с Советской Родиной (1918–1940 гг.)» [‘The Struggle of the Working People of Bessarabia for their Liberation and Reunification with the Soviet Motherland (1918–1940)’], Кишинев (Chisinau [Kishinev]: Cartea Moldoveneasca, 1970); M A Alekseev, A I Kolpakidi and V Ya Kochik, *Энциклопедия военной разведки. 1918–1945 гг. [Encyclopedia of Military Intelligence. 1918–1945]*, 2012, p. 138.
 9. Artem Fillipenko, «закордот и применение советским союзом методов «гибридной войны» против румынии в 20-е годы хх-го века» [‘Cordot and the Use of “Hybrid War” Methods by the Soviet Union Against Romania in the 20s of the 20th-Century’], *COHORTA* (No. 1, 2019), pp. 54–67, <https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/54-67_1.pdf>, accessed 19 December 2023.

While these efforts were largely unsuccessful, they spawned a body of theoretical literature in the Soviet Union that remains the foundations of the Russian theory of unconventional warfare. Notable texts from this period include Philip Anulov's *Armed Uprising*,¹⁰ *Armed Uprising* by August Neuberg¹¹ (the nom de plume of August Gellis),¹² P Karatigin's *Guerilla Warfare: Initial Experience of Tactical Research*,¹³ and M Drobov's *Small War: Guerilla Warfare and Sabotage*.¹⁴

Most of the uprisings of the 1920s failed, largely because there was insufficient public support and a too concerted official response to the attempts. Thus, as the Soviet school of unconventional warfare evolved, greater emphasis was placed on the interrelationship between subversion through propaganda and human intelligence and its exploitation through violent destabilisation. The KGB's Major General Yuri Drozdov summarised this interdependency in what became known within the Russian special services as the 'Drozdov Binomial'. This argued that 'the success of a HUMINT [human intelligence]-combat operation in modern conditions depends on a combination of two factors: an illegal intelligence operative plus a combat group (оперативно-боевая группа)'.¹⁵

The extent to which the vanguard theory of revolution propounded by the Bolsheviks remains at the core of the identity of Russian unconventional warfare practitioners is perhaps captured in the writings of the Strugatsky brothers, whose Noom universe proposes a cast of 'progressors' infiltrating less-developed societies to guide them on the true path.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that the KGB infiltration of opposition movements in Eastern Europe, launched in 1968, was codenamed Operation *Progress*.¹⁷ The consistent features of the Soviet methodology are: elite capture through the recruitment of agents within a faction of a state's political elite; the use of information operations and subversion to create political destabilisation; and escalation through violence to create a crisis through which Russian allies can seize power. Probably the best-known example of this process was Operation *Storm-333* in Afghanistan in 1979, when GRU and KGB special forces assassinated President Hafizullah Amin to be replaced by the Soviet client Babrak

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10. Philip Anulov, *Вооруженное восстание [Armed Uprising]* (Military–Political Academy, Department of Civil War, 1930).
 11. A Yu Neuberg, *Вооружённое восстание [Armed Uprising]* (Moscow: Sotsekgiz Publishing House, 1931).
 12. Yu A Vasiliev, «Люди и судьбы Коминтерна: Тууре Лехен» [‘People and Destinies of the Comintern: Tuure Lehen’], *Власть [Power]* (No. 1, 2022), pp. 197–202.
 13. P A Karatygin, *Партизанство. Начальный опыт тактического исследования [Guerilla Warfare: Initial Experience of Tactical Research]*, 1924.
 14. M A Drobov, *Малая война : партизанство и диверсии [Small War: Guerilla Warfare and Sabotage]* (State Military Publishing House, 1931).
 15. Military Social Support Fund named after hero of the USSR G I Boyarinov, ‘Legends’, <<http://kuos-vympel.ru/legends-intelligence/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 16. Arkady Strugatsky and Boris Strugatsky, *The Beetle in the Anthill*, translated by Olena Bormashenko (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2023).
 17. Christopher Andrews and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (London: Penguin, 2015).

Karmal.¹⁸ The centrality of HUMINT to even tactical special operations remains extant Russian doctrine, codified in the still-classified *Manual for the Combat Use of Formations and Units of Special Purpose*.¹⁹

The GRU unit responsible for carrying out these operations is the 161 Intelligence Specialists Training Centre (currently Центр подготовки специалистов специального назначения; previously Центр подготовки специалистов разведки), hereafter the 161 Centre or Unit 29155. The 161 Centre was established in 1963 and brought together both human intelligence and special forces personnel. This duality of skills was exemplified by the first head of the centre, Major General Nikolay Patrakhaltsev, who started his career in special reconnaissance units but subsequently worked in both the legal and illegal stations of the GRU in Hungary, Slovenia and Brazil. He was also a member of the Soviet military mission at the General Staff of the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia.²⁰ The continuity in approach of the Russian special services from the Soviet period can be observed in several recent operations.²¹

In 2016, the 161 Centre was responsible for cohering an attempted coup in Montenegro,²² aimed at preventing the country's accession to NATO.²³ Part of the operation's premise was that organised criminal elements working as recruited agents under GRU control would provide the basis for the seizure of Montenegrin government buildings, allowing for a seizure of power by several opposition politicians.

The second example of the process is Ukraine in February 2022. The idea behind Russia's invasion was that protests would provide the basis for polarisation and thereafter escalation of fighting inside Ukraine, sparked by provocations. This would justify Russian military intervention, aided by collaborators within the

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18. Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации [Foreign Intelligence Services of the Russian Federation], «куос без грифа «секретно»» [‘KUOS Without the “Secret” Stamp’], <<http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2009/04/vpk20090401-2.htm>>, accessed 19 December 2023; Mark Galeotti, *Storm-333* (Oxford: Osprey, 2021).
 19. M GRU GSh VS, *Manual for the Combat Use of Formations and Units of Special Purpose*, 1991.
 20. History of Domestic Intelligence Services and Law Enforcement Agencies, ‘Nikolay Patrakhaltsev’, <https://shieldandsword.mozohin.ru/personnel/2019/patrahaltsev_n_k.htm>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 21. Michael Weiss, Christo Grosev and Roman Dobrokhotov, ‘The Enemy Within: How Russia's GRU Agents Blend in with Human Rights Activists, Journalists, and Filmmakers’, *The Insider*, 5 February 2024, <<https://theins.ru/en/politics/268886>>, accessed 6 February 2024.
 22. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, ‘Attempted Coup in Montenegro in 2016: Foreign Secretary's Statement’, press release, 9 May 2019, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-the-attempted-coup-in-montenegro-in-2016>>, accessed 27 January 2024.
 23. Reuf Bajrović, Vesko Garčević and Richard Kraemer, ‘Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2018, <<https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/kraemer-rfp5.pdf>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Ukrainian government, clearing the path for Russian agents recruited inside the Ukrainian parliament and state to seize power.²⁴

The third example are two Russian attempts to destabilise Moldova, first during Victory Day on 9 May 2022, and the second in February 2023. Russia's original plan had been to militarily occupy Moldova after concluding its operations in Ukraine. When the invasion of Ukraine failed, however, Moscow sought a mechanism to destabilise the Moldovan state. The first attempt was orchestrated by the Department of Operational Information within the FSB. The initial concept revolved around the generation of protests against the repression of Soviet military symbols during the Victory Day commemorations in 2022.²⁵ Provocations during these demonstrations were to be used to drive an escalating cycle of violence in which politicians friendly to Russia could call for a change in leadership to stabilise the situation. This failed, partly because the poor performance of Russian arms in Ukraine at the time left several politicians otherwise friendly to Russia cautious about exacerbating the initial organised demonstrations.²⁶ Plans were further disrupted when Moldovan authorities arrested former president Igor Dodon.²⁷ Another attempt was planned for early 2023. This revolved around the protest movement of Ilan Shorr, an Israel-born Moldovan oligarch and politician, with orchestrated protests intended to create the conditions for provocation, justifying a violent response.²⁸ Part of that violent response was to be organised by GRU officers from Unit 29155 working with recruited Serbian citizens (in particular, supporters of the Belgrade-based Partizan football club).²⁹ The Moldovan authorities also disrupted this attempt.³⁰ Ilan Shorr remains in Israel after fleeing there in 2019 with Moldova seeking his extradition.³¹

These instances are important to highlight for two reasons. First, the consistency of the forms and methods show that this is a policy tool that Russia continues to employ. Second, all these attempts were unsuccessful. The reasons for failure were consistent: poor operational security leading to the exposure of the plan to domestic security services and the disruption of its implementation; and

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24. Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds, 'Preliminary Lessons from Russia's Unconventional Operations During the Russo-Ukrainian War, February 2022–February 2023'.
 25. Alexander Tanas, 'Moldova Parliament Bans Pro-Russian Ribbon Despite Opposition Walk-Out', *Reuters*, 8 April 2022.
 26. This even led one prominent Moldovan political figure to send their FSB handler images of them attending protests, claiming to be participating in demonstrations, when the pictures were actually from the previous year.
 27. *Reuters*, 'Moldova Places Former President Dodon Under House Arrest', 26 May 2022.
 28. Aurel Obreja and Stephen McGrath, 'Moldova Police Say They Foiled Russia-Backed Unrest Plot', *AP News*, 12 March 2023.
 29. Harry Latham-Coyle, 'Fans Banned from Europa Conference League Match amid Moldovan Fears of Russian Coup', *The Independent*, 14 February 2023.
 30. Stephen McGrath and Cristian Jardan, 'Moldovan Leader Outlines Russian "Plan" to Topple Government', *AP News*, 13 February 2023.
 31. *AP News*, 'Oligarch Sentenced for Role in Stealing \$1B from Moldovan Banks', 14 April 2023.

inaccurate assessment by the Russian special services as to the extent of their influence in these countries. A further factor constraining Russian capabilities – despite a continued policy interest in using these techniques in the Kremlin – is that mass expulsions of Russian special services personnel across Europe following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine disrupted the support apparatus through which Russia conducts many of its operations. Between Moscow's continuing intent to employ these methods and the identified shortcomings of the tools available, the special services have gone about changing their structures and forms and methods for implementing these operations. It is critical that those tasked with countering Russian subversion adapt to continue to counter an evolving threat.

Reforming Moscow's Vanguard

The first stage in reforming Russia's effectiveness following a string of failures was to improve both the honesty in reporting from the special services and the assessment of the likelihood of success. This was achieved in late 2022 by reforming the system for the management of operations. To do this, the Russian Presidential Administration established Committees of Special Influence under the overall direction of Sergei Kirienko, responsible for assigning the special services specific tasks against defined countries and to assess the effects of operations. By shifting the measure of special service operations from activities to effects, the committees began to cohere what had previously been rather disparate lines of effort.

Thus, over the course of 2023, following the failure of the second attempt to destabilise Moldova, Russian disinformation targeting the country became much more consistent and mutually reinforcing. Russia shifted to strengthen the public association between Moldova's aspiration to join the EU and President Maia Sandu personally, while simultaneously blaming her for the country's economic woes. At the same time, the Russians began targeting Romanian nationalists within Moldovan society to amplify their voices, and in doing so exacerbated the threat felt by Moldova's Russian-speaking population in relation to increased alignment with Europe.³²

This kind of interlocking coherence in Russia's active measures and information operations has been observed more broadly, especially the narratives aimed at undermining support for Ukraine. Although these information operations are not the subject of this report, the committee structure gives the Russian state a much better basis for judging the impact of violence on the social conditions within target countries.

32. Moldovan officials responsible for monitoring Russian information operations, Moldova, January 2024.

In parallel to the Committees of Special Influence, active measures such as violent provocations are authorised by a committee of the national security council, under the guidance of its secretary, Nikolai Patrushev. However, such operations can only realistically be considered if there are personnel and an infrastructure able to implement them. This re-forging of the GRU's capacity for subversive operations is the primary focus of this chapter.

The GRU has identified three general vulnerabilities that it needs to address in its ability to conduct unconventional operations. The first is the exposure of its personnel and their vulnerability to identification through modern analytical techniques, including the association of mobile phones with specified locations using advertising data and other means of collection.³³ The second problem was the disruption to the GRU's support apparatus in Europe and further afield owing to the expulsions of *rezidentura* and exposure of illegals.³⁴ These two issues compound one another. According to the doctrine for the use of special purpose units, a key task is 'legalisation', the term used by the Russian special services to indicate building a legend or cover identity to enable covert activity to be carried out in a target country. Depending on the duration of the cover activity, the Russians divide legalisation into full and partial categories. Full legalisation provides for the possibility of the operator staying in place for an indefinite period and ensures their safety in the event of an in-depth inspection by the target's security services. Partial legalisation is adequate for a short-term legend who can withstand basic levels of scrutiny. Although Unit 29155 was able to achieve partial legalisation for operations successfully, its activities had begun to expose enablers who had been through full legalisation and were slower and more difficult to emplace. The third problem is one of agent reliability. As the detection of GRU personnel has constrained their movement, so too has the management of agents become increasingly remote. The GRU has found, however, that the reliability of agents under remote control is unsatisfactory and in Moldova, as in Ukraine, has caused the failure of operations.

The processes to address these problems started in 2020. Naturally, they take time to implement and have accelerated since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. First, Andrei Averyanov, formerly commander of the 161 Centre, was promoted to become deputy head of the GRU, responsible for cohering all unconventional operations other than those targeting Ukrainian territory.³⁵ GRU operations

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33. This followed the exposure of GRU personnel by Bellingcat after the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018. See Mark Urban, *The Skripal Files: Putin, Poison and the New Spy War* (London: Macmillan, 2018).
 34. *Rezidentura* refers to a base with which a resident agent might liaise; Gordon Corera, *Russians Among Us: Sleeper Cells, Ghost Stories, and the Hunt for Putin's Spies* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2020).
 35. Andrei Averyanov and the units that he commanded, the 161 Special Purpose Specialist Training Centre/ Unit 29155, were virtually unknown before the poisoning of Sergei Skripal exposed some of their activities. See Mark Krutov et al., 'Russian Wedding Photos Highlight Novichok Suspect's Security Ties', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 October 2019, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/member-of-the-wedding->

targeting Ukrainian territory fall under the responsibility of Vladimir Alexeiev, as the GRU's special representative to the Command of the Special Military Operation.³⁶

To carry on rebuilding its capacity for unconventional warfare, Averyanov established the Service for Special Activities. This now comprises three entities: Unit 29155, now given a Guards designation; the newly established Unit 54654; and a headquarters and planning department for coordinating the Service for Special Activities. The 161 Centre is now organised into one headquarters unit, three training units, an operational planning unit, three operational units, a financial unit also responsible for managing support infrastructure, and a supply unit. In total, the centre appears to employ 147 instructors who also serve as operatives.³⁷

Security procedures at the 161 Centre have changed. Personnel no longer carry personal or service mobile phones to the site, relying instead on a controlled group of wired telephones. Although staff operate from the site, training exercises are no longer primarily conducted at the facility but are instead organised in a series of safe houses ('conspiratorial apartments' in GRU parlance). These measures appear to be aimed at reducing the signature and vulnerability to pattern-of-life analysis. The separation of training from a fixed location is also aimed at making it harder to identify new members of the operational units.

Many of the old members of Unit 29155 have now moved with Averyanov to the Service headquarters to plan and manage operational activities. New personnel are being recruited to conduct operations, with an altered pattern of recruiting and training focused on assuring a low signature. Whereas the old unit drew around half of its personnel from Spetsnaz formations, new recruits appear to disproportionately have no military experience and are instead given instruction on the full range of military skills necessary for their intended role from within the GRU. In intelligence tradecraft terms, this borrows from the longstanding practice of generating cleanskins (personnel with no prior association with official bodies). However, the expansion of the methodology from niche clandestine functions to general recruiting as a response to a more transparent operating environment is a substantial shift.

russian-nuptials-highlight-novichok-suspect-s-intelligence-ties/30216231.html>, accessed 28 November 2023; Jacques Follorou, 'Andrei Averyanov, the Russian General Closely Watched by Western Intelligence', *Le Monde*, 30 August 2023; Michael Schwartz, 'Top Secret Russian Unit Seeks to Destabilize Europe, Security Officials Say', *New York Times*, 16 November 2020.

36. *Moscow Times*, 'Putin Gives GRU Boosted Role in Ukraine – Report', 11 May 2022, <<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/11/putin-elevates-gru-in-ukraine-intelligence-gathering-report-a77632>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

37. The 161 Centre's order of battle as of summer 2023, obtained by the Ukrainian intelligence community.

Unit 54654 appears to function differently. If Unit 29155 is primarily intended to deploy personnel for active intelligence under partial legalisation, Unit 54654 is intended to have a higher proportion of personnel working under full legalisation to prepare operations. As well as recruiting personnel without prior military contracts, Unit 54654 also recruits contractors through front companies – the most widely used of which appears to be named Directorate – which are owned by the GRU but otherwise unaffiliated with the Russian government. In this way, their names and other information are not entered into government records and their pay is managed separately from records for military salaries. This appears to be a mechanism that has arisen from the growth of the GRU's so-called 'PMCs' (private military companies). However, unlike the Wagner Group, Redut and other structures, Unit 54654 is focused on human intelligence and the establishment of support structures premised on a network of illegals: officers operating without diplomatic cover. To further conceal their identities, personnel are often assigned jobs in non-defence-related ministries or private entities and, in some instances, work from these sites.

The GRU are also reorganising the basis on which they endeavour to build support networks in target countries. During the period when many countries sought business in Russia, the use of dual Russian nationals and business people provided an effective means of legalisation for illegals. However, the growth of Western sanctions has placed greater scrutiny on these individuals so that they are an existing but diminished vector.

At present, a major effort appears to be targeting foreign students studying at Russian universities. The 161 Centre has a budget allocated to pay the stipends of students from the Balkans, Africa and other regions where there remain exchanges with Russian educational institutions. These stipends subsidise study and living costs and are apparently used as a vehicle for recruitment. Since these individuals are often from the elites of the target countries concerned, they are in themselves valuable sources of intelligence. However, they are also useful enablers. Combined with the use of Central Asian legends for members of Unit 54654, it becomes possible, for example, for a Balkan journalist to introduce a Kazakh businessman to an Austrian colleague and in this way gain legalisation into European countries. The vector of student recruitment can also be used abroad. Sending Russian students to countries that are still relatively open for Russian nationals – including under the guise of the Russian dissident diaspora – creates the potential for members of Unit 54654 to recruit personnel who can act as a support apparatus for the inadvertent legalisation of Russian visitors

through shared causes, such as anti-colonialism, Palestine, Green protest movements and other popular student movements.³⁸

Ironically, organised crime provides another vector for legalisation. Russian organised crime is heavily penetrated by the FSB.³⁹ Consequently, the Russian special services can use Russian organised crime to create lucrative business opportunities and foster goodwill with international organised crime. In Ukraine, for example, Russia has significant access to the international drug cartel Khimprom and uses it for military purposes, including attempts to distribute synthetic drugs to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.⁴⁰ Outside Ukraine, the recruitment of organised crime members is an effective means of recruiting agents who can use the inflated proceeds from lucrative business dealings to establish support structures for Russian intelligence, including safe houses, cars and shell companies. The individuals can also be vehicles for recruiting criminals to perpetrate acts of violence.⁴¹ Criminal actors are also able to generate muscle without the need for participants to know that they are working under Russian control. This allows for deniability.

Another important vector in the regeneration of a support apparatus is the Russian exile community. Some of those who fled Russian mobilisation in September 2022 oppose the war in Ukraine.⁴² However, many others are loyal to the Russian state, albeit not to the extent that they were willing to be mobilised, and the flow of people provided cover for special service personnel to enter third countries. Participation in Russian opposition media and other activities provides surface-level 'ethical washing' and thereafter creates a pathway to legalisation, since these individuals can then claim asylum. At the same time, it becomes possible for them to collect on other elements of the diaspora. More importantly, these individuals can be financed to gain influence within the community and to acquire assets that become useful for supporting unconventional operations. The usual method is for these individuals to receive money for selling a property – fictitious or otherwise – in a third country and then to use the money from the sale to engage in business interactions with other Russian entities where the costs are inflated in order to move money to the individual. Once they have established properties or other assets, this becomes a self-sustaining financial

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38. The GRU has long worked to influence and co-opt the Russian diaspora by various means, such as through Unit 54777's network of 'public diplomacy' front organisations. For more information, see Anton Troianovski and Ellen Nakashima, 'How Russia's Military Intelligence Agency Became the Covert Muscle in Putin's Duels with the West', *Washington Post*, 28 December 2018.
 39. Mark Galeotti, *The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
 40. Briefings from SBU (Security Service of Ukraine), Ukraine, November 2023.
 41. Wirecard is a prominent case in point. See Bojan Pancevski and Max Colchester, 'He's Wanted for Wirecard's Missing \$2 Billion. He's Now Suspected of Being a Russian Spy', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 December 2023.
 42. Jedidajah Otte, "'We're Scared, We Want to Run": The Russian Men Fleeing Conscription', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2022.

structure to keep the agent in place while drawing only from legally acquired funds, reducing the risk of detection through financial irregularities.⁴³

The GRU's reach in Europe suffered real setbacks from the widespread expulsion of Russian intelligence officers and the exposure of its personnel in the lead-up to the invasion of Ukraine. There has been some surprise at the limited use of sabotage and other means to disrupt Western supplies to Ukraine; less than after Russia's original incursion into Donbas in 2014. This is partly because of a desire to manage escalation with NATO, but it is also the result of a lack of capacity. Russia is now actively trying to rebuild the capacity to embark on such operations. As the war in Ukraine protracts, Russia has an interest in creating crises further afield. The Balkans present a particularly serious set of opportunities for such enterprises. Russia also has an active interest in destabilising Ukraine's partners, and with a slew of elections forthcoming across Europe there is a wide range of opportunities to exacerbate polarisation. Moreover, with its conventional forces – so often used to coerce others – fixed by the fighting in Ukraine, the significance of unconventional operations as a lever of influence increases. This is especially important with the collapse of Russian overt diplomatic access across target countries. In short, because of the measures described in this chapter to rebuild its vanguard, Russia poses a serious and sustained threat.

Information operations are a critical enabler of Russia's destabilisation and subversion efforts and are therefore rightly scrutinised. What is often ignored, however, is that the public – and the manipulation of public sentiment – is a vehicle to mobilise or paralyse constituencies who service factions of a country's elite. The Russian theory of change is not premised on convincing a majority, but rather on empowering politicians in the target country who will spearhead the implementation of policy favourable to Russia. The objective is elite capture. The use of violent provocation to exacerbate political crisis is a consistent part of the process. As the Drozdov Binomial indicates, the lynchpin of this process is the human intelligence support apparatus, which handles agents in the elite, facilitates active measures and ultimately sets the conditions for violence. Countering disinformation, although still necessary, is far less consequential than degrading the support apparatus in disrupting this process. European states must remain vigilant in their counterintelligence activities even as the GRU seeks to adapt. The process of elite capture may be contested in Europe, but has proven much easier in Africa, where the GRU has made significant gains since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This line of effort is the subject of the next chapter.

43. A good example was the building of staging areas for Russian special forces inside Finland by Russian-US dual national Pavel Melnikov. See Jamie Seidel, 'Finnish Police Raid Billionaire's Secret Island Fortress as Fears of Moscow Espionage Grows', *News.com.au*, 3 November 2018, <<https://www.news.com.au/world/finnish-police-raid-billionaires-secret-island-fortress-as-fears-of-moscow-espionage-grows/news-story/36d35bbf96d71c2ebdc56f44a5aa2e6f>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

II. ‘Roscolonialism’: Wagner and the GRU’s Expeditionary Corps

Speaking at the St Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2022, President Vladimir Putin declared that the West was ‘still influenced by their own misconceptions about countries outside the so-called “golden billion”’: they consider everything a backwater, or their backyard. They still treat them like colonies, and the people living there, like second-class people, because they consider themselves exceptional.⁴⁴ For Putin, this reflected what he believes the West did to Russia in the 1990s and his own quest to rebuild Russian greatness. But it was also a pitch to other states.

At a time when many Western states were trying to economically isolate Russia following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Putin saw the development of economic ties with Africa and the Middle East as a means to sanction-proof Russia, and he had a pitch for the leaders of these states. It centred on the proposition that the ‘international rules-based order’ advocated for by the West structurally favoured Western interests, whereas Russia’s emphasis on sovereignty would offer a mutually beneficial partnership. The reality – as Russian officials acknowledged internally – was a renewed Russian colonialism.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the Kremlin, through the GRU, has now set about seeking to build an ‘Entente Roscolonial’ – a group of states that actively seek to assist Russia, while also becoming increasingly subordinate to Russian influence – displacing Western interests across Africa and the Middle East. This strategy’s trajectory is now becoming clear, but to appreciate its mechanisms one must understand the groundwork that was laid since 2014. Russia’s early forays into Africa were ad hoc. The foundations laid by that engagement have now developed into a deliberate strategy.

This chapter briefly summarises the work of the Wagner Group before outlining how Russian policy has developed since Yevgeny Prigozhin’s mutiny in June 2023.

44. President of Russia, ‘Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum’, 16 June 2023, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71445>>, accessed 12 February 2024.

45. Reports submitted to the Presidential Administration by Russian state bodies emphasised the risk that the country’s policy towards Africa could be perceived as neocolonial and that this was a vulnerability that meant all Russian actions should be framed as anti-colonial, as a metaphor for anti-Western.

The Wagner Group's Ring Cycle

The story of the development of Russia's new colonialism is intimately bound up with the evolution of the so-called 'Wagner Group', one of the most widely misrepresented elements of Russia's unconventional warfare capabilities. Much writing about the Wagner Group describes it as a PMC, used by the Russian state while at the same time pursuing an independent agenda. This fundamentally overlooks the dependency the group had on the Kremlin in all its activities and the extent to which its business activities followed Russian interests, rather than pre-empted them.⁴⁶ The Wagner Group was financed by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation both directly and through the provision of profitable government contracts to Prigozhin, mostly related to the provision of food to servicemen and maintenance of military units' housing stock. From May 2022 to May 2023 alone, Russia spent around \$1 billion on wages and compensation payments to Wagner's fighters.⁴⁷ By way of comparison, the Russian national health system was allocated around \$1.3 billion in 2022. This level of funding was not a unique consequence of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Between 2014 and 2023, Prigozhin received contracts worth over \$10 billion from the government of the Russian Federation.⁴⁸

These funds do not include the provision of weapons and military equipment to the Wagner Group nor the costs of enablement by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. These were transferred via military units subordinated to the GRU. For example, the documents of Russian mercenaries who fought on the side of General Khalifa Haftar against the UN-recognised Government of National Unity in Libya, which were captured by Libyan intelligence during the fighting for Tripoli, contain an application to receive weapons and military equipment required for a mission. The mercenaries received four tanks, six BMPs, 12 trucks and 44 other vehicles.⁴⁹ This equipment is comparable to that

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46. Article 13(5) of the Russian Criminal Code states that establishing PMCs is illegal; Article 71 states that the Russian state remains the only legitimate entity that can conduct defence and security activities; and Article 359 states that fighting in conflicts for material reward amounts to criminal activity. However, since organisations such as the Wagner Group function as deniable tools of the state, in the same way as Russian organised crime, the law is not enforced against them. See The Constitution of the Russian Federation, <<http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
47. *Russian Gazette*, «Владимир Путин выступил перед военными и силовиками, обеспечившими порядок и законность во время мятежа. Видео и полный текст» ['Vladimir Putin Spoke to the Military and Security Forces who Ensured Order and Legality During the Uprising. Video and Full Text'], <<https://rg.ru/2023/06/27/vladimir-putin-vystupil-pered-voennymi-i-silovikami-obespechivshimi-poriadok-i-zakonnost-vo-vremia-miatezha-video-i-polnyj-tekst.html>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
48. *RIA Novosti*, ««Вагнер» по госконтрактам получил 858 миллиардов рублей» [“Wagner” Received 858 Billion Roubles from Government Contracts], <<https://ria.ru/20230702/wagner-1881731788.html>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
49. Nader Ibrahim and Ияа Варабанов, «Ливийские гастролеры «ЧВК Вагнер»: что хранится в планшете наемника» [The Libyan Tour of the “Wagner” Private Military Company: What is Stored on the

required by one mechanised company and supporting motorised companies of the Russian armed forces. In Ukraine, the Wagner Group received hundreds of heavy weapons from the Ministry of Defence, which included, in addition to armoured vehicles and artillery, anti-aircraft and electronic warfare systems, as well as huge amounts of ammunition. Throughout the group's existence, the infrastructure of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation – particularly the Molmino training centre in Krasnodar – was used to train Wagner Group fighters. The Wagner Group's headquarters, camp and combat training centre were located at the military base of the 10th Special Forces Brigade.⁵⁰ The transport of Wagner Group fighters and goods to Syria, Sudan, Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR) was carried out by the 223rd Aviation Unit of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.⁵¹

The fact that most of the finance and enablement for Wagner Group activities comes directly from the Russian state shows that their operations were only viable if they received Russian state approval and that there was willingness to devote considerable resources to them. The Wagner Group, therefore, evolved in response to the GRU's various requirements.⁵² The original unit of recruited fighters, formed around GRU officer Dmitri Utkin – call sign 'Wagner' – in Ukraine after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014 to fight in Donbas, was a tool of the GRU's unconventional war against Kyiv. Subsequently, when Russia decided to intervene in Syria, these groupings of fighters provided a convenient means of putting Russian fighters in harm's way while reducing any political controversy by limiting the number of Russian soldiers killed.⁵³ The decision to deploy Wagner to support Haftar in Libya followed⁵⁴ Russian wishes to constrain Western access to Libyan oil and gas.⁵⁵ Over time, however, all these operations created an ecosystem of troops who worked together on multiple operations and began to form a corporate identity.⁵⁶ Moreover, Prigozhin's

Mercenary's Tablet'], *BBC Russian*, 11 August 2021, <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-58140986>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

50. *New Gazette*, «Отлет валькирий» ['Departure of the Valkyries'], <<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/07/27/otlet-valkirii>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
51. US Department of State, 'United States Imposes Additional Sanctions and Export Controls on Russia in Coordination with International Partners', fact sheet, 19 May 2023, <<https://www.state.gov/united-states-imposes-additional-sanctions-and-export-controls-on-russia/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
52. The concept of using PMCs as fronts for GRU activity was initiated under Nikolay Makarov in the 2000s. See Anna Borschhevskaya, 'Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model', Russian Foreign Policy Papers, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2019, <<https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp4-borschhevskaya-final.pdf>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
53. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, 'How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria', *New York Times*, 24 May 2018.
54. Author discussions with an officer of the SVR who had personally met with Haftar, London, January 2019.
55. Robert Uniacke, 'Libya Could Be Putin's Trump Card', *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2022.
56. Seth Jones et al., *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2021).

administrative efficiency and his closeness to Putin at the time made him a trusted administrator for these efforts.⁵⁷

The fact that so many different lines of effort became grouped under one person lent itself to a growing coherence between what had originally been diverse and separate lines of effort. The 'Wagner Group' never existed as an official entity. Fighters were employed by various companies. But Wagner became the personnel's corporate identity anyway.⁵⁸ Because many of the Wagner Group's administrative personnel were from the GRU, they pursued the traditional Russian special service methodology of endeavouring to make operations (operating as compared with capital costs) self-financing. This led to the pursuit of mining concessions and other cash-generating activities once deployed. Again, because the operations were connected through Prigozhin, this began to create a corporate identity for the organisation, although it was not in itself incorporated.

Russian thinking about the opportunities that the emergence of the Wagner Group created began to mature from 2016 to 2018. This coincided with a concerted effort to expand Russian influence and build new partnerships internationally. Within the SVR there was a sudden expansion of activities coordinated through the Coordinating Committee on Economic Cooperation with African Countries South of the Sahara (Afrokom). Although Afrokom had been established in 2009, from 2016 onwards the intensity of its activities increased. One important line of effort was the mapping of Russian influence on the continent. This was carried out through Russian cultural institutions like Rossotrudnichestvo, which began to reach out to African alumni of Russian and Soviet universities, usually under the auspices of printing yearbooks. Receptions for officials who had graduated from these universities began to be held in Russian embassies. The aim was to reconnect with those who might be both locally influential and positively disposed to Russia to begin conversations about expanding cooperation. The SVR also began to organise investment packages through Russian banks to expand the goodwill of key partners. Trips to Moscow for second-tier African politicians started to be expanded. Another line of effort saw the Russian defence ministry seek to expand defence exports across the continent, with a significant increase in the number of Rosoboronexport representatives posted to African countries. Between 2014 and 2018, Russia signed 19 defence cooperation agreements with

57. Anna Arutunyan and Mark Galeotti, *Downfall: Prigozhin and Putin, and the New Fight for the Future of Russia* (London: Penguin, forthcoming).

58. Other Prigozhin holdings not formally incorporated into the Wagner Group included Sewa Security Services and Patriot. For more information, see *UN News*, 'Central African Republic: Rights Experts Concerned Over "Russian Advisers" and Close Contacts with UN Peacekeepers', 31 March 2021, <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1088802>>, accessed 19 December 2023; Ryan Bauer and Erik E Mueller, 'Russian Private Military Companies Thriving Due to War with Ukraine', *Moscow Times*, 16 June 2023.

African states.⁵⁹ The overall volume of arms sales remains small and concentrated in Egypt and Algeria, but the influence and reach generated had wider implications.

The GRU also began to expand intelligence collection across Africa. In 2018, Prigozhin established the Back Office Africa, essentially an intelligence and planning cell for Wagner operations in Africa.⁶⁰ The cell was small, comprising 28 personnel, and had a modest budget. Several of its members, including Younis Nazarovich Abazid, were GRU officers. The GRU had deployed Abazid to Syria in 2016 to collect intelligence on the Islamic State and Jabhat Al-Nusra, and he had been a part of Russian negotiations trying to cohere the pro-Assad coalition. However, lines of effort were divided by country within the Back Office Africa. A heavy emphasis was placed on economic analysis and political technologists, political scientists and sociologists who were commissioned to produce studies of target countries.⁶¹ The Back Office's first operations targeting Mozambique in 2019 did not go well.⁶² Nevertheless, the organisation learned from setbacks. Mali would arguably prove a turning point in its effective displacement of Western rivals.⁶³

The Malian government signed a peace agreement with Tuareg and Arab rebels in 2015, with UN peacekeepers deployed to prevent clashes between both sides. However, insurgency broke out around Mopti from Fulani herders during that year, and over time Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups managed to co-opt the Fulani insurgency across the tri-border area.⁶⁴ Led by France, Western states pursued a strategy of trying to provide human security in isolated communities while conducting counterterrorism raids with the G5 group of Sahelian states. There were many problems with this approach. The counterterrorism operation was fundamentally about protecting Europe through the targeted killing of jihadists. At the same time, the peacekeeping mission shielded rebel groups from being confronted by the state, but the lack of political progress and consequent economic stagnation drove people to banditry.⁶⁵ While communities might be safe from physical attack in towns guarded by the UN, they also had

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59. *Reuters*, 'Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries', 17 October 2018.
 60. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 'Guns for Gold: The Wagner Network Exposed', 18 July 2023, p. 59, <<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41073/documents/200048/default/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 61. Documents from the Back Office Africa detailing its activities from 2018 to 2021.
 62. Jeffrey Love, 'When Private Military Operations Fail: The Case of Mozambique', *Oxford Political Review*, 6 March 2023, <<https://oxfordpoliticalreview.com/2023/03/06/when-private-military-operations-fail-the-case-of-mozambique/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 63. For an overview of Russia's operations in Africa over this period, see Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
 64. Jack Watling and Paul Raymond, 'Don't Call it a Jihadist Insurgency – Yet', *Foreign Policy*, 16 December 2015.
 65. Jack Watling and Paul Raymond, 'On Patrol with the Soldiers Battling Bandits, Islamist Militants, and Mistrust in Mali', *VICE*, 19 July 2015, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/8x3aj5/on-patrol-with-the-soldiers-battling-bandits-islamist-militants-and-mistrust-in-mali>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

no prospects, and the Malian military felt unable to implement a policy that would change the dynamic.

Russian encouragement of the Malian military to reclaim the state's sovereignty from its Western partners proved persuasive. The first coup, on 18 August 2020, was orchestrated by a group of colonels, two of whom had just returned from receiving training in Russia and were instrumental in seizing Mali's main military base.⁶⁶ After the military failed to push through the changes they wanted with an interim transitional government, they launched a second coup on 24 May 2021, and set about laying the groundwork for Russian mercenaries to enter Mali. The Russians promised to provide soldiers and equipment to the Malian armed forces to aggressively attack rebel communities. The Malian state could therefore expel MINUSMA (the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) and the French without losing access to the military support necessary to implement a sovereign policy. Russian forces began to arrive in December 2021 and have since succeeded in getting Mali's international partners for over a decade expelled.⁶⁷ Russia is now replicating its offer in Burkina Faso⁶⁸ and Niger.⁶⁹

Russia's Africa strategy⁷⁰ – to displace Western interests, gain control over critical resources, and reduce its own vulnerability to sanctions – was disrupted by the failure to achieve a rapid victory in Ukraine. Suddenly, Wagner was repurposed to confront Russia's latest security challenge, providing troops to bolster Russian ground forces in Donbas.⁷¹ Nevertheless, as Putin made clear in his 2022 speech at the St Petersburg Economic Forum, the Africa strategy remained a key priority for the Kremlin.⁷² When Prigozhin launched an attempt to have Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov removed from office in June 2023 over their incompetent prosecution of the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin faced a serious problem. On the one hand, there was a clear need to remove those who had conducted the mutiny. At the same time, for reasons of convenience as much as anything else, a significant part of Russia's foreign policy had become structurally implemented through the Wagner Group. How, therefore,

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66. Philip Obaji Jr, 'Mali Coup Leaders Seized Power Days After Returning from Military Training Camp in Russia', *Daily Beast*, 21 August 2020, <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-trained-the-mali-coup-leaders>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 67. *BBC News*, 'French Ambassador Expelled from Mali', 31 January 2022.
 68. Olorin Maquindus and Anna Sylvestre-Treiner, 'Burkina Faso is Strengthening its Alliance with Russia', *Le Monde*, 18 November 2023.
 69. Sam Mednick, 'Niger's Junta Asks for Help from Russian Group Wagner as it Faces Military Intervention Threat', *AP News*, 6 August 2023.
 70. Karolina Lindén, 'Russia's Relations with Africa: Small, Military-Oriented and with Destabilising Effects', *FOI Studies in African Security*, January 2023, <<https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208090>>, accessed 28 January 2024.
 71. Ryan Bauer and Erik E Mueller, 'Russian Private Military Companies Thriving Due to War with Ukraine', *Moscow Times*, 14 June 2023.
 72. President of Russia, 'Plenary Session of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum'.

could Russia continue expanding its African partnerships while breaking up the single power centre that had caused such disruption to operations in Ukraine?

Averyanov's Expeditionary Corps and the Regime Survival Package

Prigozhin might have been on a trajectory to establish himself as an independent actor, but at the point he attempted to exert this – either through extending his authority too early, too far or both – that independence proved illusory. His move against Gerasimov and Shoigu did not receive the retrospective official support he seems to have hoped for, and precipitated his downfall.

In the crisis meetings following Prigozhin's mutiny, the Russian Presidential Administration made several structural decisions. In late June 2023, it was decided that the Prigozhin enterprise would be broken up before the liquidation of the Wagner Group's leadership. The FSB would take over Prigozhin's domestic commercial enterprises and his communications businesses would come under SVR supervision. The foreign military components would fall under the GRU.

Within the GRU, it was decided that Wagner's activities would be divided into two components. First, a Volunteer Corps would be formed covering operations in Ukraine. Companies such as Redut would provide the legal mechanism for Wagner fighters to sign up as individuals.⁷³ These companies would then sign a contract to provide services to the Russian Ministry of Defence, thus bringing them under the Russian military's control. The Volunteer Corps would be managed within the GRU by Alexeiev as the GRU's special representative to the Command of the Special Military Operation. In parallel, the GRU has established an Expeditionary Corps, which also uses a range of companies, including Convoy, as fronts for fighters to sign up.⁷⁴ The GRU Expeditionary Corps is commanded by Andrei Averyanov and directed by his Service for Special Activities. The initial aspiration was for 40,000 troops to join the Expeditionary Corps. This was subsequently reduced to a target of 20,000 by the end of 2023 – which the GRU failed to meet – with the aspiration to recruit and train local forces to make up additional mass. Although slower than originally hoped, the number of personnel is steadily rising.

This division may have sounded straightforward on paper but would prove highly complicated to implement. First, Wagner fighters exercised some agency in

73. Steve Gutterman, 'Redut: The Fake PMC Feeding Recruits into the Kremlin's War Against Ukraine', *The Week Ahead in Russia* (podcast), 24 October 2023, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-redut-fake-pmc/32651874.html>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

74. *France24*, 'New Russian Militia Convoy Rises as Wagner Group Gets Too Big to Control', 8 April 2023.

where they signed up. Pavel Prigozhin, Yevgeny's son, attempted to retain some control over the organisation by offering Wagner as a formed body to Victor Zolotov and the Rosgvardia (National Guard). This was consistent with instructions to Rosgvardia to expand its combat capabilities in Ukraine and so was partially approved.⁷⁵ The result was a bidding war for commanders between the GRU and Rosgvardia. A similar problem arose between the Volunteer and Expeditionary Corps. The latter was clearly safer and offered long-term opportunities for lucrative financial rackets. The former was much more dangerous. The GRU attempted to manage this tension by adjusting the financial packages between the outfits. Nevertheless, the resulting division of Wagner units has proven disruptive to force cohesion.

A further challenge that had to be managed was the offer and coherence of deployed Expeditionary Corps units. Under Wagner, the Back Office Africa negotiated the provision of support with parallel concessions or other compensation often granted to a parallel company. For example, in 2018, after the president of the CAR, Faustin-Archange Touadera, appealed to Russia to provide him with assistance in the fight against insurgent groups⁷⁶ and to provide his close protection, his former national security advisor Valery Zakharov (a former Russian intelligence officer) returned to his office.⁷⁷ Despite his title, Zakharov was responsible for a wide range of issues, including the coordination of economic projects of interest to the Russian Federation.

A similar situation is observed in Sudan, where the Wagner Group has been active since 2017. Russian mercenaries appeared in Sudan after President Omar Bashir's visit to Moscow, where he signed several agreements with the Russian government, including the establishment of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan and a gold-mining concession between the Russian firm M-Invest (at that time close to Prigozhin) and the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals.⁷⁸ It is worth noting

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75. Pjotr Sauer, 'How Russia is Recruiting Wagner Fighters to Continue War in Ukraine', *The Guardian*, 9 November 2023.
 76. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Artyom Kozhin's Answer to a Media Question on Cooperation Between the Russian Federation and the Central African Republic', press release, 22 March 2018, <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1566617>, accessed 4 December 2023.
 77. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 445 I (Vol. 64, 13 December 2021), <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:445I:FULL&from=EN>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 78. Government of the Russian Federation, 'Dmitry Medvedev's Meeting with President of the Republic of the Sudan Omar Al-Bashir', press release, 24 November 2017, <<http://government.ru/en/news/30259/>>, accessed 19 December 2023; US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity', press release, 15 July 2020, <<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>>, accessed 3 December 2023; Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla and Nima Elbagir, 'Fake News and Public Executions: Documents Show a Russian Company's Plan for Quelling Protests in Sudan', *CNN*, 25 April 2019; *RBK News*, «Зачем России военный объект на Красном море» ['Why Does Russia Need a Military Facility on the Red Sea?'], 19 November 2020, <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/19/11/2020/5fb431d29a7947b75f06e721>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

that Russia is now pursuing its interests in Sudan – including setting its sights on the oil refinery in Khartoum – through the Rapid Support Forces.

The initial reason for this cost recovery was precisely to create implausible deniability for the Kremlin. This was because many of the operations being conducted were either at the expense of other states or violated UN Security Council resolutions. For example, the use of the Wagner Group in the CAR circumvented the direct prohibition of the UN Security Council on the supply of arms and military equipment to the CAR. There is no doubt that the CAR government perceived the presence of Russian mercenaries and other military and non-military assistance provided by Prigozhin's staff as coming directly from the government of the Russian Federation. Thus, in 2020, an official CAR government representative publicly announced that Russia would send several hundred military personnel and heavy military equipment to the CAR. According to him, this was done to support the government on the eve of the presidential and parliamentary elections within the framework of official agreements concluded between the CAR and the Russian Federation. A communiqué issued by the CAR Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed his words. Official representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, represented by the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to the CAR and Deputy Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, immediately denied this, saying that Russia conscientiously complies with all the requirements set out in UN resolutions.⁷⁹ In January 2023, however, the Kremlin directed cost recovery as a means of avoiding the diversion of resources from the Special Military Operation, and also to link target countries with Russia economically, thereby expanding avenues for sanctions evasion.⁸⁰

The problem for the Expeditionary Corps is that it risks the removal of this plausible deniability. Since the contracts signed by fighters are with private companies, it is possible for Moscow to retain implausible deniability as to the personnel.⁸¹ It is harder, however, for this to be the case with the negotiation of business deals and agreements. It appears that Russia has finally decided to explicitly challenge the international system rather than pretend to comply with it. Shortly after Prigozhin's death, Averyanov began to tour African capitals alongside Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, accompanied by former Wagner commanders. The message they delivered to key partners was consistent: former commitments would be honoured, but they would now deal directly with the Russian Ministry of Defence. This has not stopped the

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79. *BBC Russian*, «Россия отправила войска в ЦАР. Там не первый год работает «ЧВК Вагнера»» [‘Russia Sent Troops to the Central African Republic. “Wagner” has Been Operating There for Several Years’], 21 December 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-55396251>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
80. Instructions issued by the Russian Presidential Administration to several senior industrial figures and heads of Russian state-owned enterprises in January 2023.
81. Rory Cormac and Richard Aldrich, ‘Grey is the New Black: Covert Action and Implausible Deniability’, *International Affairs* (Vol. 94, No. 3, 2018), pp. 477–94.

parallel financing of operations. The Malian government, for example, is currently reforming its mining code to allow foreign concessions to be seized and then allocated to Russian companies. Russia's proposal is that it will use the money that would otherwise have gone to Australian and other companies to pay for its military support to the Malian government, and that the Malian government will continue to gain taxation from the mines and will not be lumbered with the debt finance proffered by the West. Russia has a particular interest in lithium mines and has established a gold refinery within its compound at Bamako International Airport.

Over the course of August 2023, the Russian government assessed the strengths and vulnerabilities of the Africa strategy. Documents reveal a vision of exploiting access for a more concerted attack on Western interests. For example, it is proposed that Russia's relations with Niger⁸² could be used to threaten French access to uranium mined in the country, further increasing the French energy sector's dependence on Russian-supplied uranium.⁸³ But the assessments also make clear that Russia has vulnerabilities. The understanding and business acumen of the GRU represents a particular area of concern, since Prigozhin's financial structures in Africa were complex. The SVR is likely to play a leading role in trying to cohere this line of effort. Another significant risk that Russian analysts highlighted was of Russia's explicit involvement causing a growing perception of economic exploitation and colonialism, undermining Moscow's anti-colonial message. The analysts acknowledge the fundamentally colonial nature of the Russian project.

The 'offer' the GRU is now pushing is being internally described as the 'regime survival package'. The logic of this offer is that Russia will provide elites in target countries with military support, economic and political protection from backlash via the UN or other international mechanisms, and the support of political technologists to sell their popularity domestically. A critical component of the package is the isolation of a target country's leadership. For example, in Mali, the Expeditionary Corps – as occurred in the CAR – now provides presidential protection, since this proximity ensures sustained understanding and influence within Malian decision-making. Wagner has a long history of establishing domestic propaganda structures.⁸⁴ One of the first successful examples was the creation of the Lengo Songo radio station, which quickly became one of the mouthpieces of Russian propaganda in the CAR and is consistently among the three most popular radio stations in the country. It is worth noting that the

82. Mednick, 'Niger's Junta Asks for Help from Russian Group Wagner as it Faces Military Intervention Threat'.

83. Assessment prepared for senior Russian officials about opportunities and risks in Africa, circulated September 2023.

84. Jean Le Roux, 'Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests', Digital Forensic Research Lab, 17 February 2022.

Russian political technologist and media manager Igor Mangushev (formerly a Russian navy officer who organised Russian paramilitary groups in the war against Ukraine in Crimea and Donbas in 2014) was heavily involved in establishing the programming.⁸⁵

However, the effect of this offer is to close off the relationships that a country has with the West. Very often, the conduct of massacres and other violations of international law will prevent Western partners from maintaining links with a partner military,⁸⁶ the long-term effects of which may not be fully appreciated when cooperation is first agreed.⁸⁷ Furthermore, in the medium term, the violent approach used by the Expeditionary Corps may secure a government and fulfil perceived short-term needs, but is unlikely to bring peace to the hinterlands of the recipient country. It is worth noting that the Russian approach is consistent with the tenets of Soviet anti-partisan warfare, involving the use of collective punishment, hostage-taking of local political figures and aggressive raids to kill insurgents. The effect is often the defeat of an insurgent group but an absence of stability or human security. The result is that Russian security partners initially gain a sovereign capability through Russia's mercenaries and medium-term personal security. However, they also become dependent and begin to lose access to alternative security providers. In the medium to long term, the economic concessions Russia demands risk creating an extremely unequal relationship, in which Moscow extracts much more than it offers.

One solution arrived at by Russia to reduce the reputational harm associated with a colonial project is to conduct partnered operations. In August 2023, Avreyanov and Yevkurov visited Syria, where they met President Bashar Al-Assad, and Libya, where they met Haftar. According to the readouts from the meetings, both leaders expressed approval for the suppression of the Wagner Group and were encouraged that the Russian state would continue to provide support. It was also proposed – and apparently favourably received – to establish fighter training camps that would be run by the Expeditionary Corps in Palmyra and Tobruk. In both cases, the offer was to train fighters for the respective Syrian and Libyan forces. However, it is also evident that the Expeditionary Corps will look to recruit some of the trained personnel to work with them in Africa. This has precedent. Wagner, for example, brought Syrian fighters with them to Libya. They are currently preparing to move troops to Burkina Faso, and the contingent may include both Russian and non-Russian troops. Another way the Russians

85. Pauline Bax, 'Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic', International Crisis Group, 3 December 2021, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/russias-influence-central-african-republic>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

86. Jason Burke, 'Russian Mercenaries Behind Slaughter of 500 in Mali Village, UN Report Finds', *The Guardian*, 20 May 2023.

87. Jack Detsch, 'Wagner's African Hosts Regret Letting Them in', *Foreign Policy*, 25 September 2023.

wish to show partnership is by embedding advisors in partner forces rather than simply providing contingents to work alongside partners. These measures are not new. They are highly consistent with the Russian experience in Chechnya, and the resemblance to Russia's Chechnya policy in the construction of the Entente Roscolonial does not stop at combat unit structure.

The Entente Roscolonial is a serious threat to Western interests. First, with the US increasingly fixated on the Indo-Pacific and European attention saturated by the war in Ukraine, most African operations have become economy-of-force affairs. Moreover, the disparity in resourcing and attention paid to Ukraine or Gaza as compared to Tigray, for instance, has left a strong and bitter sense across Africa as to the hierarchy of Western concerns. Similarly, the apparent contrast in Western language and rhetoric between how it described the destruction of Aleppo or Mariupol, and how it has excused Israeli operations in Gaza, leave many on the continent perceiving a gap between Western rhetoric about values and the values practised by those who have, for so long, imposed constraints on the policies of African states to enforce values-based norms. The language used when rejecting Western security assistance in favour of Russia is almost always that of sovereignty. This is not to suggest that there are not defensible reasons for Western policy, but the perception is clear.

In this context, Russia is exploiting a rich opportunity to build new relationships and, in doing so, set up challenges for the West. Through persistent instability, Russia can push migration into Europe, creating the conditions for Averyanov's Service for Special Activities to pursue political destabilisation, as is being explored through illegal migration pushed towards Finland.⁸⁸ Leverage over natural resources is also expanding. Perhaps most problematic, however, is how the pitch for values is giving Russia access to communities that interface with a range of extremist beliefs. In this, as with the training approach being explored in Syria and Libya, Russia is expanding what its proxy Ramzan Kadyrov offers, which is the subject of the next chapter.

88. *BBC News*, 'Finland to Close Entire Russian Border After Migrant Surge', 28 November 2023.

III. The Kadyrovtsy and the Defence of ‘Traditional’ Values

Russia’s Expeditionary Corps is intended to be the vanguard of Putin’s multipolar world view, offering those who reject Western legal structures the means to preserve their rule and wreak violence on their enemies. If the Expeditionary Corps is an offer to elites, there are more populist narratives that Russia pushes at a range of constituencies. Russia’s argument is that it is the bastion of ‘traditional values’, embodied by religiosity, the nuclear family, heterosexuality and loyalty to the state. The Orthodox Church pushes this outreach to religious groups in the US, and through social media to conservative constituencies across Western Europe and North America. This vision of Russia is contrasted with a depiction of the West as, according to some of the increasingly lurid propaganda narratives being promoted, a bastion of decadent homosexual worship of Satan.⁸⁹ The Russian narrative of its defence of traditional values finds a particular expression and confluence with Russia’s unconventional warfare capabilities in Chechnya under Kadyrov.

Kadyrov’s distinctive monologues on social media, the tactically spurious combat theatre pushed by Chechen fighters on TikTok and the arbitrary violence of Chechen politics mean that modern-day Chechnya appears comic as much as it does tragic to Western audiences. Nevertheless, many of the perceptions of Chechnya and its leader are inaccurate.

Kadyrov is largely autonomous in his domestic politics. The Russian state does not seek to impose control, and indeed the Kadyrov clan owe their position to an inability on the part of the Kremlin to do so unilaterally at acceptable cost in the past. Putin and Kadyrov share a mutual dependency. Kadyrov is loyal to Putin and thereby keeps Chechnya closely aligned to Russia’s foreign policy. There is a personal loyalty here that means Kadyrov will seek the permission of and take direction from Moscow where it matters to the Kremlin. Furthermore, like Wagner, 85% of Chechnya’s budget comes from the Russian state. Like Prigozhin, Kadyrov

89. *Meduza*, “‘Beast People,’ Feminist, and Aliens: A New Legal Paper Draws from an Impressive Array of Conspiracy Theories to Explain Russia’s Problems’, 18 December 2023, <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/12/18/beast-people-feminists-and-aliens>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

is fundamentally dependent on Moscow.⁹⁰ Like Wagner, Chechnya's semi-autonomous character lends itself to deniability for the Kremlin. Where Kadyrov exerts himself in building influence expands Russia's reach and closely aligns with the interests of Russia's special services. After all, Kadyrov can reach audiences that Moscow does not across the Muslim world and Chechen diaspora.

Russian official propaganda and networks of hidden influence operating in Muslim countries push a romantic image of Kadyrov as a defender of Islam, opposing Western heretics who are trying to destroy traditional values. A good recent example of this dynamic was how Kadyrov's son was filmed beating a prisoner accused of burning a Qur'an.⁹¹ This was contrasted with the restraint of Swedish and Danish police in punishing Qur'an burnings that took place in 2023.⁹² Qur'an burnings in Sweden not only led to violent clashes with the police, and caused rifts with Ankara at a time when Stockholm was seeking to join NATO, but prompted Iraqi protesters to storm and set light to the Swedish embassy in Baghdad.⁹³ Chechen and Russian influence channels exacerbated these dynamics by highlighting the contrast in Arabic media, and amplified criticism of Sweden and Denmark.⁹⁴ Another good example is how Kadyrov was extremely forceful in denouncing Israel during its war against Hamas in late 2023.⁹⁵ Kadyrov's anti-Israeli statements were actively replicated by Russian- and Chechen-controlled media, as well as by troll factories on social networks targeting Muslim audiences, mainly in Arabic.

The build-up of influence is also pursued through charity and social work, primarily conducted through the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation. This organisation funded the reconstruction of mosques in Aleppo,⁹⁶ but also promotes Kadyrov's status by popularising the image of his father Akhmat Kadyrov as a religious figure. This work is also pursued through entities such as the European Islamic Forum.⁹⁷ The organisation is especially active in the Balkans, where it has established ties with authoritative Muslim representatives (not only religious,

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90. Natalya Zubarevich, 'Kadyrov Tripled the Size of Subsidies for Chechnya. But the Real Volume of Subsidies is Huge', *The Insider*, 26 January 2022, <<https://theins.ru/news/248112>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 91. *Reuters*, 'Chechen Leader's Son, Who Beat a Prisoner, Made Top Bodyguard', 5 November 2023.
 92. Truesec, "'Anonymous Sudan': Most Likely Russia Attempting to Disrupt Sweden's NATO Application", 20 February 2023, <<https://www.truesec.com/news/anonymous-sudan-most-likely-russia-disrupting-swedens-nato-application>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 93. Timour Azhari, Ahmed Rasheed and Anna Ringstrom, 'Iraq Expels Swedish Ambassador Over Planned Koran Burning', *Reuters*, 21 July 2023.
 94. Miranda Bryant, 'Russia Spreading False Claims About Qur'an Burnings to Harm Nato Bid, Says Sweden', *The Guardian*, 6 August 2023.
 95. *Moscow Times*, 'Chechnya's Kadyrov Voices Support for Palestine, Offers to Send "Peacekeepers"', 15 November 2023.
 96. *Tass*, 'Kadyrov Foundation Donates \$14 Million for Rebuilding Great Mosque of Aleppo', 12 September 2017, <https://tass.com/society/965306?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com>, accessed 19 December 2023.
 97. State Security Department of Lithuania, 'Kremlin Tries to Exploit Muslim Communities in Europe', <<https://www.vsd.lt/en/reports/information-security/kremlin-tries-to-exploit-muslim-communities-in-europe/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

but also political figures) in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Croatia, Greece and Romania. The European Islamic Forum is also active on EU territory. For example, the forum held a conference dedicated to the 70th anniversary of Akhmat Kadyrov in Estonia in 2021, which was attended by Muslim representatives from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark, Finland, Poland, Sweden, Germany and Russia.⁹⁸

The popularity that Kadyrov has created personally on religious and nationalistic grounds among the Chechen diaspora allows his representatives to reach into and recruit personnel on different sides of a range of conflicts and across a wide geography. In Libya, for example, while the Russian state backs Haftar, Kadyrov maintains diplomatic channels with the internationally recognised Libyan government. In 2016, Kadyrov stated that at the very beginning of the war in Syria, fighters of the Chechen special forces were sent to training camps to join militants who professed Wahhabism. Whether this would have been to penetrate the Islamic State and other groups to counter any potential threat that they posed or to support, influence and partially co-opt them is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, Chechens achieved senior positions in many of Syria's militias including the Islamic State, and the group did manage a range of negotiations with the Assad government, for which such networks would be exceedingly useful.⁹⁹

Kadyrov's claim is plausible. Such actions are consistent with historical operations of the Russian special services. There are also proven instances of the Kadyrovtsy using these methods during the war in Ukraine. Husein Jambetov, who fought on the side of Ukraine in 2022 as a platoon commander, appeared in Chechnya in 2023 where he spoke to mercenaries at the Russian Special Forces University with a call to be loyal to Russia and Kadyrov. It is also clear that Kadyrov has no problem encouraging and engaging with Islamist extremists. Abdullah Anzorov, who in 2020 killed French teacher Samuel Pati for showing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a free speech class, was subsequently praised by Kadyrov, who declared that the teacher was guilty of his own murder.¹⁰⁰ Russian troll farms amplified this pronouncement among Arab audiences.

98. *Grozny TV*, «В столице Эстонии прошел Международный круглый стол к 70-летию Ахмата-Хаджи Кадырова» [‘An International Round Table Dedicated to the 70th Anniversary of Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov was Held in the Capital of Estonia’], 1 September 2021, <<https://www.grozny.tv/news/society/44456>>, accessed 6 February 2024.

99. *RBC*, «Кадыров рассказал о действующем в тылу ИГИЛ чеченском спецназе» [‘Kadyrov Talks About the Chechen Special Forces Operating Behind ISIS Lines’], 8 February 2016, <<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/02/2016/56b8628a9a794778cab42284>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

100. *Аргументы и факты* [Arguments and Facts], «Бывший «ичкериец» Хусейн Джамбетов выступил перед добровольцами в Чечне» [‘Former “Ichkerian” Hussein Dzhambetov Spoke to Volunteers in Chechnya’], 17 October 2020, <<https://chechnya.gov.ru/novosti/r-kadyrov-prizval-ne-provotsirovat-veruyushhih/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Anzorov is interesting because he sits at the intersection of Kadyrov's religious and ethnic influence. He was a member of a Chechen mixed martial arts (MMA) club in Paris.¹⁰¹ Martial arts have been used extensively as vectors of Kadyrov's influence since 2007, when there was a concerted effort to infiltrate Chechen diaspora organisations. This followed two well-established approaches of the Soviet special services: the seeding of agents into refugee groups; and the use of martial arts as a structured social setting enabling both network recruitment and coordination. The Soviet preference was the use of combat sambo, although the sport is rarely found outside the former Soviet Union.¹⁰² Kadyrov prefers MMA, which as a catch-all for different training disciplines enjoys broad reach.¹⁰³ Kadyrov's representative in Germany is European MMA champion Timur Dugazaev, who went there as a political refugee and now organises Chechens for pro-Russian street protests.¹⁰⁴ The representative in France is Ali Bajayev, a refugee and former lieutenant colonel in the Russian armed forces.¹⁰⁵ Sentiments among the Chechens of France and indeed other European regions are growing increasingly pro-Russian. During riots organised by Chechens in Dijon in 2020, the use of Russian symbols and the painting of pro-Russian graffiti, including the words 'Glory to Putin!', were recorded. Kadyrov then expressed his personal support for the rioters. It is notable that Chechens came from all over Europe to participate in the riots.¹⁰⁶

Popular MMA fighters are also used to influence both their international fans and other countries' elites. MMA champion Khamzat Chimaev, who is close to Kadyrov,¹⁰⁷ lived in Sweden from childhood and represented that country, but moved to Dubai in October 2023 and will henceforth represent the UAE.¹⁰⁸

101. Mitch Prothero, 'MMA Clubs are a Hotbed for Potential Extremists, European Security Officials Say', *Business Insider*, 27 October 2020.

102. Combat sambo is named after the Russian *samozashchita bez oruzhiya* ('self-defence without weapons').

103. Karim Zidan, 'How Ramzan Kadyrov Uses MMA Fighting to Cement His Power', *New Lines Magazine*, 19 April 2023, <<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/how-ramzan-kadyrov-uses-mma-fighting-to-cement-his-power/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

104. US Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Serious Human Rights Abusers on International Human Rights Day', press release, 10 December 2020.

105. Andrey Krasno, ««Всеядный Кадыров». Зарубежная чеченская диаспора не поддержала участников съезда в Грозном» [“Omnivorous Kadyrov”. The Foreign Chechen Diaspora did not Support the Participants of the Congress in Grozny], *Кавказ Реалии* [*Real Caucasus* (division of *Radio Liberty*)], 29 June 2021, <<https://www.kavkazr.com/a/31331496.html>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

106. *Radio France Internationale*, «Рамзан Кадыров высказался в поддержку чеченцев в Дижоне» [‘Ramzan Kadyrov Speaks Out in Support of the Chechens in Dijon’], 20 June 2020, <<https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20200620-chechen-leader-kadyrov-backs-compatriots-involved-in-violence-in-france>>, accessed 12 February 2024.

107. Kyle Dimond, “Support a Killer but Support Peace in the World?” – Khamzat Chimaev Under Fire After Posing with Ramzan Kadyrov Following Emotional UFC 294 Interview’, *MMA News*, 23 October 2023, <<https://www.mmanews.com/news/skhamzat-chimaev-under-fire-ramzan-kadyrov-emotional-ufc-294-interview>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

108. *Asian MMA*, 'Khamzat Chimaev Renounces Sweden, Now Representing UAE', 24 September 2023, <<https://asianmma.com/khamzat-chimaev-renounces-sweden-now-representing-uae/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

The combination of social status and access to a range of constituencies – both secular and religious – makes Kadyrov a valuable proxy diplomat of the Russian Federation; a unique capability for a regional governor in Russia that occasionally generates comment.¹⁰⁹ In recent years, he has managed to establish effective working relationships with many leaders in the Middle East, including the president of the UAE, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, representatives of the royal family of Bahrain, and leaders of Jordan.¹¹⁰ It is indicative, for example, that during his visit to Russia in 2017, the king of Saudi Arabia spent more time with Kadyrov than with Putin. The refusal of several states to join the anti-Russian sanctions associated with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is partly shaped by Kadyrov's diplomatic efforts. It is not surprising that in July 2023, Putin appointed Kadyrov's adviser Turko Daudov as a permanent representative to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Daudov was previously a key representative of Chechnya in Arab and Muslim countries.¹¹¹ It is arguable that Russia places more importance on Kadyrov as a diplomat than his interlocutors, who are pursuing relationships with Russia for a range of reasons. Nevertheless, personal relationships matter in diplomacy, and Kadyrov has become the intermediary for a range of Russian efforts.

Finally, Kadyrov conducts defence diplomacy through the Russian Special Forces University, a private organisation that was created at Kadyrov's initiative in 2013. It was initially called the International Training Center for Special Purpose Forces, and the direct supervisor of the project was Kadyrov's adviser, Colonel Daniil Martynov, a former employee of the Special Purpose Centre of the FSB.¹¹² The organisation has been widely misunderstood. Many have mistakenly believed that it is for training special forces. Like the 161 Training Centre, Chechnya does maintain special operations forces and uses them to conduct assassinations and sabotage. It also performs political demonstrations. In 2016, during Russian Special Forces University training in the Arctic, a group of Chechen special forces brought weapons and military equipment to the territory of Longyear

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109. Anya Free and Marat Iliysov, 'Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechen Strategist of Russia's Middle East Policy', Wilson Center, blog, 13 October 2023, <<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/ramzan-kadyrov-chechen-strategist-russias-middle-east-policy>>, accessed 27 November 2023; Pavel Luzin, 'Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat', *Riddle*, 19 April 2018, <<https://ridl.io/ramzan-kadyrov-russias-top-diplomat/>>, accessed 27 November 2023.
110. Neil Hauer, 'Princely Ties: The Growing Chechnya-Gulf Security Relationship', *Defense Post*, 27 December 2018, <<https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/12/27/russia-chechnya-gulf-security-relationship/>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
111. Russia-Islamic World, 'Putin Appoints Turco Daudov as New Russian Permanent Representative to OIC', 17 July 2023, <<https://russia-islworld.ru/en/main/putin-appoints-turco-daudov-as-new-russian-permanent-representative-to-oic-2023>>, accessed 19 December 2023.
112. *Дзен Новосту [Zen News]*, «Даниил Мартынов: кто он, русский командир чеченского спецназа, самый крутой русский парень в Чечне? Рассказываю подробно» ['Daniil Martynov: Who is he, the Russian Commander of the Chechen Special Forces, the Coolest Russian Guy in Chechnya?'], <https://dzen.ru/a/Y1aQ7hGgFj6N_Xv8>, accessed 19 December 2023.

Airport, located on the Norwegian demilitarised Svalbard archipelago, which became the cause of a diplomatic scandal between the two countries.¹¹³ Although the university uses the mystique of special operations in its marketing, the organisation is better understood to be a centre where special forces train irregular troops. It provides this training internationally and for preparing forces for the front in Ukraine. It is, perhaps, a good model for understanding what the GRU may end up establishing in Palmyra and Tobruk.

The Chechen model is useful in understanding the forms, methods and threat posed by Russia's unconventional warfare capabilities because it shows how multiple lines of effort, cohered under one individual, become mutually reinforcing over time. They are then brought together to achieve the interest of the Russian state. During the failed coup attempt in Montenegro, for example, the operation was coordinated by GRU officer Victor Boyarkin, close to the oligarch Oleg Deripaska, with representatives of Unit 29155. Boyarkin, however, was supported by both Serbian organised criminal elements under Sasha Sajelich, and by Martynov, which – according to the documents relating to the trial – worked with Kadyrov's networks to try to sway the attitude of the Muslim population to support the coup's outcome. During Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the intersection between active measures targeting popular sentiment and provocations using proxy networks and sabotage groups remains a serious threat. Kadyrov's importance to the Kremlin's unconventional warfare planners is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that it was Chechen organised criminals who were used to liaise with Ukrainian criminal networks just prior to the full-scale invasion, in an attempt to co-opt them to support the occupation administration.¹¹⁴ It was also Kadyrov's special forces, led by Martynov, who were to lead the seizure of the governmental buildings in Kyiv and thereafter the kill or capture of leading Ukrainians.¹¹⁵ As Russia attempts more unconventional operations in Africa, Kadyrov's involvement should be anticipated. Understanding how semi-autonomous actors like Kadyrov fit into the kaleidoscopic tools that Russia applies is important if Russia's targets are to ensure their resilience.

The resilience of the approach in the long term is also worth noting. The extent of Kadyrov's popularity and influence among the Chechen people, both within

113. Trude Pettersen, 'Chechen Special Forces Instructors Landed on Svalbard', *Barents Observer*, 13 April 2016, <<https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/node/678>>, accessed 19 December 2023.

114. Briefings by the SBU, Ukraine, October 2022 and November 2023.

115. *Українська правда [Ukraine Truth]*, «ВСУ уничтожили кадировцев, планировавших убить Зеленского - разведка» ['The Ukrainian Armed Forces Destroyed the Kadyrovites who Planned to Kill Zelensky - Intelligence'], 1 March 2022, <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2022/03/1/7327224/>>, accessed 18 March 2023; *BBC Russian*, ««В районе Майдана или Крещатика танцы подготовим». Что человеку с голосом КадYROVA докладывали накануне вторжения России в Украину» [“We Will Host Dances in Maidan and Kreschatik”. What a Person was Told in the Voice of Kadyrov on the Eve of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine'], 26 February 2022, <<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-60528746>>, accessed 14 February 2024.

Chechnya and among the diaspora, is concerning and a potential harbinger of how Russian influence might play out elsewhere. The Kadyrov clan facilitated the occupation of Chechnya by Russia, who were unable to control the region despite exceptionally heavy-handed measures. The results were disastrous for the population; while estimates vary and accurate figures are likely impossible to ascertain, up to 300,000 Chechen civilians may have died during the Chechen wars and insurgency, out of a population of little more than a million. For many years, this betrayal earned the clan a lasting hostility, and to a degree Kadyrov still rules by force, having progressively purged opponents, rivals and even on occasion his own supporters. However, a younger generation has come of age only experiencing Kadyrovite rule. While Ramzan's rule might previously have been precarious, it appears that generational change and the ability to provide patronage to younger people with few other prospects outside the Chechen state apparatus, other than moving away, has lent his regime a significant degree of stability, even resilience.

While GRU operations abroad are adjacent to those of Kadyrov, the methodologies overlap. Arguments that the scale of obstacles faced by the Wagner Group in the past indicate that Russian expeditionary operations will harm Western interests but ultimately provide little strategic benefit for Russia have some justification – Mozambique provides an example of repeated setbacks and limited progress. However, if they are allowed to solidify their influence or control unchallenged over many years and are able to conduct a high volume of influence operations and propaganda, their presence may be increasingly accepted, even as the downsides become apparent to regional actors entangled in isolation and dependency.

It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of Prigozhin's mutiny, the Russian state sought to bring much of its proxy force more directly under Moscow's control. Kadyrov, however, remains an outlier. Not only did he swiftly pledge loyalty to Putin, but Putin appears to retain confidence that despite Kadyrov's significant power base he will not create comparable disruption for the Kremlin in the future. It may be that at a personal level, Putin's trust is well placed. Beyond Kadyrov, however, Chechnya has a range of disputes with its neighbours inside Russia, especially with Ingushetia and Dagestan. How these disputes will manifest in a post-Kadyrov world is an interesting question. It is certainly evident that the Kremlin's comfort with Kadyrov's autonomy is not shared among Russia's Slav population. The irony is that the very diffusion of effort and entrepreneurialism that makes Russia's unconventional warfare capabilities dangerous remains a long-term threat to Russian stability.

Conclusion

This report has highlighted the growing and diversifying threat from Russian unconventional warfare targeting states beyond Ukraine. These activities contribute to the wider use of information operations and active measures to destabilise and subvert opposing states. The Russian playbook has been remarkably consistent for decades. The overall approach is to use information operations and active measures to polarise a target population, mobilise factions in support of allied elites, and paralyse support for opposing elements of a country's leadership. Human intelligence operations are used to attempt elite capture through the offer of assistance to politicians who support Russian interests. Finally, violence can be employed to escalate political tensions to the point of crisis, or in other contexts to isolate a captured elite.

This report, primarily concerned with the latter part of this cycle, has demonstrated three things. First, although the Russian capacity for covert violence in Europe was disrupted by the exposure of its personnel and the breaking up of elements of its support apparatus, the Russian state is actively working to rebuild this capacity. Second, the intent to achieve this reflects a wider intent to widen the aperture of its geostrategic competition with the West, which could manifest in Europe, but is already being carried out at scale in Africa. Third, as the example of Kadyrov shows, the kaleidoscopic and chaotic lines of effort pursued by Russia's special services – if left unchecked – will become increasingly mutually supporting and harder to disrupt.

Russian approaches are often crude and this report has detailed a litany of failures. Tradecraft and operational security are often poor, although the current process of restructuring and reform may bolster the capability for operations to remain undetected. There is a systemic problem in the Russian special services with a lack of independent analysis. Those tasked with implementing an operation are primarily responsible for assessing its likely success and are therefore prone to overestimate their capabilities. Nevertheless, the Russians persist and, if left unchecked, failures as experienced in Mozambique turn into successes as seen in Mali. Europe faces a slew of elections this year, and the initial chaotic application of active measures is steadily becoming more coherent under the close attention of Russia's Presidential Administration.

In the face of this threat, Western states must appreciate that undermining the human intelligence activity that supports unconventional warfare methods is vital to degrading Russia's capacity to employ the techniques described in this report. In this context, countering disinformation – while important – is far less

consequential than breaking Russia's access to and leverage over elites, and its support apparatus for active measures. This can be achieved through the exposure and arrest of its agents, intelligence officers and activities. Stepping up counterintelligence activity in this regard is an important priority. The risk is that the effort to constrain Russia becomes a McCarthyite paranoia. As a lot of Russia's unconventional operations are self-defeating, countering Russian unconventional warfare must be premised on careful, selective and intelligence-driven targeting. This is why having a broad understanding of Russian forms and methods is essential; it protects a state from jumping at shadows.

Finally, Russia's progress in Africa is referred to in this report as the formation of an 'Entente Roscolonial'. On the one hand, it is – as Russian officials admit internally – a colonial project to gain control over African governments and exploit the continent's natural resources. On the other hand, an entente – or informal and friendly alliance between factions – reflects the fact that Russia has been invited to take up this mantle and the juntas that are inviting the Russians in often have significant popular support, at least among the majority ethnic groups in their countries.

Russia's mandate is due to the West's strategic neglect and its failure to address the problems that its partners face. Russia may also fail to do this, but for now frustration with the West in both Africa and the Middle East is high. The point is that while Western states focus on rebuilding their conventional deterrence in Europe, strategic documents emphasising the nature of a global competition are being vindicated. Yet Western states are failing to compete. This must change. Russia is using unconventional warfare to advance its vision of a multipolar world order. This poses threats far beyond Ukraine. It is critical that Western states rise to meet that challenge.

About the Authors

Jack Watling is Senior Research Fellow for Land Warfare in the Military Sciences team at RUSI. Jack works closely with the British military on the development of concepts of operation and assessments of the future operating environment, and conducts operational analysis of contemporary conflicts. He is the author of *Arms of the Future: Technology and Close Combat in the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). Jack's PhD examined the evolution of Britain's policy responses to civil war in the early 20th century. Jack has worked extensively on Ukraine, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Rwanda and further afield. He is a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington DC.

Oleksandr V Danylyuk closely cooperated with Ukrainian government structures in the defence, security and intelligence sectors for many years. In 2014, he was the Chief Advisor to the Minister of Defence of Ukraine. He subsequently served as a Special Advisor to the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, Assistant to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and for many years was also a member of the Parliamentary Working Group on Countering Hybrid Threats. For the past few years, he has been the coordinator of the Ukraine–NATO platform for the early detection and countering of hybrid threats. Oleksandr is an Associate Fellow at RUSI.

Nick Reynolds is Research Fellow for Land Warfare in the Military Sciences team at RUSI. His research interests include land power, wargaming and simulation. Prior to joining RUSI, he worked for Constellis. He holds a BA in War Studies and an MA in Conflict, Security and Development from King's College London (KCL). During his studies, he was Head of Operations of the KCL Crisis Team, which organises large-scale crisis simulation events.