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**The Prigozhin Affair:
A Case Study of Ambition, Power, and Miscalculations in Putin's
Russia**

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Abstract

This research examines the rise and fall of Yevgeny Prigozhin within the context of Vladimir Putin's Russia, illuminating the complex dynamics of Russian patronal politics. Employing Henry Hale's theory of patronal politics and building upon Marlene Laruelle & Kevin Limonier's concept of entrepreneurs of influence, this study explores how hybrid entrepreneurs of influence like Prigozhin navigate the socio-political landscape and impact regime stability. The empirical analysis centres on Prigozhin's control over two key enterprises: the Wagner Group and a vast digital enterprise specializing in disinformation campaigns. By scrutinizing Prigozhin's global influence operations and the Wagner Group's role in the Ukraine conflict from 2022 to 2023, this research seeks to understand how hybrid entrepreneurs of influence manoeuvre within Russia's intricate patronal politics and the broader implications such actors have on regime stability. By contributing to the larger discourse on resiliency of patronal regimes and elucidating the crucial role of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence within such frameworks, this work offering insights into the precarious balance of power in contemporary Russian politics.

Keywords: Patronal politics, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, Yevgeny Prigozhin, semi state forces, Wagner Group, Internet Research Agency, Patriot Media Group, regime stability

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Research Question & Methodology	5
3. Methodological Constraints	6
4. Theoretical Considerations & Assumptions	8
5. The Selected Case of Yevgeny Prigozhin	10
6. Literature Review	11
6.1 Theoretical Framework	12
6.2 Debate on Resilience of Patronal Regimes	14
6.3 Selection & Application of Frameworks in the Context of Russia	16
6.4 Patronal Politics in Russia	17
6.5 Hybrid Entrepreneurs of Influence in Russia	19
6.6 Contextualization: Yevgeny Prigozhin	22
6.7 Contextualization: Semi State Forces & the Wagner Group	29
7. Empirical Analysis	38
7.1 The Digital Arm: the IRA and the Patriot Media Group	39
7.2 Prigozhin's Sword and Shield: the Wagner Group in Ukraine 2022 - 2023	48
8. Findings	62
9. Conclusion	65
10. Bibliography	67

1. Introduction

Under Vladimir Putin's increasingly personalized authoritarian regime, the closed world of politics in Russia revolves heavily around patronage networks and power struggles. The rise of savvy businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who seemed to emerge from the darkness into the global spotlight in 2022 as the infamous self-proclaimed leader of the Wagner Group during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has sparked significant interest among scholars and policymakers alike. Prigozhin's ostensibly sudden rise and swift demise raises critical questions about the nature of power dynamics within Russia's complex patronal networks and the potential for such individuals to act as legitimate destabilizing forces. Prigozhin's trajectory from a shadowy figure to a key player in the Ukraine conflict highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how such actors navigate the intricate tapestry of patron-client relationships that seem to permeate every facet of Russian society. By examining Prigozhin's case in detail, this thesis aims to provide compelling evidence that hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, with their unique combination of critical resources and high degree of autonomy, can pose significant threats to regime stability. Investigating the mechanisms through which these individuals amass power and influence can shed light on the inherent vulnerabilities of such systems and the potential for internal challenges to the status quo. In doing so, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature on hybrid entrepreneurs of influence in patronal politics, thereby deepening the understanding of complex power dynamics in societies characterized by patronal politics.

This thesis argues that hybrid entrepreneurs of influence navigating patronal networks in Russia are uniquely situated to act as serious regime destabilizers on account of their control over services deemed critical by those in power, most importantly semi state forces, and their position in the power vertical that allows them to retain a relatively high degree of operational freedom. By examining Prigozhin's trajectory, this work aims to reveal how the lack of institutional safeguards and

internecine power struggles enable the rise of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence who present unique threats to regime stability. Through an in-depth cross-sector analysis of arguably the two most powerful arms of Prigozhin's empire, control over information spaces and the semi state forces group the Wagner Group, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of entrepreneurs of influence operating in patronal politics.

The thesis is structured as follows: the following chapter will cover the research question, methodology, limitations, and theoretical considerations and assumptions. Next, the literature review chapter will be divided into the theoretical framework of patronal politics, scholarly debates on the resiliency of patronal regimes, the selection and application of patronal politics and entrepreneurs of influence, patronal politics in Russia, the conceptualization of entrepreneurs of influence in Putin's Russia, a contextualization of the Wagner Group, and an overview of Yevgeny Prigozhin life and career trajectory. The empirical analysis will then be presented in two chapters, focusing on the services that engendered Prigozhin's transformation into an entrepreneur of influence capable of providing the regime with critical resources. The first chapter will examine Prigozhin's influence over the digital realm with a broader time range and geographical scope to examine how this capacity fuelled his rise in power and solidified his position as an entrepreneur of influence. The second chapter will focus specifically on Prigozhin's control over the Wagner Group's involvement in the invasion of Ukraine from March 2022 to August 2023, showcasing the apex of his power as well as the factors that precipitated his subsequent demise. The findings and conclusion sections will then synthesize the lessons derived from analysing Prigozhin and discuss the broader implications for regime stability.

2. Research Question & Methodology

This thesis will analyse how influential entrepreneurs navigate within a regime structure dominated by patronal networks to better understand power dynamics and what threats these actors present to regime stability. Thusly, the research question steering this thesis is as follows:

How did Yevgeny Prigozhin, as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence, navigate Russia's intricate social equilibrium of patronal politics, and what are the implications of his case for regime stability?

To examine this research question, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach to analyse the case study of Yevgeny Prigozhin, focusing on his role as an entrepreneur of influence within Russia's patronal politics. The empirical analysis will focus on two key aspects of Prigozhin's wider enterprise: his control over the digital realm and his role as the patron of the semi state forces organization, the Wagner Group. To conduct such a study, historical analysis will be used to trace the evolution of Prigozhin's enterprises and the ways in which he wielded them over the years to better understand how they impacted his rise and fall. The study of Prigozhin's digital influence will span from 2010 to 2023, aiming to understand how managing the digital sphere contributed to his development as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence. In contrast, the analysis of the Wagner Group will be constrained to the group's involvement in the Ukraine conflict between 2022 and 2023, a period that encapsulates both the pinnacle of Prigozhin's power and his rapid downfall. By employing a single case study approach, this research aims to provide an in-depth investigation of Prigozhin's trajectory, offering valuable insights into the potential impact of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence within the context of Putin's Russia.

To conduct this qualitative case study, a diverse range of sources in both English and Russian will be utilized to gather comprehensive data on Prigozhin's influence and the Russian political landscape. These sources will include academic works, such as peer-reviewed journal articles and research papers related to entrepreneurs of influence, private military companies, and Russian foreign policy, which will provide a theoretical foundation and context for the study. Additionally, grey literature, including government reports, policy papers, and think tank publications will offer valuable insights into the political, economic, and security dimensions associated with the case of Prigozhin. Investigative reporting will also be utilized to contribute to a more detailed understanding of

developments involving Prigozhin's operations and relationships. By triangulating data from these diverse sources, this thesis aims to construct a robust analysis of Prigozhin as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence in patronalistic Russia.

3. Methodological Limitations & Research Gaps

While a single case study enables an in-depth examination, it is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with this approach. By concentrating on one case, the findings and conclusions derived from Prigozhin's experience may not be fully representative or generalizable to other cases, even within the context of Putin's Russia. Different hybrid entrepreneurs of influence may face unique challenges or outcomes based on their specific conditions and strategies. Thus, to strengthen the theoretical and empirical contributions of this study, it would be valuable to integrate comparative case study analysis either with other entrepreneurs of influence within Russia or extended internationally to other patronal regimes.

The availability of publicly accessible data poses another significant limitation to this study. Due to the opaque nature of Prigozhin's often illicit activities and the closed world of Russian patronal politics, obtaining relevant, accurate data was certainly a challenge. Despite efforts to gather data from diverse sources, there may be gaps in the available information, thus limiting the scope and depth of the analysis.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis was necessarily constrained to examining both the digital arm of Prigozhin's empire and the Wagner Group's involvement in the Ukraine War from 2022 to 2023. While these aspects are significant for understanding Prigozhin's role as a key hybrid entrepreneur of influence, they represent only a portion of the factors that contributed to his rise and fall. It is important to acknowledge that Yevgeny Prigozhin's control over the vast enterprise that comprised his Concord Holding company and its constellation of subsidiary companies was a significant aspect of his influence.

This facet of Prigozhin's portfolio was integral to his accumulation of wealth and social capital, fuelling his rise within Russia's power hierarchy. In many cases, however, the opaque nature of Prigozhin's business dealings and complex web of subsidiary companies under his control posed significant obstacles to a comprehensive examination of his corporate empire. Moreover, due to the challenges in obtaining publicly accessible data on these companies and the need to maintain a focused scope, this study did not include an in-depth analysis of this aspect.

To address these limitations, future research could expand the aperture of analysis by integrating comparative case studies, seeking additional data sources to fill information gaps, and examining Prigozhin's extensive network of subsidiary companies and ties to the elusive criminal underworld. Similarly, a deeper analysis of the expansive global operations of the Wagner Group could offer nuanced insights into the ways in which hybrid entrepreneurs of influence project power and advance their interests on the global stage. The implementation of quantitative network analysis techniques could also provide a useful visualized interpretation of the power dynamics within Prigozhin's patronal network, which may help identify patterns not apparent through qualitative methods alone. Such efforts would undoubtedly contribute to a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence within patronal regimes.

4. Theoretical Considerations and Assumptions

Assumptions will be drawn from a comprehensive integrated theoretical framework and conceptual framework. The theoretical framework will be grounded in Henry Hale's theory of patronal politics, while the conceptual framework will introduce the concept of 'hybrid entrepreneurs of influence' by further developing Laruelle & Limonier's (2021) notion of 'entrepreneurs of influence'. Central to this thesis is the assumption that Russia operates within a social equilibrium system of patronal networks, with Russian President Vladimir Putin occupying the integral role of chief-

patron. The intricacies of the how the system operates will be addressed within the subsequent literature review. Building upon this framework, the thesis will also make several key assumptions about the nature of Putin's regime.

A core assumption underpinning this thesis is the characterization of Putin's regime as a highly personalized (Petrov, Kazantsev, Minchenko, & Loshkariov, 2022). This assumption is based on the growing body of literature that highlights the increasing concentration of power in Putin's hands and the erosion of institutional constraints on his authority (Gunholm, 2019; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017; (Petrov, Kazantsev, Minchenko, & Loshkariov, 2022). As defined by Grundholm (2020), a personalized regime is an authoritarian system in which the leader has effectively limited the power of informal and formal institutions that could be leveraged by elites to either constrain their decision making or threaten their rule. In the case of Putin's Russia, this personalization is evident through the systematic dismantling of opposition, Putin's consolidation of power over the security apparatus, and the personalistic style of governance where loyalty holds the greatest importance (Petrov, Kazantsev, Minchenko, & Loshkariov, 2022). Another defining feature of such a regime is the conflation of an entire political system in one individual, essentially creating a 'one man rule' (Baturu & Elkink, 2021). As a result, the leader's personality possesses a disproportionate impact on shaping policy outcomes and dominates institutional law and norms in the society.

Scholars (Gunholm, 2019; Tausigg, 2017; Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017) have found that personalized regimes are more likely to undertake risky, aggressive foreign policy, due in large part to the lack of institutional accountability. The implementation of aggressive foreign policy can also be attributed to the immense stressors placed on the chief-patron to project strength to competing networks that are continually vying for leverage, most especially during periods when, impelled by a perception that the chief-patron is weak, make concerted efforts to better control political outcomes and shape the power structure (Grundholm, 2020). Studies (Gunholm, 2019) have also discovered a concerning rise in the number of observable personalized authoritarian regimes around the world. In light of this trend, this thesis aims to fill a scholastic gap in the

understanding of how entrepreneurs of influence navigate and steer such regime structures, with a specific focus on the Russian context under Putin's personalized rule.

Moreover, Baturo & Elkind (2021) argue that personalization and patronal politics are intrinsically interlinked, as "the power of the ruler in a patrimonial setting is not only unconstrained, but also personalized, often based on the personal loyalty of members of the elite". Given the interconnectedness of personalization and patronal politics, this thesis will operate on the assumption that Putin's regime is personalized, and that this personalization is a fundamental characteristic of how Russia's patronal politics function.

By grounding the theoretical section of this thesis in the aforementioned assumptions, the subsequent sections will discuss in greater detail the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This will include a detailed discussion of Hale's theory of Patronal Politics and Laruelle & Limonier's concept of 'entrepreneurs of influence', providing the reader a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and conceptual foundations to be applied in the empirical analysis.

5. The Selected Case of Yevgeny Prigozhin

This thesis will conduct an empirical case study of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a prominent entrepreneur who deftly navigated the complex landscape of Russia's patronal regime for over three decades. Prigozhin's trajectory, from an inexperienced hot dog vendor to a valuable service provider of the Kremlin, offers a unique and compelling perspective on the dynamics of power and influence within Russia's personalized patronal system. As he managed a vast enterprise that encompassed a wide array of sectors, Prigozhin provides a compelling case study in better understanding how his control over the armed Wagner Group and his management over the disinformation sphere contributed to his rise and fall, and in what ways he was able to present unique challenges to the regime.

More broadly speaking, Prigozhin's case has been selected to offer valuable insights into the strategies and mechanisms by which individuals in Russia can evolve

into hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, utilizing their positioning in the power structure to consolidate influence while maintaining a relatively high degree of operational flexibility. Prigozhin's case will also work to demonstrate the ways in which hybrid entrepreneurs of influence are poised to become significant regime destabilizers by virtue of their control over critical resources.

To fully grasp the significance of Prigozhin's case and its implications for understanding Russian power dynamics, it is necessary to first delve into the existing literature on patronal politics, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, and the specific context of Russia's patronal system. Thus, the literature will integrate Hale's theory of Patronal Politics with a refined interpretation of Laruelle & Limonier's concept of entrepreneurs of influence to introduce the notion of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence. This combined framework will guide the empirical examination of Prigozhin's role within Russian power dynamics.

6. Literature Review

This chapter will work to provide a comprehensive integrated framework for understanding the complex dynamics of Russian politics and the role of hybrid influential entrepreneurs in shaping the stability and trajectory of the regime. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for gaining insight into the resilience and adaptability of the Russian political system, with potential implications for other patronal regimes around the world. By synthesizing insights from diverse strands of scholarship, this literature review will lay the groundwork for a nuanced and empirically grounded analysis of Russian power structures to better contextualize the empirical case study of hybrid entrepreneur of influence, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Within this chapter, the reader will be presented with the theoretical framework of patronal politics, a scholarly debate on the resilience of patronal regimes, a conceptual framework of entrepreneurs of influence and hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, a contextualization of both frameworks in Russia, a contextualization of the Wagner Group, and finally a contextualization of Yevgeny Prigozhin. This comprehensive

approach will provide the reader with a robust foundation for understanding the complex interplay of formal and informal power structures in Russia, and the role of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence like Prigozhin in navigating and shaping these dynamics.

6.1 Theoretical Framework: Patronal Politics

Henry Hale's (2015) seminal theory of patronal politics refers to a social equilibrium in which political and economic objectives are pursued principally through informal personal networks, with loyalty incentivized through exchange-based rewards and punishments (2016). The social equilibrium remains fixed around an "authority based primarily on the personal power exercised by a ruler, either directly or indirectly" (Bakker, 2017). Such a fulcrum of authority is often referred to as the chief-patron. The central argument of patronal politics is based around the primary political goal of securing a resource-rich patron capable of delivering security guarantees to various clients (Hanson, 2015). In such a system, "patron(s) have a strong incentive to have more clients who 'are rich either in cash or in coercive capacity'" (Trochev, 2018). Consequently, the patron-client relationship is absolutely essential for survival and success, as elevation in status is attributed to connections rather than achievement (Root, 2015)

The dynamic of these patron-client relationships is designed to elicit an asymmetrical power balance that disproportionately benefits patrons. In this way, the patron judiciously dispenses benefits that have been calibrated to match the perceived value that can be extracted from the recipient (Root, 2015). Such a quid pro quo of reciprocity in an environment rife with corruption ensures a disproportionate level of dependency. Further, as patronalistic societies typically exhibit "weaker rule of law, greater perceived corruption, and scarcer social capital", the rule of law is not able to shield clients if they lose favour with those in power, thus compelling networks to rely on direct and personal access to a capable patron for survival and success (Hale, 2014; Hale, 2017). Indeed, the dominance of personalized networks over formal institutional controls reinforces the endemic corruption and nepotism seemingly inherent to patronal

politics. In this system, the expectation that most, if not all, actors engage in corruption and nepotism is as important as the expectations of who will remain in power and works to perpetuate the system (Hale, 2017).

Hale further argues that patronalistic societies are in a near constant battle to order themselves either into structures that more closely resemble politically closed single-pyramidal structures with a strong chief-patron, or more chaotic competing-pyramidal systems with multiple patrons competing for dominance (Hale, 2017). Single-pyramidal are believed to be more stable structures that exhibit high levels of network coordination that position a chief-patron at the pinnacle of the network (Torikai, 2023). In contrast, a competing-pyramidal system experiences lower levels of network coordination that enable a higher number of patrons to vie for dominance. This argument, however, is rather reductionist as patronalistic societies are capable of integrating both systems simultaneously. As such, a larger regime structure can encompass a single-pyramidal structure with a chief-patron in-place as well as a plethora of sub-pyramidal power structures with their own patrons feuding with other patrons within the same network for higher levels of power. This point will be further explored in the section discussing patronal politics in Russia.

Within patronalistic societies, expectations of the chief-patron's capabilities to remain a guarantor of resources and security is the primary driving force behind the stability of the regime (Hanson, 2015). This expectation extends throughout every network subordinate to a patron. Consequently, such logic is derived,

initial expectations that one particular patron is likely to become dominant thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy: once a clear patron has emerged, politics will indeed quickly be organized in a single 'pyramid' of power, in which the need to demonstrate loyalty to one's hierarchical superior will typically trump all other political considerations (Hanson, 2015).

In such a system, the chief-patron undoubtedly will feel more secure in their hold on power when surrounded by loyal allies in powerful positions that will act to insulate them from external threats. On the other hand, this type of structure exposes the regime to the inherent vulnerabilities associated with patronal networks, as the stability of the

structures itself is contingent upon the perception of the chief-patron's strength. As perceptions are in constant flux, particularly when internal and external pressures rise, the chief-patron must maintain the constant visage of capacity to maintain a monopoly on violence so as to ensure dominance over the ever-vigilant patronal networks.

Therefore, signals and perceptions of the chief-patron's strength are arguably the most important aspect for maintaining control over the patronal networks, and hence regime stability. As such, the injection of doubt into the network surrounding the chief-patron's capacity to uphold the perception of strength can have a drastic effect on the power structure. Doubts can emerge from an invariable number of sources. Perhaps the chief-patron's old age diminishes assumptions of power projection, or the chief-patron's term in office is nearing expiration and questions surrounding succession procedure are becoming more urgent (Hanson, 2015).

In any case, the reconfiguration of perceptions, and thus expectations, of the chief-patron's capabilities can occur rather swiftly and work to metastasize throughout the networks to become a serious threat to the chief-patrons monopoly of power. Hale (2015) argues that such regime breakdown rarely precipitates meaningful regime change, as the opportunity for power opens for those that are established subscribers of the patronal power structuring. Thus, the cycle of patronal regime politics begins anew with yet another pyramidal structure full of actors subscribed to the system and its transactional dynamics (Hanson, 2015). This recurrent formation of patronal networks, thereby leads into a deeper discussion on the debates surrounding the resilience of patronal regimes, particularly examining how such systems manage to sustain themselves in the face of mounting internal and external pressures.

6.2 Debates on Resilience of Patronal Regimes

Given the inherently personalized nature of patronal politics and the high level of personalization within Putin's regime, it is necessary to detail the scholarly debates that surround the resilience of such regimes. As the gravitational force of power centres around the chief-patron at the core of the socio-political sphere characterized by weak

institutional norms, a formalized line of succession is not apparent. Although Hale (2016) suggests that secession ambiguities may be mitigated by securing and maintaining public support, which sends a vital signal of enduring dominance and regime stability to the patronal network, scholars remain divided on whether patronal politics enhances or reduces a regime's stability when confronted by mounting stresses.

In terms of resilience, Geddes et al. (2018) argue that systems that rely disproportionately on personal relations rather than institutions, such as patronal regimes, are designed to more effectively consolidate power with the ruler and shield them from risk. While personalization may bolster coup-proofing mechanisms by fostering greater dependency on the leader to distribute resources while augmenting the leader's informational asymmetry (Song, 2022), others (Grundholm, 2019; Roessler 2011; Grundholm, 2020) contend that this strategy carries security trade-offs, as it increases the attractiveness of leveraging outsider challenges through the mobilization of violent rebellion as a more viable means for regime ousting. As such, within patronalistic regimes, "outsider challenges are made more effective, while [inversely] insider challenges are made less effective by the higher levels of personalization" (Grundholm, 2020). This correlation between heightened personalization and higher effectiveness of outsider challenges raises interesting questions, particularly when examining the empirical case study of Yevgeny Prigozhin. As a key player, Prigozhin leveraged control over the Wagner Group as well as his social capital among the *siloviki* (individuals in the security apparatus traditionally loyal to Putin) to precipitate a restructuring of the regime. This concept of influential entrepreneurs attempting to shape regime structure will be explored in the following sections.

Moreover, in times of heightened internal and external pressures, such as wartime, the chief-patron's ability to uphold the perception of their power becomes increasingly precarious as they are continually stress-tested by the patronal networks searching for signs of weakness (Hale, 2017). This uncertainty signals openings for opportunistic power jockeying in patronal systems that are hyper-focused on perceptions of power. Through this discussion on the highly personalized nature of patronal politics, along with the scholarly debates surrounding the resilience of regimes

operating within such social equilibrium, this work is now better positioned to transition into examining patronal politics in Russia as well as the conceptual framework of entrepreneurs of influence.

6.3 The Selection and Application of Patronal Politics and Hybrid Entrepreneurs of Influence in the Context of Russia

Hale's theory of patronal politics serves as the guiding theoretical framework for this thesis, as it provides an analytical lens suited for a deeper analysis of Russia's power bargaining system, which is built upon a highly patronalized society inherently distrustful of institutions (Batjargal, 2006). As Hale's (2015) theory of patronal politics posits that informal networks constitute the bedrock of a patronal society's social equilibrium, it is particularly apt for understanding the strategies and mechanisms leveraged by influential entrepreneurs to consolidate power and influence within the Russian context. The application of this theoretical framework to Putin's Russia will thereby allow the study to focus on relationships as the driving force in Russia's political landscape.

Indeed, the integration of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence as a conceptual framework will sharpen the analysis of power dynamics within contemporary Russia by examining a specific type of actor operating within the patronal network. Yevgeny Prigozhin's position as an influential entrepreneur who wielded significant wealth, social capital, and control over the semi-state forces of the Wagner Group renders him a compelling case study for examining how such figures are increasingly shaping the dynamics of patronal politics and presenting serious challenges to the stability of the regime. Thus, the conceptual framework will be applied to Prigozhin, focusing on his role as a critical services provider to the Kremlin in both the digital space and his control over the Wagner Group. The empirical analysis of the influential entrepreneur aims to glean insights into how such figures navigate patronal networks to enhance their status and, ultimately, pose a unique threat to regime stability.

Moreover, the scarcity of scholarly literature on hybrid entrepreneurs of influence underscores the value of this case study. By focusing on Prigozhin as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence in Russia, this thesis seeks to advance a more nuanced understanding of the how such actors navigate patronal regimes. Thus, by integrating the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, this study is better situated to uncover insights into the strategies of hybrid entrepreneur of influence within patronal societies and the potential challenges they pose to regime stability.

6.4 Patronal Politics in Putin's Russia

Patronal Politics have long coursed through the veins of Russia's historical legacy, permeating its power structures for centuries (Hale, 2017). While these informal networks have consistently influenced power dynamics throughout Russia's history, their prominence has waxed and waned in response to political developments and the various iterations of differing models of governance. From czarist autocracy to Soviet centralization to attempts at democratization, each era has moulded the political landscape of patronal influence, leaving an indelible mark on Russia's power structures.

While patronal politics have consistently woven the fabric of Russia's social equilibrium, discernible differences in the significance attributed to patronal politics across the eras are evident. Within the Soviet Union's rigid hierarchical model, the omnipotent Communist Party was able to impose control over the state as a conduit to deploy punitive sanctions on those who did not adhere to the unforgiving "formal and informal rules of the game" (Gel'man, 2015). On the other hand, Boris Yeltsin's era as president during the turbulent period after the fall of the Soviet Union was defined by the disintegration of the hierarchical model into more informal patron-client relations (Gel'man, 2015). The decentralization of the model helped keep the formal bureaucratic party-state afloat in the chaos that ensued, while ensuring the increased importance that patronal networks would come to play in post-Soviet Russia (Aslund, 1999).

In the post-Soviet landscape, the personalist nature of patronalism demands the balancing of power dynamics between sectoral political machines and informal cliques, as well as the deployment of a “divide and conquer” tactic to regulate internecine strife among the elites (Gel'man, 2015). The formation of these informal alliances and rivalries is an innate feature of patronal politics. As already established, this social equilibrium of patronal politics is intrinsically dynamic and at times highly volatile. In this way, although the regime may appear ostensibly stable with its insulation of regime allies, this is often merely a mask that is disguising deeper fragilities (Hale, 2017).

The vulnerabilities associated with patronal networks stem from a disregard for institutional safeguards, which allows for the cultivation of an atmosphere permeated by uncertainty that disproportionately benefits the chief-patron, thus driving contentious, opportunistic behaviour as actors in the network are forced to perpetually jockey for power. As such, high levels of corruption and nepotism are not a symptom but rather an essential feature and tool of control within Russia.

Moreover, during Yeltsin's era, Russia's patronal system was characterized as a competing-pyramid system in which violent rivalry went largely unchecked between regional leaders and oligarchs — who swiftly gained considerable amounts of power and capital as a result of rapid decentralization and privatization of the post-Soviet economy (Hale, 2017). Consequently, Putin's first order of business after assuming presidential powers in 2000 was likely to gain control over the chaotic galaxy of competing political machines.

In stark contrast to Yeltsin's chaotic seeming discombobulated reign, characterized by low network coordination, Putin's era has been defined by an increasingly “tight coordination of networks around his identity as the chief-patron” (Hale, 2017). The hierarchical power structure of Putin's Russia is typically defined as a “single power pyramid” (or “power vertical”) within which informal patronal pyramids, also referred to as political machines, work to manage the networks of patron-client relations (Gel'man, 2015; Hale, 2017). As such, the system works to encompass a single pyramidal model for the highest echelons of power, which is then broken down into a competing pyramidal structure. By the end of Putin's first two terms, he had

successfully re-configured the power dynamics of Russia by ensuring the most influential lower-level patronal networks were absorbed into a sweeping “nationwide political machine” or “power vertical” (Hale, 2017).

While the Russian patronal network is often defined as a single pyramidal structure, this argument is a bit too reductionist. A single pyramidal model is more appropriate for describing the “strategic sectors such as the military or energy, large companies that are deemed vital to the national economy, and foreign policy areas” (Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). The nationwide power vertical with its strategic sectors is then divided into smaller informal patronal pyramids, or political machines, that compete for resources and political/economic access. Eugene Huskey (1999) describes these political machines as “tools of control” that leverage parallel hierarchies responsible for controlling and monitoring various levels of the power vertical; “presidential administrations exert political control over governments, presidential representatives do the same vis-à-vis governors and city mayors, and so forth” (Gel'man, 2015). These parallel hierarchies are observed across all levels and sectors of Russian society such as law enforcement, education, and businesses. Such divisions encourage the microosomal formation of informal cliques that then compete with other cliques both within the political machine and other political machines. For instance, within the business sector, Rosneft competes aggressively against Gazprom for access to Putin, as Rosneft’s economic success has largely been attributed to Putin’s preferential “benevolence” (Baev, 2014).

The current patronal network within Russia has manifested in three types: oligarchs, regional political machines, and state-based networks (Hale, 2016). Putin has also successfully leveraged his robust network within the intelligence apparatus to reinforce his most trusted patronage structure (often referred to as the *siloviki*) (Bowen, 2021). In this way, he has appointed a significant number of close allies from the security services into high office, establishing well-insulated patron-client networks dependent on his power brokering capacity, which have come to dominate the closed political environment (Zygar, 2024). Notably, the patronage network consolidates a broad array of other sectors to ensure a wider sphere of influence, with Putin

exchanging fidelity from powerful oligarchs, regional machine heads, and entrepreneurs of influence for economic privileges and political access (Hale, 2016). The next section will examine this concept of entrepreneurs of influence in greater depth.

6.5 Hybrid Entrepreneurs of Influence in Putin's Russia

Scholars have worked to develop a more nuanced understanding of actors within Russia's patronal network referred to as 'entrepreneurs of influence' (Laruelle & Limonier, 2021; Samuelsen, 2022). Marlene Laruelle and Kevin Limonier have contributed significantly to the conceptual framework of entrepreneurs of influence, highlighting their key role as tools for the Kremlin to reinforce and expand Russia's influence both domestically and abroad.

First let us address the conceptualization of influence. Merriam-Webster defines it as "the power or capacity of causing an effect in indirect or intangible ways" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In the context of Russia, influential entrepreneurs do not directly exert power over Putin but rather offer services capable of augmenting the Kremlin's ability to develop and implement policies and shape narratives.

Next, let us address the concept of entrepreneurs. An entrepreneur may be defined as an "individual who, by risk or initiative, use their own means, be it political, financial, or social, to earn a profit" (Samuelsen, 2022). Research suggests that Russian entrepreneurs rely heavily on informal networks for economic success, a trend attributed to historical trauma and distrust of institutions (Batjargal, 2005; Batjargal, 2007) In many ways, historical trauma from the Soviet shortage economy, and the widespread instability following the collapse of the Soviet Union manifested into a generalized distrust of institutions among the Russian population. Consequently, the country still maintains as core features of the economy, high levels of personal bargaining, which reinforces the highly personalized, patronal nature of business dealings (Batjargal, 2006). As such, Russian entrepreneurs judiciously "recruit resource-rich and powerful contacts in their personal networks" so as to leverage personal relationships with powerful patrons who act as safeguards in an environment that is

inherently institutionally and economically unstable (Batjargal, 2006). Bearing this in mind, the empirical analysis of Yevgeny Prigozhin, an exemplar of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, will make an appropriate case study for better understanding how such figures leverage personal networks within Putin's Russia to gain power.

Building on this understanding of the importance of informal networks for Russian entrepreneurs, Laruelle and Limonier (2021) conceptualize 'entrepreneurs of influence' in the context of Russia. The term entrepreneur of influence is used as an umbrella concept to describe various entrepreneurs who "use their own financial and social capital to invest in a sector, hoping that the Kremlin will provide a return on investment-whether financial and/or political" (Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). These actors operate with the understanding that operational failure will be met with disavowal by authorities or worse. Laruelle and Limonier (2021) further refine the umbrella concept of entrepreneurs of influence by defining three distinct categorizations:

- 1) Integral actors in Russia's public diplomacy who enjoy institutional status, such as oligarchs, who closely coordinate with the Kremlin to fund the promotion of Russia abroad. These individuals typically engage in overt cultural diplomacy and tend to avoid heavy investment in the digital sphere due to their established institutional status that allows them to engage in overt cultural diplomacy.
- 2) Individuals who work outside the sphere of official public diplomacy and lack clear institutional recognition by the Russian state. As such, they often must rely on higher-positioned figures in the vertical of power to consolidate support for projects from central authorities. These actors typically view investments in the digital sphere as a key launching sector for amassing influence in a relatively low risk environment with lower barriers to entry.
- 3) Foreign personalities who negotiate the use of their services in their home country or in a third country but lack direct access to official Russian structures. While they may possess the highest degree of operational freedom, they are left to speculate about their actual position

of power as near-complete outsiders and act as “free electrons at their own financial and legal peril”.

The degree of autonomy afforded to entrepreneurs of influence is difficult to discern, as their initiatives often appear unconnected, opportunistic, and at times contradictory. However, they all seem to operate within the overarching strategic framework determined by the Kremlin’s great power aspirations. By utilizing these entrepreneurs of influence in varying capacities, the Kremlin maintains plausible deniability while optimizing its chances of achieving its broader goals through a divide and conquer approach. If the initiative fails, the entrepreneur of influence shoulders the blame, and if it is successful, the actor may be rewarded with an official state endorsement (Laruelle & Limonier, 2021).

As the empirical case study will focus on Yevgeny Prigozhin, who best fits within the bounds of the second category, this thesis will categorize him as a ‘hybrid entrepreneur of influence’. This term describes an actor who maintains the façade of a legitimate businessman while simultaneously acting as a patron to various Kremlin-deemed critical covert activities. These actors typically operate primarily in the spheres of digital services and semi state forces beneath the threshold of official state recognition. Admittedly, the distinction between oligarchs and hybrid entrepreneurs of influence remains ill-defined, further reflecting the complex and often opaque nature of power structures within Russia’s patronal system, in which individuals are encouraged to wield influence through a combination of formal and informal channels.

Despite this conceptual ambiguity, the term hybrid entrepreneur of influence will be used to situate the discussion on this second categorization of entrepreneurs of influence. These individuals are unique in that they are able to leverage their lack of overt institutional recognition to maintain a higher level of autonomy and operational freedom. By focusing on Prigozhin as an example of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, this research aims to better understand the complex dynamics of power and influence within Russia’s patronal system, and how these dynamics enable such actors to gain control of destabilizing forces that can ultimately undermine the very regime they were designed to bolster.

6.6 Contextualization: Yevgeny Prigozhin

Early Life

Born June 1, 1961, in Leningrad Russia, Yevgeny Prigozhin grew up with a checkered past. His father died when he was young, and his mother worked long hours in a hospital. Prigozhin's stepfather, Samuil Zharko, was a ski coach and inspired young Prigozhin to pursue cross-country skiing as a career (Kondratieva, 2023). Yevgeny spent his youth enrolled in a sporting academy, preparing for a future in cross-country skiing. Unable to fulfil his dream due to an injury, he found community amongst petty criminals (Dettmer, 2023). In 1981, a Soviet court found Prigozhin guilty of crimes related to drunkenness, fraud, gambling, and several robberies (Munro, 2024). Consequently, he was sentenced to 13 years in a penal colony. In 1988 Prigozhin was pardoned and released in 1990 (Zhegulev, 2013).

Business Beginnings

Upon his release, Prigozhin and his stepfather launched a hot dog selling business in the Aprashkin Dvor market block in St. Petersburg (Kondratieva, 2023). One consequential day in 1991, while working, Prigozhin ran into a former boarding school classmate, Boris Spektor (Marten, 2020). Spektor was a well-connected businessman who invited Prigozhin to assist in the management of Contrast, the first chain of private grocery stores in the city owned by Mikhail Mirilashvili, a strong player in Saint Petersburg who had close ties to Russia's criminal underworld (Zhegulev, 2013; Milton Friedman Institute, 2023). It should be further noted that Mirilashvili was already well-established in Russia as a close friend and financier of political heavy weight Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg who also served as mentor and boss to a young Vladimir Putin (Molfar, 2024). While working at Contrast, Prigozhin met and befriended Kirill Ziminov, who joined the Contrast business in 1993 as commercial director (Milton Friedman Institute, 2023). The two would go onto buy apartments on the same floor and car-pool to work for years, showcasing the tight bond the two had formed (McKay, 2023). With growing wealth and success, Prigozhin was keen to join Spektor and his influential partners on a project to develop St. Petersburg's casino scene.

Casino Market

In the early 1990s, Spektor, Igor Gorbenko, and Mirilashvili founded St. Petersburg's first and most lucrative casino, Konti, with Prigozhin acting as manager (Molfar, 2024). During this time, Putin was heading the permanent Supervisory Council for Casinos and Gambling, which likely led to the fateful crossing of paths between him and Prigozhin (Milton Friedman Institute, 2023). As the Deputy Mayor of St. Petersburg, Putin was responsible for overseeing the city's rapidly expanding casino industry, and in this capacity, he cultivated strong business relationships with the rising entrepreneurs (Knight, 2019).

While working under Sobchak, Putin was also tasked with leading the Committee for Foreign Liaison that created Neva-Chance, a municipal enterprise designed to regulate the stakes the city received from casinos (Samuelsen, 2022). Neva-Chance developed over twenty-five companies in the gambling sphere and inserted ex-FSB officials as heads that acted as liaisons to the Russia's underworld (Grant, 2022). Igor Gorbenko served as the deputy director of Neva-Chance while dually holding a major shareholding role in the Konti Casino - a common conflict of interest that enabled Gorbenko to deliver favourable economic arrangements both to the state and its stakeholders in the booming industry (Samuelsen, 2022). Consequently, Putin, Gorbenko, Spektor, Mirilashvili, and Prigozhin were able to continue profiting from corrupt business dealings away from troublesome oversight while further insulating themselves from economic rivals. Through investments and direct exposure to the casino market, Prigozhin was thus able to foster key connections with both Russia's underworld and its elites. These would be crucial for securing influential patrons who would later support Prigozhin's expanding enterprise.

Concord Empire & Gourmet Restaurants

In 1995 Prigozhin co-founded Concord Management and Consulting, which swiftly became one of the country's largest holding companies, and a critical obfuscation tool for Prigozhin's expanding enterprise (Lohmus, 2023). As a direct result of Prigozhin's expanding network of influential players, Concord Management and Consulting quickly began absorbing other companies, encompassing a wide array of

sectors including “retail, catering, gambling, marketing research, installation and construction work, and foreign trade” (Knight, 2019). This company served as the umbrella organization for what would evolve into a vast and shadowy corporate structure, equipped to obfuscate illegitimate business dealings within the folds of its subsidiaries. In 1996, Concord established a catering subsidiary, Concord Catering, and quickly expanded to dominate the fine dining and catering market (Molfar, 2024).

In 1996 Prigozhin partnered with his close friend and colleague Kirill Ziminov to open the first gourmet restaurant in Saint Petersburg, the Old Customs House (Molfar, 2024). Behind the scenes of this ambitious restaurant project loomed one of its most impactful yet hidden patrons: Aslan Usoyan, better known as “Ded Hasan”, a notorious mafia kingpin in Russia’s underworld (Zapolsky, 2020). Shortly thereafter, Prigozhin expanded his restaurateur empire by introducing a series of upscale dining establishments across the city, Cheers, Russian Kitsch, 7:40, and Stroganov Palace (Milton Friedman Institute, 2023). In 1998, buoyed by influential patrons, Prigozhin launched what would become St. Petersburg’s most expensive and prestigious restaurants, the floating New Island (Knight, 2019). Indeed, Prigozhin curated his restaurant business model to cater to an affluent and well-connected clientele to draw the gaze of high-ranking politicians and influential crime bosses (Milton Friedman Institute, 2023). This strategic approach optimized his chances of creating relationships with powerful patrons from a diverse array of sectors, thereby fueling his economic ambitions. Most famously, Vladimir Putin and Anatoly Sobchak both became frequent patrons of the Old Customs House and New Island restaurants, whereby Putin would meet with the likes of former presidents and prime ministers (Gorynavo, 2023; Milton Friedman Institute, 2023).

While Prigozhin and Putin were at least familiar with each other from the days of working in the casino industry, it’s important to note that Prigozhin’s fine-dining restaurants played a pivotal role in strengthening their ties, which enabled Prigozhin to rise within the power hierarchy. As Prigozhin expanded his business enterprise, he gradually earned Putin’s trust by forging relationships with those in his orbit. Yevgeny worked to develop a relationship with Putin’s security chief Viktor Zolotov who would

reportedly act as the conduit for Prigozhin's personal relationship with Putin (Corcoran, 2023). Prigozhin then became close with Putin's personal bodyguard, Roman Tsepov (Zhegulev, 2013). These connections provided Prigozhin a more direct pathway into Putin's orbit, allowing him to ingratiate himself within the circle by showcasing charm and humour (Walker & Sauer, 2023). Putin would come to rely on Prigozhin's services for catering prestigious birthday celebrations and high-profile state dinners with influential world leaders (Walker & Sauer, 2023). This burgeoning relationship earned Prigozhin the moniker *Putin's Chef*, and, in patronalistic fashion, ensured that his subsidiary companies secured lucrative contracts from the Kremlin and its elites in the future (Knight, 2019). Notably, in 2003, Putin chose to celebrate his birthday on Prigozhin's floating New Island restaurant, symbolizing Prigozhin's growing relationship with Putin— a development that came at a cost (Zhegulev, 2013).

By this point in the early 2000s, Prigozhin harboured ambitions of transitioning from a caterer/restaurateur to a larger player in the business world, but for this he would have to pay a price to his former partners. By 2001 Mikhail Mirilashvili and Prigozhin found themselves locking heads over ownership rights of the lucrative fine-dining restaurants. Initially, Mirilashvili demanded control of the flagship Old Customs House, but in the end, negotiations resulted in the transfer of the restaurant 7:40 over to Mirilashvili (Zhegulev, 2013). That then left Kirill Ziminov. Ziminov agreed to cede his stake in Concord Catering in exchange for one million dollars, an agreement which Prigozhin would only partially fulfill (Zakharov, Arenina, Reznikova, & Rubin, 2023). With these obstacles out of the way, Prigozhin was free to develop into a bigger player in the market.

From 2000 onwards, Prigozhin leveraged his control over Concord Holding to diversify his enterprise further, branching out into major construction projects, fast food chains, and broader catering services (Molfar, 2024). In 2008, Prigozhin's Concord Catering secured the competitive tender to provide food for school cafeterias in Saint Petersburg, and in 2010 the Concord Culinary Line, yet another subsidiary of Concord Holding, built a factory in Yanino (Zhegulev, 2013). This project received substantial funding from the state-owned Vneshekonombank, with Sergey Ivanov, a Kremlin insider

and frequent patron of Prigozhin's New Island restaurant, serving on its board until 2011 (Samuelsen, 2022). Putin, who at the time occupied the position of prime minister, chaired the supervisory board of the project, and famously attended the opening ceremony of the factory (Samuelsen, 2022). The direct involvement of Putin and Ivanov highlights the extensive influence and informal workings of the patronage network that permeates every sphere in Russia.

By the early 2010's, Prigozhin's companies were a dominant force in the catering industry, bolstered by the established contracting for school lunches and the addition of lucrative new deals with the Ministry of Defence. By 2012, Vladimir Pavlov, the lead contracting coordinator for the Russian Army's food services, was ensuring 90 percent of contracts were granted to subsidiaries affiliated with Prigozhin, amounting to an estimated value of \$2.8 billion (Lohmus, 2023). Prigozhin's ties with the Defence Ministry only continued to deepen; by the end of 2014 Concord subsidiaries received contracts for cleaning services at military facilities and the maintenance of entire military towns (Purysova, 2023). By 2015, Prigozhin controlled 90 percent of all meals supplied to Moscow schools, contracts that totalled \$346 million (Purysova, 2023). Notably, Prigozhin's influence extended to the highest levels of government, with his company Concord Catering servicing the Kremlin's New Year's reception from 2013 to 2018. This contract, however, likely ended due to U.S. sanctions imposed on Prigozhin following his uncovered involvement in the 2016 American presidential election interference (Samuelsen, 2022).

Transformation into a Hybrid Entrepreneur of Influence

By 2010, Prigozhin had amassed sufficient social capital and wealth to become a competitive provider of 'special services' to the Kremlin in the digital and psychological operations space. Such services included "bot attacks on web pages deemed objectionable, the infiltration of oppositional movements, and arranged provocations" (Samuelsen, 2022). Amid the political turmoil triggered by Putin's return to the presidency in 2011, the regime was eager to quell mass protests with such services. Seizing this opportunity, Prigozhin directed Dmitri Koshar, the head of Concord Catering, to infiltrate the protests (Girin & Khachatryan, 2012). Koshar's mission was

twofold: to collect information on Putin's political adversaries and to organize additional demonstrations to gather footage for the propaganda film 'Anatomy of Protest' (Girin & Khachatryan, 2012). The film aimed to reinforce the Kremlin's narrative that Western entities had funded the protesters to sow discord and destabilize the country (Horvath & Isabella, 2023). Prigozhin's capacity to organize the infiltration of opposition movements and produce propaganda material demonstrated to the authorities his effectiveness in aligning with and advancing the Kremlin's interests. This performative display of loyalty, coupled with his expansive enterprise, paved the way for the creation of an even more formidable propaganda tool – the Internet Research Agency (IRA).

The IRA, also known as the "troll farm", was established in St. Petersburg's Olgino district as a legally registered "private entity that [would] operate with direct approval and endorsement from Russian President Vladimir Putin" (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). While the exact date of the IRA's start date remains uncertain, by 2013, it was actively conducting influence operations both domestically and internationally (Durant, 2019; Purysova, 2023). The mission of the IRA was to leverage advanced audience targeting capabilities, enabled by sophisticated bot technology and a team of skilled cultural and linguistic operators, "to sow discord and division in nations that were not aligned with Russia's geopolitics and to undermine confidence in democratic institutions" (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). The IRA, therefore, emerged as a critical instrument of power, further empowering the Kremlin in its ambitions to extend its reach over both domestic and international information spaces. As the primary financier, Prigozhin's central role in the influential IRA was a significant development in his climb to power that cemented his status as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence.

Prigozhin's role as patron provided the Kremlin with a wide net of Concord shell companies to better obfuscate funding being funnelled into the investment of the IRA and other information manipulation operations. Claims have been made that Prigozhin's first involvement with information manipulation began in 2009, but most sources point to 2011 as protests erupted in Russia in response to Putin's return to the presidency (Brankova, 2024). In any case, the IRA was tasked with amplifying Kremlin talking

points in domestic discussion forums but would later be developed to inject and flood foreign information spaces with Kremlin-approved narratives (Walker & Sauer, 2023).

It would later be revealed that the IRA was responsible for coordinating a number of disparaging disinformation campaigns with the malicious intent of spreading false news, sowing discord, and influencing political outcomes. Most notably, the organization was found to have begun targeting the United States in 2014 and was culpable in interferences in both the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Munro, 2024). The U.S. government responded by imposing sanctions on Prigozhin and, in 2018, issued a warrant for his arrest (Bowmen, 2023).

The IRA was revealed to be one component under a larger umbrella known as Project Lakhta, which was responsible for disseminating propaganda and coordinating influence operations domestically and internationally on behalf of the Kremlin (Durant, 2019). This extensive project was bankrolled by Prigozhin through the labyrinth of Concord channels (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). Reports indicate that Concord kept records of payments for IRA software and IT services, “which were then more deeply concealed by being routed through at least 14 separate bank accounts held in its name and the names of its business affiliates” (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). This elaborate financial framework was designed to mask the Kremlin’s involvement with the project (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). Yevgeny Prigozhin’s role as the financier for Project Lakhta epitomized his evolution from a catering mogul into a competitive hybrid entrepreneur of influence, providing services tailored to the Kremlin’s strategic needs. This trend of expansion would launch Prigozhin into the market of semi state forces.

As Yevgeny Prigozhin’s ascent from a hotdog vendor to a key entrepreneur of influence in the information space has been traced, the focus now shifts to another critical factor that defined his rise – the semi state forces market and his control over the Wagner Group. The following section will contextualize the operational dynamics and strategic implications of semi state forces in Russia. Though presented as private entities, these groups function as extensions of the state, offering the Kremlin a number of strategic benefits (Foley & Kaunert, 2022). The Wagner Group, financed by

Prigozhin, will serve as a prime example of how the Kremlin utilizes such forces to advance its array of geopolitical objectives.

6.7 Contextualization: Semi State Forces & the Wagner Group

Semi State Forces in Russia

It should be noted that this sub-section constitutes the author's previous study conducted on Russia's use of semi state forces (Gibson, 2023).

Over the span of the last decade, Russia has illustrated a heightened proclivity for the outsourcing of military and security functions in the form of ostensibly private military companies (PMCs) that have come to be referred to as semi state forces, on account of their capacity to act as an extension of the state apparatus (Marten 2019, Fouley & Kaunert 2022). Paul Stronski (2020) notes that contemporary Russian semi states have emerged as a conglomeration of “force multipliers, arms merchants, trainers of local military and security personnel, and political consultants”, all done in the interest of extending the Kremlin’s geopolitical reach and advancing its foreign policy objectives. Although Russian PMCs are officially registered as private entities in other countries, close ties with the state apparatus are maintained. This is on account of the groups often being financed by powerful Russian patrons and operated by former members of the Russian military or intelligence structures who maintain close working relationships with the Kremlin. As mentioned earlier, a hallmark of a patronalistic society is a weak rule of law, which Russia certainly wields as a tool of control to keep semi state forces inline.

While PMCs, that are defined as providing services in both offensive and defensive capabilities, remain illegal under Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code (Doxsee, 2022), Private Security Companies, differing from PMCs in that they are ostensibly constrained to purely defensive security services and training, are officially registered entities that have been legally operating since 1992 (Marten, 2019). This legal loophole allows Russia’s commodity powerhouses, such as Gazprom and Transneft, to hire security units authorized to engage in predominately law enforcement-

like activities (Marten, 2019). Anna Borschevskaya (2019) further explains, although PMCs remain illegal, perversely it is this illegal status that has facilitated the growth of the semi state forces industry, as the vague legal framework is used as a leveraging tool “to maintain power dynamics and ensure loyalty within the rivalries of cronies around Putin”. This sentiment is shared by Paul Stronski who notes that several proposals put forth by the Duma to legalize Russian PMCs have been blocked, as the legal grey zone enables the state to uphold plausible deniability when international law or human rights are violated (2020). Furthermore, Borshchevskaya put forth an interesting proposition arguing the correlation between a legal grey zone and increased state plausibility remains unclear. In a similar vein, Kimberly Marten (2019) noted that the connection between plausible deniability and PMC illegality is not well-defined, as plenty of states use legal PMCs for operations they wish to conceal. Notably, Russia is not a signatory of the Montreux Doctrine, which outlines the international norms relating to private military security companies (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2009). As such, Russian semi state forces operates outside of established international norms and regulations and raise serious concerns over their blatant disregard for humanitarian standards (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020; Gubanov, 2023). Moreover, the extensive media coverage of Russian PMCs, and their atrocities, has essentially rendered plausible deniability an inadequate justification for the state’s reluctance to rectify their legal status. The plausible deniability argument has further been reduced by public statements made by Putin, that the state provided nearly one billion dollars to the Wagner Group from 2022-2023 (Maddocks, 2023).

Nonetheless, the state’s power and influence under this legal system is undoubtedly augmented, as the capricious application of law generates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty within the industry. Marten (2019) illustrates Russia’s ad hoc application by highlighting the 2013 arrest and conviction of two leaders of Slavonic Corps, a Russian semi state forces group (which many presume to be the predecessor to the Wagner Group) that was registered in Hong Kong, following a failed operation to maintain control of oil facilities in Eastern Syria against Islamic State forces. While the two were found to have been in breach of Article 359 outlawing mercenary behaviour, it remains unclear as to why Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) decided to press

charges, for the two were contracted by a Russian state ally (Marten, 2019). In any case, under this system, the state enjoys significant leveraging power as semi state forces may be more willing to comply with state demands to avoid legal repercussions or punishment. Given Russia's pervasive patronage system, the ambiguous laws ensure Putin's cronies, like Prigozhin, remain dependent on the Kremlin's power vertical, while also guaranteeing a portion of the group's accumulated wealth will be shared with the state, or more specifically its officials (Marten, 2020; Borshchevskaya, 2019). Indeed, the ambiguous legal framework surrounding semi state forces, coupled with the patronage system, not only solidifies the Kremlin's control over these groups but also ensures the state receives numerous benefits from their employment.

The deployment of semi state forces offers Russia such benefits as: plausible deniability; casualty avoidance (semi state forces "losses are not subject to the same scrutiny as military losses"); increased manoeuvrability associated with rapid deployment and withdrawal capacities; and cost efficiency, as these groups often receive substantive funding through oligarchical patrons (Congressional Research Service, 2020). Moreover, operations undertaken by semi state forces allow the state to conduct low-risk foreign policy experiments where "new modes of international influence can be tried without much cost to the Russian state if they go wrong" (Marten, 2020). The deployment of semi-state forces also provides the Russian military with an invaluable testing ground for new weapon systems and tactics, which has serious implications for future disputes (Sukhankin, 2019). Overall, an ambiguous legal system and multifaceted relationship between state apparatuses, the oligarchy, and semi state forces enables the Kremlin to employ scalable expeditionary units with relative ease. This arrangement allows the state to operate outside the bounds of conventional legal frameworks and enjoy a multitude of benefits. As Russia strategically leverages semi state forces to achieve its broad foreign policy objectives, the subsequent sections will discuss the origins and emergence of the notorious Wagner Group to provide context.

The case of the Slavonic Corps clearly demonstrated the Russian state's capricious application of the law and the risks faced by semi state forces operating in the legal grey zone. Despite these challenges, the demand for Russian semi state forces has continued to grow, fuelled by the Kremlin's ambitious geopolitical agenda. As

such, from the ashes of the Slavonic Corps the Wagner Group emerged. With its deep connections to the Russian security apparatus and patronage from well-connected Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Wagner Group quickly became an effective instrument for the Kremlin to project power and influence abroad.

Origins

The origins of the Wagner Group are rooted in the private security firm, Antiterror-Orel, which was established in the early 1990s by a cadre of GRU veterans and retired/reserve special forces operators (*Spetsnaz*) to provide security services to Russian energy companies in Iraq and demining operations in the Balkans (Rondeaux, 2019). A splinter of Antiterror-Orel, Moran Security Group headed by Kremlin insider Vyacheslav Kalashnikov, in the 1990s began offering much-needed security services in counter-piracy for some of Russia's largest shipping companies (Marten, 2019). The company's Deputy Director, Boris Chikin would go on record noting these security companies "operate under contract to state-run enterprises under the auspices of joint military operational teams overseen by Russia's Ministry of Defence" (Rondeaux, 2019). Later Chikin would argue "Moran is not a Russian company, we are registered in a different country [Iraq]" in an effort to uphold the legitimacy of the organization and maintain the state's plausible deniability (Lohmus, 2023). Chikin further emphasized, as long as the Moran Security Group remained registered in Baghdad, operations fell within the bounds of international law and would continue. Many companies dealing in the same business would emulate this model of headquartering their company in a different country to uphold plausible deniability.

In 2012 the Moran Security Group was accused of arms smuggling in Nigeria, and nine of the company's guards were arrested in a raid on a Russian-owned ship in the port of Lagos (Marten, 2019). The men were released to the Russian embassy in Nigeria in 2013, a move that illustrated the Russian government's willingness to intervene for private security employees safeguarding state assets (Rondeaux, 2019). During this time, the Moran Security Group began funnelling Russian veterans into a new break away security firm called Slavonic Corps - headquartered in Hong Kong – to

support Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime as the Syrian Civil War raged (Sukhankin, 2019; Ray, 2024).

By October of 2013, hundreds of Slavonic Corps contractors were deployed to Syria supporting Assad's regime, one of which was former-GRU and former Moran Security Group operator, Dmitri Utkin, an important figure that will be discussed further (Krutov & Dobrynin, 2023). The men's primary objective was to secure control of oil facilities and free up operational space for President Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Army in the Eastern Deir-El-Zor region, which faced imminent threats from insurgencies and the Islamic State (Sukhankin, 2019). During one of the first engagements with the Islamic State, the men realized that their Soviet-era weaponry was sufficiently inadequate for mission success (Sukhankin, 2019). After several contractors were injured, the men withdrew to the Latakia airbase, and flew back to Moscow on chartered planes. Upon their return Vadim Gusev and the Head of Personnel, Yevgeny Sidorov, were promptly arrested (Dreyfus, 2020). This marked the first instance of a conviction for mercenary behaviour under Article 359.

As to why the two men were prosecuted remains a mystery that further showcases how the capricious application of law bolsters the Kremlin's control (Marten, 2019). The conditions of their business appeared to satisfy the Kremlin's tacit requirements – the contract was with a Russian state ally, an FSB reserve officer was the official point of contact (although he was not arrested), and the company was officially registered in another country (Marten, 2019). Nevertheless, in 2014 the Slavonic Corps was disbanded, giving way for the emergence of a new semi state organization, the Wagner Group (Sukhankin, 2019).

The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group, established in 2014 under the financial patronage of Yevgeny Prigozhin and the operational leadership of GRU veteran Dmitri Utkin, is a semi state, expeditionary group operating under the auspices of a private entity. Over the years, it has evolved into a hub of transnational networks, connecting shell companies affiliated to Prigozhin, to provide stakeholders with financial gains and jointly progress the Kremlin's geopolitical goals (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023).

Although, as already discussed, PMCs are illegal in Russia, connections between the Wagner Group and the Russian military and intelligence apparatuses were long presumed. In fact, in June 2023, Putin's stated that the Wagner Group was "fully funded by the state" (Ray, 2024). The group serves as "a vehicle the Kremlin uses to recruit, train, and deploy mercenaries, either to fight wars or to provide security and training" (Reynolds, 2019).

Initially deployed to provide offensive capabilities during the annexation of Crimea and subsequent combat support to separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine (Marten, 2019), Wagner troops became known as the 'little green men' on account of their unmarked uniforms (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). After the successful Crimean operation, the Wagner Group began training in 2015 at a base in Molmino, conveniently located next to a GRU special operations facility, emblematic of the close ties between the two (Reynolds, 2019; Katz, Jones, Doxsee, & Harrington, 2020). That same year, the group deployed to Syria to act as force multipliers for President Bashar al-Assad's and safeguard valuable oil and gas plants (Sukhankin, 2019). Over the last decade, the Wagner Group has coordinated with the Kremlin and its security apparatus to expand its global footprint further, providing "regime survival packages" to predatory regimes in as many as 30 countries across Africa, South America, Europe, and the Middle East (Reynolds, 2019; Katz, Jones, Doxsee, Harrington, 2020; Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023; Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). Particularly in Africa, the Wagner Group has served as both a source of stability and instability, depending on both the Kremlin and the client's specific needs (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). The group's lack of organizational structure allows the Kremlin to utilize its flexible scalability, operating in some locations as an extension of the Russian armed forces and in others more as a commercial enterprise (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023).

In exchange for their services, including paramilitary training, combat support, intelligence capabilities, protective services, and information campaign services, the Wagner Group often receives lucrative mining concessions (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). Such concessions typically comprise precious metals, timber, and

increasingly, access to antiquities smuggling, which aid Moscow's efforts to mitigate the impact of sanctions (Katz, Jones, Doxsee, & Harrington, 2020). Typically, these contracts are secured by Prigozhin-affiliated shell companies and then funnelled back to the Kremlin, further showcasing Prigozhin's utilitarian value to the regime (Katz, Jones, Doxsee, & Harrington, 2020; Doxsee, Bermudez, & Jun, 2023; Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). This symbiotic arrangement allowed the Kremlin to pursue strategic objectives while maintaining some semblance of plausible deniability and Prigozhin and his network to become wealthier. In 2022, however, the re-deployment of Wagner troops into Ukraine would bring the Wagner Group fully out of the shadows of hybrid warfare and into the international limelight, essentially destroying all efforts to maintain plausible deniability.

The re-deployment to Ukraine in 2022 brought the organization's dual operational structure into sharper focus. The organization appears to consist of two distinct categories of personnel: 1) highly professional, well-trained veterans, typically former spetsnaz, who are dispatched to missions deemed critical by the Kremlin, and 2) convicts and inexperienced recruits who mainly serve as force supplementers and experience much higher attrition rates. This dual structure allows the Wagner Group to maintain a core of skilled operatives while appeasing the Kremlin's insatiable demand to flood the battlefield with large numbers of fighters, thus prioritizing quantity over quality (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023; Wartenberg, 2023). In 2022, Russian prisons freed up a new market of recruits, which would become a significant source of manpower for the group. This recruitment tactic enabled the Wagner Group to rapidly inflate its ranks, from an initial force of around five thousand contractors to an estimated fifty thousand fighters (Commissioner, 2023; Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). However, this tactic tarnished the once highly esteemed organization and led to an "identity crisis and branding problem" as the Wagner Group's ranks were "filled with untrained convicts [to be] fed into the meat grinder [of] the Ukrainian battlefield" (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). Despite the increased visibility of the Wagner Group's recruitment strategies and operational structure, the organization's command structure remains largely unclear, with few leadership figures known to the public.

The Wagner Group's leadership is known to comprise former special forces operators with often checkered pasts, including now deceased Dmitri Utkin ("Wagner"), Andrei Troshev ("Sedoi"), Alexander Kuznetsov ("Ratibor"), Andrei Bogatov ("Brodyaga"), and Anton Yelizarov ("Lotus") (Kung, 2021; Rondeaux, 2023). The presence of these individuals in the group's command unit underscores the strong nexus between the state security apparatus and the Wagner Group (Doxsee, 2022; Dunigan, 2021). Furthermore, in 2023, Putin publicly admitted that the Wagner Group received more than 86 billion roubles (\$940 million) from the state from May 2022 to May 2023, thus dispelling any notion that the Wagner Group was a private entity (Camut, 2023). The significant state funding allocated to the Wagner Group, coupled with the strong ties between the organization and Russia's security apparatus, demonstrates the Kremlin's overt support for the group, in spite of its notorious reputation for committing war crimes.

The Wagner Group's brutality has certainly played a crucial role in Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. The group has supplied a significant number of convicts and inexperienced fighters who are often "sent in human waves toward Ukrainian fighting positions and considered expendable by Russian military commanders" (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023). This tactic allowed the Wagner Group to maintain pressure on Ukrainian defences while minimizing losses among more experienced and valuable Wagner troops. Within the Ukrainian theatre, the Wagner Group has engaged in a wide range of criminal activities, including the "indiscriminate slaughter of civilians" most notably in the town of Bucha, as well as forced disappearances of Ukrainian soldiers, executions of deserters, rape, and theft (Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023; Minasi, 2023). Atrocities committed in every operational zone occupied by Wagner troops are emblematic of the group's propensity for brutality, which has disturbingly become a selling point for the organization in the predatory ostensibly commercial global security market (Marten, 2020; Doxsee & Thompson, 2022; Blazakis, Clarke, Fink, & Steinberg, 2023).

In conclusion, the Wagner Group has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in Russia's geopolitical strategy. The significant state funding and overt support that has

now been revealed for the group, despite its notorious reputation for brutality and disdain for international law, underscore the Kremlin's growing reliance. This dependency has broader implications for international security and the norms governing state conduct. As Wagner continues to operate in various global hotspots, it challenges the international community's ability and willingness to uphold state accountability for the actions of such proxy organizations. Moreover, state's continued reliance on such groups for the outsourcing of geopolitical strategy raise questions when individuals such as Yevgeny Prigozhin wield them for personal ambitions, but this is a matter that will be further discussed in the subsequent empirical analysis.

As a final point, this comprehensive literature review has critically examined the complex power dynamics of Russian politics through the theoretical lens of patronal politics and the conceptual framework of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence. Special emphasis has been placed on contextualizing Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group to better situate the empirical analysis. Thus, the theoretical and conceptual discourse on patronal politics and entrepreneurs of influence, coupled with an examination of semi state forces and the plethora of strategic benefits they afford the Kremlin, has better situated this work to now transition to a deeper empirical analysis of Yevgeny Prigozhin's rise and fall and the broader implications.

7. Empirical Analysis

Yevgeny Prigozhin's rise and fall can be best understood by examining two key aspects of his vast enterprise: his digital arm, which encompassed the IRA and the Patriot Media Group, and his sword and shield, the Wagner Group. Prigozhin's rise and subsequent challenge he presented to the stability of the regime are intertwined with his control over the services he provided to the regime. Thus, exploring these enterprises provides deeper insights into how hybrid entrepreneurs of influence consolidate power and influence that can threaten the regime.

This empirical analysis will first delve into Prigozhin's digital empire, with a focus on the IRA and the Patriot Media Group. The analysis will examine how these entities enabled Prigozhin to better align himself with the regime's interests by providing vital

services in the digital space to launch psychological operations, thereby solidifying his position as a valuable hybrid entrepreneur of influence. Following this, the focus will shift to the Wagner Group, Prigozhin's most daring venture, which will be analysed in the geographical constraint of the Ukraine war from 2022-2023 to understand how control over this entity effected power dynamics and transformed his ability to become a potent regime destabilizer.

By detailing how Prigozhin navigated from being a regime-aligned service provider to becoming a formidable threat to Putin's authority, this empirical analysis will uncover the dynamics of power accumulation and threat posed by hybrid entrepreneurs of influence in Russia. Through this lens, the broader implications of such actors on regime stability will be examined.

7.1 The Digital Arm: the Troll Factory & the Media Factory

Prigozhin's transformation to a hybrid entrepreneur of influence, that is to say with the capabilities to provide critical services to the Kremlin, can be traced back to 2011 when he established the Internet Research Agency (IRA), also known as the troll factory (Stognei & Seddon, 2023). Initially focused on domestic information campaigns, the IRA would later expand its operations to target foreign countries, most notably Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom. By leveraging his wide network of shell companies to obfuscate funding for the Kremlin, Prigozhin employed hundreds of individuals in the troll factory to conduct disruptive campaigns of media manipulation designed to shape public opinion and sow discord. Thus, this section will delve into the evolution and impact of Yevgeny Prigozhin's information manipulation empire, from the early days of the IRA to the expansive operations of the Patriot Media Group and the export of such tactics to Africa. By examining the structure, tactics, and notable campaigns of these entities, a better understanding of how Prigozhin became a key player in Russia's power hierarchy can be gained.

The Internet Research Agency: The Troll Factory

In the face of massive anti-government protests triggered in 2011, following the illegitimate elections that enabled Putin to resume the position of president, the IRA emerged as a useful tool for the state to regain control over public discourse and shape perceptions (Saletta & Stearne, 2021; Gerard, 2019). During demonstrations, Putin oppositionists were successful in utilizing social media to mobilize protesters (Krishnadev, 2018). Consequently, the regime intensified efforts to tighten its grip on civil society, with a particular emphasis on regulating the Internet (Pertsev, *Russian Politics in Ruins: What Vyacheslav Volodin Left Behind*, 2016). Part of this strategy to impose increasingly repressive pressures on these fundamental rights was the establishment of the IRA with Yevgeny Prigozhin tapped to be the patron. By this time, Prigozhin had garnered a reputation for being “Putin’s [go-to] for a variety of sensitive and often-unsavoury missions” (Chen, 2018). By acting as financial patron, Prigozhin strategically positioned himself as an invaluable asset to Putin and the Kremlin, providing essential services that not only bolstered his favor within the regime but also equipped him with potent tools that could be wielded against personal rivals.

By the summer of 2013, the IRA was functional and headquartered in the Olgino District of St. Petersburg— hence why the organization was often referred to as the “trolls from Olgino” or “Olgino trolls” (Krishnadev, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the general director of the IRA, Mihail Bystrov, was a former police officer with a controversial reputation for brutality (Garina, 2023). Initially, the organization was tasked with swaying the Russian population away from Putin oppositionists such as Alexey Navalny but would soon evolve to encompass Russia’s geopolitical goals centred around weakening the West (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). The IRA was funded by Prigozhin’s Concord Management and Consulting LLC and Concord Catering to better obfuscate illicit activities and Kremlin funding (Chen, 2018; Saletta & Stearne, 2021). Payments for the IRA’s software and IT services were doled out by Concord Holding and Concord Catering, then routed to at least 14 different bank accounts (also associated with Prigozhin), to then be redistributed to seven separate entities (Saletta & Stearne, 2021; Gerard, 2019). Prigozhin’s role in the organization, however, went beyond the mere provisioning of shell companies. He actively participated in the organization’s

operations, sanctioning its activities and regularly meeting with Bystrov and his second in command, Mikhael Burchik (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). In this sense, Prigozhin acted as a key liaison between the state apparatus and the IRA (Saletta & Stearne, 2021).

The IRA employed between 400-600 individuals and adopted a business model that emulated digital marketing firms (Saletta & Stearne, 2021; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). The division of labour was compartmentalized among various departments tasked with specific geographic regions/countries as well as specific online platforms (Dawson & Innes, 2019). Employees were granted some creative license, but this freedom was constrained by strict performance metrics. Each employee was tasked with managing a predetermined number of social media accounts and expected to meet specific targets, including the quantity of comments posted, articles published, and new subscribers gained on a monthly basis (Garina, 2023). Failure to meet the specified requirements regularly resulted in fines (Saletta & Stearne, 2021).

Employees worked both day and night shifts to account for time zone variance. Most of the employees were university students from St. Petersburg State University with majors in communications, international studies, and linguistics – a demographic many may have assumed would be more occupied with opposing the regime rather than supporting it (Krishnadev, 2018). The IRA likely enticed the younger demographic with salaries “nearly double the average Russian’s salary” (Krishnadev, 2018). In return, employees were tasked with exacerbating already polarized issues in the target country across a variety of platforms with posts as well as flooding comment sections.

To boost their reach and power, the IRA regularly purchased followers, executed follower fishing operations, and implemented narrative switching, where operators would initially focus on relatively mundane topics before switching to overt, Kremlin-aligned political narratives (Dawson & Innes, 2019). These tactics were implemented in an effort to maintain a veneer of account authenticity while broadening the scope of their audience (Dawson & Innes, 2019). Evidently, such tactics proved to be effective not only in the domestic digital space but also in altering perceptions in the physical world on a global scale.

In December 2013, an internal announcement at the IRA requested that 800 employees attend a daytime rally at Independence Square in Kyiv, and 200 people stay overnight in pitch tents (Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). Another incident requested 30-40 people impersonate radicalized neo-Nazis at an event in Lithuania (Garina, 2023). These instances demonstrate that Prigozhin's narrative manipulation services extended beyond online spaces to include real-world events and demonstrations, encompassing the full spectrum of psychological warfare. As the IRA proved increasingly useful to the Kremlin, it was tasked with expanding its operations into the sphere of American politics.

When targeting of the United States began in 2014, the IRA clearly emulated the "Soviet-era playbook" of fostering a highly toxic atmosphere of hate surrounding political issues in an effort to deter the average citizen from engaging or informing themselves of the matters at hand (Krishnadev, 2018). In this way, the IRA worked diligently to execute disinformation campaigns aimed at subverting the public's trust in institutions and amplifying polarization. In the IRA's campaign to interfere in the 2016 presidential election, reports revealed that Putin had issued orders for the operation in an April meeting with a small inner circle of national security advisors (Krishnadev, 2018). This decision was allegedly a retaliatory response to the release of the Panama Papers, which exposed details of Putin's undisclosed wealth (Krishnadev, 2018). As such the IRA (through Prigozhin's Concord subsidiaries) was allocated \$1.25 million per month to spread distrust among the public about the candidates and more broadly the political system (Saletta & Stearne, 2021; Garina, 2023). For this operation, the IRA established a wide array of fake American activist groups using stolen identities to appear more authentic. The goal was to transform these fake accounts into movements and political rallies that would shape public opinion (Krever & Chernova, 2023; Gerard, 2019). In February 2018, Prigozhin was indicted by the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigations for unlawful interference in the 2016 U.S. election and subsequently sanctioned (Gerard, 2019; Rothrock, 2023). This had little effect on Prigozhin's ability to continue fuelling his media empire.

Investigative reports have found that approximately 400 companies comprised Prigozhin's entire troll factory (Rothrock, 2023). These companies received hundreds of

millions of roubles to inundate information spaces with disinformation and fake comments in efforts to promote Kremlin-approved narratives and/or augment polarization and political instability within target areas (Saletta & Stearne, 2021). More recently in 2022, the troll factory worked to establish a plethora of Telegram channels aimed at a Russian speaking audience to promote pro-Russia narratives when discussing the war in Ukraine (Rothrock, 2023). One such project that Prigozhin admitted to supporting was the Cyberfront-Z Telegram channel, established in March 2022 and dedicated to publicly shaming celebrities and artists critical of Russia's military actions, as well as anyone else who dared speak poorly about the regime (Rothrock, 2023; MEMRI, 2023). The channel regularly amplified movements calling for the cancelation of artists' concerts. Prigozhin was also known to facilitate "Cyber Front Z" discussion clubs at one of his cafes in St. Petersburg in which well-known pro-war bloggers would meet (MEMRI, 2023). Beyond advancing the Kremlin's interests through such actions, Prigozhin also utilized the troll factory's resources to further his own personnel vendettas and power struggles, assigning them special assignments.

Such "special tasks" given to the IRA were related to online harassment and the collection of compromising information on those that Prigozhin wished to personally target (Prigozhin's Cyber Troops, 2023). One such target was St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov, whom Prigozhin became embroiled in a bitter power struggle after 2019 (Rothrock, 2023). The conflict began following Beglov's election in September 2019, when Prigozhin claimed that the Governor had failed to compensate him for media services provided during his campaign (Meduza, 2022). Fundamentally, the feud evolved into a power struggle, mainly over lucrative state contracts in Saint Petersburg as well as political favours for politicians in Prigozhin's network (Meduza, 2022). For instance, in 2021 when several of Prigozhin's infrastructure projects were blocked, and political parties he supported were thwarted by Beglov (Mukhin A., 2022). In retaliation, Prigozhin would direct the troll factory to criticize the Governor's ineffective management of the city. As the conflict intensified, when Prigozhin's contracts were blocked resulting in the missed opportunity for millions, the troll farm was ordered to launch character attacks against Beglov, "including petitions demanding treason charges" (Rothrock, 2023). This incident illustrates, first, how Prigozhin was leasing his

services to other influential figures within the power vertical, and second, how he wielded the services at his disposal against those he had personal disputes, foreshadowing the eventual threat he would later pose to Putin's regime.

Despite his active involvement in the troll factory's operations, Prigozhin did not publicly acknowledge his role until February 2023 (Koval, 2023; Jurecic, Kokotakis, Lostri, & McBrien, 2023). In this public statement he went so far as to declare, "I was never just the financier of the Internet Research Agency. I thought it up, I created it, I managed it for a long time" (Jurecic, Kokotakis, Lostri, & McBrien, 2023). He further justified the IRA's existence, stating that it "was necessary for defending Russia's information space from the obnoxious, aggressive propaganda of anti-Russian messaging by the West" (Koval, 2023). Prigozhin's 2023 public acknowledgement of his role in the IRA coincided with arguably the peak of his power and thus outspokenness. By this time, he had already consolidated vast amounts of influence in the digital and media space, in large part due to his founding of the Patriot Media Group, an organization that served as yet another vehicle for power.

Patriot Media Group: The Merging of the Media Factory and the Troll Factory

In October 2019, Yevgeny Prigozhin reportedly founded the Patriot Media Group, aiming to consolidate greater influence and power by merging some of the largest Russian media outlets one umbrella organization (Brankova, 2024; Pakhaliuk, 2023). This organization encompassed influential media outlets such as RIA FAN, People's News, Neva News, Politics Today, and Economy Today (Brankova, 2024; Garina, 2023; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021), thereby establishing a widened comprehensive network that could wield greater levels of narrative power. Notably, the registered address for RIA FAN was the same address as that of the IRA, suggesting that the alignment between the troll farm and the media farm may have stretched back further than 2019 (Brankova, 2024).

The organization was divided into two components: the "media factory", which consisted of formally registered media sources that maintained a façade of authenticity, and the "troll factory", which operated in the shadows of the IRA, focusing on online manipulation and disinformation campaigns (Brankova, 2024; Laruelle & Limonier,

2021). Both components functioned at an industrial scale, with a decentralized structure that allowed for the flexible shuffling of staff members between the different entities on an ad hoc basis (Garina, 2023; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021; Chiknaeva, 2023).

Over time, both the troll factory and the media factory were finely tuned and harmonized to support varying Kremlin objectives. By 2022, both were actively engaged in amplifying pro-invasion narratives and discrediting opposition to the Kremlin's stance (Rothrock, 2023). By 2023, Patriot Media had established significant partnerships with influential broadcasters like Tsargrad TV, funded by oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, and Telekanal 360, further expanding its reach and influence (Brankova, 2024). The conglomerate also reported collaborations with local and regional actors, as well as veteran organizations, showcasing its integration with the domestic populace to further legitimize its narratives.

The Patriot Media Group has been scrutinized for “similarities of content among Patriot Media outlets and their partners as well as the targeted information campaigns against the Governor of Saint Petersburg, Beglov” (Brankova, 2024). Fundamentally, this revealed the dual use of the media conglomerate as an echo chamber for advancing state-sanctioned narratives while also serving Prigozhin's personal and political ambitions. Such a strategy not only further entrenched Prigozhin's influence within the media space but also demonstrated his ability to shape public perception and discourse, thereby solidifying his influential position within the power hierarchy. And, thus, in a self-reinforcing process as Prigozhin's usefulness to the Kremlin grew with his expansion of services, so too did his power, and with that his vindictiveness and readiness to overtly confront his adversaries. Simultaneously, similar approaches to information manipulation were being actively tested and refined by Prigozhin's operations across Africa, further working to support the Kremlin's geopolitical objectives.

The Africa Toolkit

Scholars Limonier and Laruelle (2021) describe the digital arm of Prigozhin's empire as being strategically divided between influence operations in Russia's strategic

priorities – Ukraine, Syria, the United States – and Africa. Entering the African market in at least 2017, Prigozhin leveraged his vast assortment of resources to professionalize disinformation campaigns for predatory client regimes on the continent. Since then, his digital footprint has been significant, accounting for at least half of the Kremlin-engineered disinformation operations identified (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Certainly, Prigozhin’s enterprise has been pivotal to Russia’s efforts to drive a wedge between Africa and the West, fostering space for Moscow’s influence through sophisticated information manipulation campaigns (Prince, 2023).

Prigozhin’s operations spanned across Libya, Egypt, Madagascar, Mozambique, South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Benin, Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Burkina Faso (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). He advanced the Kremlin’s strategic goals through “companies that exploit Africa’s natural resources, political operatives who undermine democratic actors, front companies posing as non-governmental organizations, and social media manipulation and disinformation campaigns” (U.S. Department of State, 2022). The breadth of digital services and networking at his disposal, further cultivated through his control over the IRA and media subsidiaries, enabled Prigozhin to offer a suite of competitive disinformation services often in exchange for military and energy contracts, mining concessions, and infrastructure deals (Arbunies, 2020).

Prigozhin’s influence operations were not merely transactional but strategically embedded within local societies. His subsidiary companies employed local individuals and organizations to leverage their already well-established bases so as to spread Kremlin-sanctioned narratives more organically, significantly enhancing the authenticity and effectiveness of these campaigns (U.S. Department of State, 2024; Limonier & Laruelle, 2021). Along this vein, the troll farm’s reach metastasized into dozens of local news outlets across African target countries, employing local talent to amplify Kremlin and client-approved narratives. Such efforts were evident in Madagascar’s 2019 presidential election, efforts to support Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashar in the lead up to the civil war, and the apparent domination of the Central African Republic’s social media, print, and radio (Arbunies, 2020; Harding & Burke, 2019).

In another example of this grass-roots tactic, Prigozhin worked to capitalize on the legitimate Pan-Africanism movement by employing influential Pan-African activists with large social media followings, such as Kemi Seba and Nathalie Yamb, to “routinely weave pro-Russia narratives into their rhetoric in a digestible and appealing manner” (Patel, 2022). These influencers were connected to Prigozhin-linked entities, including the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), the Russian think-tank Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), and Media Afrique TV (Patel, 2022). AFRIC, a front company for Prigozhin’s influence operations, was found to have been involved in illegitimate election monitoring in several African countries and coordinated with FZNC and the International Anticrisis Centre, another proxy think tank controlled by Prigozhin employees (Department of the Treasury, 2021). Another organization, Africa Back Office, employed political consultants linked to Prigozhin’s subsidiaries to devise strategies for manipulating African politics in favour of Prigozhin and Russia (Department of the Treasury, 2021).

Reports have also uncovered that Prigozhin evolved “from simply providing financial support to his global disinformation network to also writing content”, a familiar trend that underscores Prigozhin’s high-level of engagement in his malign enterprise (Department of the Treasury, 2021). The consequences of his strategies were dramatically brought to light during the July 2023 coup in Niger, where Prigozhin posted on Telegram, welcoming the violent developments, as citizens exclaimed, “I’ve had to distance myself from everything because I don’t know what’s true and what’s not” (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). In the wake of the coup, Prigozhin’s affiliated networks worked to then echo the narrative that the Wagner Group was the solution to Niger’s crisis, showcasing how Prigozhin’s interconnected enterprise works to synergistically bolster each other and advance Kremlin objectives (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Yevgeny Prigozhin’s extensive influence operations in Africa played a significant role in expanding Russia’s geopolitical footprint on the continent. By leveraging a broad array of digital services, establishing front companies, employing local influencers and organizations, and capitalizing on popular movements, Prigozhin effectively laid the

groundwork for Moscow's continued manipulation of African politics and public opinion to produce favourable conditions for strategic interests. Prigozhin's role as financier, service provider, and hands-on content creator for these operations undoubtedly fuelled his rise in the power vertical of Russia. As has been well-documented, Prigozhin was adept at capitalizing on state crises. Accordingly, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 presented him with an unprecedented opportunity to fully realize his power while simultaneously marking the beginning of his downfall.

7.2 Prigozhin's Sword and Shield: the Wagner Group in Ukraine 2022-2023

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought to the fore the complex dynamics between hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, semi state forces, and ruling elite in patronalistic Russia. This section explores how, from March 2022 to August 2023, Prigozhin's involvement in the Wagner Group's operations altered the power dynamics and impacted the stability of the regime.

In March 2022, as Russian troops struggled to advance in Ukraine, the Kremlin deployed Wagner troops to bolster the Ministry of Defence in tip-of-the-spear operations, aiming to counteract the high attrition rates among regular forces (Ber, 2023). Despite Prigozhin's longstanding association with Putin since the 1990s, he was initially kept in the dark about invasion plans, and there was no initial intention to involve the Wagner Group in the conflict (Ber, 2023). This stance shifted as conventional forces failed to capture key cities, leading to the infusion of 'volunteer units' such as the Wagner Group. Wagnerites began arriving on the frontlines in March 2022, at a critical juncture for Prigozhin whose relationship with Putin was reportedly strained, endangering his standing with the presidential administration and the Ministry of Defence (Meduza, 2022).

Interneicine Tides

It was no secret that Prigozhin's contentious relations with a number of figures nestled closer to Putin's inner circle were at the heart of these strained relations. His public criticisms of inefficiencies and corruption exposed widening cracks in Russia's

power vertical (Epstein, 2023). Moreover, feuding with those in Putin's inner circle was seen as a direct threat to Putin's authority, undermining the expectation that he could protect and manage his network – paramount for maintaining his projection of strength within the vigilant power hierarchy. Among those Prigozhin opposed was Sergey Kiriyenko, Putin's head of domestic policy, who supported Prigozhin's adversary, Alexander Beglov (Pakhaliuk, 2023). As has already been established, Prigozhin and Beglov had been locked in a bitter power struggle since 2019. Furthermore, tensions between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence that had been simmering since at least 2017, were escalating, further complicating Prigozhin's position.

The acrimonious feud between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence is reported to have begun in 2017 with allegations that Prigozhin was guilty of embezzling funds, prompting the Ministry to begin restricting financing from his enterprises (Marten, *Why the Wagner Group Cannot be Easily Absorbed by the Russian Military - And What That Means for the West*, 2023). The tensions then escalated further in February 2018 following an unauthorized attack led by Wagner troops on U.S. special forces in Deir-El-Zor, Syria, at the Conoco gas plant, which reportedly infuriated Russian military high command (Marten, *Why the Wagner Group Cannot be Easily Absorbed by the Russian Military - And What That Means for the West*, 2023). In response to the attack, Prigozhin criticized the Ministry for employing antiquated strategies in Syria (Chin, 2023). Shoigu then retaliated by expressing dissatisfaction with Prigozhin's catering services, leading to the termination of several lucrative military contracts, and further worsening relations (Meduza, 2022). Shoigu's establishment of a competing semi state forces group called 'Patriot' in 2018, threatening the Wagner Group's position in the market, further intensified the rivalry (Bryjka, 2024).

By 2022, Prigozhin, with the support of Viktor Zolotov, head of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya), launched a campaign to unseat Shoigu (Pertsev, *An Inconvenient Case of Shoigu's Deputy*, 2024). Preparations were made to replace Shoigu with Wagner-ally General Sergei Surovikin and Alexei Dyumin — Zolotov's subordinate, Putin's bodyguard, and Governor of the Tula region (Pertsev, *The Arrest of Russia's Deputy Defence Minister Has Broken a Taboo*, 2024). While the escalating feuds

intensified within Russia's power structure, they also likely served Putin's broader strategy. By allowing Prigozhin to publicly air his grievances, Putin could position himself as an indispensable mediator while deflecting operational failures onto Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence. However, this strategy seems to have overlooked Prigozhin's concerted efforts to influence those in power from the sidelines as the fracture lines widened.

Prigozhin sought to further undermine the authority of Shoigu and Gerasimov by courting a cohort of generals who had thrived under the leadership of their predecessors, Anatoly Serdyukov and Nikolai Makarov (Komin, 2023). These generals' careers had stagnated following the appointment of Shoigu and Gerasimov, priming them for Prigozhin's efforts to foment internal dissent within the Ministry of Defence. Mikhail Mizintsev, a veteran and deputy commander of Wagner (known as the "Butcher of Mariupol"), and Sergei Surovikin, former head of command in Ukraine before succeeded by Gerasimov, were both openly endorsed by Prigozhin as suitable replacements, having "prospered under the Serdyukov-Makarov leadership" (Komin, 2023). In efforts to bolster the popularity of his chosen candidates, Prigozhin leveraged his media empire to generate favourable coverage of both Mizintsev and Surovikin amongst influential military bloggers, thereby exerting added pressure on military leadership (Komin, 2023). These tactics showcased Prigozhin's emboldened willingness to directly challenge key figures within Putin's inner circle. By 2022, it was evident that his standing had become increasingly precarious, placing his relationship with Putin on thin ice.

Regaining Favor

The Wagner Group's demonstrated value in Russia's war in Ukraine would enable Prigozhin to crawl back into the good graces of Putin. In April 2022, approximately 1,500 Wagnerites were deployed to Ukraine (Bryjka, 2024). These forces would play a critical role in capturing the strategic town of Popasna (Pakhaliuk, 2023). By May 2022, the town was captured, and the frontline was extended further into the Luhansk oblast, "clearly [elevating] the Wagner Group in the Russian authorities' eyes" (Meduza, 2022). This would earn Prigozhin the Hero of Russia award, and the Wagner

Group a prominent media campaign, further inflaming egos and self-importance (Ber, 2023). By summer, however, the Russian advance had plateaued, and attrition rates soared (Ber, 2023). Consequently, while Russia's demand for recruitment, the prospect of announcing an official mobilization presented complications, due to concerns about destabilizing domestic affairs further.

To remedy this dire need, in September 2022, authorities authorized Prigozhin to begin recruiting prisoners (so-called Project K) and designated the Wagner Group a separate unit operating as a component of the Russian army, which was designed to allow Prigozhin's men access to more comprehensive materiel support (Bryjka, 2024). Additionally, the Wagner Group was ordered to re-deploy members from its more elite teams working in Africa to Ukraine (Meduza, 2022). Prigozhin then began posting personal visits to penal camps online, delivering charismatic speeches promising the convicts competitive salaries and a chance to return to everyday life if they survived six months of fighting (Sauer, "We Thieves and Killers Are Now Fighting Russia's War": How Moscow Recruits from its Prisons, 2022). By the end of October 2022, twenty thousand conscripts were integrated into the Wagner Group (Ber, 2023). To minimize the loss of more valuable, experienced fighters, Wagner employed its dual operational structure of deploying the prisoners to the front line to act as cannon fodder (Ber, 2023).

The Wagner Group's participation in the war peaked from November 2022 to January 2023, when it managed to capture the town of Soledar and strengthen positioning near Bakhmut (Ray, 2024). The barrage of prisoners that the Wagner Group was able to push to the front lines as cannon fodder forced Ukrainian defences to dedicate many of its best units to the area, thereby allowing Russian forces to replenish much needed troops along other areas on the front lines (Ber, 2023). Of the approximately fifty thousand prisoners recruited in the latter half of 2022, it is estimated that a mere ten thousand remained by the end of January 2023 (Meduza, "Russia Behind Bars", 2023). During this period, criticism of the Ministry of Defence's inability, or unwillingness, to provide the troops with ammunition and food reached all new levels (Ray, 2024). While the Wagner Group's substantial losses certainly inflamed aggressions, when victory over Bakhmut was declared in May 2023, Prigozhin's

confidence and anger rose significantly, as he blamed Shoigu and Gerasimov for the over ten thousand deaths reportedly incurred (Ray, 2024; Chin, 2023). These performative diatribes against the Ministry of Defence worked to reinforce loyalty among Prigozhin's men and transformed the radicalized Wagner Group into an ever more potent lever of power. This development exemplifies how hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, like Prigozhin, can act as potent destabilizing agents, exposing vulnerabilities in the patronal network. With this established success, the Wagner Group had garnered ever more public attention, particularly after Prigozhin made the seminal announcement in September 2022 that he had founded the Wagner Group in 2014 (Bryjka, 2024).

Prigozhin's announcement marked a clear departure from the established policy of vehemently denying connections between the Wagner Group and the state apparatus. Likely, in a move to reassert control over the narrative and the Wagner Group following their battlefield successes, the state-run RT station began disseminating videos that revealed the Wagner Group's undisclosed involvement in the 2014 annexation of Crimea, along with details of their operations in Africa and the Middle East (Bryjka, 2024). Despite these reports, the group continued to develop its public persona. In November 2022, the Wagner Group Centre and the Wagneronok youth club were opened in St. Petersburg, reflecting a growing acceptance by Russian society (Bryjka, 2024). Paradoxically, Prigozhin was still barred from legalizing the Wagner Group in Russia, as the ambiguous legal framework continues to benefit the state. With the centres located in St. Petersburg, Governor Beglov worked to obstruct recruitment efforts, further provoking aggression (Bryjka, 2024). Despite these attempts to constrain the growing fanfare around the Wagner Group, Prigozhin's sense of power and hubris only increased.

The Power Paradox

By the end of 2022 and into 2023, Prigozhin's rising status had become a glaring symbol of the growing fragmentation within Russia's vertical of power. As Tatiana Stanovaya aptly described, "the more the state [needed his] services, the more weight [he carried] within the system" (Stanovaya, *Divided in the Face of Defeat: the Schism Forming in the Russian Elite*, 2022). Indeed, the state's growing dependence on the

autonomous Wagner Group, in conjunction with Prigozhin's inflated ego, was becoming a point of vulnerability for Putin's regime.

As Wagner became a vital force projection tool for the state, Prigozhin's direct involvement in the group's military operations earned him respect from his troops and further fuelled tensions with the Ministry of Defence. His visibility and aggressive stance were particularly evident on social media, where he frequently criticized military leadership for failing to provide adequate munitions and supplies, outright accusing them of either negligence or logistical incompetence. These criticisms resonated deeply with his increasingly radicalized troops, uniting them in hatred against the Ministry of Defence, and signalling a rising threat to the power vertical.

Indeed, since the beginning of the Wagner Group's re-deployment to Ukraine, Prigozhin had been utilizing his digital empire to mount scathing media campaigns against Gerasimov and Shoigu (Stanovaya, Man vs. Myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?, 2023). This increasingly bellicose rhetoric, set against the backdrop of a repressive political landscape that had criminalized criticism of the military, further highlighted Prigozhin's brazen insubordination and the growing threat he posed to the regime (Human Rights Watch, 2022). By this point in the contentious relationship, Shoigu and Gerasimov effectively conveyed to Putin that Wagner's autonomy, coupled with Prigozhin's vocal criticism of the military, represented a grave threat to the stability of the regime and Putin's ability to maintain control over the power vertical (Stanovaya, Man vs. Myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?, 2023). They further emphasized Prigozhin's growing number of adversaries within the Kremlin and lack of official status, underscoring his vulnerability.

As a direct result of these strained ties, in January 2023 the Ukraine theatre commander was switched from General Sergei Surovikin to General Valery Gerasimov (Eckel, 2023). This had a resounding effect on the political tug of war, given Surovikin's known association with the Wagner Group — at one-point Prigozhin referred to him as the "best commander Russia had to offer and a true patriot" (Turner & Sukhankin, 2023). Additionally, in that same month, the authority to recruit prisoners was revoked from Prigozhin and assumed by the Defence Ministry as part of a strategy intended to

constrain Wagner's recruitment efforts and diminish their capabilities (The Moscow Times, 2023) As such, daylight between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group grew ever more apparent.

To demonstrate their vehement disdain for the newly installed military command, in February 2023, a video surfaced online in which Wagner troops fire at portraits of Gerasimov and Alexander Lapin, chief of the Russian General Staff (Farbman, 2023). Under Shoigu and Gerasimov's leadership, the Ministry of Defence made a point to not credit Wagner's contribution to the capture of the strategic town of Soledar, likely in an attempt to politically isolate Prigozhin and his men (Preussen, 2023). As the Wagner Group had suffered massive losses to capture Soledar and make gains around Bakhmut, "Putin's decision to walk back Russian Ministry of Defence's acknowledgement of Wagner signalled a major defeat for Prigozhin" (Stepanenki & Kagan, 2023). This undermining of Prigozhin and the Wagner Group was likely undergone so as to repair the damaged reputation of the armed forces among the Russian public and weaken the perception of the Kremlin's dependence on the group (Lohmus, 2023). This snub, far from forgotten, served to exacerbate the already deteriorating relationship with an increasingly embattled Prigozhin.

While Prigozhin's role as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence afforded him significant operational flexibility, it also left him heavily reliant on others for direct access to Putin and his inner circle (Stanovaya, Man vs. Myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?, 2023). The inherent lack of formal status within the power hierarchy that characterizes hybrid entrepreneurs of influence results in a paradoxical dynamic of freedom and dependency, ensuring their relationship with those in power remains fundamentally asymmetrical. Despite this imbalance, Prigozhin's unbridled ambition compelled him to persist in launching scathing personal attacks against members of the elite through his vast media empire (Brankova, 2024). These brazen attacks, however, did little to ingratiate him with those in power. Thus, Prigozhin's failure to recognize the limitations imposed by his precarious position as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence, coupled with his relentless pursuit of power, laid the groundwork for his downfall. Moreover, the Wagner Group's battlefield successes only served to widen "the gap

between the role that Putin had assigned to Wagner and the place that Prigozhin himself [believed] he [deserved]” (Stanovaya, Man vs. Myth: Is Russia's Prigozhin a Threat or Asset to Putin?, 2023). This divergence further fuelled Prigozhin’s hunger for power and contempt for those in authority.

By May, Prigozhin’s ire towards Shoigu and Gerasimov reached new heights. In a bold move, he published a video online, in which he indignantly warned that a Russian revolution was imminent as a result of the military elite’s corruption, incompetence, and reluctance to fully commit to the war (CBS, 2023). During his impassioned rant, Prigozhin declared, “I love my homeland. I obey Putin. To hell with Shoigu,”, clearly demonstrating an attempt to ingrain his loyalty to the chief-patron while portraying himself as a valiant patriot exposing the corrupt military leadership (CBS, 2023). On May 9, 2023, Prigozhin claimed the Russian army had abandoned positions in Bakhmut, exposing a critical front flank and leaving the Wagner Group to repair the gap (Gubanov, 2023). He then forced an ultimatum onto Shoigu and Gerasimov — if Prigozhin’s men were not allocated more ammunition, the positions would be abandoned (Al Jazeera, 2023). On May 12, Prigozhin then demanded Shoigu travel to Bakhmut to assess the dire conditions; a request which was promptly ignored (Gubanov, 2023).

The final blow to Prigozhin’s power arrived on June 10, when Shoigu set a deadline of July 1st for all volunteer battalions and so-called PMCs to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence (Sauer & Roth, Putin Sides with Military Chiefs Over Placing Wagner Under Direct Control, 2023). This strategic move was designed to effectively dismantle the Wagner Group’s autonomy, bringing it to heel under the state and leaving Prigozhin politically isolated and powerless (Congressional Research Service, 2023). The Ministry’s ultimatum was a clear indication that the curtailment of Prigozhin’s influence and autonomy had been sanctioned by Putin, demonstrating the regime’s intolerance towards his brash defiance of political norms — particularly the public nature of his criticisms — and its readiness to reassert its authority.

The March of Justice

On the night of June 23, 2023, the long-standing tensions between the Wagner Group and the Ministry of Defence finally erupted into violence (Mills & Brooke-Holland, 2023). Prigozhin openly accused Shoigu and Gerasimov of deceiving Putin about the true motives behind the invasion of Ukraine and the current status of the war (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Mills & Brooke-Holland, 2023). In response, authorities issued an arrest warrant for Prigozhin, prompting the Wagner Group to launch a self-proclaimed 'March of Justice' from field camps in Ukraine (Ray, 2024). Their declared goal was to "seek the heads of the country's military leadership" in Moscow (Vertlieb, 2023; Congressional Research Service, 2023; Komin, 2023). It would later be revealed that "Surovikin and at least 30 other Russian officials knew about the upcoming mutiny before it started" (Chin, 2023). Furthermore, the FSB had uncovered Wagner's seditious plan two days before the group was set to abduct Shoigu and Gerasimov as they visited Southern Russia (Corbishley, 2023). The discovery of this plan, which led to the arrest warrant being issued, was the likely reason that prompted Prigozhin to initiate the march on June 23 (Chin, 2023).

The mutiny attempt, involving approximately 5,000 – 10,000 troops, "posed the most significant threat to Putin's power in his 23-year tenure" (Morgan, 2023; Bryjka, 2024). As Russian authorities scrambled to halt their progress by blocking roads with public transport, the Wagner Group swiftly seized control of all military facilities in Rostov-on-Don, the armed force's operational command centre (Morgan, 2023). During this time, Prigozhin maintained communication with Deputy Defence Minister General Yunus Bek Yevkurov and first deputy GRU chief General Alexeyev, making unsuccessful demands to speak with Shoigu and Gerasimov (Bryjka, 2024). While the Wagner troops progressed, the civilian population appeared to express curiosity, if not outright support, of the movement by posing in pictures with the troops, which raises questions about shifting sentiments and perceptions of power in the country (RFE/RL, 2023).

While Wagner forces made rapid advances through the Voronezh, Lipetsk, and Tula oblasts, the Prosecutor General's Office announced the opening of a criminal case

against Prigozhin under the article *Armed Rebellion* — an offense punishable by 12–20 years in prison (Sauer, Russia Investigates Wagner Chief for 'Armed Mutiny' After Call for Attack on Military, 2023; Morgan, 2023). The state also moved to block websites and social media accounts associated with the Patriot Media Group as well as raided the conglomerates offices (Rothrock, 2023). Despite these measures, the lack of effective coordination in responding to the Wagner threat was evident (Bowen, Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia, 2023)

As the Wagner group moved closer towards the capital, they inflicted serious damage to the Armed Forces by downing six helicopters and one aircraft, which killed thirteen pilots (International Crisis Group , 2023; Bryjka, 2024). Curiously, when the Wagner Group was just 125 miles from Moscow, Prigozhin abruptly ordered his men to turn back (Ray, 2024). Despite facing little resistance during their march, it appears that Prigozhin had anticipated a show of greater support from those in his network. This expectation was dashed when Surovikin publicly condemned the march and urged Prigozhin to stop, thereby exposing the Wagner leader's grave miscalculation (Bryjka, 2024). In need of a resolution for himself and his men, the situation took a turn when Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko announced that he and Putin had brokered a deal with Prigozhin, granting the Wagner Group and its leader amnesty in Belarus (International Crisis Group , 2023).

Lukashenko's role in mediating the crisis and providing an area for the Wagner troops to be monitored in while a strategic response was developed, undoubtedly worked to earn him favour in the eyes of Putin. Despite the amnesty deal in place, resolution to the conflict was far from over. As Prigozhin had greatly miscalculated the limits of his power, Putin too had seriously misjudged the danger posed by Prigozhin and his men. As such, Putin would need to respond accordingly to reinforce his status and perception of power in the patronal network. To expect that no retaliation would be inflicted on those involved in the attempted coup would be naïve, especially considering Putin had already denounced Prigozhin as a traitor who had stabbed Russia in the back (Sauer & Roth, Putin Accuses Wagner Chief of Treason and Vows to 'Neutralise' Uprising, 2023). Putin further declared the march “a mortal threat to the state and

assured that...all those who participated in the preparation of the rebellion would suffer severe punishment” (Bryjka, 2024).

The Fall

In the immediate aftermath of the March, the Russian state initiated the complete dismantling of Prigozhin’s empire and the Wagner Group as well as a crackdown on any person or organization that had supported the seditious act. Russian security services arrested at least thirteen military officials, including Mizintsev and Surovikin, as well as fired fifteen others that were found to have been associated with Prigozhin’s mutiny (The Moscow Times, 2023). By June 30, 2023, Prigozhin announced the liquidation of the Patriot Media Group, indicating he had fully fallen out of favour with Putin and lost significant amounts of his media empire (Garina, 2023; Meduza, Yevgeny Prigozhin Reportedly Dissolving Patriot Media Group, Home of His 'Troll Factory', 2023). By July 11, Wagner began to trickle into the newly erected camps in the Migilev region of Belarus (Bryjka, 2024). By August 1, an estimated 4,000-5,000 Wagnerites were stationed there, effectively rendered powerless as the Russian army had seized their heavy military equipment, along with 2,500 tons of ammunition and approximately 20,000 small arms (Bryjka, 2024).

In addition to the dismantling of Prigozhin and his associates, the Russian state also launched an aggressive public campaign to discredit Prigozhin and reassert control over the narrative surrounding the Wagner Group. On June 26, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that the Wagner Group’s operations in Mali and the Central African Republic would continue uninterrupted, signalling the state’s recognition of the group’s contentious activities (Mills & Brooke-Holland, 2023). Despite this claim, the GRU and the Ministry of Defence were preparing to seize control over Prigozhin’s empire in the Middle East and Africa by pressuring Wagner troops to sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence (Bryjka, 2024). On the evening of June 26, Putin addressed the Russian people, emphasizing that the solidarity of the Russian people had prevented the insurgency from achieving its end goal (Magramo, Edwards, Sangal, Hayes, & Chowdhury, 2023). Despite Putin’s attempt to project the image of Russian solidarity as an effective societal resiliency tool, videos of the local population of Rostov-on-Don

appeared to display a much more lukewarm response, raising questions about shifting sentiments among the people. As they posed for photos with Prigozhin and Wagner troops, the locals' tacit acceptance – if not outright support – of the insurgent militia was apparent, suggesting even more weakness on the chief-patron's control over public opinion (Gubanov, 2023). That same night, on June 26, Prigozhin would claim that he called off the march to avoid Russian bloodshed and urged that the act was a “demonstration of protest” rather than a serious attempt to undermine the regime (Magramo, Edwards, Sangal, Hayes, & Chowdhury, 2023).

In a bid to further shift the narrative in the favour of the state, on June 27, Putin publicly announced that from May 2022 to May 2023, the Wagner Group had received nearly one billion dollars from the Russian state (Maddocks, 2023). Prior to these announcements the Russian state had a steadfast policy of denying any involvement in the funding of PMCs or responsibility for their actions. Such a stark shift in rhetoric was an obvious attempt by the regime to regain control over the narrative after the Wagner Group's serious threat. Despite the state's attempts to convince the public that the state-maintained control over the Wagner Group, the March of Justice had exposed the significant autonomy and impact the organization had enjoyed under the leadership of Utkin and Prigozhin (Maddocks, 2023).

The Russian state also worked quickly to systematic takeover Prigozhin's extensive business and media empire, aiming to eradicate his influence completely. Concord Holding and its over 400 affiliated companies were absorbed by loyal oligarchs, the GRU, and the Ministry of Defence, while his media holdings were seized by the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (Bryjka, 2024). This methodical dismantling of Prigozhin's assets and influence demonstrated the state's resolute determination to erase any remnants of his power. In the end, the only thing left was the man himself.

The final fatal blow to Prigozhin's power struck on August 23, when an aircraft owned by one of his companies crashed in the Tver oblast while flying from Moscow to Saint Petersburg (Meduza, 2023). On board were Prigozhin, Utkin, and several other Wagner officials and fighters (Al Jazeera, 2023). All passengers and crew, ten in total,

were killed. The official cause of the crash remains uncertain, with reports suggesting an explosive device detonated aboard, while others argue the plane may have been shot down by Russian air defence (OSW Russian Department, 2023). This action was a clear sign to the patronal network that such an act of betrayal would not be tolerated.

The swift and comprehensive dismantling of Prigozhin's empire in the aftermath of the March of Justice certainly demonstrates Putin's ability to ostensibly reassert dominance over the patronal network, at least for the time being. Nonetheless, Yevgeny Prigozhin's ability to rise to such a position that he could command an armed rebellion, reveals serious vulnerabilities that will certainly have lasting implications for the stability of the regime. As such, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, by virtue of their control over critical services and high degree of autonomy within the power hierarchy, possess unique capabilities to destabilize the delicate balance of power in patronalized regimes. Whether through overt displays of force, as seen in the March of Justice, or more subtle methods of manipulation and persuasion targeting those who stand to benefit from a restructuring of the regime, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence can exploit their position to reshape the constantly shifting patronal network. The rise and fall of Yevgeny Prigozhin, thus, serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the need for a deeper analysis of such actors in a constantly political landscape so as to better understand the inner workings and potential fault lines of patronalized regimes.

Taking Stock

As the discussion pivots to the findings section, this segment serves as a summary point, providing an overview of the developments and analysis concerning Yevgeny Prigozhin explored thus far. This synthesis will facilitate a comprehensive understanding before advancing to the implications and conclusions derived from the empirical analysis. Though owner of a vast economic enterprise consisting of powerful holding/catering companies as well as the IRA and its media subsidiaries, Yevgeny Prigozhin maneuvered on regime peripheries, for a time preferring to leverage the outsourcing of security and influence capital abroad with his Wagner Group rather than gaining public attention (Bowmen, 2023). Indeed, by offering an assortment of cost-effective, plausibly deniable hybrid warfare capabilities that increasingly attracted

influential Kremlin clients worldwide, asset burgeoning enabled Prigozhin's September 2022 public announcement which acknowledged his prominent role in the creation of the Wagner Group (Turner & Sukhankin, 2023). The Wagner Group's surge into Ukraine in 2022 as the spearhead of the Russian offensive served as a vehicle for Prigozhin's empowerment, elevating him to a position where he believed he could legitimately claim the status of a "contender for power" (Horvath & Currie 2023).

Indeed, tracking Prigozhin's trajectory reveals a clear pattern of leveraging personal connections and wealth to expand his economic enterprise and gain influence and proximity to Putin. This, combined with his demonstrated loyalty and willingness to support Putin's agenda, created a causal pathway for his rise to power. Despite lacking a background in military or security matters, Prigozhin skilfully navigated the complex web of patronal ties in Putin's inner circle to gain economic success. By consistently demonstrating his loyalty and value to the regime as an essential service provider, he managed to gain Putin's favour and trust. Consequently, Prigozhin's focus increasingly shifted towards supporting Putin's agenda of regime stability through propaganda and outsourced force, foreshadowing his future role as a key player capable of shaping Russia's political and military landscape. Indeed, this strategic alignment with the Kremlin's interests would prove to be the crucial drivers to Prigozhin's rise and fall.

However, Prigozhin's hubris would come to play a significant role in this miscalculation, as his overconfidence in his own influence led him to overestimate the extent to which he could challenge the established power structures within Russian. This elevated position and inflated sense of self emboldened Prigozhin to become increasingly vocal in his criticism of the Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu and the Chief of the General Staff Segei Gerasimov. While some perceived Prigozhin's battlefield prominence as enabling Putin to filter criticism to competitors indirectly, the attendant publicity hazarded the patron's control as this provided Prigozhin with the increased potential to gain wider sway among clients such as security elites, veterans groups, and nationalist circles who could accelerate shifting power dynamics (Turner & Sukhankin, 2023). Lacking prior scholarly appraisal of Prigozhin's capacities, analysing his rise as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence autonomous military assets and a proficient digital

empire sharpens focus on how such actors operate in patronal regimes. Furthermore, the case reveals how and entrepreneurs of influence like Prigozhin possess unique capabilities that present serious threats to the regime.

8. Findings

In the patronal political landscape of Russia, where the rule of law is weak, corruption is ubiquitous, and personal connections provide more security than institutional safeguards, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence embody the ambitious, opportunistic power jockeying necessary for survival and success. In such a precarious social equilibrium built upon transactional relations, the development of hubris can prove fatal, as was demonstrated in the case of Yevgeny Prigozhin. By scrutinizing his rise and fall, management of crucial services, this study reveals the mechanisms through which such actors can amass power and influence while demonstrating the consequences of overstepping ones bounds. These findings resonate with the theoretical discourse on patronal politics and the conceptual framework of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, illustrating how Prigozhin leveraged his unique positioning and significant autonomy to navigate and manipulate patronal networks. This autonomy, both a bug and a feature of the intrinsically asymmetrical dynamic with the chief-patron, better allows these actors to seize opportunities that serve both their interests and those of their patron. However, this comes with the drawback of inherent political vulnerabilities, as their informal status can lead to a quick denial of access to the corridors of power when they fall out of favour. Thus, the empirical findings not only validate but enrich our understanding of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, demonstrating the real-world implications of patronal politics and the pivotal impact hybrid entrepreneurs of influence can have in shaping such political landscapes.

The Dual-Edged Nature of Hybrid Entrepreneurs of Influence

Yevgeny Prigozhin's case reveals a number of aspects that underscore the dual-edged nature of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, highlighting the ways in which they can both bolster and destabilize the regime. These actors' ability to navigate between the two stems from their unique position within the wider vertical of power. Their established wealth, social capital, and demonstrated loyalty afford them access

powerful tools of control, while their more covert ties to the state offer unique leveragability.

Firstly, Prigozhin's retention of a high degree of autonomy allowed him to evade institutional oversight when courting an array of influential military insiders. Although these insiders ultimately failed to demonstrate overt support during the attempted mutiny, they nonetheless acquiesced to the Wagner Group's efforts to destabilize the regime. This cautious approach is highly revealing, as it implies that these influential figures harboured beliefs that Putin's regime was vulnerable to overthrow; a perception that may prove very difficult for the chief-patron to dispel. Thus, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence may not need to actually overthrow the regime to weaken and destabilize it. Rather, success may have been achieved by instilling doubts about the chief-patron's ability to maintain control and project strength.

Secondly, as critical service providers of the regime, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence have unique access and control over powerful tools that can be used to subvert the regime they were designed to support. This is evidenced by Prigozhin's use of his digital enterprise to delegitimize regime opponents and, in a more personal capacity, to undermine his rivals through disinformation campaigns. Similarly, the Wagner Group's 'March of Justice' serves as a further example of how resources designed to strengthen the regime can be redirected by hybrid entrepreneurs of influence to challenge it.

Thirdly, hybrid entrepreneurs of influence may be better able to maintain a veneer of relatability with the population on account of their unique positioning in the hierarchy of power, which better obfuscates their direct ties with the state. This can be useful when attempting to mobilize certain populations. For instance, Prigozhin capitalized on his criminal history and lack of official status in the regime to better relate to prisoners during recruitment, which supported the regime's needs. He then turned around and used his positioning to differentiate himself from the corrupt military leadership to mobilize outside forces, in this case the Wagner Group, to threaten the regime. Prigozhin's tactic appears to reflect the accuracy of the argument discussed earlier in the theoretical section, where Grundholm (2020) argues that in patronal

regimes, “outsider challenges are made more effective, while [inversely] insider challenges are made less effective by the higher levels of personalization”.

Fundamentally, the duality of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence grants these actors the flexibility and autonomy to either bolster or weaken the chief patron’s power, depending on their alignment with the regime, thus augmenting their ability to transform into potent regime destabilizers.

Systemic Vulnerabilities of Hybrid Entrepreneurs of Influence

Prigozhin’s case also demonstrated a number of inherent vulnerabilities associated with hybrid entrepreneurs of influence designed to maintain the asymmetrical nature of the patron-client relationship. Access to the inner circle and chief-patron can be more easily managed (denied), leaving them more exposed to the risk of political isolation on account of the lack of official status within the state apparatus. Moreover, the state’s swift and comprehensive dismantling of Prigozhin’s expansive enterprise underscored the regime’s ability to systematically neutralize the physical threat driven by the hybrid entrepreneur of influence. However, the extent of control that Putin would have been able to maintain if the Wagner troops had not been recalled is difficult to discern.

Implications for Putin’s Regime Stability

Despite the state’s efforts to contain the fallout, the disparaging impact of Prigozhin’s actions on the regime cannot be understated. The reputational damage inflicted upon the regime has exposed underlying weaknesses that may be further exploited by ambitious entrepreneurs of influence in the future. As the Kremlin appears to pursue a path of further fragmenting of security services, as evidenced by recent legislation allowing governors to establish armed units, the spectre of “dozens of mini-Prigozhin’s” looms large (Stanovaya, *Beneath the Surface, Prigozhin’s Mutiny has Changed Everything in Russia*, 2023). The proliferation of armed units under the command of a constellation of actors is certain to further complicate the political landscape of Russia. Ultimately, the findings of this study not only highlight the unique and precarious position of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, but also set the stage for a critical examination of the broader lessons to be drawn from Prigozhin’s case.

9. Conclusion

This thesis, guided by Henry Hale's theory of patronal politics and further developing the concept of hybrid entrepreneurs of influence, which is informed by Laruelle and Limonier's framework on entrepreneurs of influence, offers insights into the complex interplay of ambition, power, and miscalculations within Russia's patronal politics. Through an empirical analysis of Yevgeny Prigozhin's rise and fall, this study addresses the research question of how Prigozhin, as a hybrid entrepreneur of influence, navigated Russia's intricate social equilibrium of patronal politics, and further demonstrated that such actors can emerge as potent regime destabilizers. From humble beginnings as a hotdog vendor, Prigozhin continued to demonstrate his worth and, more importantly, his loyalty to the chief-patron Vladimir Putin, thereby emerging as a pivotal hybrid entrepreneur of influence. For over a decade, Prigozhin would provide the Kremlin with critical services in disinformation campaigns and security outsourcing, thus enabling the state to achieve strategic objectives both domestically and internationally, while maintaining varying degrees of plausible deniability. Within the intricate web of patronal politics, the undercurrents of personal relationships and opportune crises were arguably the most salient forces that shaped Prigozhin's rise and subsequent fall. Ultimately, his case exposes the intrinsic fragility of patronal regimes and the potential for hybrid entrepreneurs of influence to become potent destabilizing forces.

The Russian state's growing reliance on the Wagner Group to act as an extension of the state in achieving geopolitical objectives, particularly in Ukraine, fuelled Prigozhin's insatiable need for power and inflated his sense of self-importance. As the case of Prigozhin further revealed, the complex interplay power, ambition, and miscalculations that make up the Russian power structure as well as highlighted the enduring consequences hybrid entrepreneurs of influence can inflict on the patronal regime. The protracted conflict between Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence, culminating in the Wagner Group's attempted mutiny, not only further exposed growing weaknesses and fractures within the power vertical but also inflicted significant reputational damage on an aging Putin. Admittedly, the swift dismantling of Prigozhin's

expansive empire in the wake of the failed rebellion underscored the regime's ability to reassert control. However, the somewhat disjointed crisis response, in conjunction with the perceived weakening of the chief-patron, have likely emboldened others within the system to test the limits of the regime's power. In this sense, the enduring effects of Prigozhin's actions extend well-beyond his demise. This is because nothing is as contagious nor resilient as an idea. Although the state may have eliminated Prigozhin, the malignant seeds of doubt he sowed within the patronal network are likely to deepen existing fissures. And as capricious loyalties within Russia sway with the shifting winds of opportunity, understanding how the stage may have been set for a broader reckoning becomes essential. While Russia contends with the enduring fallout of Prigozhin's legacy, among both the elite and the wider populace in an increasingly volatile threat environment, assessing the nuanced power dynamics within patronal politics becomes ever more crucial. Thus, this work serves as a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers alike, offering insights into the complex relationships among actors within patronal politics and enhancing understanding of the nexus between power, influence, and regime stability in Russia and beyond.

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