

Violence as a Condition: the Threat Posed by Quasi-PMCs*

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Abstract

Prevailing research on state actors and private military contractors (PMCs) suggests several reasons why these actors commit political violence. However, those theories are insufficient to explain new actors operating between the conception of state and nonstate. We introduce and conceptualize quasi-PMCs as actors that maintain ties to the state while utilizing the identity of traditional PMCs. We argue that quasi-PMCs serve as a client to the state but do not face the same market-oriented repercussions for human rights abuses that traditional PMCs do. To test our theory empirically, we study Russia's Wagner Group operations within the Central African Republic. We use the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as an instrument to deal with endogeneity. We find that quasi-PMCs such as the Wagner Group commit substantially more lethal political violence than the state actors who employ them.

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Contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Previous Literature	5
3	Theoretical Framework and Expectations	7
3.1	Defining Quasi-PMCs	7
3.2	Why Quasi-PMCs Commit More Lethal Violence	10
4	Research Design	16
4.1	Outcomes of Interest	17
4.2	Treatment	18
4.3	Controls	20
4.4	The War in Ukraine as an Instrument	21
5	Analysis	29
6	Conclusion	32

Send your children to the front. Either private military contractors and prisoners, or [send] your children - decide for yourself.

-Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner Founder/Owner in Reich 2022, par. 5

1 Introduction

Prominent theories on political violence¹ argues that when the material and political support of the incumbent is low, those governments tend to employ violent coercion (Weinstein 2007; DeMeritt and Young 2013; Conrad and DeMeritt 2013). Other evidence shows that when there are more threats to an incumbent, the “Law of Coercive Responsiveness” means that governments will deal with dissent by using violence against civilians (Davenport 1995; Lyall 2009; Davenport 2007). Existing theory on nonstate actors and violence against civilians, on the other hand, shows that private military contractors (PMCs), which by definition operate on the international market for force, are reluctant to commit political violence since they are more subject to international sanctions for norms violations (Penel and Petersohn 2022).

1. We define political violence as intentional acts of violence by organized groups against civilians, and use it interchangeably with violence against civilians.

In the Central African Republic, however, these roles are reversed. Often defined as a PMC, Russia’s Wagner Group contractors seem to commit as severe, if not worse, levels of political violence than the state actors who hire them. In fact, Wagner’s lethality was recently examined in a report by the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED). In that report, ACLED determined that violent events with Wagner Group contractors target civilians at a dramatically higher rate than their counterparts in the Central African Republic’s military, also known as FACA (Serwat et al. 2022). We explain this puzzle, and build on previous research on Wagner (Marten 2019b), through the following logic: Wagner Group personnel are fundamentally similar yet distinct from the traditional conceptions of PMCs. We argue that Wagner operates in between the conceptions of military contractors and state actors, which is a shadowy middle ground where their operations are intentionally obscured. When operating in this middle ground, groups face increased incentives for political violence and further face little consequences for human rights abuses. We define the Wagner Group, and various other actors operating in this space, as *quasi-PMCs* (QPMCs). Quasi-PMCs serve as a client and semi-state actor but do not face the same market-oriented repercussions for human rights abuses that traditional PMCs do (Penel and Petersohn 2022).

In this paper, we contribute theoretically to the existing literature on the motivations for actors who commit political violence. The current research divides actors into their status as state or nonstate actors; we extend this research by introducing quasi-PMCs that operate between these two classic conceptions. As quasi-PMCs emerge from states like Turkey, the UAE, and Russia, our paper develops a theoretical framework to explain *why* these new actors are more likely to commit political violence. We also contribute empirically by providing the first study on quasi-PMCs by studying the Wagner Group’s violence in the Central African Republic. By classifying these emergent groups as quasi-PMCs, we contribute to policymakers’ discussions on the group; examining the groups as traditional PMCs muddies the water and misunderstands how best to approach the subject. For example, the US has

recently began sanctioning the Wagner Group and its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin,² while also contemplating the designation of the group as a foreign terrorist organization (*Treasury Sanctions* 2023). We believe this is unlikely to work to reduce Wagner’s presence, as the group does not operate on the free market as a classic PMC does.

As states increasingly use quasi-PMCs, it is necessary to understand why these groups are more likely than traditional state actors and PMCs to commit lethal political violence and hence why their use should be discouraged from states and other international actors. To answer our research question, we use an instrumental variable exploiting the war in Ukraine as an exogenous shock on the quality of Wagner contractors sent to the Central African Republic. Since the troop buildup on the border of Ukraine, Russia has been repurposing its high-quality contractors,³ sending them to Ukraine and sending low-quality contractors⁴ to the Central African Republic. We exploit this change in Wagner Group personnel quality to examine their lethality of violence. We define a “lethal” event as a violent event where one or more civilians died. We further use lethal and severe interchangeably to describe political violence. Our results indicate that violent events involving Wagner contractors lead to nineteen more civilian fatalities compared to state violence.

Our paper proceeds as follows. First, we define quasi-PMCs and their relationships to the client states they serve; we follow that discussion by theorizing why quasi-PMCs will have a higher propensity to more lethal political violence. Second, we build our research design, which accounts for temporal endogeneity and potential selection effects in the first-ever empirical research on quasi-PMCs and the first quantitative research on the Wagner Group. Third, we discuss our results, and show how the use of Wagner Group forces and other quasi-PMCs dramatically increase the lethality of violence against civilians. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the implications of quasi-PMCs and the Wagner Group for

2. Prigozhin is a Russian oligarch and former criminal with direct and longstanding ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. For more discussion of Prigozhin and his role within Wagner’s operations and Russia’s government, see the online appendix.

3. These are the elite contractors we associate with Wagner pre-Ukraine.

4. These are the more run-of-the-mill contractors, who often have no military experience but tend to have criminal records.

the political violence literature and political science as a whole, and explore future avenues for research on these actors.

2 Previous Literature

While previous iterations of research on PMCs conceptualize them as nonstate actors, that definition in and of itself is based upon a single distinction of the state and nonstate. Thus, in this section, we explore prior literature on nonstate actors by first explaining what a modern-day state is and juxtaposing nonstate against that definition. We then explore the commonly accepted definitions of PMCs and commercial military actors (CMAs), and explain how neither those definitions nor state actor definitions fit quasi-PMCs.

What is the state, and by necessity, sovereignty? Originally devised by Weber as an entity with a monopoly on the use of force (Weber 1919), more recent conceptions, from Tilly (1985) to Thomson (1996) and more recently Srivastava (2022b), have redefined the state through its sovereign claims, often through violence. Thomson, for example, defines the state and its sovereign claims through the state’s “institutionalized sovereignty claims,” as the state monopolizes legitimate violence within its borders (Thomson 1996, 14). Important here is the violence making aspect deriving solely from the state. As modern-day states emerged, they legitimized the violence of the state and deligitimized the violence of nonstate actors such as mercenaries (Tilly 1985).

Yet, this does not preclude modern nonstate actors from taking up arms, especially in the name of the state. As states delegate their authority to PMCs, they inherently delegate the right to violence (Srivastava 2022b; Kunkel 2023). Thus, while operating with state authority, PMCs remain nonstate actors. Recall that PMCs are formal, legal entities with structures exogenous of the state (Petersohn 2014). As nonstate actors, PMCs and other actors that sell their capacity for violence act on the market for force (Penel and Petersohn 2022). Thus, they operate as nonstate actors that operate within a state and for a state,

but as actors external to the state.

How does this compare to our conception of quasi-PMCs? We argue that quasi-PMCs fit in the middle of these classic definitions of state actors and nonstate PMCs. Take, for example, Thomson’s *Mercenaries, pirates, and sovereigns* (Thomson 1996). Thomson wrestles with historical and current conceptions of nonstate actors, and classifies actors (primarily) through their Decision-Making authority and the ownership of the means of violence (Ibid, 8.). While quasi-PMCs fall firmly under the “State” category for Decision-Making authority,⁵ the ownership of quasi-PMCs sets them apart. According to Thomson, when decision authority is held by the state, if an actor is owned by the state it is a modern standing army, but when owned by nonstate then it is a privateer (Ibid, 8.) How does Thomson determine where the state and nonstate are separated here? The way coercion is exercised, also known as labor and property (Ibid, 9.).

The issue, however, is that quasi-PMCs do not fall squarely into either privateer or standing army categories. Take Wagner, for example. Wagner no-doubt owns the expertise, skills, and human aspect of the labor. The property, however, is not as clear. “Property includes the armaments and money required to sustain” its work (Ibid, 9.). The line for quasi-PMCs is blurry; the Wagner Group’s property is supplied both by nonstate actor and de-facto leader Yevgeney Prigozhin who funds the group personally (Kim 2022), and by the Russian state, who provides material and physical support (Brugen 2022), such as Wagner’s recruiting and training center being located within a Russian military intelligence complex (Rácz 2020, Par. 19). This is muddled even moreso by the fact that other states fund the Wagner Group (Whitlock and Jones 2022) while the group also receives payments for services directly from client states like the Central African Republic and Mali (Edwards 2021; Thompson, Doxsee, and Bermudez Jr. 2022; Mackinnon and Gramer 2022). In other words, even among highly specific definitions of state and nonstate such as those from Thomson, quasi-PMCs operate in the middle. In the next section, we discuss our definition of quasi-

5. In other words, the quasi-PMC host state determines where the actor goes and what tasks they undertake at a strategic level.

PMCs, and further reinforce how these new groups do not fit into traditional state and nonstate categories, leading to an increase in political violence.

3 Theoretical Framework and Expectations

In this section, we explore the literature on why states and PMCs commit political violence, and juxtapose those expectations with quasi-PMCs. The negative incentives to political violence faced by state and nonstate actors hold substantially less weight when the actor is inbetween classifications. We argue that quasi-PMCs do not face political repercussions that state actors face for political violence, and similarly do not face the market repercussions PMCs deal with. Next, we discuss what a quasi-PMC is, and explain in detail why they are more likely to commit lethal political violence than the state that hires them.

3.1 Defining Quasi-PMCs

Quasi-PMCs maintain strong connections to the host state that are likely formalized but often without a formal paper trail, likely by design, while also acting as semi-independent actors who operate outside of the bounds of the host state. We define the “host” state as the state where the quasi-PMC is based and/or receives material resources from, and the “client” state as the state that is using the quasi-PMCs that originated in the host state.

We do expect some aspects of state and PMC political violence theory to extend to quasi-PMCs. To be defined as a quasi-PMC, actors must meet five necessary but not sufficient conditions. In these conditions, they come close to the definition of state and nonstate actors without directly meeting a threshold for either. First, as semi-state actors,⁶ quasi-PMCs have an official relationship with the state or a state institution, and second, they use the resources and institutional capacity/reach of the state to achieve the host-state’s goals. Quasi-PMCs existence as semi-state actors is important, as it removes the international market from the

6. With the prefix “semi” for state, we are stating that quasi-PMCs are only partially state actors, rather than full state actors.

equation. In other words, quasi-PMCs are given contracts not based on the market that would otherwise deter them from human rights abuses (Penel and Petersohn 2022), but are rather privileged through their relationship to the state. Case in-point is the UAE's use of quasi-PMCs within Libya. The UAE has a specific interest in upending the Libyan government, and so its quasi-PMCs, registered in the UAE, signed \$80,000,000 worth of contracts with a Libyan warlord to assassinate political leaders in Tripoli (Werleman 2020). The UAE is so insistent on taking advantage of and legitimizing quasi-PMCs, in fact, that the state has financed Russia's Wagner Group as well as its own quasi-PMCs (Whitlock and Jones 2022). Other groups like Wagner are also removed from the international market, as the host state leverages its international sovereign power to get the quasi-PMC its contracts, which is a large part of why Wagner and Russia are often seen as synonymous (Risemberg 2021; Law 2021).

Third, as semi-nonstate actors, quasi-PMCs typically have a very circumstantial paper trail that cannot directly implicate them as state actors, which can be especially hard to identify in states where bureaucratic transparency is low. Quasi-PMCs are not formal state actors and often do not legally exist according to the laws of the state (Kim 2022). Within the UAE, for example, the state maintains a relationship with unnamed quasi-PMCs that operate with the recruiting capacity and partial funding of the state (Werleman 2020) while also operating as companies paid by client states and registered as PMCs in the UAE. (Roston 2018) While they are technically and legally PMCs in the UAE and thus appear to be a private nonstate actor, the quasi-PMCs have strong ties to the state and often operate on behalf of the UAE to supplement state forces and achieve state interests through plausible deniability (Werleman 2020).

Fourth, we further argue that quasi-PMCs do not fit squarely into the state category because of the comparisons with traditional state actors. For example, quasi-PMCs operating alongside military forces, as Wagner has done with Russia within Ukraine, does not make it a state actor. When the US contracts with PMCs like DynCorp or Academi (formerly

Blackwater), these actors are not formalized state actors, despite locals' mistaking them for state actors (Srivastava 2022a; Kunkel 2023). Even more important as a distinction, quasi-PMCs do not fall under the direct command of state actors, and act independently of the chain-of-command while still pursuing the host-state's goals. The Wagner Group's actions in Ukraine, for example, distinguish this clearly; Wagner contractors do not fall into the chain of command of the Russian military or government, and they sometimes act as a rival of the Russian military (Schwartz et al. 2022). While Wagner maintains its privileged status with Russia as long as it works towards state goals, further highlighting its status outside of the chain-of-command.

In many ways, we derive our theoretical expectations and definitions of quasi-PMCs from Srivastava's research on Blackwater in *Hybrid Sovereignty* (Srivastava 2022b). Srivastava defines Blackwater as a hybrid actor between the state and the nonstate (Ibid, 114). Similar to quasi-PMCs, Blackwater maintained *contractual hybridity*, where the company derived its power from the United States and operated in warfighting capacities (Ibid, 121; 123), but "were not part of the sovereign obligations to be included in war fatalities or disclose their finances or be held legally liable" (Ibid, 124). Blackwater, especially during its time in Iraq, appears to be a prototype of our conception of quasi-PMCs, especially in how these new actors exist in Russia, the UAE, and Turkey. Moreover, Srivastava concludes that it was this hybrid status for Blackwater that directly led to increased political violence (Ibid, 123-124). We thus build from this framework, and further explicate why quasi-PMCs commit more political violence than their state or nonstate counterparts.

Finally, we define quasi-PMCs via their distinctiveness vis-à-vis otherwise comparable host state actors. In other words, we define them in contrast to the state actors they work in conjunction with or replace. Thus, we should expect the state to treat them differently than traditional military forces. For example, the previously-discussed unnamed UAE quasi-PMCs are used by the state to give plausible deniability, and to avoid any casualties adding to the UAE's official numbers (Jebnoun 2022), similar to Blackwater's use by the

United States (Srivastava 2022b, 124).

Due to quasi-PMCs status as operating between classic conceptions of state and nonstate, we expect them to have similar state-based positive incentives and decreased state and nonstate-based negative incentives to political violence. In the next subsection, we discuss why.

3.2 Why Quasi-PMCs Commit More Lethal Violence

From suppressing dissent (Hill and Jones 2014; Davenport 1995), seeking information (Kalyvas 2006), demonstrations of power (Schelling 1966), suppressing threats and insurgencies (Davenport 1995; Lyall 2009), and various strategic benefits (Kalyvas 2006), incumbents have several reasons for committing political violence. We argue that positive incentives to violence against civilians do not change substantially from state actors compared to quasi-PMCs. Each of the listed reasons can be used to spur violence among either type of actor. For example, while the client state and quasi-PMC are both incentivized to violence to re-take geographic control for different reasons,⁷ each reason still leads to both actors committing political violence for the same desire: territorial control.

Alternatively, the client state faces many negative incentives to political violence that we argue *do not* extend to quasi-PMCs; in these scenarios, the state often faces some measure of accountability that cannot transfer to quasi-PMCs. For example, incumbents and rebels often rely on civilians for material and political support (Weinstein 2007; DeMeritt and Young 2013; Conrad and DeMeritt 2013). Even as a semi-state actor, quasi-PMCs do not rely on civilians for material and political support. Their status in the middle ground means their material support comes from two places. Quasi-PMCs rely on material support from the host state and nonstate organizers of the group, and can extract other financial means from the client state such as resource extraction and direct payments. In this sense, then,

7. We assume that the client state wants the Weberian concept of sovereignty via territorial control while the quasi-PMC wants to comply with client state desires to ensure future contracts and to take over potential areas of resource extraction

quasi-PMCs do not depend on material support from the civilian population of the client state. To be clear, the client state does rely, at least partially, on the support of its civilian population; this, combined with the fact that quasi-PMCs are supported by the client state, means there is a tangible, albeit minor, pathway for civilian support to change quasi-PMC violence outcomes. We expect this to have a trivial effect on quasi-PMC actions, especially due to the relatively small support quasi-PMCs receive from the client state compared to the host state and the quasi-PMC's resource extraction capabilities that are exogenous of civilian support.

Similar to the PMC literature on market-oriented concerns about human rights abuses (Penel and Petersohn 2022), state and nonstate actors face external legitimacy concerns for human rights abuses (Jo 2015). Quasi-PMCs do not operate on the free market as traditional PMCs do, so they have no external legitimacy concerns. Moreover, because quasi-PMCs are not the state, they face no external legitimacy costs, as those are exclusive to state actors.

Finally, state actors face risks of accountability post-war if the government loses (Downes 2006; Keels and Greig 2022). As before, these do not apply to quasi-PMCs, as the actors involved can simply leave during any negative outcomes. Quasi-PMCs have no reason for loyalty to the client state and thus little reason to stick around if the government is expected to lose the war. We theorize that quasi-PMCs do not face the moral hazard that regular PMCs do, as the host state is unlikely to punish quasi-PMCs for human rights abuses, and the client state will be unable or unwilling to punish it either. To be clear, the possibility always exists that either the client state deflects blame and scapegoats its crimes to the quasi-PMC, the host state decides to punish the contractors, or that the client state personally extradites and prosecutes the contractors. Moreover, on the empirical side, there is little evidence of this ever occurring. The only situation that *may* be construed as a negative externality is Wagner's substantial casualties at the hands of US Special Forces in Syria. Although Wagner Group contractors were explicitly led into a trap by other assets within the Russian government, this was likely more of a pushback on Prigozhin himself rather

than a punishment for any perceived crimes by the quasi-PMC (Marten 2019b). Until more evidence of these negative incentives to political violence arise empirically, there is little reason to believe that quasi-PMCs would change their behavior, especially if they have yet to see it happen to anyone else.

Of every negative incentive present, we theorize that the only one that applies to quasi-PMCs is that of civilian support of the opposition. When states or quasi-PMCs commit indiscriminate violence against civilians, civilians then have less reason to not support the opposition group (Mason and Krane 1989). Thus, the use of political violence may worry quasi-PMCs, who would then have to fight against a stronger opponent. Of the original negative incentives to violence, only one applies to quasi-PMCs. This leads us to expect that, from a state-perspective, quasi-PMCs have dramatically fewer negative incentives to violence against civilians, which in-turn leads to more political violence.

PMCs face very different positive and negative incentives to political violence than state actors. Yet, applying these theories to quasi-PMCs leads to inaccurate outcomes. While some research examines the connection between PMCs and violence severity, it either falls short of explaining quasi-PMCs behavior or is entirely irrelevant for quasi-PMCs. Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski use data on PMC contracts in African civil wars (Akcinaroglu and Radziszewski 2013); while important, their measures of how PMCs increase domestic military effectiveness are not relevant towards the nonstate actors' use of violence against civilians.

While Penel and Petersohn focus extensively on CMAs (Penel and Petersohn 2022), their theory also extends to typical PMCs that operate on the “market for force.” This market tends to punish norm-violating PMCs, and the international order tends to punish norm-violating states (Ibid, 5-6.). Thus, Penel and Petersohn argue, states will be opposed to hiring PMCs that violate these norms, especially if the state values the international order (Ibid, 6.). Even more important for the PMC operations, they argue that committing human rights abuses will likely lead to sanctions from states to that actor, severely blunting their

future prevalence and contracts and further disincentivizing political violence.

Importantly, however, quasi-PMCs do not operate on the same market for force that traditional PMCs or CMAs do. Rather, quasi-PMCs are contracted out by the host-state to a client-state that then uses the forces. While acting as a quasi-state actor, they use the resources of the state without being directly integrated into it. Thus, instead of competing on market for force, we theorize that quasi-PMCs are semi-private actors that operate *outside* the market for force. Without market pressures typically faced by actors fully external of the state to comply with international norms, quasi-PMCs operate on a narrower market from the host-state and can thus avoid any moral hazard faced by those actors not operating in the same market as them. Even if we granted the assumption that host states would pass on costs from sanctions to quasi-PMCs, there is little evidence in the strength of sanctions to change state behavior in this context. While existing research is mixed on whether sanctions work (Potter 1922; Pape 1997; Blanchard and Ripsman 1999; Baldwin 2000), recent anecdotal evidence is leading to more questions about those conclusions, as Russia skirts economic sanctions for its invasion of Ukraine (Rappeport 2023; “Why the West’s oil sanctions on Russia are proving to be underwhelming” 2023).

There is one more assumption/definition we make in our conception of quasi-PMCs; that is, the quality of troops used by quasi-PMCs is assumed to be stable over time. Outside of a shock such as the war in Ukraine, the shift in recruiting standards likely would not happen. The quality of quasi-PMCs matters to their lethality of violence, which is why our instrument is predictive of the outcomes. Thus, the recruiting base of quasi-PMCs can matter, such as the UAE’s focus on recruiting American former military (Werleman 2020). We further expect quasi-PMCs with more training such as the UAE’s to be less lethal than those with less training. Regardless of the quality of training, we expect the goals of quasi-PMCs to remain static while the means (i.e., using prisoners to fight) may change.

The characteristics and interests of quasi-PMCs allow for ease of violence and a lack

Table 1: Reasons for committing political violence by actor.

Mechanisms		Actors		
<i>Incentive Type</i>	<i>Positive/Negative</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Nonstate/PMCs</i>	<i>Quasi-PMCs</i>
Suppressing dissent	Positive	X	X	X
Seeking information	Positive	X	X	X
Demonstrations of power	Positive	X	X	X
Suppressing threats to incumbent	Positive	X		X
Strategic benefits	Positive	X		X
Material/political support by civilians	Negative	X	X	
Civilian support for opposition	Negative	X	X	X
External legitimacy concerns	Negative	X	X	
Post-war accountability	Negative	X		
Int'l sanctions for norm violations	Negative	X	X	

of constraint inherent within traditional military or market institutions. The attributes of quasi-PMCs mean that there is no mechanism or interest in pursuing justice for violence against civilians. Whereas we can expect traditional militaries to be held accountable for their actions, quasi-PMCs have a distinct lack of oversight by host and client states. The onus of responsibility is less on political and military leadership and more on combatants with an institutionalized lack of reciprocity for their actions. When client states hire quasi-PMCs, they avoid traditional expectations of private military companies, preferring more ill-defined identities on the international stage. Hiring quasi-PMC groups from the likes of Turkey, UAE, or Russia has shown that it is essential for client states to avoid the responsibilities and expectations that come with making legitimized decisions in the world order.

There are numerous interests of quasi-PMCs that allow them to use more violence against civilians. The pseudo-relationship quasi-PMCs have with the client and host states allows for a distinct lack of accountability. We believe that the concerns over human rights violations do not hinder the practices of either of the involved parties. Therefore, we argue that the interests of each group outweigh the human losses associated with quasi-PMC practices. Material interests by quasi-PMCs, foreign policy expectations by host states, and client

state security goals have all been shown to be of greater importance than the human rights violations associated with these relationships. Therefore, the interests of each party allow for violence against civilians in favor of pursuing each party's interests.

As we show with the Wagner Group, the quality of troops in quasi-PMCs has not changed the relationships with client states nor the willingness of host states to maintain mutual relationships between all parties. Due to the top-down structure of quasi-PMCs and their host states, as long as interests and goals are being met by all parties involved, quasi-PMCs' qualities or actions matter less, client state included. The nature of the governing structure of quasi-PMCs shows either that there is direct control with one individual at the helm or an obscure ownership apparatus tied with a personal interest in the host state. The lack of clear distinction in decision-making means that interests must be considered imperative over the quality of business practices. In the case of quasi-PMCs, violence against civilians becomes less important to the ends of host states, client states, and quasi-PMCs.

Therefore, the identifying characteristics of quasi-PMCS and their motivating interests create the expectation that quasi-PMCs will use more lethal violence against civilians. Given a lack of institutionalized accountability and the purposeful avoidance of holding quasi-PMCs accountable in favor of each party's goals, quasi-PMCs are more likely to show increased violence against civilians.

By deriving a novel conception of what quasi-PMCs are, we posit that traditional incentives against political violence do not apply, and that quasi-PMCs are substantially more likely to commit political violence than the client state that employs them. Client states face pressure both domestically and internationally in a way that does not extend to quasi-PMCs. Nonstate actors on the market for force, on the other hand, face market pressures to avoid political violence that also do not extend to quasi-PMCs. We thus hypothesize that in the absence of these negative incentives to violence, quasi-PMCs will commit more severe violence than client state forces.

H₁: Quasi-PMCs are more likely to commit more lethal violence against civilians than client

state forces.

4 Research Design

To test our hypothesis that quasi-PMCs are more prone to lethal violence than the client state forces, we zoom in to a specific case of quasi-PMC use in Central Africa. By examining Wagner’s violence within the Central African Republic, we propose a formal test of our quasi-PMC hypothesis. We choose to examine Wagner’s operations within the Central Africa Republic for several reasons. First, as explained in the theory section, Wagner is the first quasi-PMC to emerge, and is far from the last. Even within Russia, there are potentially many more quasi-PMCs that may operate with the directions of the Kremlin, such as Shield, Patriot, and Redut that each have close ties to the state (Altynbayev 2020; Sukhankin 2019a; Meduza 2022; Ziener and King 2022). Even periphery Russian actors are planning on joining in the quasi-PMC arms race; Chechnya’s leader Ramzan Kadyrov, a close ally of Putin, recently discussed his ambitions to imitate the Wagner Group with his own quasi-PMC (“Plan to compete” 2023). Outside of Russia, other states such as the UAE and Turkey have emerged as new users of quasi-PMCs (Werleman 2020; Roston 2018; Whitlock and Jones 2022). The phenomenae of quasi-PMCs modelled after Wagner has expanded to at least two states beyond Russia’s borders, and there’s little reason to suggest this trend will not continue. For a deeper discussion of the Wagner Group and how we conceptualize it as a quasi-PMC, see the online appendix.

Second, Wagner operations within the Central African Republic are extensively documented in a way that PMCs, quasi or not, are rarely done as accurately as in ACLED’s data. For example, there is a long history of PMCs being mistaken as state troops and vice versa (Srivastava 2022a; Kunkel 2023). If we studied quasi-PMC use in the war in Ukraine, it would be substantially more difficult to be confident in the veracity of the data, with it being an active war zone where Wagner contractors often dress similarly to official

Russian military personnel (Mohieddeen 2022) and are thus likely misreported. Indeed, any quasi-PMC operating this way is likely to be misunderstood as military troops for the state. Importantly, the Central African Republic case lets us deal with potential data integrity issues. This is because Wagner, an organization based out of Russia and with a long history of adoration of white supremacist ideology and imagery, is all but guaranteed to be full of white Russians in military gear.⁸

4.1 Outcomes of Interest

To measure whether Wagner’s violence leads to more lethal outcomes than if state forces were involved, we zoom in on violence in the Central African Republic by using the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010). More specifically, we measure the *lethality of violence* in two measures of the dependent variable. First, we measure the lethality of violence as a binary indicator. In these models, we explore whether a violent event occurred with (1) or without (0) a death. Using this as our dependent variable allows us to measure whether a violent event led to a fatality and thus understand the probability that a violent encounter led to a death. This is important as a measurement because we expect Wagner contractors to have a higher propensity to political violence and especially more severe political violence. As we explained earlier in the theory section, Wagner contractors have less to lose and more to gain when committing violence than state forces. The state is expected to engage in strategic violence against civilians and may still avoid killing when possible, whereas Wagner faces little threat from state prosecution for violence.

Take, for example, two incidents of violence against civilians, one perpetrated by state forces and one perpetrated by Wagner contractors.⁹ In each of these examples, both units were retaliating against civilians for suspected ties to rebel groups, yet each ended with

8. This is validated by examining any image of Wagner contractors. See Mohieddeen 2022. Moreover, other sources note that CAR civilians refer to Wagner contractors as the “White soldiers” (Obaji Jr 2022a, par. 3).

9. Each of these examples is taken directly from the ACLED data used in our analyses

dramatically different outcomes. In May 2021, FACA forces alleged that twenty Muslim civilians were collaborating with rebel forces, and subsequently attacked, imprisoned, and tortured them. While undoubtedly a horrible outcome for all involved, each civilian was eventually released, and none died in the custody of FACA forces. In contrast, less than half a year after the prior incident, Wagner contractors accused Fulani herders and their families of assisting rebel forces. In retaliation, Wagner contractors attacked the civilians and families, in which they killed approximately forty civilians and permanently displaced others. In one violent event, to prevent future support of rebels, the state engaged in coercive violence that, while horrendous, did not directly cause civilian deaths. In another violent event, also to prevent future support of rebels, Wagner forces engaged in coercive violence that directly killed forty civilians and likely injured more.

We also distinguish our dependent variable as a count outcome, where the outcome of interest is measured as the number of fatalities when an event occurred. By measuring the lethality of violence this way, we can examine the difference in the total lethality of violence when Wagner contractors are involved, as opposed to only knowing the likelihood that it leads to death. For a more thorough discussion of how we coded the violence, please refer to the online appendix.

4.2 Treatment

For the treatment in our analyses, we code based on ACLED’s determination of whether Wagner forces were or were not present within the Central African Republic. As Wagner forces were first recorded in ACLED’s database within the Central African Republic in April of 2018, the data used in our analysis ranges from that date until the present,¹⁰ as it encompasses the total range of times the “treatment” of Wagner contractors could have been assigned. For more description of how we coded our variables, see Appendix C.

As discussed previously, Wagner’s use in the Central African Republic presents an ex-

10. Dec. 10, 2022 at the time of writing.

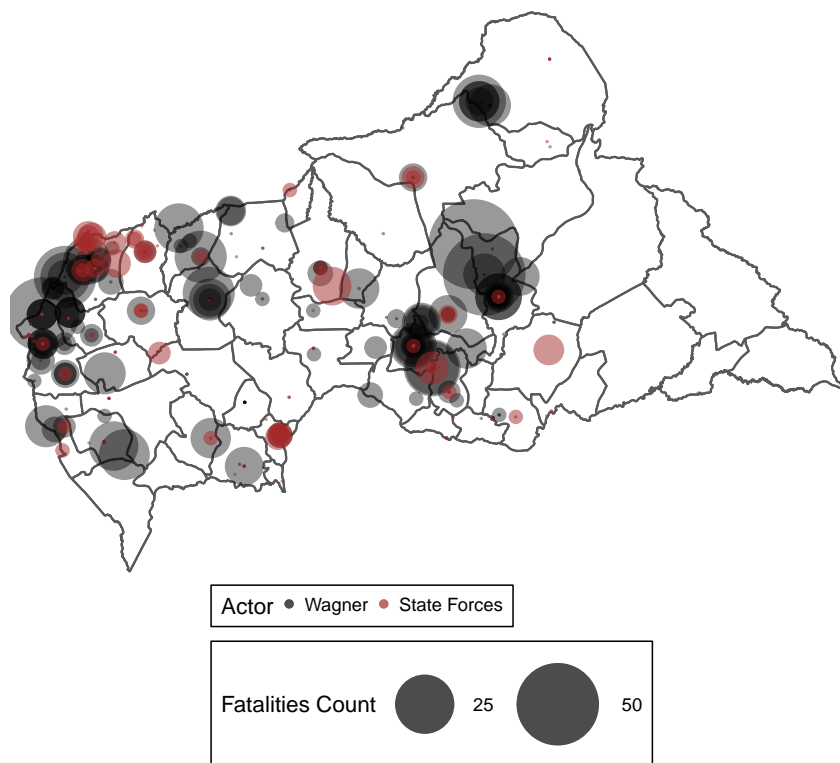


Figure 1: Wagner Group and State Violence in the Central African Republic since 2021.

cellent way to study quasi-PMCs. As quasi-PMCs intentionally operate in the shadows, establishing where they are and distinguishing them from state forces can be especially problematic. Even regular PMCs, who intentionally have formal, legal structures and operate distinctly from state forces can be hard to identify by local populations (Kunkel 2023), and even those who report to ACLED. The racial heterogeneity between Wagner contractors and FACA forces, primarily white and black, respectively, combined with the fact that Wagner contractors speak in Russian means that we are highly confident that the violence is coded accurately by ACLED. If we measured the treatment of Wagner in Ukraine, for example, it would likely bias our results, as the confidence in the accuracy of the coding data is substantially lower due to Wagner’s operation in conjunction with official Russian military forces (Atlamazoglou 2022).

We code the treatment as a binary indicator where a zero represents only FACA forces during a violent event, and a one is where Wagner forces are present. We also expect, due to

the nature of our theory predicting that Wagner forces are more lethal than state forces, our estimates of Wagner violence to be underestimated. Since Wagner is less sensitive and more prone to mass casualty events against civilians, there are likely more times when the group has committed violence with no witnesses or reporters than state forces.¹¹ To see where the violence is located by actor in the Central African Republic, see Figure 1.

4.3 Controls

While our analyses do use an instrument, we use various controls that may ultimately affect the treatment assignment and the outcome of violence severity. We measure the lag sum of fatalities in the past month before a violent event, as that likely affects where Wagner and state forces are deployed. We expect Wagner to be deployed to places the state may expect to be more severe, as the state will face less domestic costs with Wagner contractors committing lethal violence than state forces. So, to deal with that potential temporal reverse causation, we control for *Violence Lag*.

We also control for natural resources within the Central African Republic. Wagner’s deployments often have much to do with natural resources like diamonds and gold that can be extracted and used to gain capital (Obaji Jr. 2021; Olivier 2022a; Joyner 2023). Similarly, because there is a direct financial incentive for Wagner to maintain a monopoly on a resource mine, they are also more likely to commit severe political violence to maintain control. Thus, we further control for the Central African Republic’s most prominent natural resources, diamonds and gold, coded as *Diamond* and *Gold*, respectively. This data comes from PRIO’s database, which records the location of diamond and gold mines throughout the world (Tollefsen, Strand, and Buhaug 2012).

While we control for as many variables as possible, we also acknowledge that we cannot model every variable that could be biasing the analysis. For example, there is emerging evidence that the Wagner Group has been granted access to previously untouched rainforests

11. This is based on the assumption that more deaths means less witnesses.

under a subsidiary company where they will likely export lumber (Joyner 2023; Komminoth 2022). Not only would Wagner quasi-PMCs be more likely to be more severe in their violence here, in order to protect their investment, but we also expect Wagner group contracts to change their violence levels when they are co-located with United Nations Peacekeepers (*MINUSCA Fact Sheet*). With over 17,000 UN personnel present, it is possible that Wagner contractors are more severe when not in the presence of peacekeepers. Nevertheless, with no up-to-date UN data past the end of 2021 (Cil et al. 2020), and no up-to-date forestry data of the Central African Republic, we recognize this as a limitation to our study and leave this up to future researchers who study the Wagner Group.

4.4 The War in Ukraine as an Instrument

While we control for as many variables that may plausibly act as confounders, there is a substantial potential for endogeneity with our causal model. Central African Republic incumbent leaders have a strong incentive to send Wagner contractors where they expect more severe violence. Why is this the case? First, Central African Republic leaders face substantially lower domestic audience costs for casualties inflicted upon and by Wagner contractors. While civilians and elites may associate the contractors with the state, they are still distinct entities. We thus posit that the state would expect to face lower domestic costs for using Wagner than it otherwise would for the same outcomes but with state forces. Second, prior to the war in Ukraine, Wagner’s reputation was one of expertise. Wagner contractors were often recruited from Russian ex-special forces or ex-intelligence operatives (Chraibi 2020). Russia’s current fiasco in Ukraine notwithstanding, the Russian armed forces are well-trained, especially when comparing the special forces of the Russian state to regular troops within FACA. Since it is likely that Wagner advertised its expertise when marketed to Central African Republic leadership, we expect that same leadership to send contractors where there is a higher expectation of violence severity.

Finally, due to the Russian benefits of Wagner contractors, such as gold and diamond

extraction, Wagner will likely keep sending contractors regardless of casualties. Wagner and Russia benefit highly from the resource extraction from the Central African Republic; elites within the regime such as Prigozhin and Utkin can increase their wealth and Russia can use the resources to fund its foreign policy goals. Thus, the state faces even lower costs in sending Wagner to violent locations rather than state forces, as the supply of Wagner forces is unlikely to decline.

To deal with the endogeneity present, we propose the use of the war in Ukraine as an instrument. For the remainder of this section, we justify using the war as an exogenous shock to the supply and quality of Wagner contractors, explain our justification for how it meets the exclusion restriction and only affects the lethality of violence in the Central African Republic directly through Wagner contractors, and then we describe how we coded our instrument.

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has consistently maintained approximately 80,000 troops on its border with Ukraine (Shepeleva 2018; Bickerton 2018; *Responding to Russia's New Military Buildup Near Ukraine* 2021). However, in late 2021, Russia's forces began shifting, and the number of troops on the border ballooned to approximately 100,000 troops. Russia continuously increased troop numbers on the border until it had roughly 200,000 personnel near the Ukrainian border by February 24th of 2022, when it finally decided to invade the country (CRS 2022). We thus argue that Russia's decision to finally begin increasing troop numbers in November 2021 is when it would have started to pull its high-skilled Wagner contractors out of countries like the Central African Republic and Mali and instead repurpose them to the Russian-Ukrainian border in preparation for the invasion.

We have several reasons, both theoretically and empirically motivated, that the high-skilled Wagner contractors were repurposed to Ukraine initially; afterward, substantial casualties in Ukraine meant that to keep the war going and to keep extracting diamonds and gold from the Central African Republic, Russia started to send low-quality contractors to the

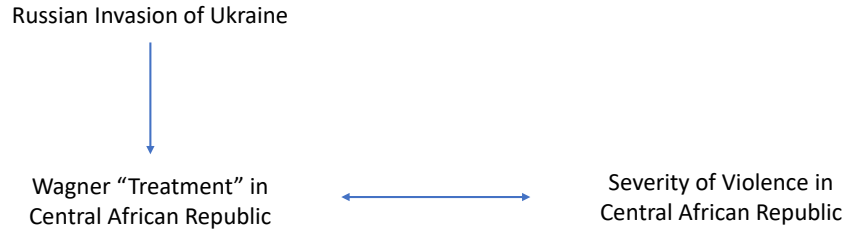


Figure 2: Directed Acrylic Graph (DAG) of causal logic and instrument.

Central African Republic. Thus, we theorize that Russia’s high-skilled contractors initially in the Central African Republic would yield *lower* lethality of violence than after Wagner’s high-skilled troops are repurposed to Ukraine. After this initial repurposing, Russia’s interests in the Central African Republic are fulfilled by less-skilled contractors who are prone to more lethal violence. As previously explicated in the theoretical framework, the shift in quality and supply will only affect the means and not the goals of the quasi-PMCs.

Why would the quality of Wagner Group members change the lethality of their violence? Importantly, we are comparing Wagner’s violence before and after the troop quality changes rather than comparing Wagner here to state forces. Before Ukraine, Wagner’s forces were selective in how they recruited. Wagner operators were advertised as former Russian military, special forces, and even intelligence services. At a baseline level, then, we assume that these Wagner contractors were given some formal training in the laws of war, including various means of crowd/riot control, weapons control, and other forms of violence mitigation tactics. While this training may be more particularly violent than typical police forces of a state, they are nonetheless trained in nonlethal warfare that they can then use in dangerous situations to get what they want without necessarily killing civilians.

Putin, however, has a much higher interest in re-taking Ukraine than he does in projecting power in the Central African Republic. Because of this, we expect Putin and Prigozhin to have repurposed high-skilled Wagner contractors to Ukraine instead of the Central African Republic. Putin’s top priority of taking control of Ukraine and rebuilding the USSR has been evident. For example, Putin has described the fall of the Soviet Union as “the greatest

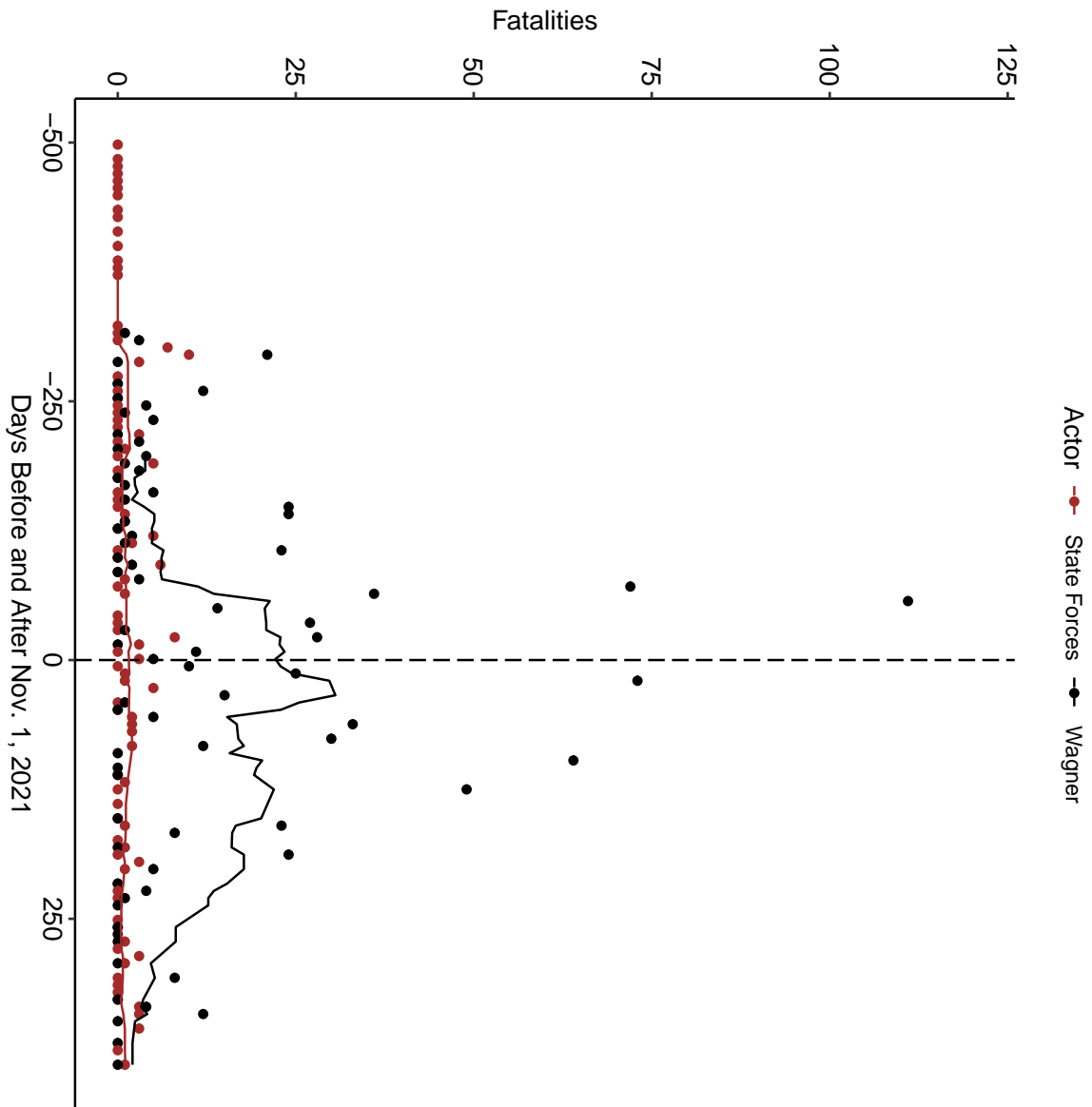


Figure 3: In early Nov. 2021, Russia began massive mobilization to the Ukrainian border, which marks the start date of our instrument.

geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (*Putin* 2005). Moreover, the 2014 annexation of Crimea combined with the recent invasion of Ukraine shows just how far Putin is willing to go to rebuild the USSR, starting with Ukraine. More telling is the fact that “unprecedented numbers” of Wagner Group contractors departed the Central African Republic in January 2022, right before the initial invasion (Obaji Jr. 2022b). This, combined with the fact that Ukrainian intelligence identified several mobile phones most recently seen in the Central Africa Republic instead pinging near President Zelensky’s residence and key infrastructure throughout Kyiv (Owen 2022), increases our certainty that repurposing occurred for the invasion.

Unfortunately for Putin and his allies, Russia has suffered devastating losses after the initial invasion of Ukraine. Russian casualties have been so high, in fact, that the state recently reinstated a national draft to mobilize 300,000 new recruits for the front lines (MacFarquhar 2022). As Wagner contractors in the early stages of the war were given ambitious tasks, such as infiltrating Ukraine and assassinating Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (Ma 2022; Rana 2022), the group suffered massive casualties during the conflict as well (Trieibert and Khavin 2023; Hopkins and Heitmann 2023). While official estimates vary, British Intelligence and other sources have confirmed heavy casualties among Wagner’s forces (*UK intelligence* 2022; Rai 2022; Victor Kovalenko [@MrKovalenko] 2022). Wagner’s forces in Ukraine have deteriorated at such a high level that the group was recently reported to have sent former rebels from the Central African Republic to fight in Ukraine (Olivier 2022b; Shoaib 2022).

To keep the war going, Prigozhin has massively expanded Wagner’s recruiting base well outside of previous standards. For example, while pre-Ukraine Wagner contractors were well established to have high standards for recruitment (Çelik and Şafak 2017; Sauer 2022; Smith 2022), new evidence has uncovered a dramatic drop in the quality of contractors being recruited to the quasi-PMCs. We discovered our first piece of evidence by digging into Wagner’s recruiting efforts after the initial invasion. The strongest secondhand knowledge to date of this change in recruiting comes from a journalist’s account on Wagner’s supposed

website of operation, known as wagner2022.org. No longer online, Wagner2022 established a method of recruiting for Wagner, which allowed anyone over the age of 25 that is not a citizen of a NATO/EU state to participate. This admission from Wagner is clear that, as the war has dragged on, the quasi-PMCs has lowered its standards for recruits.

Our smoking-gun evidence, however, comes from the head of Wagner. In September 2022, a video uncovered by the New York Times showed Wagner founder and head Yevgeny Prigozhin recruiting for Wagner within a Russian prison (Triebert 2022). The Times had independent experts verify the authenticity of the video, and it is very clear that this was indeed Prigozhin recruiting for Wagner. At this point in the war, Wagner has resorted to prisoners, violent criminals, and essentially anyone to fill its ranks. More recent evidence has emerged that up to a fifth of Russian forces in Ukraine are Wagner recruits, with 10,000 servicemen leading battalions of 40,000 ex-prisoners presumably recruited from Prigozhin (Axe 2022). With a limited number of troops to call, and a desire to win greater for Putin in Ukraine, they repurposed their highly skilled contractors away from states like the Central African Republic.

The high-skilled Wagner contractors may have had training on how to avoid lethal violence and training on the various aspects of warfighting. Especially highlighting this point is Wagner's operation in Ukraine of Russia's most advanced T-90 tanks (Axe 2022), an act that would require large amounts of military experience and that could not be learned in a short amount of time. This further shows that Wagner's most experienced fighters have been shifted to Ukraine and away from their pre-war deployments. Further highlighting the skill of Wagner's pre-prisoner forces is the Ukrainian military's acknowledgement that Wagner forces are among the most skilled and effective fighters from Russia (Schwartz 2023).

The final piece of empirical evidence stems from on-the-ground conditions within the Central African Republic. Anecdotal evidence from a journalist on the ground highlights that, despite the war, Wagner contractors are still deployed in large numbers (Joyner 2023). With heavy casualties in Ukraine and a relatively low supply of skilled contractors, it is even

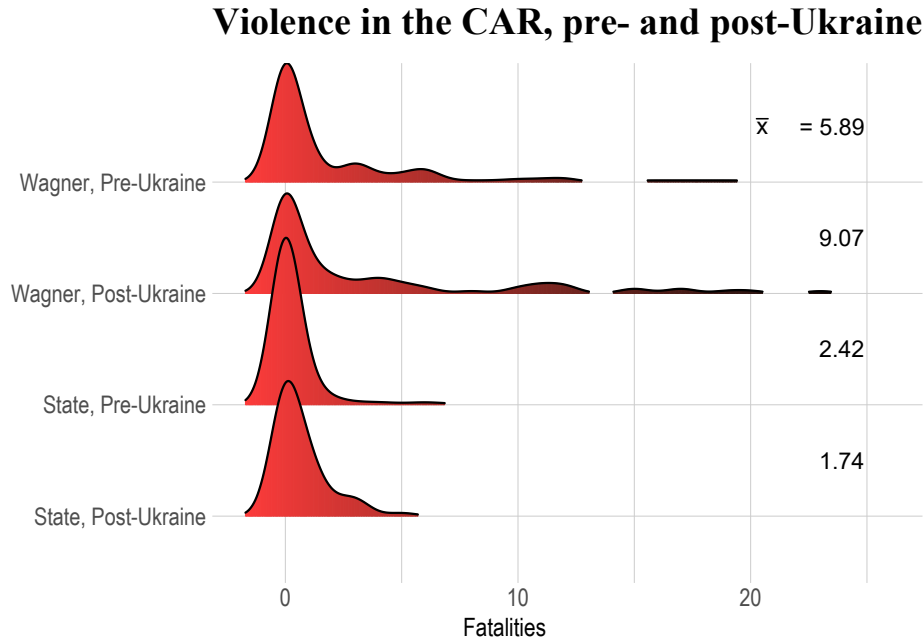


Figure 4: A joyplot of the violence by actor pre- and post-Ukraine invasion.

more likely that, to maintain a presence in the Central African Republic, Wagner sent lower skilled contractors and withdrew the high skilled contractors for Ukraine.

As discussed earlier, Wagner recruiting standards have shifted dramatically since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and high Russian casualties. These new recruits, have had little training, and are now being recruited from prisons. Indeed, with the drop in prior-military experience as a requirement, Wagner is now recruiting people who have zero professional military experience.

As outlined in the theoretical framework of this piece, we expect quasi-PMCs to commit more lethal and overall higher amounts of political violence due to the lack of punishment and benefits gained from it. In this case, however, our instrument suggests that Wagner's violence in the Central African Republic should be *higher* after Russia began to repurpose troops to Ukraine, and especially after substantial casualties from Russian forces.

If the war in Ukraine is in fact changing the quality of Wagner contractors deployed to

the Central African Republic, then the lethality of violence by Wagner contractors should be higher after the Russian buildup in November 2021. To test our instrument empirically, we provide evidence from Figures 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows the lethality of violence over time, with a rolling two-week average line tracing the state vs Wagner’s violence. Figure 4, on the other hand, compares the distribution of the lethality of the violent events for Wagner and state forces before and after November 2021. This plot further verifies that there is a substantial increase in the lethality of violent events before and after Ukraine from Wagner contractors and that this violence wasn’t spurred by state forces, as FACA violence has a minor increase in mean violence lethality over the same time span.

Necessary for an instrumental variable, the war in Ukraine is fully exogenous to violence in the Central African Republic; there are also no other pathways for the lethality of violence to change based on the war in Ukraine. While it is impossible to prove completely that the instrument meets the exclusion restriction, we investigate potential violations empirically and find that it holds. One potential violation is the economic trade from Russia to the Central African Republic. For example, if Russian trade changed drastically to the Central African Republic, it could change the incentives to violence severity after the war began. While Russia faced a slew of sanctions from the international community post-invasion (DiPippo 2022; Times 2022; “What is Russia’s Wagner Group of mercenaries in Ukraine?” 2022), very little of its economic relationship with the Central African Republic changed. In 2021, Russia had very little economic trade with the Central African Republic. According to the UN COMTRADE database on international trade, for example, Russia exported less than six million dollars worth of goods to the state, indicating a relatively low economic relationship (*UN Comtrade Database* 2022). If this relationship did change after the war, it is unlikely to have made a dramatic difference, especially due to the weak nature of the relationship before the war. Moreover, while there have been massive sanctions by the West after the invasion, most of Russia’s economic output has remained stable but shifted to other markets, such as Russia’s switch to non-Western markets. For example, while approximately two-fifths of

Russia’s oil exports before the invasion went to China, India, and Turkey, that percentage is now up to two-thirds (Lee 2022). Thus, we argue that any potential economic changes from Russia after the invasion likely had a little-to-no change on the economic imports within the Central African Republic.

To code our instrument, we treat the invasion using a dose approach. First, we calculated the days to the starting date of when Russia began repurposing troops to the border of Ukraine.¹² For any event before the November shift in troops, the instrument is thus coded as a 0 since it did not receive a “dose” of the war. Thus, an event occurring five days after the shift is coded as 5, and so on. Because the initial days of the war are more relevant for the direct effect of the instrument on the treatment, we log the instrument for any events excluding 0.

Beyond the numerous empirical tests we use to verify the War in Ukraine as a valid instrument, we also present the results of statistical robustness checks within appendix D; to sum our conclusions there, we verify the war as a valid instrument that directly effects the treatment assignment of Wagner contractors.

5 Analysis

All versions of our models validate the hypothesis proposed. Starting with Table 2 and models one and two, there is a clear connection between Wagner’s violence and state violence. Using a negative binomial logit regression of the treatment of Wagner on the outcome of violence severity, models one and two each show that Wagner’s violence is more lethal than state violence where Wagner Group contractors were not present. Model one shows that the odds of a fatality during a violent event when Wagner is involved is more than two times higher than when they are not involved. Even more damning evidence of quasi-PMCs, Wagner’s violence results in a much higher likelihood of fatalities than if the group was not involved in a violent event. There is a weak connection, both statistically and substantially,

12. The exact date used is November 1st, 2021.

between the lag of fatalities and the outcome of violence. Similarly, the other control variables have no statistical significance in either model.

Table 2

	Death (B)	Fatalities (C)
	(1)	(2)
Treatment	2.265*** (0.136)	7.108*** (0.226)
Fatalities Lag	1.002 (0.002)	1.000 (0.003)
Gold	1.598 (0.319)	1.247 (0.553)
Diamonds	0.685* (0.215)	1.297 (0.286)
Constant	0.187*** (0.145)	0.428*** (0.243)
N	532	532
Log Likelihood	-383.852	-846.449
AIC	777.704	1,702.898

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Negative Binomial Logit Models transformed into odds ratios.

Of course, there is a real possibility of endogeneity and selection effects in these models, which, if present, could bias the outcomes higher. Thus, in Table 3, we approximate a two-stage least-squares (2SLS) using the instrument of the war in Ukraine. In these models, fatalities become even more salient when Wagner is involved.

In the analyses, models one and three treat the instrument as a binary of before and after Russia began shifting its troops to the border of Ukraine. Models two and four show the same outcomes but with the instrument coded using the dose approach described earlier. The results in our models are robust to multiple specifications; moreover, when using the instrument in the first stage, it is clear that the naive models *underestimated* the effect of Wagner on the lethality of violence.

In these models, the statistical significance did not change; however, the substantive significance increased dramatically. We point specifically to models three and four to show

the dramatic increase in the count of fatalities during a violent event when Wagner is present. Each model used in our analysis shows the same statistically significant picture: Wagner’s use within the Central African Republic directly leads to more civilian fatalities. Comparable to FACA’s violence, which Wagner is there to assist with, Wagner’s violence is substantially more likely to lead to a civilian death. In the 2SLS models, violent events with Wagner contractors present compared to FACA violence lead to *nineteen* more civilian fatalities.

Table 3: 2SLS models.

	Death (B)		Fatalities (C)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	1.751*** (0.401)	2.198*** (0.616)	14.326*** (4.491)	19.068*** (6.877)
Fatalities Lag	0.001** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)	0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.007)
Gold	0.304** (0.125)	0.300** (0.126)	1.188 (1.399)	1.144 (1.402)
Diamonds	-0.079 (0.063)	-0.069 (0.063)	1.475** (0.701)	1.550** (0.701)
Constant	-0.603*** (0.206)	-0.833*** (0.315)	-5.830** (2.310)	-8.265** (3.518)
N	532	532	532	532
R ²	0.052	0.041	0.031	0.027
Adjusted R ²	0.045	0.033	0.024	0.019
Residual Std. Error (df = 527)	0.460	0.462	5.153	5.164
F Statistic (df = 4; 527)	7.198***	5.580***	4.236***	3.607***

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Compared to the OLS models in Table 2, the instrumented analyses in Table 3 show a different outcome in respect to the control variables. The 2SLS models instead show that the presence of gold mines has a statistically significant increase on the probability of a death during a violent event, but not on the overall count of fatalities. The presence of a diamond mine, however, has the reverse effect; diamond mines have a statistically significant effect on the count of fatalities but not on the likelihood of a lethal event.

Finally, to verify the statistical power and robustness of our instrument, please refer to

Appendices D and E. We find that our models are robust to potential concerns of a weak instrument, and confirm the validity of our findings with a regression discontinuity design.

6 Conclusion

We argue that quasi-PMCs such as the Russian Federation’s Wagner Group operate between traditional expectations of state and nonstate actor relationships in the PMC and political violence literature. Traditional security relationships between states provide accountability for violent actions in a given host state. If State A’s soldiers, for example, committed the same level of political violence that the Wagner Group does, then we would expect either the host state (State B), or State A to hold the soldiers accountable. Nonstate actors such as PMCs are still expected to be held accountable by the market for force, and would thus be otherwise disincentivized to commit political violence. The middle ground of these identity characteristics forms the nexus of the quasi-PMC definition. Quasi-PMCs are uniquely tied to their state relationships, pursuing both state goals and company interests while ignoring free market incentives contrary to existing expectations for PMCs. In doing so, little accountability is provided for a quasi-PMCs violent actions, and state relationships are still maintained.

We hypothesize that quasi-PMCs are more likely to commit violence against civilians than client states forces. We believe that future conceptions of PMC identities will shift toward quasi-PMC relationships to lower market costs and increase plausible deniability for state actions. The Wagner Group’s actions in the CAR provide an ideal case to improve future research. Our analysis finds that members of the Wagner Group are more prone to using lethal violence than FACA forces. Additionally, when using the initiation of the 2022 war in Ukraine as an instrument, we find that the lack of training and attention appropriated to Wagner members has increased violence against civilians in the CAR. We find little accountability toward the Wagner Group from the CAR, Russia, or the market for force

that would typically push state or nonstate actors away from violence against civilians. Recent evidence from the United States’ Africa Command contends that the Wagner Group “operates in at least 16 African countries” (Owen 2022), leading us to conclude that despite the group’s heavy casualties in Ukraine, it is not going anywhere.

Our results have far-reaching implications for how policymakers, military personnel, and academics alike understand political violence. When quasi-PMCs are granted the legitimacy to perform violent acts while subverting market costs for state interests, there is little to no accountability between the parties involved. Future research must consider why quasi-PMCs from the likes of Turkey and UAE can be more willing to exert lethal violence against civilians in foreign states without being held to account for their atrocities.

Our results have far-reaching implications for how policymakers, military personnel, and academics alike understand political violence. We provide knowledgeable additions to wider international relations concepts. For example, our work adds to current research on paramilitaries and pro-government militias (PGMs). Much of the work on PGMs focus on civil conflicts and overlooks the long-term ties with foreign governments. For example, classic conceptions of PGMs determine that when a host government collapses, so does the PGM (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013, 251). The existence of a quasi-PMC is not threatened when a client government collapses, and their ability to ignore legitimacy costs in the market for force allows us to understand that quasi-PMCs can support client state governments as effectively as PGMs but may be more accountable and preferred security supporters across administrations as we have seen with the Wagner Group in places like Sudan (Blank 2022).

Quasi-PMCs can also contribute to academic work on paramilitaries. Stronger governments employ auxiliary forces like paramilitaries to carry out state functions. Paramilitaries have official government links using both regular and irregular military activities but have a low level of autonomy from the government (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018, 199). That said, paramilitaries primarily meet the needs of the incumbent government and focus on domestic security and are often a preferred choice for stable regimes weighing reliance between

paramilitaries and PGMs. That said, focus on domestic stability within the client state is not necessary criterion for quasi-PMCs. Client states can employ quasi-PMCs to meet their domestic security needs, but quasi-PMCs differ from paramilitaries due to their high level of autonomy granted by the host and client states. Additionally, quasi-PMCs are not impeded by stability concerns within the client state since quasi-PMCs have lower legitimacy costs and can abdicate the obligations of the client state at any time.

This research provides a grounded theoretical framework for understanding emerging security groups in the 21st century. Quasi-PMCs remain a global foreign policy concern. As our research shows, quasi-PMCs increase violence against civilians. We hope to lay the foundation for further research and provide the catalyst for new perspectives going forward.

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Appendix

A A History of the Wagner Group

In this section, we discuss the history of the Wagner Group. As the only peer-reviewed academic research on the subject, Marten provides a descriptive analysis of what Wagner is and why Russia uses it, which includes an extensive history of the group that we draw from heavily here (Marten 2019b).

We first distinguish that the moniker “Wagner” is, by many accounts, likely a misnomer categorizing several groups within Russia. Per personal email correspondence with Colonel Christopher T. Mayer, U.S. Army ret. (Mayer 2023), along with other sources (Axe 2022), we believe that the term Wagner refers to groups of companies run under Prigozhin. This does not change how we conceptualize the Wagner Group as a quasi-PMC, mainly because Wagner seems to be acting as a more-or-less unified group under Prigozhin, while maintaining their tenuous ties to the state.

The first evidence of Wagner arrives in 2014. There were several groups in Russia that precede the Wagner Group, but none were used as extensively as Wagner, and Wagner is the next step in the group’s evolution into a quasi-PMC. The Slavonic Corps, the pre-Wagner go-to PMC for the state, transitioned to a new leader, Dmitrii Utkin, who rebranded the quasi-PMC after his nom de guerre “Wagner”, referring to his affinity for the Third Reich’s “aesthetics and ideology ” (Ibid, 192.).

Wagner’s first task upon its name change is also part of what makes it so unique compared to pre-Wagner Russian PMCs. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea was indeed spurred and enabled by Wagner contractors. Known at the time as “Little Green Men,”¹³ Wagner contractors arrived and took control of the rebels, which eventually led to Russia’s annexation of the Ukrainian territory (Ibid, 192.)

Later, a strong connection was made between Wagner and a rising Russian oligarch.

13. This is a direct reference to the green military uniforms they wore that explicitly bore no national insignia.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, nicknamed Putin’s Chef due to his vending contracts with the Kremlin, is linked as the primary funder for Wagner (Ibid, 193.), although more concrete evidence of the connection has only more recently come to light. As the likely head of Wagner,¹⁴ Prigozhin maintains a firm grip on the organization and uses it to his advantage.

Other than Marten’s article on the Wagner Group, there is little else substantive, peer-reviewed research. For example, there are plenty of policy memos written about the group. The same Marten that wrote the only article on the subject has also written two of the existing policy pieces. In the first piece, Marten examines evidence of Wagner’s activity in Africa and determines that the state was willing to collaborate with Wagner contractors by leveraging the power of the Russian state to make friendly deals with Prigozhin’s company and other states (Marten 2019a). In another piece, Marten details how the group has changed since the Fall of 2019 and explores how the group doesn’t fit into the category of mercenary and documents the many places they operate in (Marten 2020). While each of these pieces are important in documenting the existence and structure of Wagner, they provide little evidence of what exactly is occurring when Wagner is deployed and why the group seems to be more lethal than the state counterparts they deploy alongside.

While these policy analyses are important, they are more useful for providing contextual information rather than using them as something to build off of. Thus, our paper provides the first causal evidence of the effect of Wagner’s deployments. More specifically, we contribute to Marten’s 2019 article and subsequent policy memos by providing a definitive classification of the group, developing a novel theory on why quasi-PMCs commit more lethal violence, and then explore the first empirical evidence testing our theory. Our research has implications for policymakers and other international actors that have the power to limit the Kremlin’s,

14. The exact hierarchy at the top of the Wagner Group is unclear, and is disputed by multiple credible sources (Marten 2019a; Engelbrecht 2022; Kim 2022; Sukhankin 2019b). Prigozhin’s status as a Russian oligarch (Lister, Ilyushina, and Shukla 2018, par. 25), and the fact that Utkin is a former Russian military officer, indicates that Prigozhin is the primary funder and organizer of the group at a macro level, and that Utkin likely organizes the group’s military parts, such as tactics and strategy. Moreover, a recent Bellingcat report clarifies that it is unclear who is the true leader but that Utkin is likely the field commander (Team 2020).

and thus Wagner's, influence in the states in desperate need of external assistance where quasi-PMCs commit this violence.

B Wagner as a Quasi-PMC

To distinguish how Russia utilizes the Wagner Group as a quasi-PMC, it is essential to understand the group’s identity and its theoretical implications for IR research. Russia grants violence-making authority to the Wagner Group. When Russia applies plausible deniability to the actions of the Wagner Group, we should expect to see Russia’s sovereignty erode. The erosion means that the Wagner Group should no longer be considered a de facto state actor. That said, the international community often views the actions of the Wagner Group as an extension of Russia’s sovereignty even when Russia denies authority over them.

The Wagner Group can be considered close to a state actor because, in many cases, the Wagner Group appears to be employed by Russia directly, as the state provides Wagner with money and materials (Østensen and Bukkvoll 2021, 6). The Wagner Group is expected to carry out the desires of the Russian state when required. The Wagner Group does not only operate for Russia, however, and “in some cases there is no direct relationship, and the outfit is purely operating for profit, not following a political agenda” (Owen 2022). That said, when using aggressive actions in pursuing power for Russia, the Wagner Group can be considered nonstate actors when the international community challenges Russia’s role in foreign policy relations. Russia also considers the Wagner Group a PMC and claims that the use of such an actor is illegal under Russian law further highlighting its nonstate identity. To skirt the responsibility of Russia’s actions, the Wagner Group represents a hybrid form of actor, which we consider a quasi-PMC, containing attributes of state and nonstate actors.

One of the critical claims by Russia to avoid sovereignty costs over the actions of the Wagner Group is the lack of a paper trail between the two. That said, we argue that a direct legitimized connection between the group and the state is not necessary. While working with a state does not necessarily make a PMC a state actor, the Wagner Group, despite its claimed illegality in Russian law, is deeply embedded into the Russian military complex and the country’s foreign policy. The Wagner Group directly operates with the military apparatus of the state. The Wagner Group’s main base shares facilities and security with the

Russian military intelligence agency (GRU) in Molmino, Russia (Rácz 2020). Historically, the Wagner Group is distinctly Russian. The Wagner Group was created by Yvegeny Prigozhin and preferred to be made up of ex-Russian soldiers (Marten 2019b, 162). Additionally, Wagner recruiting centers and employment efforts are visible throughout Russia, suggesting that the state formally recognizes the Wagner Group as a public entity (Caravanserai and AFP 2022; “What is Russia’s Wagner Group of mercenaries in Ukraine?” 2022).

The Wagner Group, despite being illegal according to the Russian state, uses Russian military hardware and gear obtained directly from the Kremlin (Schwartz 2023), and is observed to be “white” Russian-speaking actors throughout many of their foreign engagements (*Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia’s Disinformation in Africa* 2022). Therefore, while considered a PMC unrecognized by the Russian state, there is little tangible evidence of an official relationship between the two actors. Putin has continually stated publicly that the Wagner Group is not a part of Russian military actions. Yet, Putin’s ally, strategic partner, business confidant, and former “chef” Yevgeniy Prigozhin, is the group’s owner and de facto leader (Marten 2019b; Rácz 2020).

Recent events in Mali, Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic tie the Wagner Group to the Russian state (*Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia’s Disinformation in Africa* 2022). Following the deteriorating traditional Russian forces in the current war in Ukraine, Prigozhin was seen on video speaking to Russian prisoners, leveraging their participation in the Ukraine War as a means of freedom (“Russian mercenaries behind Central African Republic atrocities - HRW” 2022). We thus place Wagner as a quasi-PMC, and use it to test our hypothesis that quasi-PMCs are more prone to more lethal political violence.

C Coding the Violence

In this section, we discuss how we code the independent variables of ACLED’s data and how we subsetted the data and define “potential” treatments. The treatment variable is coded as a 1 if Wagner Group forces committed the violence, and a 0 if Wagner Group forces were not present during the violent event. In other words, there are observations where the Wagner Group and state forces commit joint violence against civilians. We believe our theory holds up under conditions where quasi-PMCs operate with the client state they work for; as stated in the theoretical framework, the client state places little to no restrictions on quasi-PMC, and has little incentive to prosecute for crimes against civilians, so we further argue that the increased violence with a quasi-PMC present will hold at the same rate regardless of whether the actor commits the violence with a state actor or not. Our assumption is further solidified by existing empirical evidence showing how FACA and other state forces are often deferent to Wagner Group forces, meaning that Wagner Group forces are unlikely to expect any sort of punishment for political violence and thus unlikely to change their behavior in the presence of state actors (Cohen and Lima 2022).

In defining the observations we use from ACLED, we use all data where Wagner forces could have been observed. In other words, we do not use rebel violence against civilians in our observations as a control outcome, as Wagner exclusively works with the state and thus the event could not have been “treated” by Wagner’s presence.

D Instrumental Variable Validity

To address concerns that the instrumental variable is potentially statistically weak, we run several robustness checks to verify the use of the War in Ukraine as an instrument. First, we note that the F Statistic of the first stage of our 2SLS models for the continuous instrument is not above the commonly accepted threshold of 10 (Stock, Wright, and Yogo 2002), and we further report the results in Table 4.

While we have substantial theoretical and empirical evidence in the section of our article discussing the instrument, we test an alternative specification of the instrument. In Appendix E, we report the use of our Nov. 1 2021 cutoff as a regression discontinuity design. Our models are robust to that specification as well, and as shown in that section, the models also fulfil all necessary assumptions and tests of the cutoff date.

Table 4

	Treatment	
	Model 1	Model 2
Binary Instrument	0.112** (0.048)	
Continuous Instrument		0.016 (0.010)
Constant	0.469*** (0.025)	0.480*** (0.025)
N	532	532
R-squared	0.010	0.004
Adj. R-squared	0.008	0.003
Residual Std. Error (df = 530)	0.498	0.500
F Statistic (df = 1; 530)	5.427**	2.361

***p < .01; **p < .05; *p < .1

E Regression Discontinuity Robustness Check

To further verify the results of our models, we transform our analysis into a regression discontinuity research design (RDD), leveraging the time-series data to do so. First, we show and interpret the results of our RDD regression, and then we test the assumptions of an RDD. The RDD uses the same time cutoff used by the instrument.¹⁵

Table 5

	Pr(Fatality)	Total Fatalities
	(1)	(2)
Treatment	0.222** (0.088)	3.681*** (1.109)
Score	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.0003 (0.024)
Treatment * Score	0.004 (0.003)	0.002 (0.028)
Constant	0.366*** (0.072)	0.764 (0.916)
N	532	532
R ²	0.060	0.062
Adjusted R ²	0.040	0.046
Residual Std. Error	0.041 (df = 141)	0.508 (df = 171)
F Statistic	2.986** (df = 3; 141)	3.768** (df = 3; 171)

*p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01

Regression Discontinuity Design output.

Table 5 shows the results of our regression. Both models further verify the results of our main analysis. Model 1, using a binary measure of the outcome, shows that the presence of Wagner Group forces increase the likelihood that a violent encounter turns lethal by nearly 30%, statistically significant. Model 2 shows similar results, as it measure the outcome through a count of fatalities during a violent event. With statistically significant results, Model 2 further shows that Wagner forces increase the count of fatalities when compared to state forces, with an increase in more than four deaths per violent event. While the results

¹⁵ Nov. 1, 2021.

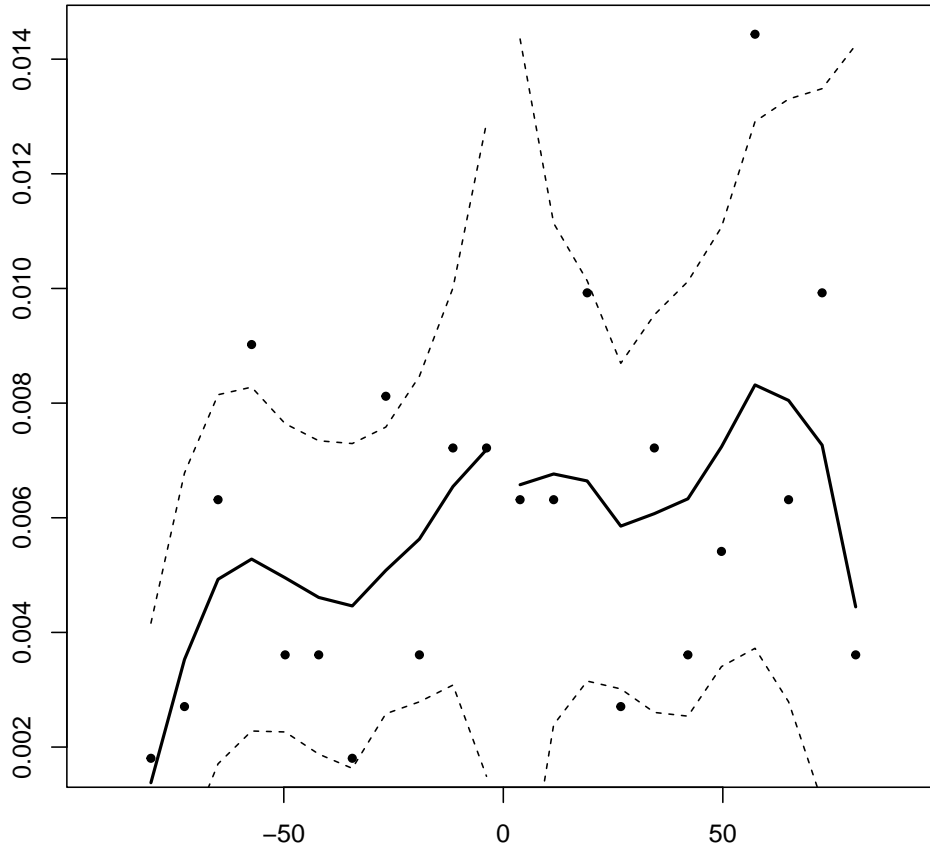


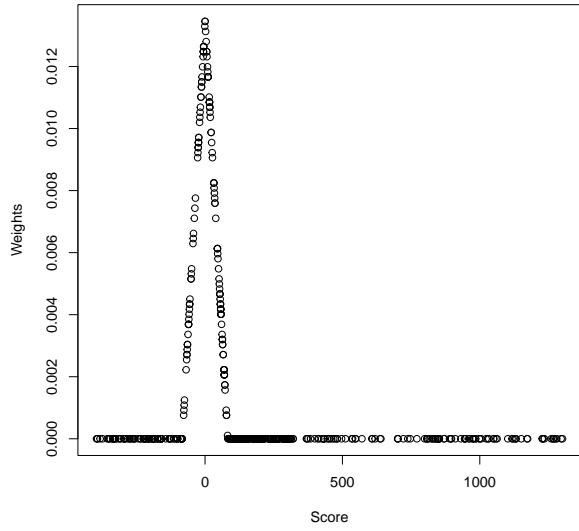
Figure 5: Density test of the “no unobserved sorting” RDD assumption.

of our RDD analysis are not as strong as the instrumental variable analyses, the RDD shows similar results to the main analysis of the paper and further verifies our hypotheses.

Below, we present the outcome of those plots. Figure 5 shows the results of the density test, an important assumption for RDDs. Because Figure 5 does not have a large gap in the lines before or after the cutoff at time zero, the RDD passes the basic density test assumption.

Figures 6 and 7 show other important results of our analyses. Figure 6 is two plots of the weights in relation to where they fall on the running score (hence giving higher weights in the regression to those closer to the cutoff). Figure 7 is two more plots that show the effect of treatment based on the cutoff.

(a) Pr(Fatality)



(b) Total Fatalities

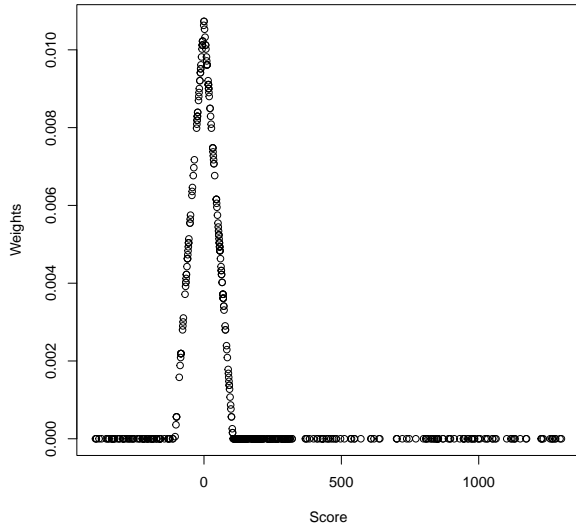
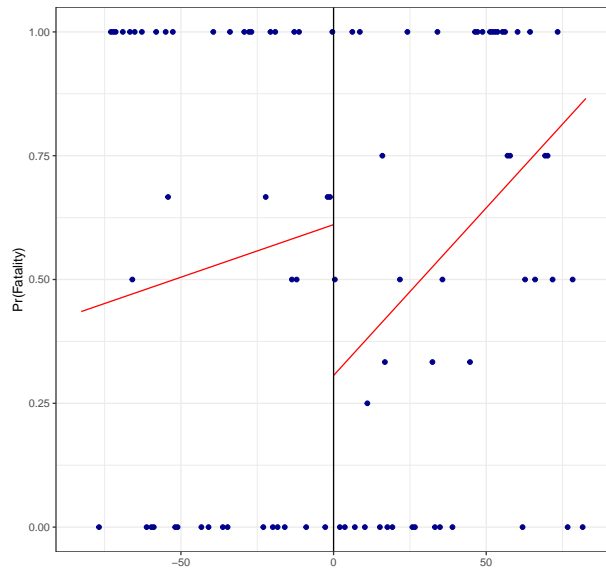


Figure 6: Distribution of weights per outcome.

(a) Pr(Fatality)



(b) Total Fatalities

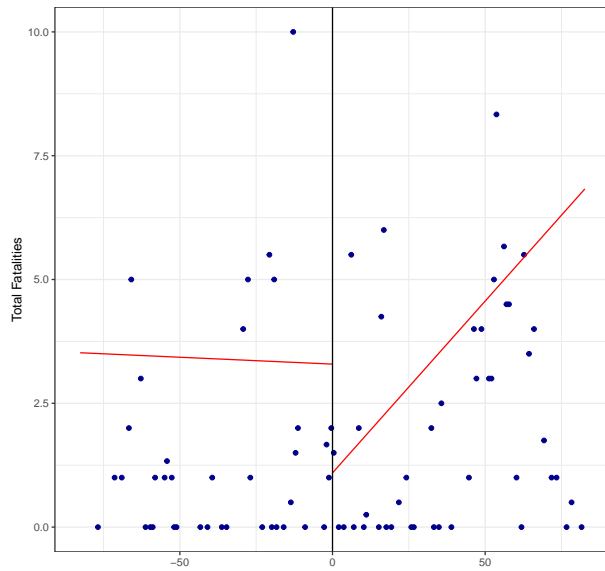


Figure 7: Regression discontinuity plot of each outcome.