

# **W** WARSAW INSTITUTE

— SPECIAL REPORT —

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## **RUSSIAN „CONTRACTORS” IN THE SERVICE OF THE KREMLIN**

- Since 2014, the Russian Federation has seen an increase in the number of operations performed by private military „contractors”. Those who are de facto Moscow’s mercenaries are committed to carrying out a series of tasks, as they offer support for Moscow-backed separatists in Ukraine’s Donbas or guard military and oil infrastructure in Syria. Also, their position is used to extend Russia’s influence on African soil while safeguarding Moscow’s allied regimes in Latin America.
- In addition to being an export product, military services have emerged for Russia as a strategic tool for building up its strength in Asia and Africa. By granting support to local regimes and their armed forces, Moscow seeks to install its military facilities and create favorable conditions for both armaments deals and long-term mining investments.
- Private military companies are technically illegal in light of the Russian law, which serves as a convenient excuse for the Kremlin elites to deny any connection with „contractors” in a bid to diminish both political and reputational costs of breaching international law. But the activities of Russia’s Wagner Group in Syria show that an ability to plausibly deny one’s actions is limited in times of ubiquitous digitalization and open-source intelligence (OSIT) methods while falling back to hire ChVK’s (Частная Военная Компания, Chastnaya Voennaya Kompaniya), defined as private military companies, may eventually become a double-edged sword.
- Their operating in the legal gray zone emerges as an element of rivalry between Russian special forces that seek to win control over the sector of private military firms. This generates a set of specific forms of exerting operational control over „contractors”.



SOURCE: INFORMNAPALM.ORG

Employing private military „contractors” has become an inherent part of present-day armed conflicts. They offer a wide range of military-related tasks at the request of states: perform combat operations, train local military forces, provide consultancy services, carry out intelligence activities, and ensure logistics and security. Countries that are directly or indirectly involved in an armed conflict see using private military companies (PMCs) as viable, both economically and politically. Sending „contractors” – instead of regular armed forces – to a battlefield incurs smaller financial and political expenses and helps reduce diplomatic and social-related costs of using forceful solutions in relations between states. While contracting PMCs, the country’s ruling elites manage to retain their ability to deny plausibly (plausible deniability), a phenomenon that refers to refuting one’s participation in a given conflict or diminishing any reputational costs. Also, they do not need to explain losses in their military personnel publicly; as the conflict prolongs, this may trigger off some serious (negative) consequences, like stripping the government off public support, as best exemplified by U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Over the past years, the Russian Federation has expressed a growing interest in contracting private military personnel, seen until now as the domain of countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa or Israel. But unlike these private military giants, ChVK’s remain illegal in Russia under Article 13, paragraph 5 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation and Article 208 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. But all despite this, private military firms enjoy (unofficial) support from the Kremlin that treats them as a tool to implement its strategic interests yet without the state’s direct participation. Russian mercenaries boost Moscow’s military influence while allowing political elites to evade responsibility for any steps taken by such companies in war-torn regions. Also, Rus-

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sian state-run firms, including Gazprom, Rosatom, and Rosneft, have deployed groups of mercenaries to Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East with a mission of ensuring the security of their resource extraction and transmission infrastructure. They get in return substantial financial benefits, including stakes (25-30 percent) in energy sale contracts<sup>1</sup>.

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## From „Near Abroad” to the Middle East

The roots of Russian military contracting activity go back to the 1990s when Moscow transferred the fighters of the Rubikon private security company to the Balkans – where they sided with the Serbs – or to other conflict-inflicted areas in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. It is worth emphasizing that back then Rubikon remained under the authority of the Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) that in 1995 gave rise to the Federal Security Service (FSB), a shift that seems to prove the group’s political, yet not economic nature. In the 1990s, former troops of the disbanded Soviet Army made individual trips to some of Africa’s war-inflicted countries (Ethiopia, Angola, Sudan, or Zaire) to offer a military savoir-faire and combat experience in exchange for an attractive salary.

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**Russia uses “contractors” in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic and Venezuela.**

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**Among the military personnel of such firms are servicemen and officers who formally served in Russian army’s special units and services.**

But this took place independently for the Kremlin, thus contrary to mercenary activities carried out in Russia’s „near abroad”.

Today Russia continues to employ the modus operandi that it has already tested in the Balkans and post-Soviet states in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, and Venezuela, to where it has deployed a range of private military companies. The list includes the notorious Wagner Group, the RSB-Group, a private contracting firm known for protecting pipelines and vessels, MAR, a formation embroiled in Donbas fighting, the PMC Shchit (Щит, „Shield”) with a mission of safeguarding oilfield infrastructure in Syria, maritime cre-

[1] A.M. Dyer, Znaczenie prywatnych firm wojskowych w polityce zagranicznej Rosji [The role of private military companies in Russian foreign policy], „Biuletyn PISM”, 2018, no. 64, pp. 1-2.



**CREATED BY UKRAINIAN HACKTIVISTS, THE INFOGRAPHICS PRESENTS RUSSIAN MILITARY COMPANIES EMBROILED IN PRESENT-DAY CONFLICTS. SOURCE: INFORMNA-PALM.ORG**

wing company Moran Security Group, Redut-Antiterror (Centre R), whose members are former special forces troops, and Antiterror-Orel, an organization that specializes in engineering and sapper activities<sup>2</sup>.

Though the share of Russia’s ChVK’s in the global military service market does not exceed 5 percent, Russia boasts unique „human resources”. Among the military personnel of such firms are servicemen and officers who formally served in Russian army’s special units and services, including elite units of GRU Spetsnaz special forces and FSB divisions Alfa and Vypmel, as well as other well-trained military

specialists. In his article for the Warsaw Institute, Grzegorz Kuczyński said that „Russia is a real forge of personnel, according to various assessments, it is able to deliver from 100,000 to 150,000 people with military preparation to the global market for military services<sup>3</sup>”

[2] W. Husarow, Prywatne agencje wojskowe Rosji jako narzędzie zalegalizowanego terronu [Russian private military companies as a tool of legalized terror] [online] <https://informnapalm.org/pl/prywatne-agencje-wojskowe-rosji-jako-narzedzie-zalegalizowanego-terroru/> [17.07.2019].

[3] G. Kuczyński, Niewidzialna armia Putina [Putin’s invisible army], [online] <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/niewidzialna-armia-putina/> [17.01.2019].



**RUSSIAN WAGNER GROUP MERCENARIES IN SYRIA.  
SOURCE: INFORMNAPALM.ORG**

## „(Im)plausible deniability”

The most prominent of all private military firms is Wagner Company, a company founded by former Russian intelligence officer Lt. Col. Dmitry „Wagner” Utkin who earlier served in a Pskov-based 2nd Spetsnaz unit of the GRU. The Wagner Group is said to have a close operational relationship with Russia’s military intelligence services, as evidenced by the fact that it trains its members at a military base in Molokino (Krasnodar Krai) where the 10th Special Purpose Brigade of the GRU is based. Once made public, this information has narrowed down Moscow’s ability to deny having used the military contracting firm to fulfill the state’s strategic goals. It is worth noting that the Wagner Group operates under the aegis of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman with ties to Vladimir Putin and the supplier of consumer goods for the army, the man thought to stand

behind the St. Petersburg „troll factory”, officially known as the Internet Research Agency. Founded in 2013, the institution has a monthly budget of €1 million and employs about 80 people<sup>4</sup> whose task is to disseminate the Russian narrative, spread fake news, elicit extreme social and political attitudes, and misinform public opinion abroad. This makes it one of the Kremlin’s essential tools to carry out hybrid activities.

The Russian use of mercenaries does not always guarantee to lower political and reputational risks related to the Kremlin’s military involvement outside the country. In February 2018, 100 to 300 (according to various sources) Wagner military „contractors” were killed in heavy fighting in Syria; they died in a U.S. bombing while siding with Syria’s govern-

[4] A. Legucka, Walka z rosyjską dezinformacją w Unii Europejskiej [Countering Russian disinformation in the European Union], „Biuletyn PISM”, 2019, no. 111, p. 1.

ment-led forces to advance towards the SDF-controlled oil and gas fields in the Deir Al-Zor region. The Kremlin saw the incident as a severe political challenge, both domestically and internationally. It undermined Russia's image worldwide as victorious in the Syrian conflict while increasing the risk of tensions running high in the U.S.-Russian row that Moscow sought to alleviate at that time. This is why the Kremlin eventually declined to comment on the incident, trying to downplay what really happened in Syria, even despite harsh criticism from public opinion<sup>5</sup>.

As the example of Syria shows, deploying military „contractors” is not always viable for the Kremlin nor does it allow reducing political and image-related costs, but may pave the way for a blowback effect. Moscow's ability to plausibly deny its use of private military companies is efficiently narrowed down by reports published by independent investigative news site such as InformNapalm and Bellingcat.

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By employing advanced methods of open-source intelligence (OSINT), both websites give a broader insight into the Kremlin's ties to Russian ChVK's while unveiling the latter's participation in the war theaters in Ukraine, Syria, Venezuela or African countries.

## Russian „Contractors” in Africa

Russian ChVK's occupy a crucial role in safeguarding Moscow's interests in Africa, where they protect transmission infrastructure and hydrocarbon extraction sites. Offering military services is one of the top factors behind solidified Russia's influence on African soil, with Moscow's increasing interest in the continent, illustrated by a growth in its trade exchange from \$3.4 billion in 2015 to \$14.5 billion in 2018<sup>6</sup>. A private Russian firm RSB-Group has sent its people to Libya where they stand close by the military forces under the

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[5] M. Menkiszak, K. Strachota, P. Żochowski, Rosyjskie straty pod Dajr az-Zaur – problem dla Kremla [Russian losses near Deir Al-Zor – a problem for the Kremlin] [online] [www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2018-02-21/rosyjskie-straty-pod-dajr-az-zaur-problem-dla-kremla](http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2018-02-21/rosyjskie-straty-pod-dajr-az-zaur-problem-dla-kremla) [21.02.2018]

[6] S. Sukhankin, Russia's hired guns in Africa [online] [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu) [12.11.2018].



**CENTRAL AFRICAN TROOPS TRAINED BY RUSSIAN TROOPS.  
SOURCE: THE CITIZEN**

command of Khalifa Haftar who fights against Islamists and the internationally recognized government in Tripoli<sup>7</sup>. In the Central African Republic, Russia backs government-led forces that are embroiled in a conflict with Muslim militias from the former coalition Séléka and a band of Christian militias, called the anti-Balaka<sup>8</sup>.

In Sudan, Russian „contractors” trained local forces of the country’s former leader Omar al-Bashir whose regime had been hit by a wave of popular unrest. But this failed to help him retain power as the Sudanese president eventually stepped down after 33 years in power, toppled by the Transitional Military Council. Russian strategic interests in Sudan are therefore up in the air. Moscow’s help was not selfless in any of the cases above; as for Sudan and Libya, the Kremlin is making efforts to be granted permission to install its military

facilities. Moscow holds substantial interest in Libya’s oilfields, and back in 2015, after it had discovered large gold deposits in Sudan, it signed the biggest investment deal in the history of the African country. The regime in Khartoum took an interest in purchasing Russian-made military hardware, including Sukhoi Su-30 and Su-35 fighter jets, missile boats, minesweepers, and missile systems, including the S-300s. The Kremlin seeks to build in exchange its naval facilities in Port Sudan, a plan that may trigger off a „security dilemma” among the Americans and Saudis, both of whom voiced concern over the security of oil and gas supplies from the Persian Gulf to Europe. This would also be a challenge for China and its overseas military base in Djibouti, Turkey – both militarily present in Somalia and interested in leasing Sudan’s Red Sea island of Suakin – and Ethiopia, seen as a regional military power that is capable of counterbalan-

[7] M. Tsvetkova, Russian Private Security Firm Says It Had Armed Men in East Libya, [online] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-contractors-idUSKBN16H2DM> [10.03.2019].

[8] C. Schreck, What Are Russian Military Contractors Doing In The Central African Republic?, [online] [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org) [01.08.2018].



cing the Egyptian-Eritrean alliance<sup>9</sup>. Deployed to the Central African Republic, Russian „contractors” have a mission of stabilizing the internal situation in the country while paving Moscow’s way for making investments in the local mining sector. The country is rich in oil, diamonds, gold and uranium.

But the Kremlin’s accomplishments on African soil achieved by private military firms so far have deemed limited, though both Moscow’s position in Africa is growing and so is its ability to influence the geopolitical situation on the black continent.

## „Contractors” as an ally support

In January 2019, Russia’s Wagner Company was reported to have sent 400 of its people to Venezuela – Moscow’s top Latin American ally – to guard President Nicolas Maduro in response to U.S. support for anti-government protests as Washington’s recognition of Juan Guaido as the „only legal authority in the country.” When revealing this news to the public, media quoted Yevgeny Shabaev, the ataman (head) of a Cossack community with ties to mercenaries. The Wagner Company was thought to have sent its first individuals to Venezuela in advance of the May 2018 presidential election. In January 2019, a group of Russian „contractors” used two chartered aircraft to take them to the Cuban capital Havana where they boarded flights to Caracas. Cuban officials declined to comment on the matter<sup>10</sup>.

Tensions amidst Moscow’s involvement in Venezuela ran high in late 2018 when Russia sent its aircraft to the country to take part in military drills: Tupolev Tu-160 strategic bombers, Antonov An-124 cargo plane, and Ilyushin Il-62 long-haul aircraft. Back then Moscow planned to restore an idea of fielding its strategic aircraft at a Venezuelan military facility on the island of La Orchilla located

about 200 kilometers northeast of Caracas. There are many indications that sending Russian jets to Venezuelan soil was intended as a demonstration of force, aimed at scrapping U.S. attempts to back the country’s opposition leaders. The Kremlin eyes its South American ally as of key strategic importance, both economically and geopolitically; Russian made several investments in the local oil sector and issued loans to buy some of its military equipment (23 Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets, two sets of S-300 air-defence systems and 92 modernized T-72 battle tanks) while interfering the traditional U.S. sphere of influence is a response to Washington’s involvement in Russia’s „near abroad”. By placing its „contractors” to Caracas, Moscow sought to prevent the allied regime – whose debt to Russia stands at \$3 billion – from collapsing.

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[9] Rosyjska baza w Sudanie? Nierealne [No chances of Russian military base in Sudan] [online] <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/rosyjska-baza-w-sudanie-nierealne/> [15.01.2018].

[10] S. Sukhankin, Are Russian Mercenaries Ready to Defend Venezuela’s Maduro? [online] <https://jamestown.org/program/are-russian-mercenaries-ready-to-defend-venezuelas-maduro/> [28.01.2019].



**RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN AT A MEETING WITH VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT NICOLAS MADURO.  
SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU**

Also Venezuelan state-owned oil giant PDVSA owes Russia's Rosneft a similar amount of<sup>11</sup> money.

The Kremlin, for its turn, officially refuted rumors that Russian mercenaries had been deployed to Venezuela and accused Washington of „inspiring and sponsoring a coup in Caracas.” In March 2019, about 100 troops and 35 tons of mysterious cargo were offloaded from Russian military aircraft after they landed in Venezuela, allegedly to fulfill Moscow's

obligations under earlier military deals. This sparked off a sharp response from Washington and ignited a dispute over the situation in Latin America, by some referred to as a „new Cuban crisis”. Russian military experts flew back to Moscow in June 2019, a step that aimed to show primarily that the Kremlin „does not leave its allies alone” while its announcement of an increase in the number of military personnel may serve as a „bargaining chip” in negotiations with Washington.

## Operational control

It is worth making an attempt to answer the question of why private military companies re-main illegal though Moscow is keen to use them to pursue strategic interests. But claiming that Moscow seeks to cut its ties to such firms fails to exhaust the issue. According to Anna

M. Dyner, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, maintaining the status quo in the interest of Russian force structures to which such private military companies hold close ties. Legalizing their activities could narrow down their impact and control. The

[11] Cf.: I. Wiśniewska, Ochrona rosyjskich aktywów w Wenezueli [Protecting Russian assets in Venezuela] [online] <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2019-02-06/ochrona-rosyjskich-aktywow-w-wenezueli> [25.02.2019]; G. Kuczyński, Amerykański Przyczółek: Rosja wobec kryzysu w Wenezueli [U.S. foothold: Russian stance on Venezuelan crisis], [online] <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/amerykanski-przyczolek-rosja-wobec-kryzysu-w-wenezueli/> [21.02.2019].

## Obeying orders from the Kremlin, even regardless of economic calculations, is as a kind of „tax” for carrying out private contracting activities.

Kremlin is not willing to pass amendments to the legislation in fear of giving an impulse to creating large oligarch-owned armies, for instance as it is in Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. Grzegorz Kuczyński, an expert at the Warsaw Institute, says that this state of affairs is in the interest of private firms while greater control from the state would lower their level of autonomy. Keeping the companies’ status in the legal „gray zone” makes Russian force structures retain their ability to subordinate personnel of such firms under threat of criminal liability. Obeying orders from the Kremlin, even regardless of economic calculations, serves as a kind of „tax” for carrying out such activities. Both the issue of the possible legalization of ChVK’s and that of maintaining the status quo could nurture further rivalry between individual special services that would seek to gain total control over the private military sector in Russia. This is precisely what is now taking place in Ukraine’s Donbas where the FSB and GRU are fighting over influence in the self-proclaimed people’s republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, both being governed by local „warlords” with ties to the Russian intelligence services<sup>13</sup>.

The lack of full operational control over private military companies also creates the risk that they will carry out activities incompatible with Moscow’s interests, as this is the case of the ultra-right paramilitary group E.N.O.T. Corp.

Originally created by Igor Mangushev, the organization is officially said to deal with patriotic and paramilitary tasks, but it has in fact a strong taste for mercenary activities. Though the E.N.O.T. Corp denies being a private military company and claims to be a legal „Russian Orthodox community”, pointing to its official registration by the Russian Ministry of Justice in May 2016, attention should be paid to its non-statutory activities.

Since the beginning of the Donbas conflict, the organization recruited „voluntary fighters” to side with a group of pro-Russian separatists, collected assistance for „Novorossiya”, and guarded „humanitarian convoys” with servicemen and military equipment. Its personnel assisted in some combat operations in Ukraine’s Donbas as part of various military formations, including the Rusich sabotage and reconnaissance group that was subordinated to the Batman Rapid Response Group, part of the special forces of the Luhansk People’s Republic led by Oleksander Biednov. From June 2014 to July 2015, the Rusich Company group fought in Donbas under the command of Alexei Milchakov („Serb”) and his comrade

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[12] A.M. Dyner, Znaczenie prywatnych firm wojskowych w polityce zagranicznej Rosji [The role of private military companies in Russian foreign policy], „Biuletyn PISM”, 2018, no. 64, pp. 1-2

[13] Pucz w Donbasie – analiza sytuacji [Donbas coup – an analysis] [online] <https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/pucz-w-donbasie-analiza-sytuacji/> [04.12.2017]



**RUSSIAN YOUNGSTERS TAKING PART IN A MILITARY TRAINING INSTRUCTED BY E.N.O.T. GROUP MILITANTS. SOURCE: ENOTCORP.ORG**

Yan Petrovsky („Great Slav”), both of whom are now leaders of the E.N.O.T. Group units. In addition to Russian fighters, Rusich was composed of foreign-born militants, which shows the international nature of the organization.

As a result of an ambush laid near Privetnoye village (Luhansk region) in September 2014, the separatists killed about 40 soldiers of Aydar Battalion and the 80th Air Assault Brigade. Milchakov’s group gained notoriety for its cruelty against prisoners of war and fallen troops; its militants cut off ears of dead soldiers and scratched kolovrats („spoked wheel”, a symbol of Slavs) on their faces. Ukraine’s Military Prosecutor’s Office issued a warrant against Alexei Milchakov as wanted for war crimes. „Merits” of some of the group’s militants were even distinguished by an ex-Minister of Defence of the Donetsk People’s Republic Igor Girkin (Strelkov).

Since 2016, the E.N.O.T. Corps has organized military youth camps for Orthodox youngsters from Russia, Belarus, Serbia, and Montenegro. Young attendees are trained on how to use guns, taught military tactics and hand-to-hand combat, practices that were condemned by Serbian and Belarusian authorities that saw them as „aggressive”. They may prepare the ground for conducting hybrid operations, the purpose of which may be to spark domestic unrest, rebellion, coup, or to incite an external military intervention. It is worth noting that in November 2018 officers of Russia’s Federal Security Service, working together with the police, arrested several members of the E.N.O.T. Corp in a bid to terminate the organization’s activities. The Russian investigative website Daily Storm wrote the operation was staged to detain the militants for „organizing paramilitary training for Russian youth and sending them abroad with a mission of carrying out illegal activities<sup>14</sup>.” The Kremlin’s response

[14] P. Goble, Russian Nationalist Group, Acting as a Private Military Company, Worries Kremlin, [online] <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-nationalist-group-acting-as-a-private-military-company-worries-kremlin/> [25.07.2019].

to the group’s independent missions may indicate its being afraid of losing its monopoly on the use of force, as well as assessing risks related to potential international incidents. Lacking full operational control over a radical paramilitary group may on the one hand pose

a particular, albeit limited threat domestically while the organization’s outlawry elsewhere may on the other hand mean for Moscow some extra costs related to how the international community may react to the subversive activity of the E.N.O.T. Corp.



SOURCE: ENOTCORP.ORG

## Summary

Using private military companies should be seen as yet another element of Russian strategic culture. When employing „contractors”, Moscow wages war by proxy while boosting its sphere of political and military influence in Africa and Latin America in exchange for new military facilities or mining investments. Therefore the Kremlin is pursuing its foreign policy goals by minimizing risks and all costs related to the use of military force. Due to the current legal status of private military firms, Russian officials can deny any links to mercenaries, a strategy that goes in line with

**By employing „contractors”, Moscow is conducting a war in Donbass through intermediaries (war by proxy).**

Moscow’s traditional disinformation and military deception (maskirovka) doctrines. But what seems to impede their effectiveness are the activities performed by Russian investigative journalists and websites that reveal the Kremlin’s aggressive pursuits.

Whether the Russian security sector will one day come into private hands remains an open question. Published in 2014, the military doctrine of the Russian Federation saw the participation of private military companies in military operations as a threat to the country's security. But strategic practice shows that the use of private „contractors” has emerged as one of the tools of the Russian concept of a „new generation warfare”. Despite this, Russia's State Duma lacks a consensus on whether to legalize such military entities. Those who are in favor argue that it is inadmissible for Russian-held infrastructure to be protected by foreign companies, as was the case of Lukoil's Iraq-based oilfield facilities guarded by a British PMC. For their part, opponents claim that the autho-

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## Strategic practice shows that the use of private „contractors” has emerged as one of the tools of the Russian concept of a „new generation warfare”.

rities need to be granted a monopoly on using forceful solutions. Undoubtedly, what is now taking place acts to the benefit of special services that create and control private contracting companies while competing against one another for influence. ■

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