

Policy

## Brief

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# Russia's Private Military Contractors

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Defence & Security Foresight  
Group

## About the Author

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Nico Saunders is a PhD in Global Governance student at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, through the University of Waterloo. Her interests are centered around social perspective on national security, and how that translates, or influences 'community' conflict prevention strategies.

Previously, Nico has worked as a Strategy Specialist in the Ontario government's Prevention Office, and as a research assistant at Defence Research and Development Canada. Nico is a junior affiliate at the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS).

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The development of this policy brief was inspired by the working paper "Russia's Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry?" written by Dr. Sergey Sukhankin.

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## Objective:

To provide an information briefing note for policy practitioners, highlighting key takeaways from the Working Paper 'Russia's Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry?' authored by Dr. Sergey Sukhankin and Alla Hurska, funded by the Defence and Security Foresight Group (DSFG) through the Mobilizing Insights in Defence and Security (MINDS) program.

## SUMMARY

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- > Russian Private Military Contractors (PMCs) should not be considered a significant strategic element in the Russian military toolkit, however, Russian PMCs could be an effective tool against opponents under certain circumstances, such as in combination with regular Russian armed forces and/or in regions of instability.
- > Russian PMCs are unlikely to be used against NATO members directly, and instead the main danger to the Western alliance emanates from irregular formations used auxiliary military forces, as demonstrated in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015).
- > There is a discrepancy between the perceived and actual military potential of Russian PMCs such as the Wagner Group, inflating the risk perception in the short-to-mid-term.
- > Russia is likely to continue testing NATO and its allies through provocations in zones of instability, such as in the Balkans, the Arctic region, and the EU.

## BACKGROUND

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- > PMCs are private companies separate from the government that can provide a variety of protective security services, military support, and/or state building activities for profit.
- > Russian PMCs, such as the prominent Wagner Group, emerged in the Ukrainian Southeast in 2014, with activities in Syria (2015), the Central African Republic (2018), and Libya and Mozambique (2019).
- > Western private military and security companies (PMSCs) typically operate on the basis of complete legality and perform non-military functions, with rare exceptions for the use of weaponry in self-defence missions.
- > Russian PMCs by contrast are prohibited by the Russian Penal code, with the objective of avoiding direct involvement with Russian armed forces, and to perform shadow tasks.
- > Russian PMCs are a tool of covert power, supported by diplomats, to promote the geo-political and economic interests of Russia.
- > In the early 2010's the Russian government highlighted the need for Russian PMCs to perform "delicate missions abroad," aligning the domestic PMC industry to protect government and certain oligarch business interests.

### *Milestones of Russian PMCs*

- > Russia has relied on non-state actors since the second half of the 16th century, playing a visible role in major regional conflicts to promote its geo-political and economic interests.
- > Roots of Russia's current PMC industry stem from 1991-2003, with three intertwined groups:
  - > Volunteers' participated in conflicts in 'grey zones' such as South Ossetia, Chechnya, and the Balkans, as a mechanism to build their resumes to later join Western PMCs or private security structures (such as the Wagner Group) in Russia.
  - > 'Private armies' organized in the 1990's resulting from Russian criminal webs and oligarchs (for example Roman Tsepov, leader of 'Baltik-Eskort'), gained military experience in regional conflicts, such as Chechnya. Leaders within 'private armies' were either killed or moved to other private security companies (PSCs).
  - > 'Highly qualified professionals,' with particular attention to the Moran Security Group (founded in 2011), that had a consortium of smaller companies and a broader set of capabilities, such as a marine branch. Members related to Moran have been linked to the Wagner Group.

### *Wagner Group*

- > The most prominent Russian PMC, operating from 2014 - 2020 in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Mozambique.
- > Wagner's role varies in different missions, however, can include various tasks associated with para-military and non-military missions.
- > The Ukrainian chapter of the Wagner Group's history participating in all major engagements became a significant marketing and training tool and enhanced its ability to secure more economically lucrative missions in Syria (2015).
- > The Wagner Group's reputation was built on their involvement in Ukraine and Syria.
  - > Although risk against and within NATO members and the Western alliance does exist, the perception propagated by Russian and Western media on Wagner's actual capabilities is inflated.

### *Implications and Threats (Actual and Potential) to Western Alliance*

- > Western PMCs are outcompeted by Russian PMCs due to competitive pricing and good relations with local/regional governments to win contracts.
- > Due to the structural weaknesses demonstrated in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as poor coordination, substantial loss of manpower, and withdrawal from frontline zones, the Wagner Group's actual capabilities are assessed as a low threat to Western allies in the short-to-mid-term.
- > Russia delegates PMCs with certain functions, and although effective on the tactical/operative level, functioning as an informal, expendable armed forces, they are currently not structurally designed, or resourced, to play a strategic role in Russia's military thinking.

> Although there is a risk of PMCs provoking and destabilizing Western allies, the use of irregular formations (Night Wolves, Cossacks, military-patriotic organizations), pro-Russian and Anti-NATO-Ukrainian ties in Russia's Westernmost part (Kaliningrad Oblast), and Russia's geopolitical interest in the Arctic region are more imminent threats to the Western Alliance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- > Russian PMCs should not be viewed as a strategic element in Russia's military toolkit
  - > The importance of Russian PMCs, however, should not be downplayed, as under certain circumstances and conditions, such as in combination with Russia's regular armed forces, they could be useful against opponents, as demonstrated in Ukraine.

PMCs are unlikely to be used against NATO members directly, however, in the short-to-mid-term, employment of Russian irregular formations, including PMCs, may:

- > Operate in resource-endowed and politically unstable countries, such as the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.
- > Engage in provocations and ground testing in the Balkans, the Arctic region, or the EU.
- > Perform information-psychological operations, as demonstrated in Crimea, as a component of new network-centric warfare.

## CONCLUSION

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- > Russian PMCs are of growing importance to the Kremlin as a mechanism to achieve Russian geo-political and economic interests.
- > The Wagner Group, as the most prominent Russian PMC, is not the root of the problem or the main threat, however it provides insight into how Russia could use PMCs against NATO and its allies in zones of instability.
- > Russian PMCs' illegal status, full diplomatic support from Russia and host countries, and military and non-military involvement suggest that legal measures are unlikely to impact Russian PMCs or other semi-state actors.
- > The employment of PMCs in and against European Union/NATO member-states is not expected in the short-to-mid-term.