

GBA+

Application

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Russia's Private Military Contractors Policy Brief



Defence & Security Foresight
Group

About the Author



Victoria Tait completed her BA hon. at Queen's University in Kingston with a major in political studies and a minor in history. Victoria's PhD research examines the apparent disconnect between Canada's strong presence in framing and adopting 1325 in the United Nations Security Council and NATO with the notable absence of female personnel in the Canadian Combat Arms. She is particularly interested in how the normative and practical goals of UNSC Resolution 1325 and NATO/EPAC Directive 40-1 have been translated and communicated to Canadian soldiers during gender sensitivity training. This research is being supervised Dr. Melissa Hausman. Victoria recently received the 2015 Women in Defence and Security (WiDS) Memorial Scholarship and the 2016 Geoffrey Pearson Travel Bursary. She was an executive editor for Federal Governance and is currently an active reviewer for Armed Forces & Society and acts as the Vice-President of Social Affairs for the Political Science Graduate Committee at Carleton University. She is currently working as a collaborator on a Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight grant with Dr. Maya Eichler on the experiences of female veterans. Victoria's research is funded by SSHRC and the Carleton Department of Political Science.

GBA+ Application for: "Russia's Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry?" by Sergey Sukhankin & Alla Hurska

DSF Thematic Team: European NATO

Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+)

GBA+ is an analytical tool to advance gender equality and diversity outcomes of various policies, programs, and services. This strategy of gender mainstreaming is specific to the Government of Canada, and includes not only gender but also intersectional considerations, such as race and sexuality. In 2016, DND-CAF adopted GBA+ in response to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions, which acknowledges the need for gender perspectives in conflict, post-conflict and peace-building processes, and women's participation in decision making. GBA+ training through the Status of Women Canada online course is mandated for most DND-CAF employees and is an important consideration in assessing the most pressing future defence and security issues.

The GBA+ team of the DSF Group has developed a GBA+ toolkit that supports authors of working papers to integrate gender and intersectional considerations in their work from the initial stages of their research to the development of evidence-based findings and recommendations. The GBA+ Toolkit provides a series of key questions for regional teams to consider, such as: "are your concepts conceived in broad and inclusive ways to account for the experiences and perspectives of those not well represented in research and power structures?" or "how does your foresight analysis reinforce or challenge existing power relations?" A gender-liaison from each regional team works in consultation with members of the GBA+ team to develop GBA+ for the working papers. This GBA+ application complements the efforts of working paper authors to apply a GBA+ lens to their work.

GBA+ Considerations of the Role of Russian Private Military Contractors

Sukhankin and Hurska present the argument that although Russian Private Military Contractors (PMCs) are likely to remain a tactical challenge for NATO forces, they are unlikely to present a cohesive strategic threat. Non-state actors, working on behalf of Russia, have long been a useful tool in securing Russian dominance, but these actors have proven incapable of securing any major victory without support from Russian forces.

The state is not value-neutral: masculinity, sexuality, and Russia

Research suggests that military service and Russian national identity has been profoundly shaped by gendered discourse, and that the perceived legitimacy of the ruling regime relies on the socio-legal construction of hetero-masculinity (see Riabov and Riabova 2014; Sleptcov 2017). This insight has key implications for the strategic goals of the state and the ways in which Russia may continue to engage with PMCs. Domestic instability remains a serious threat to Russian security; groups that represent marginalized groups—like Pussy Riot and anti-state LGBTQ+ protesters—have succeeded in creating large-scale protests against the Russian state leadership. Amidst these tensions, Putin has demonstrated a willingness to shore up Russian nationalism by leaning heavily on traditional imagery of Russian masculinity. Gendered discourse also serves the purpose of distinguishing Russia from the rest of Europe, which is often portrayed in Russian propaganda as a "degenerate civilization best manifested in the collapse of the traditional gender order: the triumph of homosexuals and feminists, the legalization of same-sex marriages, and the destruction of the family" (Riabov and Riabova 2014, 29). At the broadest level, this relationship should push researchers and policymakers to explore how gender and sexuality figures into the covert and coercive power economy of the state described by Sukhankin and Hurska in their paper.

Applying a GBA+ lens to the privatization of security would highlight how masculinity is used to reinforce the strength of the Russian state, thus providing a rich depiction of the power relations that exist between citizenship, PMCs, and the Russian political elite.

Humanizing the labour of private military contractors

Second, GBA+ perspectives would enrich tactically oriented studies of Russian security by drawing researchers' attention to the human dynamics of PMCs. It is likely that PMCs will remain key players in asymmetric tactics of engagement like psychological operations (PSYOPS) and information warfare as described by the authors, areas for which gender and culture are crucial strategic considerations. For example, Russian operatives have disparagingly referred to NATO forces as feminized—a gendered tactic meant to increase support for the Russian state (US Senate 2017). Similarly, we are likely to see more PMCs in the Middle East, North Africa, and Latin America as Sukhankin and Hurska note, where research shows that gender plays a key role in engaging local actors in these regions. Inability to communicate with and gain support from host populations could impede proper functioning of PMCs and may lead to harmful outcomes for civilians in these areas. Sukhankin and Hurska point out that PMCs have been more successful at gaining contracts when they can build a rapport with local leaders, but we know little about how that relationship is established. It seems that these relationships are established through bribery and pandering to political leadership, but how do cultural elements play a role in securing affective ties with political elites? How are linguistic challenges overcome? Similarly, research suggests that PMCs are often staffed by underprivileged Russian youth, which introduces class and age as explanatory components (see van Rij 2020).

Security researchers have noted a massive increase in the use of private security firms over the last three decades (see Eichler 2015). This expansion necessitates better mapping of the recruitment and retention patterns within the privatized security sector. Accounting for gender and other intersecting identity factors like class, age, and race could enable and enhance the forecasting of recruitment and retention patterns within PMCs by illustrating what push and pull factors are connected to individual and group identity. This would allow for the mapping of variation across forms of Russian irregular actors ranging from the relatively inexperienced volunteers that comprised fighting forces in places like Chechnya and Bosnia, to the highly trained professionals of private security companies like the Moran Security Group described by Sukhankin and Hurska.

Economies of Violence

Lastly, GBA+ can illuminate the substate politico-economic sphere in which PMCs operate. From a cursory overview of available reporting, it would seem that Russian PMCs maintain footholds in both the licit and illicit economies. In this regard, they exist as part of a larger move towards the legal privatization of security (see Eichler 2013; 2015, Chisolm 2015; 2018; Tickner 2004; True 2015) while still maintaining illicit ties in activities like human trafficking (van Rij 2020). Feminist political economics point to the differential impact of conflict economies, especially in the context of security privatization (Peterson 2008, 2016; Stachowitsch 2013). A GBA+ lens would allow researchers to anticipate future trends in Russian PMCs, with a particular emphasis on the connection between economies of violence and the construction of the militarized state.

Recommendations

1. Applying GBA+ will allow Canada to more holistically assess the negative impact of security privatization in both the Russian and global context. In particular, a GBA+ lens will highlight the negative impacts that privatization has on gender equality in the security sector.
2. A GBA+ lens will allow Canada to better assess the broader societal impacts of the use of PMCs in conflict environments. For instance, both transparency and accountability are impaired by the use of PMCs, which increases the likelihood of Law of Armed Conflict violations. This imperils Canadian human rights priorities and impedes the proper functioning of democratic processes.
3. A GBA+ perspective can highlight the ways in which Russian security discourses rely on constructions of belligerent masculinity domestically and in operations abroad. This increased awareness will allow Canadian security scholars and practitioners to better anticipate Russian threats to NATO military personnel and civilians in both Russia and countries within its sphere of influence.

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