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Russia's Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry?

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Abstract

Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), its role in the fuelling of the Ukrainian crisis in the country's Southeast and ensued involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of Bashar al-Assad sparked a vigorous debate among academics and policy makers on an extremely sensitive subject – Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs). De-jure illegal, yet de-facto actively operating, these forces (PMCs) have played an important part in Russia's successes in gray zone operations, performing both (para)military and non-military tasks. Employment of PMCs has granted Moscow "plausible deniability" – ability to remain a stakeholder in regional crises without direct participation – an element that was virtually absent in the late Soviet (the war in Afghanistan) and early Russian (both Chechen conflicts) practices. PMCs have also become an important part in serving Russia's geopolitical objectives in strategically important areas. Furthermore, PMCs have emerged as a powerful tool of 'power economy' (silovya ekonomika), allowing Russian ruling elite to generate large economic profits in resource-endowed, yet politically disturbed areas. Within 2016 – 2019, Russian PMCs increased their operative geography well beyond post-Soviet space (a place of their first operations) to (allegedly) three continents. Yet, despite seeming strength and omnipotence, these groups have demonstrated some flaws/weaknesses that could be used by Western alliance in conflicting them. In this paper we argue two main points. First, the actual military capabilities of PMCs are quite restricted, and their successfulness is premised on a number of complementary factors, meaning that their strategic employment might be restricted. Secondly, a much greater challenge stems from the 'irregulars' – a broad array of forces comprised on (non)military elements. Thus, to successfully deal with such groups a more complex approach should be adopted.

Keywords

Private military companies; Wagner Group; irregulars; Russia; NATO

Introduction

Two major geopolitical shifts – the Syrian civil war and the Ukrainian crisis – drew attention of the global academic and policy-related community to the issue of Russia's private military companies (PMCs) and the so-called Wagner Group that has operated in Ukraine, Syria, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya and Mozambique. In so doing, it has become the living symbol of Russia's covert use of 'shady' militarized groups and irregulars in a powerplay against the west and its allies as well as securing Russia's geo-economic/strategic interests abroad.

Although they are effective as a tool against weaker opponents, we argue that Russian PMCs should not be viewed as a strategic element in Russia's military toolkit. Indeed, their effective only when paired with Russia's regular armed forces. We contend that PMCs are unlikely to be used against NATO members directly. Nevertheless, Russia will continue employing these forces in zones of instability as a means to engage the West in non-linear and asymmetric fashion.

This essay proceeds as follows. First, we will analyze the milestones of Russia's PMCs industry through the lens of continuity and tradition. Second, we will discuss the case of the Wagner Group – its emergence, main operations, and transformation. Third, we will explore the implications and threats (both actual and potential) to the western alliance posed by Russia's increasing use of PMCs and other irregular formations. From methodological point of view this paper – while benefitting from western scholarship – is primarily based on the Russian language sources.

Russian PMCs throughout history

Russia's active reliance on non-state actors dates back to the second half of the 16th century.¹ In general, in Tsarist Russia, militarized irregular formations, primarily, Cossacks were employed by the state for various (para)military tasks, including ensuring physical safety of the Russian monarch and, using contemporary parlance, confronting "hybrid threats".² Russian irregulars played a visible role in all major regional conflicts waged by the Tsarist regime, frequently acting as proto-special forces that were partly tasked with protection of the Russian national border in the areas populated by the non-Russian peoples. In the course of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) both sides of the conflict also actively relied on and collaborated with various forms of irregular formations and armed groups.³

During the Soviet period (1922–1990), the state primarily used irregulars in pursuit of its geopolitical objectives. Specifically, in its confrontation with the western powers in the Third World, that is, Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Soviets would use "military instructors" – de-facto Soviet active military⁴ sent to 'friendly countries' to assist local armed forces in training, yet on many occasions directly participating in combat.⁵ At the time, the Soviet state acted as both contractor and provider of these services, whereas pecuniary motives were almost completely overshadowed by ideological calculations.⁶ However, in the 1980s this trend experienced certain transformation: in Libya, the Soviet military instructors and advisors started to be used by the government of Muammar Gaddafi in his adventurous "border wars".⁷ Upon the dissolution of the USSR several thousands of them chose to remain in Libya and serve Gaddafi,⁸ de-facto becoming first Russian private military contractors in Africa, while others left home becoming enmeshed in the turbulent reconstruction of the Soviet state architecture in the post-communist period.

The collapse of the Soviet Union 1991 dealt a severe blow to state institutions as well as to Russian society. An abrupt and ill-planned transition to market economy destroyed/badly damaged key governmental structures. One of the main 'victims' were security services and armed forces. Chronically underfinanced and occasionally humiliated by new regime,⁹ this branch of the Russian state started to lose some of its most qualified cadre to various 'business' (de-facto semi-criminal) structures.¹⁰ Thus, the roots of Russia's current PMCs industry should be searched within this historical epoch (1991–2003). However, it would not be adequate to refer to a single source. Instead, we propose to take a look at the following three (intertwined) groups.

The first group consists of 'volunteers' who had participated in conflicts that raged throughout the post-Soviet and post-communist space in places like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Transnistria, Tajikistan, Chechnya as well as the Balkans (Bosnia).¹¹ As noted by Igor Girkin/Strelkov, a participant in hostilities in Bosnia himself¹², many "volunteers" were drawn to these "gray zones" for "résumé building": to later either join western PMCs or the private security structures that were proliferating across Russia.¹³ Importantly, some members of the Wagner Group had followed this path prior to joining the group.

A second set of groups comprises 'private armies.' These groups were organized in the 1990s as a result of expanding Russian criminal web. Such oligarchs as Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky¹⁴ organized powerful security structures headed by highly qualified professionals.¹⁵ To gain military experience, members of these 'private armies' took part in some regional conflicts, including Chechnya where they fought "on both sides of the barricades."¹⁶ Within this sub-group special attention should be allocated to Roman Tsepov, the owner of a security firm "Baltik-Eskort" (1992). The firm – which began as an idea of Viktor Zolotov, the current Director of the National Guard of Russia and a member of the Security Council – was tightly connected to some of Russia's most powerful organized criminal groups (the Tambov Gang) and rendered security services to the family of (then) St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak and for his deputy at the time, the future Russian President Vladimir Putin.¹⁷ However, with the strengthening of the Russian state, "private armies" were disbanded with some of its members and leaders either killed or moved to other private security companies (PSCs).

A third group consists indeed of those PSCs, entities organized by and composed of highly qualified professionals. The most well-known players on the Russian market were Antiterror-Orel, Antiterror, Redut-Antiterror.¹⁸ Particular attention should be paid to Moran Security Group (founded in 2011) – a spin-off of the Antiterror PSC. Unlike similar groups, Moran consisted of a "consortium" of smaller companies and even had a "marine" branch, which owned a number of vessels, *Ratibor* (ESU2529), *Maagen* (E5U2139), *Anchor 1* (E5U2491) and *Deo Juvante* (E5U2630). The company offered a much broader set of services than the "standard packages," with some Russian sources even claiming that "one of the company's clients was Bashar al-Assad."¹⁹ In effect, there is every reason to believe that the origins of the Wagner group were somehow related to Moran: not only did it stand behind the Slavonic Corps Limited PMC, but ties of some of the Moran members – including Alexander Kuznetsov (*Ratibor*)²⁰ – with the Wagner have also been proven.

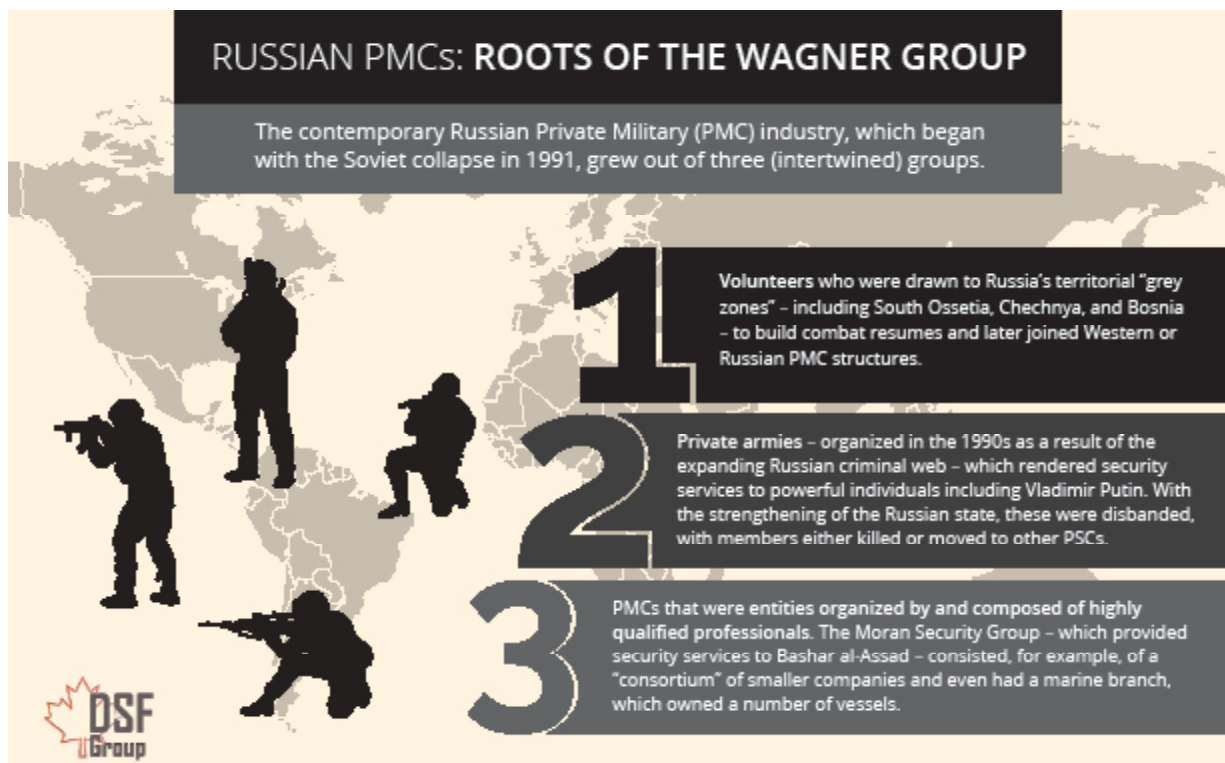


Figure 1: Russian PMCs: Roots of the Wagner Group

Russia vs. the world: differences in practices

As Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll indicate, the range of services typically provided by the Western private military security companies (PMSCs) consists of “protective security services, military support, and state building services” and “[Western companies] will generally shy away from services that will associate them with mercenaries.”²¹ Indeed, some tragic occurrences that have happened in the past primarily resulted from either the necessity of self-defence, or became a result of tragic mistake(s). One of the most notorious cases was the infamous “Baghdad Massacre” (September 16, 2007) that involved Blackwater PMC²², when members of this PMSC killed seventeen Iraqi civilians (twenty wounded) in Nisour Square, while escorting a U.S. embassy convoy.

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Furthermore, Western PMSCs operate on two main principles: complete legality and non-military with rare exception could use weaponry in self-defence missions.²³ For their part, Russian PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, were created for diametrically opposed purpose and operate in line with different logic. Russian PMCs, de-jure non-existent and prohibited by the Russian Penal Code²⁴, should be viewed as a part of “Active Measures 2.0”²⁵: a tool of (a) Russia’s covert power politics in strategically important areas,²⁶ and (b) “power economy” (*silovaja ekonomika*), “a state-controlled system of coercion (including a reliance on limited-scale military conflicts, if necessary) aimed at realizing economic goals.”²⁷ Therefore, one crucial detail should be noted: (il)legal status of Russian PMCs is not a coincidence – it should be viewed as a reflection of their true purpose. At the same time, acts of violence accompanying activities of Russian PMCs are not coincidental or even defensive. They are in fact integral. As rightfully noted by Jānis Bērziņš, “Russians, PMCs must be understood as mercenaries in the worst sense of the word”, whose main objective, while performing various shadow tasks, is to avoid the direct involvement of Russian armed forces.²⁸

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What is the Wagner Group?

Among Russian PMCs, the Wagner Group is the most prominent. Its emergence was by no means spontaneous. The Russian General Staff first entertained the necessity to organize PMCs for various “delicate missions abroad” as early as in 2010.²⁹ Yet it took no concrete steps in this direction. In 2012, Boris Chikin, one of the founders of the Moran PMC, lamented that the global PMCs market was being divided between western players and the lack of opportunities for Russian companies. He thus argued that the Russian state had to take domestic PMCs industry under its “wing”. In effect, a predecessor of the Wagner Group, Slavonic Corps Limited (2013) was a PMC created by members of the Moran and sent to Syria to fight on the side of al-Assad and protect business interests of certain oligarchs. It was destroyed near al-Sukhnah in eastern Syria, not far from Homs.³⁰ Still, Slavonic Corps Limited was a trial run of a more ambitious and better organized project. Incidentally, one of its leaders, Dmitry Utkin (ret. lieutenant colonel of the GU) would later become a commander of the Wagner group in Ukraine and Syria, where, playing a key role in capturing Aleppo, would later be decorated with the Order of Courage during the gala held in the Kremlin.³¹

The Ukrainian crisis—especially in its violent stage that ensued in April 2014—played a pivotal role in emergence and the rise of the Wagner Group. Although some (future) members of the group took part in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the groups’ actual emergence dates to May 2014, and the outbreak of armed conflict on the Ukrainian Southeast where the group would take part in all major engagements (the Battle of Luhansk Airport, the Battle of Debaltseve), subversive/terrorist operations (the Il-76 shoot-down; provocations in the rear of the Ukrainian armed forces; intelligence gathering) and ‘quelling’ of the (pseudo) Cossacks and local strongmen acting as “cleaners” (*chistilshiki*).³² While in Ukraine, the group practiced some of the tactics learned earlier in Syria and used by Islamic radicals, which, aside from operations in small and highly maneuvering groups (commensurate with general principles of non-linear operations that include sabotage, guerrilla/partisan warfare, rapid penetration of the frontline and operations in the enemy’s rear), also included employment of armoured jeeps/vehicles when attacking the enemy formations.³³ The “Ukrainian chapter” of Wagner history had a crucial meaning becoming a training polygon and a form of ‘marketing tool’ (advertising the group and its capabilities to third parties).

Ukraine accordingly became a springboard for the group towards a much more economically lucrative missions in Syria. Still, operations in Ukraine also played essential role in transformation of the entity in terms of its composition, primarily reflected in decreasing quality of the personnel. Between 2014 – 2015, according to various testimonies, the core of the group was indeed predominantly composed of highly skilled professionals with vast hands-on experience gained in various regional conflicts. During this period, functions performed by Wagner could be (at some level, of course) compared to tasks vested upon the Russian Special Operations Forces (inaugurated in 2015) – a flexible, multi-functional force combining qualities of *Spetsnaz* and the armed forces.³⁴ However, with a swelling in its rank-and-file of the PMC, the entrance requirements and training standards plummeted.³⁵ Moreover, between 2016 and 2017, the tasks performed in Syria by the group drifted away from military operations toward forceful seizure (“*otzhim*” in Russian slang) of oil- and gas-fields/facilities from the anti-al-Assad forces.

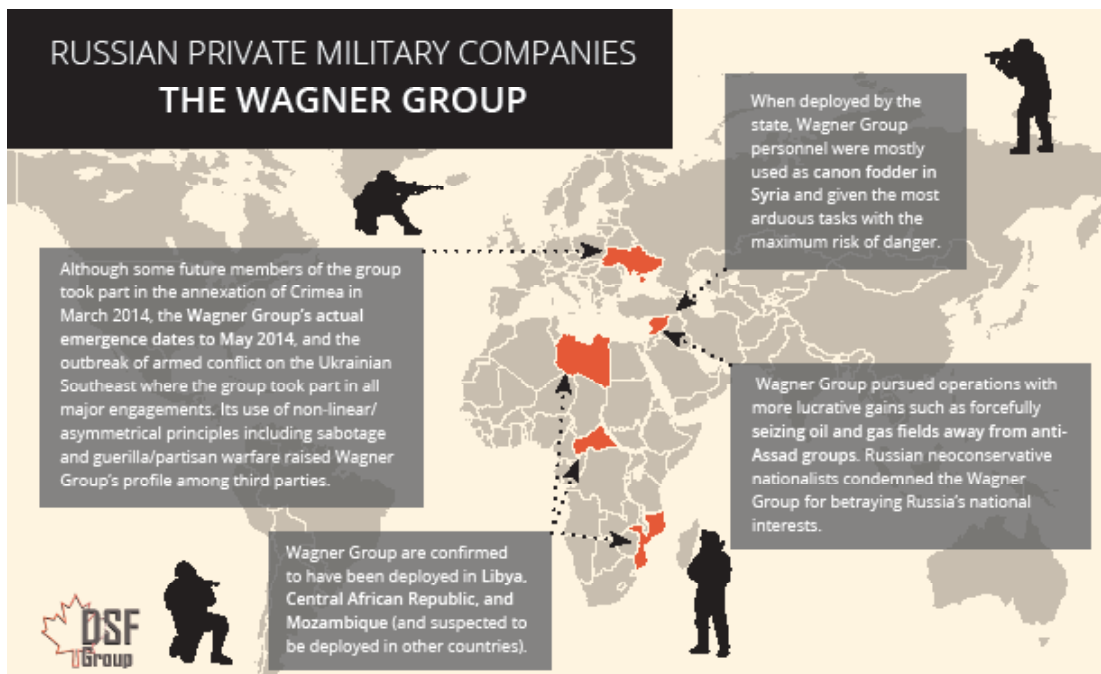


Figure 2: Russian Private Military Companies: **The Wagner Group**

Further, there is every reason to believe that, at least partly, the group started acting increasingly together with pro-Assad forces (uncoordinated, highly diverse and demonstrating not very high war-fighting qualities) and its coordination with the Russian side started to loosen. This transformation increased resentment from the side of Russian neo-conservative nationalists (such as Strelkov) who condemned the Wagner Group and the Russian government for betrayal of Russia's national interests and drifting away from Russia's key mission (creation of the Novorossiia).³⁶ Incidentally, one of such missions co-carried out by Wagner led to a debacle near Deir-ez-Zor where the group suffered its largest losses as a result of the aerial strike dealt by the US forces.³⁷

In discussing the Wagner Group in Syria, we should make two observations. First, a common inaccuracy is that in Syria "the Wagner Group is often used as elite infantry."³⁸ Although this assumption might be somewhat applicable to the Ukrainian chapter of Wagner history, this argument does not apply to its experiences in Syria. Close analysis of operations carried out by Wagner in Syria – based on both known casualty rates and testimonies of some mercenaries – suggests the group was primarily employed as "cannon fodder" whereby it performed most arduous tasks in areas of maximum risk or danger. Alternatively, it served as an auxiliary force that assisted Russian regular armed forces – the SOF, on the ground, and the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) by coordinating and terrain reconnaissance³⁹ – to avoid casualties among Russian regular armed forces akin to Afghanistan and both Chechen wars. Indeed, according to various estimates official number of Russian contract soldiers (*kontraktniki*),⁴⁰ who were killed in Syria in military engagements was significantly lower than any other party involved. This fact, even though much praised by the Russian military and pro-Kremlin information outlets, failed to attribute some credit to Russian PMCs that took part in the heaviest battles. Unlike Russian PMCs, elite forces are typically used in high-precision operations – which is clearly visible in the work of the Russian SOF in Syria – and do not typically participate in potentially highly costly frontal attacks.⁴¹ The Wagner Group, however, while in Syria, was used as shockwave troops, which confronts tasks vested on elite special forces.

The second aspect is related to the Deir ez-Zor disaster suffered by the Wagner group in the early 2018 in Syria. According to Kimberley Marten, whose research draws primarily on materials published by Denis Korotkov, the defeat of the Wagner Group near Deir ez-Zor might have resulted from an alleged disagreement in 2017 between Russia's Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Yevgeny Prigozhin (the reported sponsor of the Wagner Group). Marten suggests that the inaction of the Russian Defense Ministry that led to the Deir ez-Zor massacre might have been deliberately staged "to sacrifice the lives of the veterans who work for Wagner, in order to send Prigozhin a message."⁴² However, the physical eradication of experienced veterans and, perhaps more importantly, giving the United States a reason to claim victory makes little practical sense, especially in light of Russia's growing involvement in Libya. In effect, thorough investigations have demonstrated that in this debacle the major losses were suffered by the pro-Assad and pro-Iranian forces. By contrast Wagner occupied a marginal part of the overall advancing forces, and was unlikely to be the leading/coordinating force.⁴³ Following this logic, this means that the Russian MoD "punished" not Wagner per se, but Russia's regional allies. This argument is not plausible. Most likely, members of the Wagner – who, incidentally, did not take part in the first attack against the Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces – fell prey to a combination of poor coordination and over-confidence that the US side would not use its military-technical capabilities to confront and to repel the attacker.⁴⁴ Moreover, as argued by reputable Russian journalist Petr Kozlov, the Syrian debacle may have had a serious impact on the Russian ruling elite.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the “punishment theory” may be challenged by the post-2018 developments and Russia’s increasing involvement in Libya. Specifically, Prigozhin was spotted during negotiations between Shoygu and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in November 2018⁴⁶, which resulted in Wagner group being sent to Libya to support Haftar’s Tripoli offensive the *Operation Flood of Dignity* (April 2019).⁴⁷ Another essential aspect is related to the issue of Russian military advisors (which combined legal advisors and members of the Wagner group) in the Central African Republic (CAR), who were deployed in the country in 2018, as a part of technical-material cooperation between the CAR political regime and the Russian MoD.⁴⁸ Neither episode could have been performed without the coordination of actions between leadership of the Wagner and the Russian MoD.

The Wagner group: image and reality.

Between 2014 and 2020, the Wagner group has been spotted operating on three continents and carrying out various tasks associated with both (para)military and non-military missions. In this regard, one important aspect should be mentioned: the growing discrepancy between the image of the group (primarily created by Russian and western media based on the group’s operations in Ukraine and Syria) and its actual capabilities. This argument gains more relevance in the light of the operations carried out by Wagner between spring – winter 2019 in Libya in scopes of the Operation Flood of Dignity⁴⁹ and Mozambique. Specifically, despite the fact that Wagner fighters have been sent to Libya to support Haftar’s offensive against Tripoli,⁵⁰ its results (at the time of writing) have fallen short of its declared objective. First, Haftar’s forces were stopped in the outskirts of Tripoli, signifying their inability to achieve a decisive victory by purely military measures alone. On the other hand, by supporting Haftar and making a bet on one player, Russia may have substantially decreased its bargaining power – in case of Haftar’s unsuccess his opponents are unlikely to turn to Moscow – a prospect that Russia has been trying to avoid in Libya.⁵¹ Furthermore, as reported by both Russian and Turkish sources, the Wagner group suffered its largest losses in manpower since the Syrian debacle in early 2018.⁵² These losses have resulted in certain reputation damage. According to available information, following this unsuccess Russian mercenaries were withdrawn from the frontline zone,⁵³ which, of course, might stem from a combination of factors.

Yet another disappointment has befallen the group in the Sub-Saharan Africa, a region of growing importance to the Kremlin’s geo-political/economic calculations.⁵⁴ Following the meeting between the President of Mozambique Filipe Nyusi and Vladimir Putin in Moscow (August 22, 2019) – when the African guest promised “lucrative contracts” and “ample opportunities” for the Russian businesses in the country⁵⁵ – Russian mercenaries were reportedly deployed in the Cabo Delgado province (northern Mozambique) to help the government in its up-to-date unsuccessful fight against locally operating Islamic radicals.⁵⁶ According to both Russian and western sources⁵⁷ in pursuit of this contract in Mozambique, Wagner outcompeted leading western PMSCs primarily due to advantageous pricing policy and good relations with local political leadership. However, the initial excitement was soon replaced by the sobering effect made by the first military encounters with the local rebels. Ambushed by the radicals, Wagner reportedly lost several fighters, with up to twenty Mozambique official military also killed.⁵⁸ According to some unverified sources, this episode prompted the withdrawal of Russian mercenaries from Cabo Delgado.⁵⁹ Indeed, these experiences have shown some structural weaknesses showcased by private military contractors as well as the fact that this tool, even though effective in tactical/operative level, is unlikely to gain strategic role in Russia’s military thinking.⁶⁰

The main reason behind this assumption boils down to the following: in its actions, the Russian side is delegating PMCs with certain functions – such as military operations – they are not designed to perform and have no appropriate resources. These functions are typically performed by regular armed forces, such as the SOF, specifically designed for it.

Beyond Wagner: Russian irregulars and the western alliance.



Figure 3: Russian PMCs: **The Threat to NATO**

While reflecting about the range of challenges faced by NATO due to Russia's use of PMCs, one essential aspect should be recognized: as the most well-known and notorious entity of its kind, the Wagner Group is neither the root of the problem nor the main peril. As it has been convincingly demonstrated in the battle near Deir ez-Zor, Libya⁶¹ and Mozambique,⁶² the actual military capabilities of the Wagner group depend on various external factors and local conditions. One of them is the close cooperation with Russia's regular armed forces, which secured its success in both Ukraine and Syria. Therefore, from a strictly military perspective, Russian PMCs should not be viewed as a supreme threat, yet those forces could act as 'spoilers' distracting/disrupting actions of NATO/Western powers in zones of instability.

Arguably, however, a much more serious peril emanates from "irregulars"—a broad array of forces that including PMCs, Cossacks, the Night Wolves,⁶³ members of various military-patriotic organizations/societies, and hacktivists—that could be used to provoke and destabilize situation. The main challenge stemming from activities of this group was, perhaps, best showcased during Russia's annexation of Crimea. Success of this operation (consisted of a number of consecutive steps) in many ways was inseparable from actions of the irregulars that performed all "groundwork"⁶⁴ whereby preparing the 'turf' for the "little green men"⁶⁵ – regular armed forces (the SOF and the *Spetsnaz*).⁶⁶

“ Even though this risk does exist and should not be neglected, it appears highly unlikely that Moscow would use the “Crimean scenario” in/against countries that hold NATO membership. After all, the current operative theater of Russian PMCs/irregular forces is either confined by the ‘borders’ of the post-Soviet area, or extends to places classified as “gray zones”. This, however, does not mean that the risk should be excluded completely: Russia is likely to continue testing NATO and its allies through a string of provocations as a means to tackle cohesion of the alliance and resolve of its members. ”

Some elements of the “Crimean scenario” could be exercised by Russia in other venues/theaters as well. One of the potential areas are the Balkans (where Russia has been using covert operations since the early 1990s through proxy forces) and/or Latvia and Lithuania. Incidentally, during Zapad-2017 strategic military exercises (14–20 September), Moscow used both local and the Don Army Cossacks as an auxiliary force⁶⁷ on the territory of Kaliningrad oblast, which co-hosted the event. Even though this risk does exist and should not be neglected, it appears highly unlikely that Moscow would use the “Crimean scenario” in/against countries that hold NATO membership. After all, the current operative theater of Russian PMCs/irregular forces is either confined by the ‘borders’ of the post-Soviet area, or extends to places classified as “gray zones”. This, however, does not mean that the risk should be excluded completely: Russia is likely to continue testing NATO and its allies through a string of provocations as a means to tackle cohesion of the alliance and resolve of its members.

For this purpose, Moscow is already actively using irregulars – primarily, the Night Wolves, Cossacks, various military-patriotic organizations as well as hacktivists – to infiltrate, provoke, destabilize and stir up things in other regions/countries/places. Out of a large number of known examples it would be essential to recall the role of Cossacks and PMCs members (covered up by the Russian MFA, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs) in radicalizing the Serbian youth, which came to be known as the “Zlatibor affair” – an event that caused huge resonance in the country and required personal involvement of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. The incident revealed (strong) ties between the Russian MFA, Cossacks, the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs and members of some PMCs that had fought in the Donbass.⁶⁸ Currently, on the Balkans Russia’s attention is diverted to Bosnia, Montenegro (where Russian agents already tried to carry out a military coup in 2016), and Serbia, which had refused to introduce any anti-Russian sanctions as a result of the unlawful annexation of Crimea. It is highly possible that even NATO/EU membership of the above-mentioned countries would not fully stop Moscow from using covert methods.

The second concern is premised on the developments in Russia’s westernmost part, the Kaliningrad oblast. Namely, Kaliningrad-based Cossacks are actively establishing ties (primarily, via joint para-military exercises) with The Slavic Union (*Braterstwo Słowian*) and The Movement for the Sovereignty of the Polish People (*Ruch Suwerenności Narodu Polskiego*) – pro-Russian and anti-NATO -Ukrainian platforms.⁶⁹ The direct impact of these ties should not be overrated, yet the collateral damage is unpredictable and might become more visible in the future.

The third concern relates to the Arctic region, an area of Russia's strategic interests and massive expectations.⁷⁰ As Marlene Laruelle notes, the Arctic occupies special place in Russia's economic, geopolitical and ideological calculations.⁷¹ Following the Ukrainian Crisis, Russia began intensifying its efforts in (re)militarization of the region. Russia's strategy is on many levels commensurate with an idea brought forth by a renowned Russian military expert Vladislav Shuryghin "[I]n the Arctic region, you do not fight wars with armies and divisions."⁷² Indeed, a closer look at Russia's maneuvers/exercises in the region show high role of small and highly maneuvering formations – elements that are presumably seen by Russia as the main operative force in case of a limited-scale escalation in the region. Aside from military-related aspects, Russia's actions in the region generate interest for yet another reason: by using a mix between facts and provocations and information operations.⁷³

Conclusion

The emergence of Russian PMCs on the Ukrainian Southeast in 2014 and their subsequent (re)appearance in Syria (2015) created a huge wave of interest toward this phenomenon both among Russian and international experts, scholars, journalists, and policy makers. Initial veneer of omnipotence and invincibility of Russian private military contractors was challenged in 2018 (Syria) and 2019 (Libya and Mozambique). Based on these examples, it would be adequate to presume that the actual military potential demonstrated by Russian PMCs do not allow to classify this tool as a strategic element in the Russian toolkit. Yet their importance/capabilities should not be downplayed – under certain circumstances and against specific enemies/adversaries this tool could and will be very useful. This said, we believe that the main danger to the Western alliance and, in particular, its partners emanates from 'irregulars' that could be employed in scopes of various (both military and non-military) missions, acting – in case of a potential limited-scale military escalation or preceding events – as an auxiliary forces, which was demonstrated during the annexation of Crimea.

Therefore, we argue that in short-to-mid-term prospect main areas of employment of Russian irregular forces (including PMCs) will extend to the following three main areas. First, actual (para)military operations will likely be performed by Russian PMCs in resource-endowed and politically unstable countries in the Middle East, the Maghreb, the Sub-Saharan Africa and (potentially) South and Central America (Venezuela and Nicaragua) as well as countries of the post-Soviet space. The employment of these forces in/against EU/NATO member-states should not be expected in a short- and mid-term prospect. Second, provocations and "ground testing" as a means to test the resolve of the western alliance – an element whose spread will extend beyond the above-mentioned area, including the Balkans, the Arctic region, and the EU. While actual impact of these actions should not be overstated – since Russia is unlikely to use offensive potential of irregulars (including PMCs) against EU and NATO members – the western alliance must be cautious, since some provocations (especially, on the Balkans and the three Baltic States) might take place. *Third*, information-psychological operations as an integral part of the war of the new generation (Network-centric warfare) – an element that was demonstrated during the Crimean operation.⁷⁴ That said, to understand better and perhaps even re-consider their role, potential areas of employment of Russian irregular formations (including PMCs) and their coordination with Russian regular armed forces, it would be valuable to thoroughly analyze history of the Ukrainian crisis paying special attention to the interim between January 2014 and February 2015.

“ Based on the analysis of operative principles employed by Russian PMCs, whose functions and de-facto activities drastically differ from PMSCs – including their illegal status, full diplomatic support from the sides of both Russia and hosting countries, clandestine transportation, ‘hybrid financing’ and a combination of military and non-military tasks – legal measures are unlikely to have any impact on Russian PMCs and other semi-state actors. ”

and non-military tasks– legal measures are unlikely to have any impact on Russian PMCs and other semi-state actors. Although activities of irregulars could be, to some and very limited extent, confronted by legal measures, PMCs could only be targeted by military measures. By inflicting substantial damage on these mercenary formations in ‘gray zones,’ two main results could be achieved. For one, the recruiting mechanism could be disrupted because the number of qualified recruits is likely to subside dramatically. For another, and most importantly, defeats of mercenaries will repel third parties from hiring them in the future.

One final aspect should be highlighted. Christopher R. Spearin argues that one way to curtail the activities of Russian PMCs is for the United States to place them “in a normatively defensive context in which utilization is transparent.”⁷⁵ This scenario, as confirmed by A. Pfaff and E. Mienie⁷⁶, looks at the problem of Russian PMCs from Western angle, which completely disagrees with Russian context. Based on the analysis of operative principles employed by Russian PMCs, whose functions and de-facto activities drastically differ from PMCs– including their illegal status, full diplomatic support from the sides of both Russia and hosting countries, clandestine transportation, ‘hybrid financing’ and a combination of military

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