The Emergence of Russian Private Military Companies: A New Tool of Clandestine Warfare

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In recent years, the Russian private security and military company (PMSC) industry has evolved to serve the needs of both business clients as well as governments. Thus far, the ties between the Kremlin and the Russian PMSC industry are ambiguous and seem to vary across the different companies. What seems clear though, is that the Kremlin is experimenting with the utility of these companies and that the use of PMSCs is on the rise. Private security and military companies are neither explicitly legal nor illegal in Russia, a status that may serve Russian authorities well in situations where attribution and attention is unwanted. While the exact shape and role of the Russian PMSC industry may not be carved out fully, Russia is now home to a small, but potent, PMSC industry that can be mobilised to inflict harm on the country's enemies.

Keywords: Private military companies, Russia, hybrid warfare, military capability

Introduction

In recent years, private military and security companies (PMSCs) appeared in many parts of the world. The example set by the US in particular, including its extensive use of PMSCs in military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been a source of inspiration for many other countries, including Russia. While some of the Russian PMSCs have received considerable media attention during the past couple of years, there is still little systematic study of the Russian PMSC industry and its capabilities.[1] Speculations also abound in terms of if and how these companies relate to Russian authorities and Russian foreign policy. This article directs attention to these questions and discusses some of the implications that Russian use of PMSCs may have for the security of Western countries. By way of introduction, the article first provides a brief description of the Russian PMSC industry.

The early Russian PMSC industry

[1] There is however an increasing number of studies on the subject of Russian PMSCs. These include among others Marten, K. (2019); Spearin, C. (2018); Sukhankin, S. (2019); Østensen, Å. G. & Bukkvoll, T. (2018).

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In the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, surplus Russian military and state security personnel frequently established domestic security companies but some also got acquainted with the international PMSC industry. Former Russian soldiers served as body guards and carried out diverse types of protective work while Russian pilots and technicians were attractive to companies operating aircraft (Lock, 1999). The South African mercenary PMSC, Executive Outcomes for instance employed Russian Mi-17 and Mi-24 attack helicopters and Russian and Ukrainian pilots and technicians to operate them (Reno, 1997). A lot of surplus military transport planes and helicopters ended up on private hands in this period, some of which is still on the market.

The downsizing of the Soviet military not only demobilized individual troops, but also entire cadres and military units. According to one observer, some of the demobilized elite military formations maintained sufficient cohesion to reconstitute themselves as, in effect, readymade PMSCs (Axelrod, 2013). The company 'Alpha Group' was created out of Group A (Alpha Group), one of two FSB special forces units. Alpha Group was later acquired by ArmorGroup sometime between 1999 and 2003.[2] Another early Russian PMSC that disappeared or mutated is RusCorp Group. In 2010 RusCorp described itself as an 'international security holding company' headquartered in Moscow and with offices in Nigeria, Iraq, the United States, the UK and 'other selected European countries'. The company claimed to have wide experience from emergency and high-risk environments and to deliver services within 'all aspects of security' (PrivateMilitary.org, 2010). As such, RusCorp appears to have been an armed private protection company, with what perhaps can be described as a rather 'gun toting' image, not uncommon in the early 2000s.

Parts of the early Russian PMSC industry also hail back to the organization of volunteers in foreign wars and thus have little to do with protective services. As an example, the St Petersburg based security company named Rubikon, supervised by Russian security services, was central in organizing volunteers to fight on the side of the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (InformNapalm, 2015).

After 9/11, the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan presented huge business opportunities for PMSCs. Russian companies also rushed to the scene in order to cater to Russian corporations in particular. The so called 'non-government educational centre' Antiterror was established in 2003 with the assistance of the Russian Union of Paratroopers. Antiterror signed contracts for the

[2] ArmorGroup also had acquired well-known Defence Systems Limited (DSL) in 1997 and was itself acquired by G4S Risk Management and morphed into that company in 2008 (Østensen, 2011).

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protection of the oil and gas infrastructure of the companies Tatneft, Energoinzheniering and the Russian Engineering Company in the mid-2000s (Konovalov and Valetskii, 2013). In 2010, the Russian oil company Lukoil established its own security company – Lukom-A – to protect investments in Iraq. According to Arkadii Babchenko, the Lukoil subsidiary was by law just a regular private security company, but in reality, it was a PMSC. The same author also claims that the next trigger for the PMSC business in Russia was Somali piracy (Popkov, 2016). Much like Western shippers, Russian ship-owners needed protection for their vessels in the Gulf of Aden. Russian security companies however quickly got the reputation for a 'shoot first' approach designed to deter pirates from attacking Russian flagged ships in the first place. Thus, in terms of timing, the development of Russian PMSCs seems to largely follow international trends.

The Contemporary Russian PMSC industry

According to the Russian experts Ivan Konovalov and Oleg Valetskii, earlier this decade there were between 10 and 20 PMSCs in Russia (2013). Accurate and up-to-date numbers are non-existent, largely due to the secretive nature of the industry, but also because of the difficulties involved in determining exactly which organisations qualify as a PMSC, and because they are not yet officially legal. The better-known companies are Moran Security, RSB-Group, Wagner, Mar, ENOT Corp., Patriot and Shchit.[3] Moran Security, the RSB-Group and Shchit in many ways resemble Western PMSCs; Wagner and Patriot are more government-hired mercenaries than PMSCs; while Mar and ENOT are smaller, ideologised companies active mostly in the post-Soviet space. ENOT was disbanded in late 2018, and the leader arrested on charges of extortion (Polykhina 2019). The ideological anchoring of some Russian PMSCs sets them apart from Western PMSCs, which except from declaring that they support their home countries' troops, usually insist on being apolitical actors. Another difference between Western PMSCs and their Russian cousins is that Western PMSCs are heavily involved with military support services and logistics, types of services that Russian PMSCs do not appear to focus on, or even offer, as of yet.

[3] There have also been reports of a company called Vega Strategic Services allegedly providing military training to the pro-Syrian government militia Liwa al-Quds (aka the Jerusalem Brigade); however, some sources have claimed the company's existence may be part of a counter-propaganda campaign carried out by media outlets close to the Kremlin. See Sukhankin (2019).

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Wagner is undoubtedly both the largest and the most well known of the Russian PMSCs because of its role in Russia's war effort in Syria. However, several of these companies may yet become active both in a potential escalated conflict with the West and in conflict theatres in the developing world. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in terms of military hardware, none of these companies are likely to be able to fight on the level of regular military units unless they are armed as such by the Russian military itself.

Even though this article denotes these companies 'private security and military companies', several of the Russian companies hardly fit a categorization as commercial actors.[4] In fact, it may even be a stretch to call Wagner a *private* company. Some of the Russian PMSCs are business ventures, selling their services to other commercial actors in a commercial and competitive market e.g. for piracy protection. Wagner however appears more of a mercenary outfit, understood to mean an outfit that also offer combat services as opposed to mere protective services.[5] Furthermore, their services seem to be exclusive to parts of the Russian security apparatus or to a handful of clients approved by that same apparatus. However, Russian PMSCs are not homogeneous. Some seem to be designed primarily to be proxy forces that can take commercial assignments for approved clients on the side. Others appear primarily to be commercial actors that act as proxies when they are called to do so. Compared to Western companies, most Russian companies seem however to be less weary of providing services close to the combat spectrum. In contrast, the large segment of the Western industry that competes for contracts for (Western) state clients and which operates on the open market will shy away from services that will associate them with combat as that will warrant the much dreaded mercenary association, which in the West has a clear delegitimizing effect. After several Blackwater 'scandals' in particular, Western companies have also become very sensitive to bad publicity and many also find that operating in complex war zones is simply too risky. In addition, most Western companies also lack the cohesion and coordinated training necessary to operate in substitution of an army unit.

Like any other national 'market for force', Russian PMSCs are shaped not only by supply and demand, but also by the cultural, historical, political and legal environment they exist within.

[4] The issues of how to define these types of companies has been a constant matter of academic discussion since the early 2000s. Making categorical distinctions between different companies that broadly speaking can be labelled PMSCs, has largely proven difficult under most circumstances because companies themselves are flexible and because most categories tend to merge into one another. Consequently, analyzing what companies of this sort *do* may be more fruitful than what they *are*.

[5] This is not to suggest that there always is a clear demarcation line between combat and protective work when push comes to shove, but it also does not suggest that protective work cannot be separated from offensive soldiering.

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The industry is affected by the national institutional environment, informal and formal regulations, national military culture, popular acceptance, historical propensity for using private actors to exercise force, relations to government structures and elites, and many other factors. In short, companies will be 'socialized' by their home environment, even when acting internationally (Flohr, Rieth, Schwindenhammer & Wolf, 2010). In the case of Russian PMSCs this so far has resulted in a crossbreed PMSC industry populated by some Western style companies, some mercenary outfits and some ideologically driven units which resemble armed militias. Common to them all is that they exist at the mercy of the authorities and thus that they may need to prove their worth in order to continue to exist.

PMSCs and the state

The Russian state at present seems relatively ambivalent about the phenomenon of PMSCs. In fact, when a new proposal for the legalization of PMSC again was raised in Russian media at the beginning of 2018, Putin's spokesman Dmitrii Peskov simply stated that the Kremlin 'has no position on this question' (Aptekar, 2018). Despite their undeniable existence, PMSCs are not yet explicitly regulated by Russian law.

These companies are furthermore also largely absent from Russian military theory, at least in terms of PMSCs being an instrument in the Russian military toolbox (Eklund and Elfving, 2018). In the latest 2014 version of the official Russian military doctrine, PMSCs are only mentioned in the context of foreign threats (Neelov, 2017). Likewise, in a major new Russian work on future war written by the military intellectuals Igor Popov and Musa Khamsatov, PMSCs are mostly described as a Western phenomenon. They are (as of yet) not prescribed any particular role in future Russian security politics (Popov and Khamzatov, 2017, 256–259).

Russian motives for developing a PMSC industry

The Russian debate on PMSCs suggests at least four main drivers for their development: profits, military emulation, the companies' potential as a non-attributional means of coercion and avoiding an Afghanistan-type loss aversion situation among the public.

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In terms of profits, it is worth recalling that Russia is home to a large and lucrative domestic private security sector, which in 2011 was worth US $7 billion annually (Galeotti, 2013). Russia and Russian decision makers are hence accustomed to not only the concept of privately supplied security, but also to the revenues that such a sector generates. The Deputy Head of the Duma (Russian parliament) Sub-Committee for Statebuilding and Legislation, Mikhail Emelianov, maintains that the private military industry is an internationally rapidly growing market dominated thus far by Western countries (the US and the UK in particular), and he argues that there is huge untapped potential for Russia. As Emelianov put it, 'Our history is such that we always had to fight wars. Why not exploit this experience [for profit]?'(Kovalenko and Baltacheva, 2018). The dominance of Western companies within the private protection market in war zones troubles Russian decision makers. The fact that the country's PMSC industry is underdeveloped has led Russian companies to seek protective services from Western companies in war zones, which has caused Russian interests to miss out on business opportunities. Russian military observer Ivan Konovalov suggests that many developing nations' governments may welcome the emergence of PMSCs with geopolitical affiliations that differ from those of the West (Eremenko, 2014). This argument is supported by the recent experience of Russian PMSCs in several African countries, and possibly also in backing President Maduro in Venezuela.

A second motive could simply be to adopt what appears to be a useful foreign political instrument for the US and the UK in particular. Military emulation is a well-known international phenomenon. It would be fair to say that the radical reform of the Russian armed forces initiated by Minister of Defence Anatolii Serdiukov in 2008 was, to a significant extent, an emulation of reforms that occurred in many Western countries after the end of the Cold War. Thus, it is not unnatural to see the development of Russian PMSCs essentially as a conscious attempt to imitate what may appear to be a smart innovation by the West. For example, an article in the Russian Ministry of Defence (MOD) daily *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red Star) from 2013 argued that PMSCs is a 'phenomenon of our times' that the West has understood but in which Russia has lagged behind (Palchikov, 2013). There is, however, reason to doubt that the Russian political-economic model is producing a PMSC market similar to those that exist in many Western countries, given that there is currently a very strong tendency towards monopolies in many sectors of the Russian economy. In 2014, Oleg Krinitsin, the head of RSB-Group, expressed concern regarding the potential for a genuine neoliberal Russian PMSC market. His suspicion was that Russia was more likely to end

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up with some 'clumsy monopoly structure' (Boiarskii, 2014). Such a model may serve the Kremlin's interests well.

Third, the possibility of using a certain level of force in pursuing your national interests without this force being attributed to you is clearly tempting. Russian voices in the PMSC debate are certain that Western countries already do this (Neelov, 2017), and President Putin himself has talked about PMSCs as 'an instrument for the realisation of national interests where the state itself does not have to be involved' (RIA-Novosti, 2012). Furthermore, investigative Russian reporters suggest that some members of the Russian General Staff were sold on the idea during a presentation delivered to them by the founder of the South African company Executive Outcomes, Eben Barlow, on the side-lines of the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in 2010. It was the non-attribution aspect in particular that apparently triggered the generals' interest (Malkova and Baev, 2019).

PMSCs also provides the opportunity to offer covert international assistance to allied regimes. Duma representative Gennadii Nosovko, who proposed one of the laws relating to the legalisation of PMSCs, has even publicly indicated that Russian PMSCs could be made available to Putin's allied authoritarian leaders in other countries that face popular uprisings. According to him, 'there would not have been this present situation in Ukraine if there in Russia had been relevant PMSCs for hire at the time of the crisis for the Yanukovych government. At a time where they [the Yanukovych government] could not be certain of the loyalty of their army, they could have signed a contract with a Russian PMSC' (Boiarskii, 2014).

A fourth motivation for developing Russian PMCs may be to avoid the well-known 'body bag effect', also a motivating factor in the West. In short, PMSCs could provide Russian authorities with a convenient means of utilising military force in operations where the general Russian public would be sensitive to casualties. Ever since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), there has been considerable scepticism in Russia about risking Russian lives in operations not directly connected to the defence of the country. A Levada Centre opinion poll from October 2015 (the beginning of Russian operations in Syria) suggested that despite more than 50 per cent support for the Russian policy towards Syria overall, only 19 per cent were willing to support 'boots on the ground' (Levada Center, 2015). Private military contractors are often ex-service personnel, but tend to garner less support than their public counterparts. One Russian observer suggests sympathy

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for losses suffered by Wagner personnel is low, largely due to a perception that '(...) these people are highly paid, and knew what they were getting into' (Pukhov, 2017).

The bureaucratic politics of Russian PMSCs

There have been a number of initiatives in the Duma designed to legalise PMSCs and regulate their activities. In 2009, the representative Andrei Lugovoi proposed an amendment to the law governing private security companies that would allow them to operate abroad. Similar attempts were made in 2012, 2014 and 2018, but none have succeeded so far.

Some of the domestic resistance to legalising PMSCs is probably ideological and stems from concerns regarding the state monopoly on the (legitimate) use of violence. An arguably more important objection relates to worries regarding who is to control PMSCs. Rival agencies would vie for such control because of the potential political clout attached and because of the desire to manage any potential future financial resources available to PMSCs. It may be the case that as long as the control issue remains undecided, most of the domestic players in Russia prefer the current ambiguous existence of these companies to outright legalisation.

Several Russian sources point to a conflict of interest between the FSB (domestic security service) and the GRU (military intelligence) on this issue. The prevalence of competition and rivalry between these two agencies is historically well known, and there being a dispute between them on the issue of PMSCs does not seem far-fetched, especially not since Wagner in particular seems closely aligned to the GRU. One Russian source claims that the GRU 'has spent 15 years on spreading the, in principle false, myth that private military companies play a major role in contemporary wars', and points to what he sees as planted publications on this topic in Russian military journals such as *Zarubezhnoe Voennoe Obozrenie* (Foreign Military Review) (Tokarev, 2017). Other sources maintain that the scepticism towards PMSCs is also strong within the military, not only in the FSB, and that both the MOD and the FSB constitute obstacles to the adoption of a law on PMSCs (Neelov, 2017). However, even if the GRU may be a driving force behind the development of Russian PMSCs, this does not necessarily mean that the institution is in favour of legalization. There is every reason to think that the GRU sees the potential benefits of the 'informally allowed to exist' status.

That said, it would probably be wrong to suggest, as some have done, that the FSB is entirely against the PMSC idea (Tokarev, 2018). If that was the case, PMSCs would most likely

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not have been able to exist, even in the shadowy way that they do today. The FSB currently enjoys enough political pull in the Kremlin to block this phenomenon completely if it so wanted. The Russian military observer Arkadii Babchenko is adamant that the FSB is currently in full control of the PMSCs (Popkov, 2016). Thus, it seems more likely that the FSB has chosen a strategy of allowing the limited development of PMSCs under strict FSB control, rather than trying to block such companies from emerging. Control here does not necessarily mean day-to-day monitoring and interference. It is more likely that the FSB, and ultimately the Kremlin, have made it clear that PMSCs exist at their mercy, will have to do whatever the political leadership tells them and, should they fail to comply, can be dissolved almost instantly. This latter point may also help to explain the apparent paradox of PMSC existence without legalisation. If they, in the absence of legalisation, continue to exist at the FSB's mercy, they are likely to be easier to oversee and direct. It is also likely that there are mixed views on PMSCs within the armed forces. At a conference on PMSCs organised by the Academy of the General Staff in March 2016, former Chief of Defence General Iurii Baluevskii argued forcefully against legalisation on the grounds that PMSCs have the potential to become uncontrollable (Falichev, 2016). Another concern may be that the military is not comfortable working alongside presumably less professional and less capable PMSCs, or that a PMSC presence in the same theatre would be more of a nuisance than a help to the military forces. In addition, the military may also be concerned that PMSCs could consume resources that otherwise could have been earmarked for the regular forces. Thus, if PMSCs are allowed to continue to exist in Russia, it is, for MOD image purposes, best for the armed forces if they remain non-legalised and thus less visible (Polovinko, 2017).

PMSCs in Russian foreign policy

Russian PMSCs have existed at least since the mid-2000s, but their role as a tool of foreign policy has developed more recently. There is now substantial empirical evidence to suggest that Russia over the past five years on several occasions has employed PMSCs in pursuit of national interests beyond its borders. Wagner's participation in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 may have been the first major example of this tactic. Since then, their employment by the Kremlin on the rebel side in Donbas, and on the side of Assad in Syria, are the most prominent examples. Furthermore, there are now firm indications that they have been active in Libya, on the side of President Bashar in

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Sudan and in support of the government in the Central African Republic, among other places (Marten, 2019).

Two aspects of the Russian use of PMSCs as a tool of foreign policy are particularly striking: the diversity of operations in which they have been engaged and the blurring of national and private interests in their employment. The full extent of Russian PMSC participation in the annexation of Crimea remains unclear. However, Russian sources suggest that at least Wagner took part in the preparations for the disputed Crimean referendum on leaving Ukraine (Dergachev and Zgirovskaia, 2016). In Donbas, the same company was nicknamed 'the cleaners', a name that alludes to their role in getting rid of local rebel commanders not to the Kremlin's liking, and to their participation in disciplining anti-Kiev rebel groups that operated too freely. In particular, there have been several claims that Wagner was used to discipline the loosely organised Cossack groups that fought Ukrainian forces in the Luhansk area (Korotkov, 2015; Guliaiev 2016).

The above-mentioned examples could arguably be grouped as special operations. However, a separatist source also claimed to the online Ukrainian newspaper *Strana* (The Country) that at least Wagner took part in regular high-intensity fighting during the battle of Debaltseve in February 2015 (Ivashkina and Skibitskaia, 2016). If that is the case, it is further evidence that Russian PMSCs can be used in more conventional military roles. This claim corresponds with how Wagner has been utilised in a high-intensity fighting role in Syria. As a former Wagner fighter told the Estonian TV channel ETV in July 2017, 'Wagner is no ordinary private military company. It is a miniature army. We had it all, mortars, howitzers, tanks, infantry-fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers' (Zakharov, 2017). One commentator describes Wager at the peak of activity in Syria as a force consisting of four reconnaissance assault brigades (each made up of three companies of up to 100 men), an artillery squadron (three batteries of 100 men each), a tank company (twelve tanks), a diversionary-reconnaissance company (150 men), a combat engineering company (100 men), a communication company (100 men), and staff and support sub-units (Kuczynski, 2018). Whether or not this description is entirely accurate, it seems clear that Wagner has capabilities that are a far cry from those of Western PMSCs. That said, it is unlikely that Wagner itself owns or controls the weaponry and equipment needed to perform in this way, rather it is likely scrambled from the Ministry of Defense. Still, in this case, there was both the permission and the ability to mobilize a potent unit of contractors to substitute or support conventional forces.

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The second striking aspect of the Russian use of PMSCs is how it, as opposed to the use of regular military force, potentially blurs national and private interests. In June 2017, the online Russian newspaper *Fontanka* claimed to have seen documents proving that in December 2016 the Syrian government and the Russian private company Euro Polis signed a deal in which Euro Polis promised to liberate oil and gas fields from Islamic State. In return, Euro Polis was to receive 25 per cent of the future income from these fields. Euro Polis is owned by the well-known Russian businessman and suspected Wagner banker, Yevgenii Prigozhin (Murtazin, 2017; Korotkov 2017), and the task of retaking the fields was to be carried out by Wagner. Russian regular forces in Syria could not have taken on such a commercial-military contract as this, but a PMSC could. In a somewhat similar situation in February 2018 in Deir Ezzor in Syria, an unidentified number of Wagner soldiers died in an attempt to force the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces away from oil wells they controlled. The 600-strong Wagner force involved in this incident operated in support of the Assad-backed militia 'ISIS Hunters'. However, anonymous Russian military sources have characterised the operation as essentially being a local fight over oil resources (Solopov, Lusin, Belenkaia, Mishina, Chernenko, & Safronov, 2018). Two Russian commentators called this incident the first direct clash between Russian and US forces since the Vietnam War (Aptekar and Zhelezneva 2018), while Russian military sources confirmed that this operation was initiated without the approval of the Russian command in Syria (Solopov et al., 2018).

This blurring of national and commercial interests may not be limited only to Syria. The above-mentioned separatist source *Strana* claims that in Donbas, Wagner was 'integrated into the GRU, but also open for private customers on the side' (Ivashkina and Skibitskaia, 2016). This jumbling of interests may not represent a major problem if the national and commercial interests coincide, but serious confusion and potential conflict could erupt if they do not. Neither Wagner nor any other Russian PMSC would intentionally do something contrary to the will of Putin. However, when these companies sometimes are allowed to act according to their own agenda in the same theatre of operations, their activities may easily create negative consequences for Russian strategic interests. It would be equivalent to having a military unit that over the course of the same engagement is sometimes within and sometimes outside the chain of command.

The Russian PMSC industry is opaque, diverse and somewhat immature, meaning it has probably yet to find its shape and role. What that shape and role will be depends on power brokers within the security apparatus and in the Kremlin, and the rivalries and power struggles between

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them. It may also depend on clientelistic dynamics and the balancing of private interests with the interests of other elites.

What role for Russian PMSCs in a Russian-Western conflict?

When Russian PMSCs operate on behalf of the Russian government, they can do so either by command or on a contractual basis. The former is possible because the distinction between public and private enterprise is more blurred in Russia than in most Western countries. There is little rule of law to protect private enterprise from having to carry out the wishes of the political leadership, even if they do not want to. Thus, it is easier for the Russian government than for many other governments to order private companies to do the government's bidding. Therefore, whether the PMSC in question is a "company" set up to primarily serve the Russian security apparatus and to operate in close conjunction with government agencies, such as Wagner, or a registered private security firm, such as RSB-Group, might prove unimportant if the state decides that it needs its help.

Despite the fact that Wagner, according to some sources, on occasion fought on the level of a battle group in Syria, this seems less likely in the event of a conflict with Western countries, and particularly unlikely in a potential conflict with NATO countries. In Syria, Wagner fought the relatively lightly armed Islamic State. In a Western context, they would be fighting regular and far more heavily armed forces. In such high-intensity scenarios, Russia would probably prefer to use its regular forces. Still, one cannot rule out the possibility that PMSCs in some instances would be used as force multipliers in situations where Russia found its troops stretched. Nevertheless, we argue that PMSCs, in the context of a conflict with one or more Western countries, would be valuable to Russia as an instrument that could be used in *preparing* or *shaping* the battlefield. In fact, there are numerous ways that civilian contractors operating covertly on enemy soil could be used to facilitate Russian military operations, to carry out acts of sabotage in order to slow down Western military action or limit the options available to mission planners, or simply to paralyse civilian societal functions. Importantly, PMSCs could be used covertly to sabotage an enemy irrespective of the level of open conflict.

In many ways, the most obvious potential implication of Russian PMSCs for Western security is that Russian authorities could use them in situations where they want a very limited use of force for a restricted aim of some kind. One example could be the forced release of a Russian

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fishing vessel seized by a Western coastguard. In the event that the operation should fail, or if some of the Russian operators are arrested, Russia could deny responsibility. It is of course highly likely that the government of the other country involved would understand, or at least strongly suspect, that the use of force could be attributed to Russian authorities. However, in terms of both legal responsibility and the international narrative, there would be a major difference between the use of PMSCs and regular forces.

In a somewhat different scenario, PMSCs could be used to provoke a confrontation with a Western country, orchestrating it so that a reaction from the West could be deemed as militarising or escalating the situation. Using a maritime example again, Moran Security Group (in contrast with most Western maritime PMSCs) has its own small fleet of unmarked vessels that would fit such purposes.[6] The company also boasts that its core personnel are ex-navy officers. If such a ship was used to carry out acts that would warrant a Western country to deploy naval ships or in other ways respond using military means, that could very well produce the international crisis scenario that the Russian leadership had wanted.

As the example above illustrates, PMSCs do not necessarily have to use kinetic force in order to help Russian authorities achieve foreign policy goals. They could be used, for example, to instigate civil unrest, execute cyber-attacks, act as foreign agents or inflict significant economic losses. At least one of the Russian PMSCs, ENOT Corp., seems to have run military-type training camps for right-wing activists from foreign countries (Goble, 2017). If Russia wanted to put a foreign government under pressure, then training right-wing radicals in violent methods before sending them back to their home country could be one way of doing that. Meanwhile, RSB-Group has established its own dedicated cyber warfare capacity. So far, most cyber operations emanating from Russia have been traced back to the FSB or the GRU. In order to avoid direct attribution to Russian government agencies in the future, the authorities could start outsourcing more of the cyber operations to competent PMSCs.

The PMSCs could also be useful agents abroad. Personnel associated with the GRU allegedly poisoned Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury in 2018; even though Russia denied responsibility for the attack, the UK and some of its Western allies claimed GRU agents

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[6] In fact, a diplomatic issue arouse between Russia and Nigeria after nine crew members of the MV Myre Seadiver, one of Moran's vessels, were arrested on charges of gun-running in 2012. The issue was solved after the Russian embassy stepped in and negotiated the crew members' release from prison. (Marten, 2019).

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carried it out and responded by expelling Russian diplomats. The risk of such retaliations could be lessened by using PMSC personnel without a direct affiliation to any government security agency.

Additionally, one may also imagine a situation where Russia wanted to harm a Western country economically in order to exert pressure on its government or as an act of revenge for perceived illegitimate actions against Russia. Here, Russia could, for example, target port infrastructure, oil and gas facilities or underwater sea cables. Using PMSCs for such missions could create a situation of formal deniability while still sending a clear message to the target country. The main takeaway here is that these are just some examples of non-kinetic activities that Russian PMSCs could potentially carry out on behalf of the Russian government. In other words, PMSCs are an adaptive and flexible tool that could be used in any number of ways and for many purposes.

Within the kinetic spectre, PMSCs could be well suited to 'preparing' the target country for a possible later arrival of regular Russian forces. The private companies' activities here could include, for example, acts of sabotage, assassination of key personnel, reconnaissance, intelligence collection and target identification. PMSCs could hence be very useful in the early stages of a conflict or in peacetime by gathering data useful to military operation planning processes. PMSC operators (possibly ex-special forces personnel), dressed as civilians would be able to carry out reconnaissance work that would provide detailed information on e.g. potential landing sites or other local conditions in foreign countries.

Many of these tasks would normally be the domain of Russian special forces, but the use of PMSCs would decrease the potential for attribution. Uncertainty and confusion over attribution could slow down the target country's decision making and complicate appeals for NATO guarantees and the invocation of Article 5. Other NATO countries would most likely be hesitant to retaliate against Russia and thus risk war if there was a chance that Russia was not to blame for the hostile acts. One should note here that Russian military thinking for a long time has entertained the idea that there is no longer a clear demarcation between peace and war. The line is blurred, and efforts to achieve strategic aims may move back and forth between states of civilian and military aggression.

Additionally, PMSCs could be employed as smokescreens for regular Russian soldiers or special forces personnel in locations or contexts where deploying Russian soldiers would not sit well nationally or internationally. Simply put, regular Russian troops could be disguised as

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PMSCs. Russian-speaking personnel could thus be carrying out activities in locations under the cover of commercial agencies. This type of cover-up would be plausible in cases where Russia was providing unofficial state support for a regime or a militia, or where it for other reasons wanted to maintain a low profile or a light footprint. For example, given the close relationship between the GRU and Wagner, it is not unthinkable that the same personnel may operate for both organisations in some cases; one should not rule out shoulder patches being swopped according to assignment or convenience. Such an approach may not be very farfetched; after all, a similar mode of operation designed to offer military assistance covertly was used in several countries during the cold war when Soviet soldiers and military instructors were sent to the Middle East as 'tourists' (Sukhankin, 2018). Most PMSCs boasts their senior leadership hailing from various special forces units, the FSB or GRU, and that they employ former service personnel from the ranks of GRU and FSB. Many likely also remain in the reserves for such units (Jane's Intelligence Review, 2018). This confirms that the ties between some of the Russian PMSCs and divisions of the state security apparatus are close, but it also suggests that the dividing lines between them at times may be porous. The PMSC Shchit for example, seems largely to be a commercial outcrop of the 45th special forces regiment of the Airborne Forces (Korotkov, 2019).

Finally, PMSC activities in working against a foreign state may in principle also be initiated by the PMSC itself or by its owners or sponsors. There is reason to believe that not all hostile activity in support of Russian political goals, for example in cyber space, is directly ordered by Russian authorities. Some of it may be initiated bottom-up, and could be motivated by idealistic patriotism designed to earn goodwill from decision makers. One cannot rule out Russian PMSCs doing something similar, especially the more ideologically motivated among them. On the other hand, companies that strive for a position among international PMSCs are probably less likely to engage in such activities. Furthermore, any actor contemplating taking action on behalf of Russia without the explicit consent of Russian authorities would probably be relatively careful when deciding on the activities in which they should engage. They would know that they could easily end up putting the Russian government in an awkward position, and that this could backfire and leave them facing extremely negative consequences at home.

Russian PMSCs in conflicts in developing countries

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As already described, Russian PMSCs have started to have a presence in several conflict-ridden countries in the developing world, including South Sudan, Libya and the Central African Republic. In these war-torn countries, PMSC personnel have been reported to provide military training, but also to in more direct ways, meddle in internal power struggles. In Libya, there are reports that Wagner has been an active supporter of warlord Kahlifa Haftar, the self-declared field marshal of the 'Libyan National Army' who aspires to overthrow the UN backed government in Tripoli. While the exact role of Wagner is not entirely clear, it seems to include military training, political 'counselling' and information campaigns (see e.g. Weiss and Vaux 2019). In some cases, Russian PMSCs thus have a proxy role in weak states, which in fact may affect who holds power in such states.

The presence and participation of Russian PMSC in violent conflicts may also have direct consequences for civilians in those conflicts, as well as for Western forces in the same theatre. In the wake of the PMSC boom during the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, several instances of PMSC misbehaviour were reported in the Western media. This triggered debates in both political and academic circles regarding what PMSC proliferation meant for the security of civilians in war zones. Such worries are also warranted in the case of Russian PMSCs; in fact, Russian PMSCs may pose an even greater risk to civilians in conflict zones than Western PMSCs do. This hypothesis rests on two assumptions. First, Russian military culture is relatively more tolerant of collateral damage in terms of civilian life than the cultures prevalent in many other countries. Observers will point here to the two Chechen wars, and the bombings of Grozny in particular, as evidence of a military culture less concerned with collateral damage. Similar evidence of limited sensitivity to collateral damage can be observed in the Russian war effort in Syria since 2015, as illustrated by the aerial bombardment of population centres and the use of cluster munitions (Bostad, 2018). The second assumption is that Russian PMSCs may be less constrained by the risk of reputational damage than their Western counterparts. For example, Russian PMSCs have not experienced the same level of criticism related to violent conduct as the Western PMSCs did when they worked in Iraq. This means that not only are Russian PMSCs' personnel likely to be drawn from a military culture that has a comparatively higher acceptance of

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loss of civilian life, they are probably also less likely than PMSCs from other countries to face sanctions from their own government for causing such losses.[7]

Russian PMSCs may also cause harm due to their propensity to work for regimes that care little about human rights. They cater for many of the same clients as Western PMSCs do, in particular oil and gas companies operating in conflict zones and shipping companies hiring guards to protect against piracy, but after Donbas and Syria there might be an increasing tendency for Russian PMSCs to sign contracts with regimes in developing countries that have questionable human rights records. For example, the fact that Russian PMSCs are working for the governments of Sudan and the Central African Republic point in such a direction (Iakoreva, 2018). Both these countries were, according to Freedom House, among the 11 worst in the world in terms of political rights and civil liberties in 2018. As argued earlier in this article, the provision of violent force for the suppression of domestic rebellion in other countries has even been presented as a motive for the legalisation of PMSCs by some Russian lawmakers. Thus, there is a danger that Russian PMSCs may become an additional source of repressive capacity for some of the world's most oppressive regimes.

Violent conflicts in developing countries may also lead Russian and Western PMSCs to be pitched against each other causing friction between Russia and the Western state home to the Western PMSC. Worse still, Western military forces could find themselves fighting Russian PMSCs acting as proxies for state or non-state adversaries of the West. This has already happened, in February 2018, when US warplanes bombed forces on the ground in Syria that included Russian Wagner fighters. The number of Wagner fighters killed remains a matter of controversy, but the episode created international headlines and provoked the fear that Russia would see this as an act of violence against the Russian state. Fortunately, that did not happen. According to former US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, the Russian forces in Syria used the established deconfliction line to convey to US commanders that Wagner in this case was acting outside of their control (Pawlyk, 2018). That, however, may not always be the case in the future. Thus, the danger is both that Western countries' adversaries in such conflicts may be militarily augmented by Russian PMSCs, and that the Russian authorities may come to see attacks on their PMSCs as more problematic than

[7] Importantly, Western PMSCs have also rarely been held to account for misbehaviour in theatres. The case of four Blackwater operators in 2010 was the first widely publicised trial where PMSC personnel were convicted of murders committed in Iraq.

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they did in the February 2018 example in Syria. Russian reaction to similar incidents in the future will probably depend on the ties that the PMSC in question has to Russian authorities in general, and in the theatre in question in particular.

Russian PMSCs might also be engaged to fight directly on behalf of the Kremlin in international conflicts. While that did not seem to be the case in the Wagner episode in February 2018, it was most probably true in the two fights for Palmyra in March 2016 and March 2017. Since these were both battles against Islamic State, US or other Western forces had no reason to attempt to prevent the Syrian and Russian offensives. However, it is not difficult to imagine a future situation where a Kremlin-backed Russian PMSC fights a local ally of Western forces. In such situations, Western countries would have to take into account that supporting its ally might result in an escalation into a conflict with Russia. Worst case, the antagonist of the Western ally may invite Russian PMSCs specifically for this purpose, and the expectation that the Kremlin will see attacks on Russian PMSCs as an affront to itself may embolden the antagonist to be more offensive than it otherwise would have been. Thus, the extent to which Russian PMSCs will act on behalf of the Russian government in future international conflicts is likely to be crucial in terms of the effect their development has on Western security.

Finally, we cannot disregard the possibility that an actor allied to a Western country will hire Russian PMSCs to boost its military capacity beyond what the Western partner can offer. For instance, Nigeria hired STTEP International to help combat Boko Haram in 2015; STTEP is a PMSC with links to the defunct Executive Outcomes, and it allegedly does not shy away from engaging in combat. Nigeria at the same time has recurrently received various forms of military training from Western countries, also with the aim of helping its forces confront Boko Haram (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). Thus, there is at least a theoretical possibility that Western forces at some point in the future may find themselves fighting alongside Russian PMSCs. This would probably not create many problems with regard to relations with the Kremlin, but if the Russian PMSCs were to show a disregard for human rights or civilian casualties, such fighting may become a dilemma and a significant source of embarrassment for the Western countries engaged in that particular conflict.

Some of the possible consequences for international security pointed out in this article may seem somewhat startling. After all, the Russian PMSC industry is still relatively limited, and Russia as an international actor is not militarily engaged in many countries around the world.

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Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the nervousness created by the US bombing of Wagner in Syria in February 2018, things may change quickly. Six years after the little green men invaded Crimea, Western strategic thinking still does not seem to reflect the wide range of possibilities available to powers that tend not to worry much about international humanitarian law.

Conclusions

Despite Russian rhetoric on the need for a state monopoly on the use of force, and despite resistance in Russia to the legalisation of PMSCs, the country already has a record of outsourcing violence to private entrepreneurs (Østensen and Bukkvoll, 2018). The Russian PMSC industry is not an entirely new manifestation of this inclination, rather it dates back to the 1990s. The Russian PMSC industry is still relatively small and heterogeneous in terms of professionalism and the services on offer. Compared to most Western PMSCs, Russian companies appear more rugged and more likely to take part in direct combat.

The still-lacking Russian legalisation of PMSCs is somewhat puzzling given that as far back as 2012, President Putin spoke positively about the development of such companies. We find the answers to this puzzle in the strong ideological resentment towards PMSCs in some quarters of the Russian elite, and even more in state agency infighting over who will control PMSCs. Nevertheless, despite the absence of formal legality, Russian PMSCs are a reality, and there are few indications that they will disappear. If anything, they have lately become more active and more important, especially due to their role in the Donbas and Syrian wars and their increasing engagement in several African countries. Western countries should anticipate that Russian PMSCs may well continue to be a feature in violent conflicts where Russia is a party. However, Western countries should also anticipate PMSCs being used to carry out a wide array of actions within the hostile spectrum, in war and in peace, and in the grey zones between war and peace.

The modern use of commercial military and security companies in war zones can still be seen as a particularly Western, or even a US, phenomenon. Nonetheless, as with most other military innovations, it has come to be emulated in other regions of the world. It will, however, almost never be the case that military innovations are simply copied. When entering new political, economic and cultural realities, these groups will inevitably take local forms, and while the exact shape and role of the Russian PMSC industry is not yet carved out fully, Russia is now home to a

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small, but potent, PMSC industry that can be mobilised to inflict harm on Russia's enemies if called upon. Understanding the Russian conception of this 'tool', and understanding what advantages these companies might offer in complementing any Russian use of force, is therefore an important part of understanding Russian strategic thinking.

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