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Russian Private Military Contractors

The growth, usage, structure, and characteristics of
Russian PMCs through a comparative lens.

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Executive Summary

Samuel Jardine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning February 2022, among other things, shone a very public spotlight on an increasingly common phenomenon in modern conflict zones; the presence of Private Military Contractors (PMCs). Russia has made extensive use of these, specifically its “Wagner Group”, in support of, or leading elements of its operations in Ukraine.

The use of mercenaries or irregular forces to support, complement, or operate alongside standing state armies or royal retinues has a rich history of course; from the Hellenic Successor State’s deployment of local specialist forces and Carthage’s “mercenary armies” to the 12th Century French “Free Companies” and Italian *Condottiero* and beyond, mercenary forces have always provided a means for a state to quickly expand its pool of trained or specialist combatants quickly, and without the same long-term social, political, and economic costs that utilising citizen-soldiers in war implies.

However, the utilisation of mercenaries on the front lines (not to be confused with foreign volunteers) had declined in favour of citizen-soldiers since the start of the 20th Century. Instead, mercenaries tended to be used in niche roles (such as providing contracted military security, or as “advisers” in conflict zones) or in areas where a state’s public or direct involvement would cause political issues (such as CIA contractors utilised in the Congo during the Cold War). These would become known as PMCs and are heavily employed by “Western” states today. They are legal, commercial enterprises, which while often having issues regarding their transparency, are regulated by national and international frameworks.

Russian PMCs, however, took a different turn. Based on a unique set of circumstances within Russia they are not technically legal, largely unregulated by national or international framework, more closely tied to the interests and objectives of the Russian state; and utilised as a means to compete geopolitically “on the cheap” with other major global powers, facilitating Russia to “punch above its weight” through the deployment of deniable force operating within the “grey zone” and asymmetrical conflict. This is not merely in Ukraine but has been a global trend since the early 2010s. The re-utilisation of them on the frontlines in Ukraine indeed is a further step-away from current PMC norms, and one whose impact on the future of war is still unravelling.

This comprehensive report delves into Russia’s PMCs, their origins, structure, the key actors, their operations, impact, and key takeaways. It does this in three specific sections, utilising Open-Source Intelligence, Human Intelligence, and desk-based research;



- **Section 1-** Provides a historical overview of Russia’s own interactions with mercenaries and PMCs to provide the context as to why and how Russia’s PMCs have emerged to operate differently than their western counterparts. It then provides an overview of the current key actors and what sort of environment they operate in within Russia.
- **Section 2-** Provides a detailed analysis and accounting of Russian PMC operations, their contexts, and impact in 20 key countries across all corners of the globe. While Russian PMCs have certainly operated in more state’s than this, the lack of transparency has meant there is very little information to go on. As such we have only included countries in which we could find at least some information.
- **Section 3-** Through a comparative analysis of Section 2’s findings alongside elements of Section 1, we provide 6 key analytical takeaways regarding Russian PMCs including how geography and context impact their operations, trends in human rights abuses and how these can be impacted by the type of Russian PMC employment, How the Wagner Group differs from others, how Russian PMCs differ from their Western and Chinese counterparts.

Key Findings

- Russian PMCs operate in a grey zone legally, being technically outlawed in Russia constitutionally and legally.
- Despite this PMC’s are an important tool for the Russian executive. They provide forces heavily tied to the state that are outside normal chains of command who are directly answerable to Putin or his key supporters. They are often utilized as a deniable arm of the Russian state to further Moscow’s geopolitical interests. This is especially true of the Wagner Group.
- The ideological foundations of most Russian PMCs and their ties to Russian elites, set them apart from Western PMCs, which usually seek to remain apolitical actors. Western PMSCs are also much more heavily involved with military support services and logistics compared to their Russian counterparts.
- The operational usefulness of Russian PMCs as a tool for the Russian state to pursue its geopolitical aims with a veneer of “plausible deniability” is mixed. Russian PMC operations clearly tied to state aims, such as in Ukraine, can be more concerned about their own security and financial gain than meeting the aims of Moscow efficiently. This can result in breakdowns of discipline and the commitment of atrocities upon civilian



populations. Likewise, Russian PMC groups can have their own particular agendas or contracts within the wider framework of supporting Russian interests, that can come into conflict with other more official elements of the Russian states such as its armed forces or Foreign Ministry or complicate the aims of Russia itself (such as in Chad).

- Broadly Russian PMC's have struggled to make a significant market impact on the PMC market compared to US and UK PMCs who have dominated it since the 1990s. This is partly due to their lack of transparency, operating as they do in a legal grey zone. Their perceived ties to the Russian government and its objectives, headlined by the likes of Wagner Group also hinder their wider utilisation.
- From Section 3 we extrapolate, from a comparative perspective based on their operations some key trends and points about Russian PMC's
 - 1) Russian PMCs are able to operate across the full spectrum of conflict, being versatile in pursuing a range of Russian interests;
 - **Hybrid**- Particularly when in US interest spheres like Venezuela and need to tread carefully.
 - **Low Intensity**- With a soft power focus (state building, propping up Russian-friendly governments, or carving out and protecting key economic interests- particularly true in Africa which Russia considers a new strategic hub and the Indo-Pacific).
 - **High Intensity**- Warfighting (Specifically in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Middle East where Russia has an interest in destabilisation, building direct influence or control, or supporting strategic Russian assets).
 - 2) Linked to this, a trend can be identified in **the scale of Human Rights violations** by Russian PMCs on operations. If the Russian PMC in question is employed by a state entity- as in Mali or Ukraine, the scale of civilian abuses and human rights violations rises rapidly, compared to instances where Russian PMCs are supporting non-government rebel groups as in Chad. It is likely the legitimisation which governments provide in such contracts facilitates PMCs to feel they can more readily commit abuses, particularly when government forces aid and abet, or have already created an operational culture which promotes this.
 - 3) **Legal Grey Zone** The legal grey zone in which Russian PMCs operate, being banned domestically in Russia, gives them a certain degree of protection from being effectively prosecuted due to the difficulties national or international courts have in getting redress from Russian citizens operating within a PMC or owning it. This legal grey area also suits Moscow, who have a degree of deniability for the activities of their PMCs in service to Russian geopolitical aims.



- 4) The **Wagner Group** enjoy a very close relationship with the **Russian State**, Armed Forces and President Putin. While all Russian PMCs to some degree have ties to the Russian state, and are utilised in pursuit of its interests, Wagner appears far more integrated into Russia's geopolitical aims and elites than other Russian PMCs. However, it also presents, due to this, a distinct and emerging threat to the Russian state since the Ukraine invasion, reportedly wielding a growing degree of political influence within the Russian government.
- 5) **Russian PMCs are significantly different from their Western counterparts** on the market in terms of structure and operational methods. Western PMCs are legal entities who sign up to the 2008 Montreux Document which provides a regulatory framework for their activity. Typically, Western PMCs are commercial entities, defensive in the nature of their operations and utilisation. Russian PMCs meanwhile operate in a legal grey area, do not recognize any international regulatory framework, and conduct military-style operations that meet the Russian states interests, alongside more typical defensive-oriented work. While there are significant issues regarding accountability and transparency across all PMCs, Russian PMCs are far more opaque. They also are paid less than their western counterparts.
- 6) **Russian PMCs for now differ significantly from their Chinese counterparts** who have grown under-the-radar. Chinese contractors are far more openly tied legally to the Chinese state, and overtly in the protection of its foreign infrastructure, operating largely in the BRI states. They legal cannot carry arms and so are classified as Private Security Companies (PSCs). However, as China's presence in Africa grows and the types of opportunities and operations increase Beijing may potentially look to the Russian model for inspiration.



Section 1) An Overview of Russia's Private Military Contractors (PMCs)

A History of Russian PMCs

Polina Encheva and Eva Kristinova

Pre-1945: The Lineage of Russian PMCs

Russia's use of PMC-like forces dates all the way back to the Russian empire, even pre-dating it in some cases. Some of the earliest cited forms of such formations date back to the [16th century](#),¹ under tsar Ivan IV, namely to the use of irregular forces largely composed of Cossacks. Over time, their formations expanded to include [other minority](#) ethnic backgrounds under subsequent rulers.² The main objectives of the period were eastward and southward expansion, seeking defensible borders, essentially forming a formidable Russian empire. However, empire-building came with its own share of domestic unrest, especially in the newly incorporated areas. These irregular forces were therefore deployed to these regions to prevent or deal with such issues.

These irregular forces were usually geographically and ethnically concentrated into smaller groups across the territory of the empire, and often led by their minority chiefs and leaders. After greater consolidation of the empire and the entrenchment of Russian rule over newly acquired territories, their use expanded to include military defence in weakly governed territories, border security, as well as varied '[hybrid](#)' functions.³ This included their use in the training of foreign militias, such as the [Persian Cossack Brigade](#) in the 1870s.⁴ Russia's use of irregular forces to supplement regular warfare also started early on, with Cossack and other formations notably used in the [war of 1812](#).⁵ Their unusually brutal methods did not go unnoticed abroad, and these irregular forces acquired quite a reputation throughout the rest of Europe during this period.

¹ Sukhankin, S., 2019. "The Russian State's Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period." *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-russian-states-use-of-irregular-forces-and-private-military-groups-from-ivan-the-terrible-to-the-soviet-period/>.

² Borshchevskaya, A., 2019. *Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model*. [Russia Foreign Policy Papers] Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp4-borshchevskaya-final.pdf>.

³ Sukhankin, S., 2019. "The Russian State's Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period." *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-russian-states-use-of-irregular-forces-and-private-military-groups-from-ivan-the-terrible-to-the-soviet-period/>.

⁴ Egorov, B., 2020. "How Russia helped Iran create a Cossack unit." *Russia Beyond*. <https://www.rbth.com/history/331523-how-russia-helped-iran>.

⁵ Полонский, И. 2018. "Самые необычные и экзотические войска Российской империи." *Военное Обозрение*. <https://topwar.ru/145903-samyne-neobychnye-i-jekzoticheskie-vojska-rossijskoj-imperii.html>.



Towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, irregular forces of various ethnic backgrounds throughout the empire began to be incorporated into official Russian army structures. This mostly took place in the form of enhanced military training before coming to serve directly under Russian officials. In this way, a unique model of later-PMC deployment emerged, with a mixture of Russian and non-Russian soldiers, military contractors, and guerrilla fighters consolidated into what later became known as ‘[People’s Militias](#)’.⁶ This kind of military service also had the secondary effect of facilitating the cultural assimilation of minority ethnic groups into the Russian empire

The Soviet Union and the Cold War: The Foundations for Russia’s later PMCs

After the Russian Revolution in 1917, irregular forces continued to be used domestically, most vitally during the ensuing Civil War. Both the [Red and the White armies](#) employed the services of such forces, however, it was the ultimate victor, the communist side, that would figure out a way to integrate and use them in the most effective manner.⁷ This was done by recruiting forces from behind enemy lines using the communist ideology as a chief persuasion tactic and subsequently leaving them to operate directly within enemy territory. The use of existing guerrilla forces supplemented by [volunteers](#) became the hallmark of the Soviet use of irregular forces.⁸ Furthermore, small groups of irregular forces formed separate divisions and were then trained to specialise in particular tasks and forms of warfare, for instance, the manufacture of bombs and other niche weaponry. It is important to note that this exact strategy would later be used by the fully formed Soviet Union when training terrorist and guerrilla military groups abroad.

In terms of functional purposes and overarching objectives, these too changed for the regime and its subsequent use of irregular forces. For the Soviet Union, the goal of military action and involvement shifted from the domestic to the international sphere, namely fighting for the spread of communism around the world. In addition, increased foreign involvement had the dual purpose of serving as a counter to American influence globally. In line with these objectives, the Soviet Union adopted a concept of ‘[internationalist obligation](#)’ to justify their actions and presence in other countries (which later culminated in the Brezhnev doctrine in the sphere of international law and foreign interference).⁹

⁶ Sukhankin, S., 2019. “The Russian State’s Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-russian-states-use-of-irregular-forces-and-private-military-groups-from-ivan-the-terrible-to-the-soviet-period/>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Borshchevskaya, A., 2019. *Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model*. [Russia Foreign Policy Papers] Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp4-borshchevskaya-final.pdf>.

⁹ Kristinova, E., 2018. “Soviet International Law and its Legacy: Theory and Practice.” *Unpublished*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_k0ltwsKrXfoHDzJFz4tYAn138JSc5ir/view.



Regarding the functions carried out by irregular forces in these operations, a few general patterns emerged as well;

- First, was the pursuit of legitimacy prior to foreign engagement. The Soviet Union would issue formal '[requests](#)' to countries before beginning their operations on their territory.¹⁰
- Second, despite the increase in foreign involvement during this period, the regime was worried about international exposure of such operations. For this purpose, most foreign involvement was turned into a proxy war, with other allied countries (such as the PRC) involved to mask Soviet activity. In other cases, the incumbent militaries would conduct clandestine operations with the help of Soviet military personnel; otherwise, a combination of both approaches was used.
- Irregular forces were also used to train terrorist groups and other radical organisations directly in Western countries, in line with previous tactics of the Red Army. This was done primarily through direct contact with Soviet officers, or even through more [subtle corridors](#), such as youth and educational exchanges.¹¹
- A final feature of irregular force operations during this period was the standardised patterns of paramilitary preparation. Soviet officers took a generalised approach to training and military action based on the structures of the Soviet army, [drawing mostly](#) from its experience in the Second World War.¹² This often meant that local geography, circumstances, and political climates failed to be taken into account.

As a consequence, the Soviet use of irregular forces brought in significant disadvantages and setbacks for later use by Russia. The standardisation of training and practices resulted in emergent dogmatism in Soviet military structures, which meant that many lessons learnt abroad later failed to be implemented domestically. Additionally, the perceived superiority of Soviet irregular forces, relative to those in countries that they were involved in, led to a widening gap in capabilities and technology when compared with the Western bloc.

A lot of new functions added to military preparation, such as control over communication or protection of critical infrastructure, were gradually being adopted by newly formed Western PMCs. Not perceiving this gap in knowledge and ability served as a testament to the fact that

¹⁰ Sukhankin, S., 2019. "The Russian State's Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period." *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/the-russian-states-use-of-irregular-forces-and-private-military-groups-from-ivan-the-terrible-to-the-soviet-period/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*



the Soviet Union was failing to catch up with the modern nature of warfare. Nevertheless, Soviet military officers were continuously being deployed abroad for training and advisory purposes, many of whom chose to stay abroad as independent private contractors after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

1991-2014: The Emergence of Russian PMC's

The full growth of the Russian PMC industry could be traced back to the chaos of the 1990s, when former Soviet soldiers, intelligence personnel, and other members of the security apparatus moved into the private sector to provide security for big companies and politicians. The widely popular private protection to government, corporate and individual clients marked the post-Cold War era and the changed the nature of warfare. Over the years, Russia's focus on PMCs widened and extended abroad as a means to achieve its foreign policy goals.

Under the rule of Vladimir Putin in recent decades, this model evolved significantly and expanded across the globe. Since the legal status of PMCs in Russia differs from that in the West, the history of semi-state military forces also diverges from the way Western governments work with private contractors particularly when it comes to transparency, their legal standing (the fact that technically in Russia, PMCs are constitutionally banned), and that they do not operate under the auspices of the Swiss and Red Cross Montreaux Agreement. Russia is not a signatory of the document which emphasizes the “defensive nature” of PMCs.¹³ Furthermore, under Putin's regime the role of [PMCs evolved](#) as a means to gain and hold political power, for instance, with the set up in early 2012, of Russia's Special Operations Forces Command (SOFC) and in 2013 the Special Operations Forces (SOF). These while seemingly modelled on western Special Forces, are [uniquely](#) led by contractor officers and operate outside of the armed forces.¹⁴ They act as a private arm of the executive, able to utilise local forces as needed and filling a role where PMCs might typically find themselves if they were not ostensibly outlawed constitutionally. Other PMCs in Russia such as the Wagner group operate in a legal grey zone in terms of domestic politics and law, despite fulfilling the geopolitical needs of their country.

Partly filling this grey zone is the building upon of [“volunteerism”](#) in national narratives to justify the existence of what are Russian PMCs operating in foreign countries to further Moscow's geopolitical aims.¹⁵

¹³ Borshchevskaya, A., 2019. *Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model*. [Russia Foreign Policy Papers] Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp4-borshchevskaya-final.pdf>.

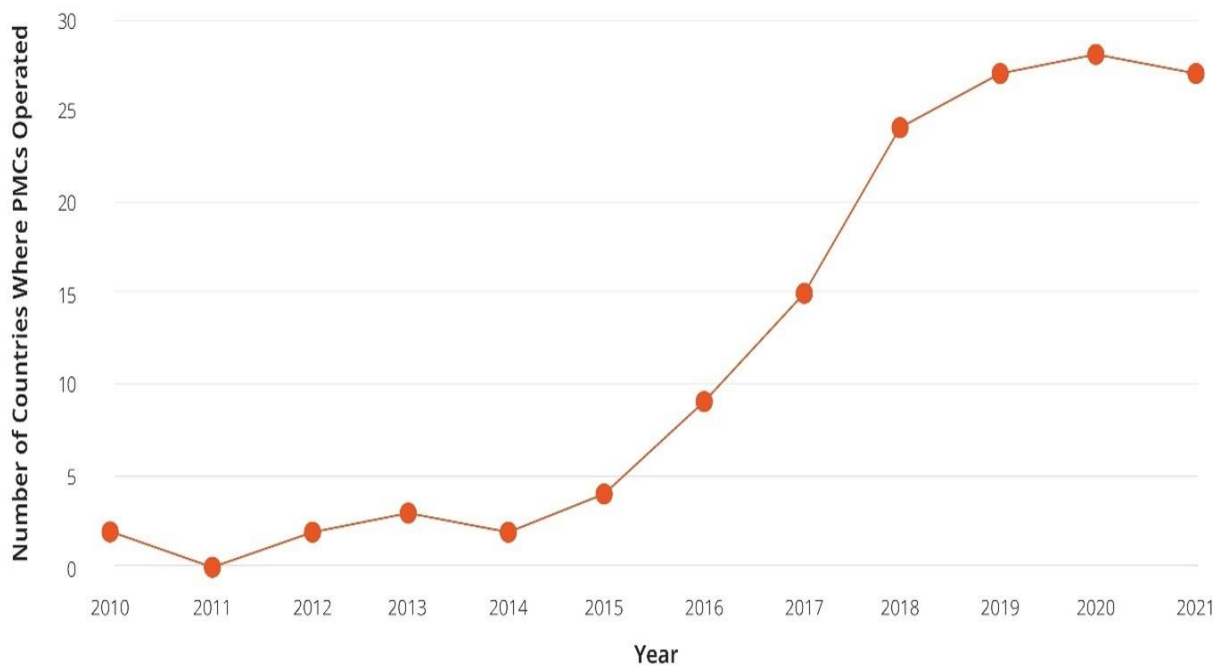
¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sukhankin, S., 2019. From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts. *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmcs-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts/>.



There are multiple occasions where the unofficial military forces of Russian ‘volunteers’ has been used to reshape the geopolitical landscape and outlook on conflicts [across the globe](#), particularly those which are in Moscow’s geopolitical interest.¹⁶ The evolving [strategic benefit](#) has resulted in Russia providing protective services in the Central African Republic,¹⁷ [Mali](#),¹⁸ and even energy fields in [Syria](#).¹⁹ There are also numerous instances where Russian PMC’s provided training, such as to pro-Russian Cossacks in Transnistria. The grey zone and emphasis on “volunteerism” allow the Russian state to deny it is involved in any shape or form in these operations. “Volunteers” indeed has become part of Russia’s post-2014 PMC operation in Ukraine.

Number of Countries Where Russian PMCs Operated, 2010–2021



SOURCE Data compiled by CSIS Transnational Threats Project.

CSIS | TRANSNATIONAL THREATS PROJECT

Figure 1 courtesy of the [Center For Strategic & International Studies](#), 21 September 2022

¹⁶ Centre for Strategic & International Studies, 2020, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>

¹⁷ Eschroeder. 2022. “Hackers, Hoodies, and Helmets: Technology and the Changing Face of Russian Private Military Contractors.” Atlantic Council. August 1. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/technology-change-and-the-changing-face-of-russian-private-military-contractors/>.

¹⁸ Guillermo. 2022. “The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali.” Foreign Policy Research Institute. April 8. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

¹⁹ “Reports and Memos Russia and Eurasia.” 2022. FOI. <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/research/security-policy/russia-and-eurasia/reports-and-memos-russia-and-eurasia.html>.



Russian PMC Operation in a US-UK Dominated Market

The current global PMC industry is not unified around the practices of modern Russian firms but rather the contrary. The private security market is UK/US dominated market, helped by both countries having agreed on a common legal framework that allows the legal operation of PMCs.²⁰ The Montreux convention (of which Russia is not part of) outlines the use of PMCs for defensive purposes only. While Russia sees the use of PMCs as a way to challenge the West, it would not benefit from recognising the legality of such companies on its sovereign territory. This fact gives the state plausible deniability that not all PMCs are directly controlled by the Russian state creating an opaque operational environment.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, Russia began to form the first of its PMCs.²¹ Companies such as *Antiterror-Orel* failed to compete successfully with their Western counterparts, and by the time of the Iraq War in 2003, Russia had largely lost the chance of being a true competitor to US/UK PMCs.²² Despite this, the company *Antiterror-Orel*, while only being active on the market for three years, is considered to be the pioneer for the current structure of Russian PMCs. It directly inspired the likes of the Moran Security Group (which has ties to the Wagner Group).²³

The Current Political, Legal, Economic, Environment for Russian PMCs

Carl Aellen and Polina Encheva

Many issues and inconsistencies arise when discussing the legal status of PMCs in Russia. While Russia has been home to and used all sorts of non-government security forces in the past, their legal status has often purposefully murky and complex.²⁴ This lack of clarity around the legal status of PMCs leads to a subsequently a lack of accountability and transparency which can be both a benefit for the Russian state, as well as a disadvantage for those serving in a Russian PMC. It also has implications for the wider Russian Federation. To understand this, there are multiple issues that should be explored to fully understand the impact of PMCs and why the outlawing of PMCs has negative consequences within and outside the country.

²⁰ Matthew Sutherland, 2021, “Market for Force: The Emerging Role of Private Military and Security Companies in Contemporary Conflicts.” The Security Distillery. <https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/market-for-force-the-emerging-role-of-private-military-and-security-companies-in-contemporary-conflicts>.

²¹ *Ibid*,

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Nadezhda Sokolova, 2022 “War to become a private affair”, October 18, https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/10/17/war_to_become_a_private_affair_19219.html

²⁴ Borshchevskaya, A., 2019. *Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model*. [Russia Foreign Policy Papers] Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp4-borshchevskaya-final.pdf>.



The first issue arises from the fact that generally there is no accepted international definition when discussing what PMCs actually are. To some countries, any security organisation that operates within conflict zones is considered a mercenary organisation and most often considered illegal. There are only 35 countries that signed the [2001 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries](#).²⁵

Nonetheless, most of the more powerful countries provide some legal definitions and basis for the operation of military or security contractors in some form and thus make the distinction between these and mercenaries clear. Countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France have for decades employed private contractors to fulfil many roles both within the framework of the military and outside of it, sometimes to great effect. For many countries, the use of such contractors provides cost efficiency for their defence structure, and the ability to conduct a wider range of operations without the need for direct government intervention.

Not all PMC companies have a relationship with the state, and often their interests and operations are incredibly varied. However, during the turbulent years and the collapse of the USSR, Russia was not familiar with those types of defence and military relationships as the Soviet military consisted of five centralised armed services.²⁶ Likewise, as noted previously, Russian volunteers and contractor had been used abroad to further the aims of the Russian state, and tied to its service, rather than compete on a global market.

It is this context that informs the Russian Federation's effective banning of [mercenary groups](#) and their operations.²⁷ [Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code](#) outlaws mercenaries and their financing, and article 71 of the constitution also bans any actor other than the Russian state from engaging in matters of defence, security or foreign policy.²⁸

However, the relationship between the Russian state and PMCs has often been complex in this regard, as the ban on mercenary units has not applied to [Private Security Companies](#) (PSCs) and PMCs are often seen in Russia as being a subset of the former in the eyes of the Russian state.²⁹ The Russian government has often seemed to attempt to strike the balance between their desire for a strong state that is in control of their security affairs, and the desire to compete

²⁵ "International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries." 2022. OHCHR. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-against-recruitment-use-financing-and->

²⁶ "Key Personnel and Organizations of the Soviet Military High Command." 1987. <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/notes/2009/N2567.pdf>.

²⁷ "What Laws Constrain This Russian Private Military Company?" Lawfare, August 31, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-laws-constrain-russian-private-military-company>.

²⁸ "Criminal Code Russia - Imolin." https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Russian_Federation_Criminal_Code.pdf.

²⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross. "Russian Federation: Regulating Private Military and Security Companies." International Committee of the Red Cross, April 24, 2019. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/russian-federation-regulating-private-military-security-companies>.



with the West in their employment of PMCs to impose cost-effectiveness and international reach. What has often happened is that PMC activities have some a wide degree of appropriation and tolerance by the Russian state. Specifically courtesy of the plausible deniability that PMCs have provided for the Kremlin in their operations over the last two decades in helping to secure a global security footprint, but without the dedication of too many national resources.

This tolerance should not be mistaken though for a willingness to allow Russian PMCs to operate without a very tight leash attaching them to state interests. For instance, the recent [amendment of Article 359](#) following the occupation of Ukraine has seen the penalties of acting as a mercenary in an armed conflict rise from 3-7 years in prison to 7-15.³⁰ Likewise, groups like Wagner have been somewhat [absorbed](#) into the security structure of the Russian state in order to benefit Russian foreign policy.³¹ Legally, they seem to be separate from the state when convenient, but represent the Kremlin's interests frequently. These restrictive laws and their use in binding Russian PMCs to the needs of the state also prevent in theory the accumulation of power and influence of potentially independent armed powerbases within Russia.

It has been difficult for dissenting Russian politicians to effectively challenge the “grey zone” status that Russian PMCs have. Criticism is [based](#) typically around the very advantages that Russian PMCs bring to the state; primarily deniability and lack of transparency and status.³² Attempts to push for regulation also suffer

Interestingly, the influential operators of PMCs such as [Yvegniy Prigozhin](#), Wagner Groups founder, have of late shown a tendency to be vocal critics of the Russian state security structure (and so potentially of Vladimir Putin himself). There is a potential depending upon how the Ukraine war continues to progress that PMC's like Wagner group may occupy a more influential place in Russia's political space, certainly they are potentially a serious competitor to the state security apparatus.³³

For their part the Russian states security apparatus can be alleged to have an equally negative relationship with Russian PMCs. This is best highlighted by the [Deir Al-Zour incident](#) in Syria, where potentially hundreds of Wagner group operatives became casualties after they tried to attack a U.S military occupied Kurdish outpost. The process of how this disaster unfolded can

³⁰ “Russian Federation Council Backs Bill to Punish Defection during Armed Conflict as Treason.” TASS. <https://tass.com/society/1477499>.

³¹ Stronski, Paul. “Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniability-russia-s-private-military-companies-pub-81954>.

³² “Russian MP Demands Government Regulate Private Military Companies.” TASS. February 2018. <https://tass.com/politics/989972>.

³³ “Someone Will Fall Victim': Insiders Reveal Elite Anguish as Russia's War Falters.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, October 7, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/07/intense-dread-and-infighting-among-russian-elites-as-putins-war-falters>.



be attributed to poor relations between Russia's Defence Ministry and Wagner as they compete for influence, the incident providing a source of criticism against the latter.³⁴

An Overview of Current Major Russian PMCs

Sarah Kuszynski and Candace Huntington

In this section of the report, we aim to provide an overview of the current major Russian PMCs, with a particular focus on the Wagner group, RSB group and Moran Security Group; their organisational structure and strategic objectives.



Figure 2 courtesy of the [Center For Strategic & International Studies](#), 21 September 2022

The form, and structure of PMCs has shifted over time. For example, one of the forerunners was [Tigr Top-Rent Security](#).³⁵ established to conduct operations in Iraq. It existed in 2005-2006 before its members disbanded to create a number of other military groups, namely, the Wagner Group. The Wagner group today is one of the most recognisable Russian PMCs, other smaller PMCs include, the E.N.O.T. Corp and the Cossacks.

There remains great variety among the Russian PMSCs. Some, first of all Wagner, are composed primarily of mercenaries and militias, while the RSB-group is relatively similar to Western PMSCs. The ideological foundations of most Russian PMCs and their ties to Russian

³⁴ "The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir Al-Zour." War on the Rocks, July 5, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/>.

³⁵ Tool. "TIGR Top-Rent Security Archives." Warsaw Institute. <https://warsawinstitute.org/tag/tigr-top-rent-security/>.



elites, set them apart from Western PMCs, which usually seek to remain apolitical actors. Western PMSCs are also much more heavily involved with military support services and logistics compared to their Russian ‘counterparts’ as the Wagner Group, RSB and Moran Security demonstrate.

Wagner Group:

The Wagner Group are the most well-known and notorious Russian PMC. First appearing in the Luhansk region of Ukraine in 2014, the group has been involved in operations across the globe, primarily to further the Russian government’s interests. Russian law officially prohibits the creation or use of PMCs, and the Russian government has denied their existence. The Wagner Group, however, is widely considered to have close ties with the government and conducted operations in Ukraine, Syria, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali. Much of the organisation’s structure and membership is shrouded in secrecy, including its connections to the government, and unlike some other Russian PMCs it is [not an officially registered entity](#).³⁶ Wagner has been dubbed “[Putin’s private army](#)” due to its wide-spread operations and close relationship with the Russian government.³⁷

Since its founding, Wagner’s leadership has also been somewhat obscured. Until recently, Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch and close associate of Vladimir Putin, had adamantly denied his ties to Wagner. A [video](#) released on social media in September 2022 showed Prigozhin recruiting Russian prisoners on behalf of Wagner to fight in Ukraine.³⁸ Since his video appearance in September, Prigozhin has continued to appear in other [videos promoting Wagner](#),³⁹ including videos of him jumping out of a helicopter and at a Wagner member’s funeral service. At the end of October 2022, Wagner opened a “[military technology centre](#)” in St. Petersburg with the goal of “developing new ideas which they are ready to apply in the field of national defence”.⁴⁰

Dmitry Utkin, a former Russia military intelligence officer (GRU), is also reportedly linked to the group. An [EU sanctions regulation](#) from December 2021 stated Utkin as the co-founder and

³⁶ Vorobyov, Niko. “Shrouded in Secrecy for Years, Russia's Wagner Group Opens Up.” Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, August 10, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/10/wagner-private-group-now-an-extension-of-russias-military>.

³⁷ “Combating Terrorism Center – CTC at West Point.” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 21, 2022. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/>.

³⁸ Triebert, Christiaan. “Video Reveals How Russian Mercenaries Recruit Inmates for Ukraine War.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 16, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/europe/russia-wagner-ukraine-video.html>.

³⁹ Mackinnon, Amy. “Putin's Chef Steps out of the Shadows.” Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, October 3, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/03/yevgeny-prigozhin-wagner-group-putin/>.

⁴⁰ Person. “Outspoken Putin Ally Prigozhin's St Petersburg Defence Tech Centre Opens.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, November 4, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/outspoken-putin-ally-prigozhins-st-petersburg-defence-tech-centre-opens-2022-11-04/>.



commander of the Wagner Group.⁴¹ After leaving the Russian military, Utkin worked for the so-called first modern Russian PMC, the [Slavonic Corps](#),⁴² which operated in the Syrian Civil War mainly guarding oil fields, but was unsuccessful. Many of the members of the Slavonic Corps moved to what would become the Wagner Group, headed by Utkin. During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Utkin commanded a mercenary group called Wagner (Utkin's call sign) and participated in operations in Luhansk and Donetsk. Utkin's ties to the Kremlin were confirmed when he attended an event hosted by the Kremlin and appeared in a photo with Putin in 2016. It is unclear to what extent Utkin is currently involved in Wagner's activities. Recent [reports](#) have identified Konstantin Pikalov, a former Russian officer, as commanding various Wagner activities in Africa.⁴³

The Wagner Group is widely understood to have close ties with Vladimir Putin and operates to further the Kremlin's interests domestically and internationally. Despite the Russian government not officially recognizing the group, the Russian military and Wagner have close ties. Wagner's primary base is in Molokino in Russia and "[is operated jointly by the 10th Separate Special Purpose Brigade of Russia's GRU](#)".⁴⁴ In addition, Wagner has used the Russian military's resources and infrastructure to carry out its foreign operations. Wagner has been involved in a wide range of operations abroad, primarily in Africa. In these operations, mercenaries will [either](#) engage in combat in already-active conflicts (in Ukraine and Syria),⁴⁵ or act as security-providers for foreign governments aligned with the Kremlin. In 2014, Russia used Wagner in Ukraine to help carry out the internationally unpopular annexation of Crimea and to somewhat shield the Russian government from culpability in the process. In Syria, Wagner was deployed to support the Russia-backed al-Assad regime. Along with engaging in combat, Wagner mercenaries were contracted to provide security for oil and gas fields during the war. These operations also served Prigozhin's personal economic interests. As payment for Wagner's services, the Syrian regime gave Prigozhin [25% of the revenue from Syrian oil and gas fields](#).⁴⁶

⁴¹ Office Journal of the European Union, December 13, 2021. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R2193>.

⁴² Sukhankin, Sergey. "Russian PMCS in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond." Jamestown, December 18, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-the-syrian-civil-war-from-slavonic-corps-to-wagner-group-and-beyond/>.

⁴³ "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed." Bellingcat, January 13, 2022. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>.

⁴⁴ "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State." Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State | Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.

⁴⁵ "Putin's Not-so-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group" Accessed October 26, 2022. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/GlobalRussia_NateReynolds_Vagner.pdf.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*



Since 2016, Wagner has [reportedly](#) operated in 18 African countries, including Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Mali.⁴⁷ Wagner served to extend Russian and the Kremlin's influence in Africa to compete with the U.S. and China in regions where they had a limited presence. For example, Wagner mercenaries supported the Libyan Arab Armed Forces against the UN-supported regime and established military bases in Libya to gain a foothold in the region along the Mediterranean. In the Central African Republic, Wagner has [benefitted from natural resources](#),⁴⁸ providing its security services to the regime and receiving access to gold and diamond mines in return. While Russian state interests drive the Wagner Group's objectives, it is notable that its leadership has links to far-right and neo-nazi ideologies, particularly Dmitry Utkin.

In conclusion, Wagner differs from Western and even other Russian PMCs due to its very close ties to the Kremlin and its role in implementing Russia's foreign policy objectives abroad, making it a de facto private military for the Russian government. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Wagner has moved out of the shadows and is increasingly operating in the public eye.

RBS Group:

The RSB-Group was [officially registered in Moscow in 2011](#) whilst also being registered in the British Virgin Islands.⁴⁹ The RSB-Group has an office in Senegal as well as their main office in Moscow, and they have representatives in Sri-Lanka, Turkey, Germany and Cyprus (Boiarskii, 2014). Their [key areas of influence](#) include: Libya, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia, Columbia and some areas of South-East Asia.⁵⁰

From [the RSB's website](#) they denote themselves as “private military companies” or “military consulting companies”.⁵¹ The head of the company is Oleg Krinitsyn. In [a 2017 interview with Reuters](#) claimed that the RSB's task in Libya “was to remove mines from an industrial facilit[ies]”.⁵²

⁴⁷ “Combating Terrorism Center – CTC at West Point.” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 21, 2022. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/>.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ RBS Group, 2022, <http://rsb-group.org/>

⁵⁰ Sergey Sukhankin, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests,” papers.ssrn.com (Rochester, NY, March 20, 2019), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3622075.

⁵¹ RBS Group, 2022, <http://rsb-group.org/>

⁵² Maria Tsvetkova, “Russian Private Security Firm Says It Had Armed Men in East Libya,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2017, sec. Aerospace and Defense, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-contractors-idUSKBN16H2DM>.



The RSB group has also been engaged in the [protection of naval vessels](#) in African waters (mainly in the Gulf of Guinea) and they have been linked to the protection of land convoys and high net worth individuals across various Arab countries.⁵³

The RSB-Group is most specialised in the [protection of gas and oil pipelines](#) and it is also composed mainly of former GRU and FSB officers.⁵⁴ Significantly, some [Russian commentators describe the RSB-Group as possibly “the most serious” Russian PMC](#).⁵⁵ This was interpreted as meaning that the company is the one most similar to major Western PMSCs – that the RSB-Group – in terms of organisation, professionalism and capabilities. Indicative of the scope of RSB Group’s capabilities is that in 2016 the group established its own cyber defence core.

Moran Security Group:

The [Moran Security Group](#) is connected to what is known as the Antiterror family of companies.⁵⁶ The company Antiterror-Orel was officially registered in the city of Orel in 2003 as a “[non-government education and training centre](#)”.⁵⁷ They were initially a training centre set up by former Special Forces operatives living in the aforementioned city. Antiterror-Orel was associated with Russian civilian companies, enabling the protection of their commercial operations in Iraq.

Importantly, Tiger Top Rent Security was one of the Antiterror-Orel detachments that worked in Iraq. Tiger Top Rent Security served as [a base for the establishment of companies](#),⁵⁸ namely the Moran Security Group. Intriguingly, operatives from Moran Security were [instrumental in setting up the Slavonic Corps](#) that served as the precursor for the Wagner Group.⁵⁹

The Moran Security Group is viewed as a PMC that focuses on providing anti-piracy armed guards and intelligence for Russian oil tankers, port facilities, and offshore oil rigs. Moran Security Group even has its own small fleet of unmarked vessels. The company also boasts

⁵³ RBS Group, 2022, <http://rsb-group.org/>

⁵⁴ Christopher R. Spearin, “Russia’s Military and Security Privatization,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 48, no. 2 (June 1, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2943>.

⁵⁵ Åse Gilje Author::Østensen and Tor Author::Bukkvoll, *Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies – the Implications for European and Norwegian Security*, *Ffi-Publikasjoner.archive.knowledgearc.net* (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2018), <https://ffi-publikasjoner.archive.knowledgearc.net/handle/20.500.12242/2327>.

⁵⁶ “Flexibility Confidentiality Responsibility - Moran-Group.org.” http://moran-group.org/upload/file/240_103502763.pdf.

⁵⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow’s Interests,” *papers.ssrn.com* (Rochester, NY, March 20, 2019), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3622075.

⁵⁸ Echo, 2022. <https://echo.msk.ru/programs/personalnovash/2130154-echo/>

⁵⁹ András Rácz, “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State,” *www.csis.org*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>.



that its core personnel are ex-navy officers, with one of [Moran's biggest clients being the state owned Somkomflot petroleum fleet corporation](#).⁶⁰

The group's activities came to notoriety in Russia, and globally when [nine of Moran's Russian guards were arrested by the Nigerian government](#) during a raid of their vessel in the port of Lagos in October 2012.⁶¹ However, according to [the company website](#), their first international mission was in 1999, when they recovered a ship belonging to a private individual from the UAE, that had been hijacked by Sudanese pirates.⁶² Most of the other missions they have conducted since their formation have taken place in Iraq. Additionally, they also mention missions in some African countries – Central African Republic, Kenya, and Nigeria.

In short, the Moran Security group is a long-established PMC with operations in key areas of geostrategic influence.

⁶⁰ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (March 26, 2019): 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2019.1591142>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Moran Group, 2022, <http://moran-group.org/>



Section 2) The Growth and use of Russian PMCs since 2014

Russia PMC's have been deployed around the world, largely in pursuit of Moscow's geo-strategic interests since 2014 in at least 20 countries across the globe; predominantly these have been in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. This section provides a comprehensive overview and analysis for the activity of Russian PMCs in each of these states to the furthest extent possible. However, a full accounting of activity is limited by the availability of OSINT and other intelligence sources courtesy of the lack of transparency around Russian PMC's generally, and also the secretive nature of their operations and ties.

2.1 Europe and the Caucasus

Christopher Healey and Eva Kristinova

Ukraine

Christopher Healey

Given the evolving situation in Ukraine, the following information was correct at time of writing (Late-October 2022)

Russia's contemporary use of irregular warfare units was sparked by the 2011 Arab Spring, which saw civil wars break out across the Middle East and North Africa—most notably in Syria and Libya.⁶³ These [hybrid wars](#) (wars that feature “an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion”) led Russia to build Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the Slavonic Corps Limited PMC.⁶⁴ The Wagner Group—the most well-known Russian PMC—was formed out of the Slavonic Corps.⁶⁵ It is

⁶³ Sukhankin, Sergey. “Unleashing the PMCS and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas.” Jamestown. Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/unleashing-the-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-ukraine-crimea-and-donbas/>.

⁶⁴ Bilal, Arsalan. “Hybrid Warfare – New Threats, Complexity, and 'Trust' as the Antidote.” NATO Review. Nato Review, November 30, 2021. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2021/11/30/hybrid-warfare-new-threats-complexity-and-trust-as-the-antidote/index.html>.

⁶⁵ Borshchevskaya, Anna. “Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model.” Foreign Policy Research Institute. Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 18, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model/>.



funded by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and close associate of President Vladimir Putin.⁶⁶

Inspired also by the success of American PMCs, the goal of Russian PMCs is to further the Kremlin's geopolitical goals—such as securing economic assets and undermining unfriendly governments—and roll back U.S. global influence.⁶⁷ Yet, unlike American PMCs, the use of PMCs is technically illegal under Russian law and therefore their activities are intentionally clouded and lack any real transparency and oversight.⁶⁸ They therefore grant Putin plausible deniability in their usage, and serve as another tool in his foreign policy toolkit while the leaders of all Russian security services joust and compete for influence. PMCs are also seemingly cheaper to utilise than other military units, as the Russian government does not need to provide salaries or benefits to PMC operatives.⁶⁹ Simply put, they are more expendable than Russian forces.

Pre-Invasion PMC Activity

Ukraine was one of the [initial testing grounds](#) for Russian PMCs.⁷⁰ During the illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Wagner Group played a “key role” in supporting Russian SOF.⁷¹ Moreover, other irregular units (but not generally understood as PMCs) such as the [Night Wolves biker gang](#) and the Cossacks, assisted in seizing strategic sites and blocking roads in and around Sevastopol.⁷² Some analysts have highlighted, however, that the Wagner Group, despite being involved, likely did not become a formally operating company until after the annexation.⁷³

Russian PMCs were also heavily involved in the fighting that occurred in Eastern Ukraine beginning in 2014 until Russia's invasion in February 2022. Based on analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, while the Wagner Group was the most notable PMC to

⁶⁶ Kim, Victoria. “What Is the Wagner Group?” The New York Times. The New York Times, March 31, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/wagner-group-russia-ukraine.html>.

⁶⁷ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moyer. “Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies.” Center for Strategic and International Studies. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Diana Davis Spencer Foundation, July 21, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.

⁶⁸ Borshchevskaya, “Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model,” 6.

⁶⁹ Jones, Doxsee, Katz, McQueen, and Moyer, “Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies,” 16-17.

⁷⁰ Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington. “Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020. <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.

⁷¹ Borshchevskaya, “Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model,” 9.

⁷² Salem, Harriet. “Ukraine: Night Wolves and Unidentified Military Men Seize Key Crimea Sites.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, February 28, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/ukraine-night-wolves-military-seize-crimea>.

⁷³ Sukhankin, “Unleashing the PMCS and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas.”



be involved (their total numbers were estimated to have reached between 2,500-5,000 during peak fighting in 2015 with an estimated [1,000 active in the region](#)),⁷⁴ other PMCs present in Ukraine during this period include the Rossiskie System Bezopasnosti (RSB), E.N.O.T., MAR PMC, and the Slavonic Corps.⁷⁵

PMC activity in the Donbas region, while different across certain groups, generally encompassed the training of Russian-backed separatists, “technical and human intelligence collection, diversion, sabotage, and other covert and clandestine missions, including assassinations,” and disinformation campaigns to spread pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian messages to influence the local population.⁷⁶

The Wagner Group was directly involved in combat operations. To name a few examples, Wagner Group operatives assisted rebels in [seizing the Luhansk Airport](#) and fought in the brutal Battle of Debaltseve in Donetsk,⁷⁷ where some received the Russian military Medal for Courage in Death.⁷⁸ According to Professor Kimberly Martin of Columbia University, Debaltseve was a rout against the Ukrainian army, and in part led to the conflict becoming a war of attrition—until Putin launched the “special military operation” in February 2022.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Katz, Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington, “Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies,” and “What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?” BBC News. BBC, October 3, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

⁷⁵ Jones, Doxsee, Katz, McQueen, and Moye, “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies,” 15.

⁷⁶ Katz, Jones, Doxsee, and Harrington, “Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies.”

⁷⁷ “Ukraine Crisis: Troops Abandon Luhansk Airport after Clashes.” BBC News. BBC, September 1, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29009516>.

⁷⁸ Marten, Kimberly. “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (March 26, 2019): 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2019.1591142>.

⁷⁹ Martin, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group, *Post-Soviet Affairs*.”



PMC Activity in the Invasion

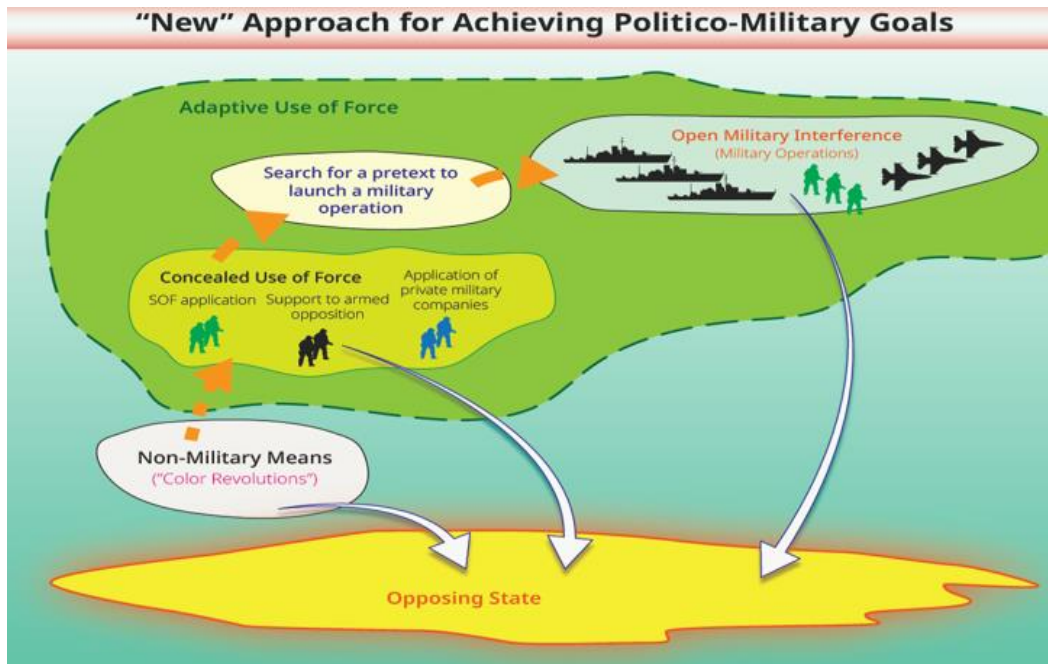


Figure 3 courtesy of Valery Gerasimov, [published](#) by CSIS Emeritus Chair in Strategy Anthony H. Cordesman.⁸⁰

A major threat to Moscow is the existence of successful liberal democracy on its borders as, among other reasons, it sees this as an encroachment of U.S. and European influence. The war in Ukraine, and the use of PMCs in it, must therefore be understood in the historical context of a former Soviet satellite state inching—however imperfectly—towards liberal democracy.

Figure 3 illustrates the Kremlin's view of how the United States leverages colour revolutions—anti-regime revolutions (generally aimed at existing corruption in government) that have taken place across several post-Soviet states and in the MENA region—to ultimately intervene militarily in certain countries and expand U.S. influence.⁸¹ In this context, PMCs work alongside SOF and armed rebels to find a pretext for said military intervention.

While not a seamless analogy and with critical distinctions in the nature of its motivations and behaviour, Russia would likely claim it is emulating the U.S.'s approach to achieving political-military goals in its intervention in Ukraine. This includes the role of PMCs—principally the

⁸⁰ Cordesman, Anthony H. "Russia and the 'Color Revolution.'" *Russia and the "Color Revolution"*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D>. The image was created by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*



Wagner Group—in helping to [create a pretext](#) for military intervention, which is likely what occurred in Eastern Ukraine prior to February 2022.⁸²

For example, on February 18, Russian-backed separatists circulated a video on Telegram purportedly showing Ukrainian forces trying to blow up a chlorine tank in the Donbas—a [claim that was disputed](#) by open-source analysts.⁸³ Also, Russian state media claimed that Denis Sinenkov, chief of the Donetsk separatist police, was targeted in a car bombing, but this too was disputed as staged by Russian journalist Anton Pustovalov and the Ukrainian government.⁸⁴ Further, Sam Cranny-Evans, a research analyst at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), has argued that Russia’s claim of destroying two Ukrainian personnel carriers while repelling an alleged Ukrainian offensive is false, as the vehicles more closely resemble Russian vehicles.⁸⁵

Among PMCs, the Wagner Group has been the most involved since the invasion beginning on February 24. According to Dr. Samuel Ramani, an associate fellow at RUSI, the Wagner Group played “an active role in capturing cities like Popasna and Severodonetsk in Luhansk,” while fighting alongside regular Russian troops in the Donbas.⁸⁶

Moreover, since September 2022, the Wagner Group has been building a roughly [two-kilometre defensive line](#) outside Hirske, a Russian-occupied town in eastern Ukraine.⁸⁷ Russian media claim this line is being erected to stall any Ukrainian breakthrough in the region, but critics have pointed out the limitations of the fortification. Indeed, although the line may inhibit a frontal attack, Ukrainian forces can simply travel around the line due to its limited length, and defensive lines themselves are vulnerable to drone attacks which have been prevalent in the war thus far.⁸⁸ On October 14, a Wagner-affiliated Telegram channel stated they would [transfer vehicles](#) to the Kherson region to support the Russian 126th Coastal Defense Battalion in their efforts to hold the front line there.⁸⁹

⁸² “What Is Russia’s Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?” BBC News. BBC, October 3, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60947877>.

⁸³ Kayleen Devlin, Jake Horton, and Olga Robinson. “Ukraine Crisis: Is Russia Staging 'False Flag' Incidents?” BBC News. BBC, February 23, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/60470089>.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ BBC, “What Is Russia’s Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?”

⁸⁷ Gianluca Mezzofiore and Paul P. Murphy. “First on CNN: Russian Mercenary Group Constructs Anti-Tank Fortification, Satellite Images Show.” CNN. Cable News Network, October 22, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/22/europe/russia-anti-tank-fortification-intl>.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Trad, Ruslan. “Russian War Report: Wagner Sends Vehicles to Kherson While Iran Increases Military Support.” Atlantic Council. Atlantic Council, October 21, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-wagner-sends-vehicles-to-kherson-while-iran-increases-military-support/#wagner>



Wagner operatives have also played a critical role in [Russia's fierce assault on the city of Bakhmut](#) in Ukraine's east, where some of their forces—many of whom are [tortured prisoners](#) from Russia—are taking significant casualties.⁹⁰ If Bakhmut were to fall to Russian forces, it would damage Ukrainian supply lines and open a path for them to press towards Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, "[key Ukrainian strongholds in Donetsk province](#)".⁹¹ Dr. Samuel Ramani highlighted that while the Wagner Group has been effective in terrorizing the local population around Bakhmut, they have not been as impactful when attempting to seize and hold territory.⁹²

Alongside Russian forces, the Wagner Group is accused of committing war crimes in Ukraine. According to Ukrainian prosecutors, Wagner operatives tortured and murdered civilians in the village of Motyzhyn outside Kyiv in April.⁹³ Two of the three operatives named are from Belarus and the other is from Russia. Also, Der Spiegel reported that Germany's foreign intelligence service—Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND)—intercepted radio traffic from those involved in the war crimes committed in Bucha that [places the Wagner Group](#) at the center of the atrocities.⁹⁴ Following the Russian withdrawal from Bucha, investigators uncovered the bodies of 458 murdered Ukrainians 419 of which had markings indicating they had been shot, tortured, or bludgeoned to death.⁹⁵ In Bucha, 366 [of those killed](#) were male, 86 were female, and 5 were children.⁹⁶

Some experts, such as CSIS associate fellow Catrina Doxsee, have pointed out the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of PMCs like the Wagner Group. Oftentimes, the success of these groups is a mixed bag, as they are more concerned with their own security and financial gain than the geopolitical aims of the state.⁹⁷ The aforementioned lack of oversight can lead to a collapse in discipline, as the murderous rampages on civilians in Ukraine may themselves demonstrate.

⁹⁰ Walsh, Nick Paton, Natalie Gallón, Brice Lâiné, and Konstantin Gak. "Russian Mercenaries Bombard Bakhmut as Moscow Searches for a Win." CNN. Cable News Network, September 21, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/20/europe/russian-mercenaries-wagner-bombard-bakhmut-intl-hnk> and Land, Olivia. "Russia Recruits Raped, Abused Prisoners to the Ukraine Front Lines." New York Post. New York Post, October 26, 2022. <https://nypost.com/2022/10/26/russia-recruits-raped-abused-prisoners-to-the-front-lines/>.

⁹¹ "Battle for Bakhmut Heats up as Russian Forces Edge Closer." Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, October 28, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/28/russian-and-ukrainian-forces-exchange-fire-near-bakhmut>.

⁹² BBC, "What Is Russia's Wagner Group of Mercenaries in Ukraine?"

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Melanie Amann and Matthias Gebauer, and Fidelius Schmid. "Possible Evidence of Russian Atrocities: German Intelligence Intercepts Radio Traffic Discussing the Murder of Civilians in Bucha." DER SPIEGEL. DER SPIEGEL, April 7, 2022. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/possible-evidence-of-russian-atrocities-german-intelligence-intercepts-radio-traffic-discussing-the-murder-of-civilians-in-bucha-a-0a191c96-634f-4d07-8c5c-c4a772315b0d>.

⁹⁵ Liz Sly and Kostiantyn Khudov. "Accounting of Bodies in Bucha Nears Completion." The Washington Post. WP Company, August 9, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/08/ukraine-bucha-bodies/>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Putin's Proxies: Examining Russia's Use of Private Military Companies, Before the House Oversight and Reform National Security Subcommittee*, 117th Congress, pg. 5 (2022) (statement of Catrina Doxsee, Associate Director and Associate Fellow of the Transnational Threats Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies).



Indeed, the increased attention these groups are drawing to themselves due to their actions in Ukraine and elsewhere will likely diminish Putin’s ability to claim plausible deniability in their usage, while major powers like the U.S. will focus more attention on countering their impact. Yet as the case of Russian PMCs in Ukraine continues to demonstrate, these irregular groups can destabilise countries through activities ranging from disinformation campaigns and false flag operations, to direct combat with opposing forces, to committing heinous human rights violations. Policymakers and other relevant stakeholders would be remiss to overlook the impact of Russian PMCs.

Belarus

Christopher Healey

Background

Compared with Ukraine—a major testing ground for Russian PMC activity—PMC activity in Belarus appears considerably less frequently and with less sweeping implications. While there is not a precise date on the first appearance of PMCs in Belarus, one estimate from the Center for Strategic and International Studies places it around 2015, amidst the general boom in PMC presence and activity.⁹⁸ Also like Ukraine, the Wagner Group is the most notable group with a presence, while E.N.O.T is also believed to be operating in Belarus.⁹⁹

Russian PMC activity either taking place in Belarus or involving Belarusians should be understood within the context of the complicated but important bilateral Russia-Belarus relationship. Like other former constituent republics of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin seeks to maintain strong influence over their political decision-making. This is particularly the case with Belarus, which serves as a key buffer state between Moscow and NATO. Moreover, Belarus is dependent on Moscow for subsidised energy, and President Lukashenko has increasingly relied on political and economic support from Putin since the outpouring of pro-democracy protests following his [sham re-election](#) in 2020.¹⁰⁰

Yet, the relationship is not without its tensions. It is hardly ideal for Lukashenko, already an unpopular political figure commonly referred to as “Europe’s last dictator” ruling over an economically stagnant country, to be subservient to Russia. Lukashenko and the Belarusian

⁹⁸ Jones, Doxsee, Katz, McQueen, and Moye, “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Rainsford, Sarah. “Kremlin Looks to Keep Protest-Torn Belarus in Moscow's Orbit.” BBC News. BBC, September 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54155882>.



public are also less than eager at the prospect of a formal “[merger](#)” with Russia, where no one need guess who would be the junior partner in the relationship.¹⁰¹

At present, Belarusian forces are yet to engage directly in Russia’s war in Ukraine, instead acting as a launching pad for the Russian military (although [ominous signs of late](#) hint that Belarus could be involved soon).¹⁰² If Belarusian forces do become involved, Lukashenko will likely do everything he can to keep them in a [supporting role](#)—emphasising the overall uneasiness felt in many post-Soviet satellites about the war despite close ties to Moscow.¹⁰³

Reported Activity

One of the earlier examples of PMC activity in Belarus came around 2015, when reports emerged of the Russian government and Russian Orthodox Church recruiting young Belarusians to “[ultra-right-wing](#)” paramilitary camps.¹⁰⁴ These camps, that have operated both within Belarus and near Moscow, are run by the shadowy E.N.O.T. PMC—a PMC with purported ties to Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB).¹⁰⁵

While the long-term goal of the camps is not explicitly clear, the fact that Russia views it as a venture worth its resources is revealing regarding its designs vis-à-vis Belarus. In addition to providing basic military training, these camps serve as a tool to indoctrinate young people into supporting Russian imperialism and authoritarian values. As a result, any pro-democracy movement in Belarus will have to reckon with groups of young Belarusians with military training and solidified illiberal sentiments standing in their way. The same can be said for other regions in the post-Soviet space where these camps are recruiting from, such as Transnistria and South Ossetia.¹⁰⁶

A more recent example of PMC activity in Belarus came in July of 2020, when 200 mercenaries disguised as protestors allegedly [entered the country](#) to disrupt the presidential elections

¹⁰¹ Mirovalev, Mansur. “Will Western Pressure Trigger Russia's 'Merger' with Belarus?” Russia-Ukraine war News | Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera, July 15, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/15/will-western-pressure-trigger-russias-merger-with-belarus>.

¹⁰² Reuters. “Belarus's Lukashenko Warns Ukraine, Deploys Troops with Russia.” Edited by Guy Faulconbridge. Reuters. Thomson Reuters, October 10, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-russia-form-joint-military-group-lukashenko-says-2022-10-10/>.

¹⁰³ Rainsford, Sarah. “Ukraine War: Russia Troop Deployment to Belarus Prompts Speculation.” BBC News. BBC, October 25, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63386634>.

¹⁰⁴ Goble, Paul. “Moscow Again Training More Belarusian Youths in Ultra-Right Camps in Russia.” Jamestown Foundation. Jamestown Foundation, November 28, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-training-belarusian-youths-ultra-right-camps-russia/>.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, Doxsee, Katz, McQueen, and Moye, “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies,” 15.

¹⁰⁶ Goble, “Moscow Again Training More Belarusian Youths in Ultra-Right Camps in Russia.”



scheduled for August of that year.¹⁰⁷ Belarusian media later reported that [33 of those arrested](#) were members of the Wagner Group, and several analysts at the time took this as a ploy for the largely unpopular Lukashenko to stoke fears of Russian encroachment and thereby secure more domestic support ahead of the election.¹⁰⁸

Yet, as Bellingcat later [uncovered](#), rather than a Russian plot to sow discord ahead of Belarus’s elections, the operation that led to the 33 arrests was in fact a Ukrainian sting operation. It was designed to “lure dozens of Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian citizens who, in the assessment of the Ukrainian authorities, had committed serious crimes while fighting for Russia-supported military entities in the country’s East”.¹⁰⁹ The arrest of the mercenaries by Belarusian authorities in Minsk cut the operation short, as the recruits—who believed they would be heading to Istanbul—never got on the flight destined for Ukraine where they would be arrested (see Figure 1).¹¹⁰

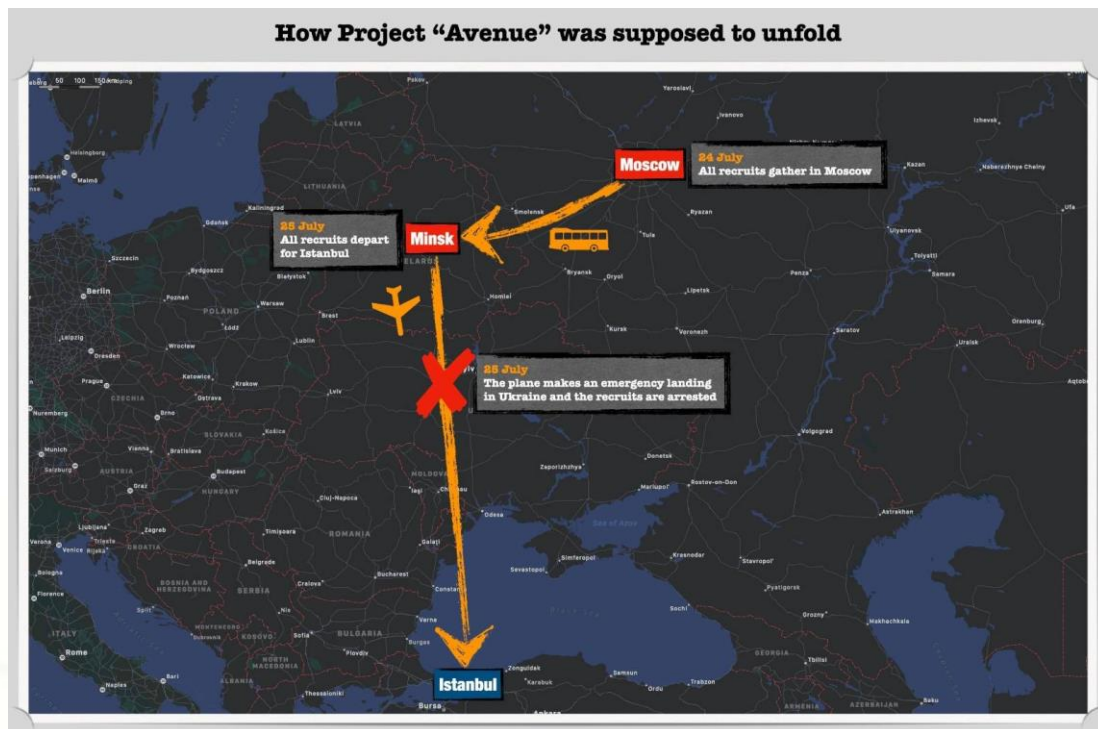


Figure 4 The plan for the Ukrainian sting operation that was cut short in Minsk.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Higgins, Andrew. “Belarus Says Russian Mercenaries Planned to Disrupt August Election.” The New York Times. The New York Times, July 29, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/29/world/europe/belarus-russian-mercenaries-lukashenko.html>.

¹⁰⁸ Higgins, “Belarus Says Russian Mercenaries Planned to Disrupt August Election” and Mackinnon, Amy. “What Were Russian Mercenaries Doing in Belarus?” Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, July 29, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/29/what-were-russian-mercenaries-doing-belarus-wagner-group/>.

¹⁰⁹ Bellingcat Investigations Team. “Inside Wagnergate: Ukraine’s Brazen Sting Operation to Snare Russian Mercenaries.” Bellingcat. Bellingcat, December 12, 2021. <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2021/11/17/inside-wagnergate-ukraines-brazen-sting-operation-to-snare-russian-mercenaries/>.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*



Nevertheless, the fact that it was a plausible scenario (even if it was untrue in this instance) for the Russian government to use PMCs to destabilise a foreign election fits with what this report has assessed regarding their use. Namely, that Russian PMCs operate as a tool for the Kremlin to further its geopolitical aims—such as undermining unfriendly neighbours, propping up allies, and securing economic resources—while maintaining a shroud of plausible deniability.

Conclusion

Reports concerning Russian PMC activity in Belarus are limited compared with countries such as [Ukraine, Libya, and Syria](#).¹¹² Yet, the alarming activity of PMCs like E.N.O.T. in Belarus and around the post-Soviet space focused on training and indoctrinating youth ought not be overlooked. It has a tangible effect on the civic health of those countries, and fits into the larger context of Moscow using a variety of hybrid means to expand its influence.¹¹³

An important trend to observe will be the activity that many of the youth who were trained in these camps engage in when they are at prime fighting age or old enough to engage in politics, but predicting precise behaviour and outcomes is impractical. That being said, although there are as yet no reports suggesting this, it is not implausible to wager that some alumni of the camps may be fighting in Russia's increasingly desperate war in Ukraine.

The arrest of the 33 Wanger operatives is also revealing in several ways. Firstly, although it turned out to be a Ukrainian-run sting operation, the Russia hands in the sources examined were not surprised at the idea of the Kremlin leveraging a PMC to sabotage Belarus's elections, nor at Lukashenko using the arrests to stoke fear of Russian interference as a means to bolster domestic support.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, the fact that Ukraine recognized the value of recruiting for a PMC in order to trap would-be operatives demonstrates the level of influence that PMCs play in the region. Indeed, had they not been caught, Ukraine may have secured the arrests of dozens of individuals (who were ultimately returned to Moscow) intending to wreak havoc on Ukrainian soil, or in other locations where PMCs operate.¹¹⁵

With Putin's eyes chiefly focused on Ukraine—at the behest of other strategic locations, like the country's [eastern flank](#) or its [border with Finland and the Baltics](#)—the main way to understand PMC activity in Belarus at present is as a support structure for Russian military

¹¹² Katz, B., Jones, S.G., Doxsee, C., and Harrington, N., 2020. *Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.

¹¹³ Rainsford, "Kremlin Looks to Keep Protest-Torn Belarus in Moscow's Orbit."

¹¹⁴ Higgins. "Belarus Says Russian Mercenaries Planned to Disrupt August Election," and Mackinnon, "What Were Russian Mercenaries Doing in Belarus?"

¹¹⁵ Bellingcat Investigations Team. "Inside Wagnergate: Ukraine's Brazen Sting Operation to Snare Russian Mercenaries."



activity in Ukraine.¹¹⁶ Given [Lukashenko's recent claim](#) that Ukraine is preparing an military attack on Belarus (an unlikely prospect as Ukraine concentrates its efforts in the south and east, and is forced to keep troops in the north to dissuade further Russian advances from Belarus), and that PMCs were involved in [forging a pretext](#) for the initial invasion in Ukraine, it is worth closely observing whether PMCs will indeed help create a pretext for direct Belarusian military involvement or whether it is merely a bluff.¹¹⁷ In any case, PMCs are here to stay in Belarus.

Serbia

Eva Kristinova

Following on from the previous section on Ukraine and Belarus, Russia's use of PMCs in Serbia is tied quite closely to Russia's conflicts in Europe, and sometimes beyond. Given their historically close ties, the Russian and Serbian states and peoples have a number of values and political perceptions in common, and the two countries maintain much closer relations than Russia has with most other states in the region. The use of PMCs in this context is less about providing military support or being directly involved on behalf of Serbia itself, although this category of services is not completely excluded. Instead, the chief responsibility of PMC operations in the country is training and indoctrination, creating in Serbia a vast population of potential reservists to fight in Russia's other conflicts.

Background Context and Russian Interest

The Serbian and Russian states maintain unusually strong ties as far as post-communist European countries are concerned. What might seem like political expediency, however, translates rapidly into ideological motivation as well. Serbia's close relations with Russia go back to at least the start of the First World War, when Russia sided firmly with Serbian nationals, which ultimately brought it into the war. In many ways, the independence of many states, including Serbia (as a part of Yugoslavia) occurred after this major conflict. As a result, many Serbs have grown up with the image of "[Mother Russia](#)"¹¹⁸ - some believe Serbia would

¹¹⁶ Woody, Christopher. "A Warming Friendship with China Is Allowing Russia to Turn up the Heat on Ukraine." Business Insider. Business Insider, February 10, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/improving-china-ties-allows-russia-to-raise-ukraine-military-pressure-2022-2>, and Gramer, Robbie, and Jack Detsch. "Russia's Stripped Its Western Borders to Feed the Fight in Ukraine." Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, September 28, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/28/russia-ukraine-war-nato-eastern-flank-military-kaliningrad-baltic-finland/>.

¹¹⁷ Service, RFE/RL's Belarus. "Lukashenka Says Ukraine 'Planning' Attack on Belarus." RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, October 10, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-lukashenka-ukraine-attack-russia-task-force/32073335.html>, and Kayleen Devlin, Jake Horton and Olga Robinson. "Ukraine Crisis: Is Russia Staging 'False Flag' Incidents?" BBC News. BBC, February 23, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/60470089>.

¹¹⁸ Zivanovic, M., 2017. "Russia 'using Serbia to destroy Europe', Ukraine's Ambassador says." *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/11/02/russia-using-serbia-to-destroy-europe-ukraines-ambassador-says/>.



not exist as a country at all were it not for Russia.¹¹⁹ But the period that figures most in current domestic political discourse are the 1990s,¹²⁰ and with them the unrest and suffering brought about by the Yugoslav War. Being so recent, the events of this time figure prominently in Serbian collective memory, and among them the support of Russia stands out the most. For their own purposes, Russia is more than willing to exploit these sentiments, aided with continuous information campaigns, and displays of solidarity.

The Yugoslav War

The Yugoslav War was in fact a series of conflicts, largely ethnically motivated, between the current Balkan states in the 1990s. Serbia in particular fought to preserve its region of Kosovo, which ended up gaining de facto independence, and reunite with ethnic Serbs with what is today known as Republika Srpska, a secessionist region part of modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the war, Serbia relied heavily on Russian military and political support. A notable feature of the conflict was the presence of a substantial number of Russian volunteer militants fighting on the side of Serbia. Their experiences would reignite the traditional culture of “volunteerism” so prominent today in the methods of recruitment by PMCs and other irregular forces,¹²¹ as well as playing an instrumental part in the formation of some of the first Russian PMCs.¹²² But beyond just the positive image of Russia that these memories invoke, they also portray Western countries, and NATO in particular in a negative light. An important memory for many older generations, but even those born in the 1980s and 1990s, is the bombing of Belgrade in 1999 by NATO forces.¹²³ What for many remain traumatic experiences have severely altered Serbian perception of the West, giving Russia ample opportunity to use these sentiments in their own interest as a counterbalance to Western and NATO power.

Russian Interests in the Balkans

Russia in many ways welcomes the sentiments of the Serbian population, and the Serbian state in a bid to achieve its geopolitical and security interests. The expansion of NATO has always

¹¹⁹ Stemakh, A., and Kholodov, P., 2017. “How Russia recruits Serbian mercenaries into the ranks of its fighters in Donbas.” *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/10/30/how-russia-recruits-serbian-mercenaries-into-the-ranks-of-its-fighters-in-donbas/>.

¹²⁰ DW Documentary, 2022. “Serbia, Russia and the war in Ukraine.” [Youtube]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET20WZxm2kk>.

¹²¹ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part Two).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmc-s-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-two/>

¹²² Sukhankin, S., 2019. “From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmc-s-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts/>.

¹²³ DW Documentary, 2022. “Serbia, Russia and the war in Ukraine.” [Youtube]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET20WZxm2kk>.



been viewed as a security threat and a direct affront against Russia, which it has every intention of mitigating as much as possible. Given its history of conflict incitement and subsequent frozen conflict involvement in what it terms its ‘sphere of influence’, it is not surprising that similar tactics apply to the prevention of NATO expansion into the Balkans. Recent incidents in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro were all aimed towards this strategic goal. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia is instrumental in [supporting](#) the secessionist Republika Srpska,¹²⁴ a region inhabited mainly by ethnic Serbs, where the outbreak of the war in Ukraine prompted attempts at de facto decentralisation of political and social institutions as early as [March 2022](#).¹²⁵ In Montenegro, Russia has been accused of inciting a coup d’état in [late 2016](#),¹²⁶ in an attempt to prevent the country from joining NATO, which it, however, did anyway [in 2017](#).¹²⁷ It is in Serbia that Russia has been much more successful, not only in preventing the country from joining NATO and the EU, even though it has been a candidate for approximately a decade now, but also in turning public opinion [against](#) such actions in the first place.¹²⁸ Beyond these efforts, Russia continues to pursue an active information and engagement campaign, often through the involvement of PMCs and domestic organisations, which has led many Serbian nationals to fight in Russian conflicts since 2015.

Russian PMCs in Serbia

With a history and experience in the Yugoslav wars, early Russian PMCs in Serbia are characterised by “[hybrid](#)” operations, with a strong ideological element,¹²⁹ and lasting non-military effect. In the present, the most notorious PMC operating in Serbia is E.N.O.T., which is mostly used for [training](#) radical activists and fighters abroad.¹³⁰ Going beyond these usual activities, however, the operation of Russian PMCs in Serbia includes a unique feature of ideological indoctrination. E.N.O.T., for instance, specifically portrays itself as a fighter for

¹²⁴ Čančar, F., 2022. “Russia’s New Front with the West in Bosnia.” *RUSI*. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-new-front-west-bosnia>.

¹²⁵ Borger, J., 2018. “Russian-trained mercenaries back Bosnia’s Serb separatists.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/12/russian-trained-mercenaries-back-bosnias-serb-separatists>.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ DW Documentary, 2022. “Serbia, Russia and the war in Ukraine.” [Youtube]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET20WZxm2kk>.

¹²⁹ Sukhankin, S., 2019. “From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmcs-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts/>.

¹³⁰ Jones, S.G., and Doxsee, C., 2021. *Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. p. 20. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.



the “[Russian World](#)” and is actively involved with what is termed ‘[youth upbringing](#)’.¹³¹ This involves running a series of predominantly Slavic-speaking military camps under the guise of youth cultural programmes. Among the values promoted are pan-Slavic patriotism and brotherhood, as well as the culture of volunteerism, from which participants are then prompted to join “[international volunteer](#)” associations in places like the Donbas region of Ukraine.¹³² In fact, this strategy dates back to [2009](#), when first of these camps were started on a larger scale by The Patriotic Front, a Serbian organisation, in cooperation with Stig and Kosovo Front, both Russian soft power operatives.¹³³ The existence of these camps is not unknown to the Serbian government either, but is, in fact, supported by individual officials in certain cases. Nevertheless, the Serbian government has been pressured, in no small part by the European Union and NATO, to address these issues on its territory, especially following a particularly high-profile case of a camp in the west of the country.

The Case of Zaltibor

In 2014, allegations came out that E.N.O.T. was involved in running a youth camp just off Serbia’s western border with Bosnia and Herzegovina called Zaltibor. The activities of the camp were described as “[patriotic upbringing](#)” of youths aged between 14 and 23 years.¹³⁴ Instruction was carried out by Russian and Serbian veterans, many of whom had served in the Yugoslav War, and were directly or indirectly associated with the Veterans of the Yugoslav War society. The aim was to indoctrinate these youths in pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments and convey skills and military knowledge of nonlinear military operations. Having gained public attention, the government was forced to step in and shut down the camp, but this was only after all essential activities had been carried out already, [according](#) to E.N.O.T.¹³⁵ The organisation was also surprisingly upfront about the continuation of such activities in this manner, only vowing to carry them out in a more clandestine manner in the future.

Far from being an isolated instance, Russian PMCs and irregular military organisations have been participating in similar activities not just throughout Serbia, but post-Soviet and even Western countries throughout the world. This is first and foremost through attracting youths

¹³¹ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part Two).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-two/>.

¹³² Jones, S.G., and Doxsee, C., 2021. *Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. p. 27. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.

¹³³ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part One).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-one/>.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part Two).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-two/0>



from these countries to camps like Zlatibor, but also by running separate activities directly on their territories. For instance, The Cossack operated group Balkan Cossack Army (BCA) has been involved in camps with participation [from](#) Belarus, Donbas,¹³⁶ Transnistria, Montenegro, Bosnia, Italy, Bulgaria, Moldova, Armenia, Canada, Finland, Norway, South Ossetia, Australia, and France, among others. This particular group is also connected to the [highest echelons](#) of Serbian government,¹³⁷ as well as the [Serbian Orthodox Church](#).¹³⁸ The long term agenda of PMCs such as E.N.O.T. and groups like BCA is to create a sort of “[international legion](#)” - a structure tasked with hiring foreign nationals for various missions under the Russian umbrella.¹³⁹

Other PMC activities

In addition to Russian organisations actively promoting youth indoctrination and military training in Serbia, the country’s government has also enlisted the help of lesser-known Russian PMCs for their own operations in Kosovo and Republika Srpska. This is the case, for example, with the relatively new PMC [Patriot organisation](#), which has ties to the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the Russian Ministry of Defence.¹⁴⁰ These PMCs have been involved in direct recruitment of Serbian nationals to carry out irregular operations near Serbia’s borders with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and are a part of continuous expansion of the work of Russian PMCs in the country since 2015. Nevertheless, as the next subsection shows, one of the biggest objectives of Russian PMC involvement in Serbia is for the purposes of recruitment of its nationals into foreign conflicts. This is where PMCs, such as the infamous Wagner Group, also come into play.

Recruitment of Serbian Nationals into Foreign Conflicts

Russian PMCs and irregular military organisations often recruit non-Russians into their ranks. For this purpose, Serbia has proven to be an especially fertile ground to tap into. They are often

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Milošević, M., Petrović, P., Unijat, J., and Stojanović Gajić, S., 2008. “Private Security Companies in Serbia - Friend or Foe?” *ResearchGate*.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322331213_Private_Security_Companies_in_Serbia_-_Friend_or_Foe.

¹³⁸ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part One).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-one/>.

¹³⁹ Sukhankin, S., 2018. “Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running ‘Patriotic’ Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part Two).” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-two/>.

¹⁴⁰ A.N., 2018. “Russian private military companies proliferate ‘to make money on war’” *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2018/10/13/despite-being-illegal-russian-private-military-companies-proliferate-to-make-money-on-war/>.



recruited by Russian groups such as the [Kosovo Front](#) to carry out activities [mostly concerned](#) with defence,¹⁴¹ guarding infrastructure, and unloading humanitarian aid.¹⁴² These structures are particularly popular among Serbian militants, who tend to join groups with strong participation by other ethnic Serbs. Such groups [include](#) The International Brigade (known as ‘Pyatanashka’), The Seventh Brigade, the Serbian-Hussar Regiment (previously the Oplot Unit), the First Slavic Unit, the Batman Unit, and the Rezajn Unit (mostly counterintelligence operations).¹⁴³ There were also an estimated 100 Serbian fighters taking part in operations for the Wagner Group in Ukraine, although the Ukrainian Security Services [estimate](#) there could be as many as 300.¹⁴⁴ Many of these volunteers are Serbs with [prior military experience](#),¹⁴⁵ either in the Serbian or foreign militaries. The ‘veterans’, so-to-speak, of these foreign volunteer campaigns are later used as recruitment agents themselves. Prominent [among those recruiting](#) forces for Russian PMC campaigns in Ukraine since 2014 is the French-Serbian military trainer Nikola Perovic, as well as the former leader of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) Alexander Zakharchenko, who was assassinated in 2016.¹⁴⁶ The main motivations for Serbian militants and veterans to join these causes are often feelings of “[slavic brotherhood](#)”,¹⁴⁷ although this only plays a partial role. A second motivation is undoubtedly financial compensation. Wagner Group fighters reportedly received approximately [USD10,000 per month](#) at the start of the fighting in Donbas,¹⁴⁸ although this figure decreased substantially afterwards. This, coupled with the low deterrence measures employed by the Serbian government to stop such activities, greatly contributes to the continued popularity of foreign military participation among Serbian nationals.

Response of the Serbian Government

¹⁴¹ Stemakh, A., and Kholodov, P., 2017. “How Russia recruits Serbian mercenaries into the ranks of its fighters in Donbas.” *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/10/30/how-russia-recruits-serbian-mercenaries-into-the-ranks-of-its-fighters-in-donbas/>.

¹⁴² Sukhankin, S. 2019. “Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and ‘Volunteers’: Non-Russians in Russia’s Wars.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-mercenaries-irregulars-and-volunteers-non-russians-in-russias-wars/>.

¹⁴³ Zivanovic, M., 2018. “Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine.” *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>.

¹⁴⁴ Sukhankin, S. 2019. “Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and ‘Volunteers’: Non-Russians in Russia’s Wars.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-mercenaries-irregulars-and-volunteers-non-russians-in-russias-wars/>.

¹⁴⁵ Zivanovic, M., 2018. “Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine.” *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Kupchan, C.A., 2021. “Is Bosnia on the Verge of Conflict?” *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/bosnia-verge-conflict>.

¹⁴⁸ Sukhankin, S. 2019. “Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and ‘Volunteers’: Non-Russians in Russia’s Wars.” *The Jamestown Foundation*. <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-mercenaries-irregulars-and-volunteers-non-russians-in-russias-wars/>.



The Serbian government has been largely ambivalent to the use of Serbian fighters by Russian PMCs and other irregular military organisations in foreign conflicts. As previously noted, some of these organisations are actively supported by the Serbian government. Nevertheless, the parliament passed a [law in 2014](#) prohibiting the involvement of Serbian nationals in foreign conflicts.¹⁴⁹ Penalties range from imprisonment for [six months to five years](#),¹⁵⁰ although individuals may be sentenced for up to [eight years](#) if they go abroad as a part of an organised group, and [10 years](#) if they take part in organising such departures.¹⁵¹

This has, nevertheless, proven to be a weak deterrent since the law has not been adequately enforced since its entrance into effect. Of those who were prosecuted, all got off with lighter sentences than stipulated, often having them [suspended](#) entirely if they pledged not to get involved in foreign conflicts for five years.¹⁵² In fact, there have only been [32 individuals](#) tried since 2014, all of whom received suspended sentences.¹⁵³ In addition, certain names of tried fighters have been blacked out of official court documents normally made public after the hearings, with the [High Court](#) citing personal data laws as a justification.¹⁵⁴ As a result, many are not dissuaded from repeating their previous offences just a couple of years after sentencing. Moreover, recruitment organisations have devised elaborate transportation routes for Serbian nationals to get into conflict territories such as the east of Ukraine (Figure 1). On top of this, the Serbian government denies any involvement of Serbian nationals in foreign conflicts, and resorts to the weak enforcement measures of international law when defending its actions vis-a-vis PMCs. This is namely the fact that it is difficult to hold PMCs [accountable](#) even under international law because it is hard to tell who is the responsible in command due to the lack of particular hierarchies within these organisations.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ Zivanovic, M., 2017. "Russia 'using Serbia to destroy Europe', Ukraine's Ambassador says." *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/11/02/russia-using-serbia-to-destroy-europe-ukraines-ambassador-says/>.

¹⁵⁰ Zivanovic, M., 2018. "Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine." *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>

¹⁵¹ Stojanovic, M., 2022. "Belgrade Denies Serbian 'Militants' are Fighting for Russia in Ukraine." *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/14/belgrade-denies-serbian-militants-are-fighting-for-russia-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁵² Zivanovic, M., 2017. "Russia 'using Serbia to destroy Europe', Ukraine's Ambassador says." *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/11/02/russia-using-serbia-to-destroy-europe-ukraines-ambassador-says/>.

¹⁵³ Stojanovic, M., 2022. "Belgrade Denies Serbian 'Militants' are Fighting for Russia in Ukraine." *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/14/belgrade-denies-serbian-militants-are-fighting-for-russia-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁵⁴ Zivanovic, M., 2018. "Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine." *BalkanInsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>

¹⁵⁵ Rodio, C., 2021. "Modern Warfare: Corporate Mercenaries and Wars for Profit." *Center for International Relations and Sustainable Development (CIRSD)*. <https://www.cirsd.org/en/expert-analysis/modern-warfare-corporate-mercenaries-and-wars-for-profit>.



Figure 5 Entry points of Serbian fighters into eastern Ukraine.¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

The work of Russian PMCs in Serbia occurs in the background of strong bilateral relations between the two countries and overly positive sentiments towards Russia on the part of the Serbian population. These ties are both historical and cultural, and present somewhat of an [ontological security](#) issue for many Serbians as a part of the national collective memory.¹⁵⁷ As a result, Russian PMCs have been operating mostly through the means of youth indoctrination and military training camps, as well as providing certain clandestine operation advice to the country directly when dealing with issues in the Balkan region. In addition, Serbian nationals have played an active role in foreign conflicts on the side of Russian PMCs and other irregular military organisations. This has proven a tough problem to solve for the Serbian government, with incentives to halt such activities largely absent. Consequently, it is unlikely that such activities will stop in the near future. In fact, the war in Ukraine has proven a potent motivation for [resurging](#) patriotic and pro-Russian voices in Serbia,¹⁵⁸ whose own experiences frame Russia as the ‘good guy’. This is a situation which Russian PMCs will certainly continue to exploit, and in which they will continue to prosper.

¹⁵⁶ Zivanovic, M., 2017. “Russia ‘using Serbia to destroy Europe’, Ukraine’s Ambassador says.” *Euromaidan Press*. <https://euromaidanpress.com/2017/11/02/russia-using-serbia-to-destroy-europe-ukraines-ambassador-says/>.

¹⁵⁷ DW Documentary, 2022. “Serbia, Russia and the war in Ukraine.” [Youtube]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET20WZxm2kk>.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*



Azerbaijan and the Caucasus

Eva Kristinova

This section analyses the expansion of Russian PMCs into the Southern Caucasus region, with a particular focus on the perspective of Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia. Russia has both geopolitical and economic interests in the region due to its shared borders, shared history, and strategic importance. In addition, Russia acts as a peacekeeper and a leading player in conflict resolution for the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which both Azerbaijan and Armenia claim as its own. The opportunity for Russian PMC involvement is therefore robust. As subsequent paragraphs aim to show, the somewhat unique nature of PMC involvement in this region gives Russia considerable advantage in its pursuit to maintain influence in the region for the foreseeable future.

Background Context and Russian Interests

Ever since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus region has continued to be perceived as part of a Russian sphere of influence. Located to its south, the region is split between Northern Caucasus (territory, which is part of the Russian Federation, and which notably includes North Ossetia and Chechnya among others) and Southern Caucasus, split between the territories of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Being part of Russia, Northern Caucasus is an obvious priority for Russian leadership. However, as with many post-Soviet state formations, the links between the two sections of the region remain vital for Russian strategic interests of power projection and, to an extent, great power competition, seeing as the region borders a contentious area of geopolitics, the Middle East. Home to a number of ethnic groups, the region is in many parts divided quite arbitrarily into separate country territories. Thus, conflicts with de facto states, such as Georgia's territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or the Azer-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh are nothing out of the ordinary. The remainder of this section focuses on the southern part of the region, with a special focus on Azerbaijan and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, although Georgia's frozen conflicts also feature in the analysis of Russian PMC deployment in the region.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh dates back to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, and with it the need to demarcate new borders between previously neighbouring soviet republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Originally part of Azer territory, Nagorno-Karabakh, however, harbours a substantial Armenian population, which resulted in demands to be included in the newly formed state of Armenia during the independence revolutions of both countries. With their own historical ties to the region, Azerbaijan refused to grant the territory



to Armenia, resulting in an enclave of Armenian territory surrounded by Azerbaijan, and a decades-long on-and-off frozen conflict. At the same time, a faction of the local population in Nagorno-Karabakh, disillusioned with the never-ending struggle, decided to press for their own independence, and proclaimed a de facto state in the early 2000s, with the explicit support of Armenia. Amid the continuous dissatisfaction and diplomatic *impasse*, border clashes continued to spark new periods of thaw of the conflict, culminating most notably in the [Four-Day war](#) in April 2016,¹⁵⁹ and more recently in a prolonged continuation of hostilities between [June and November 2020](#).¹⁶⁰

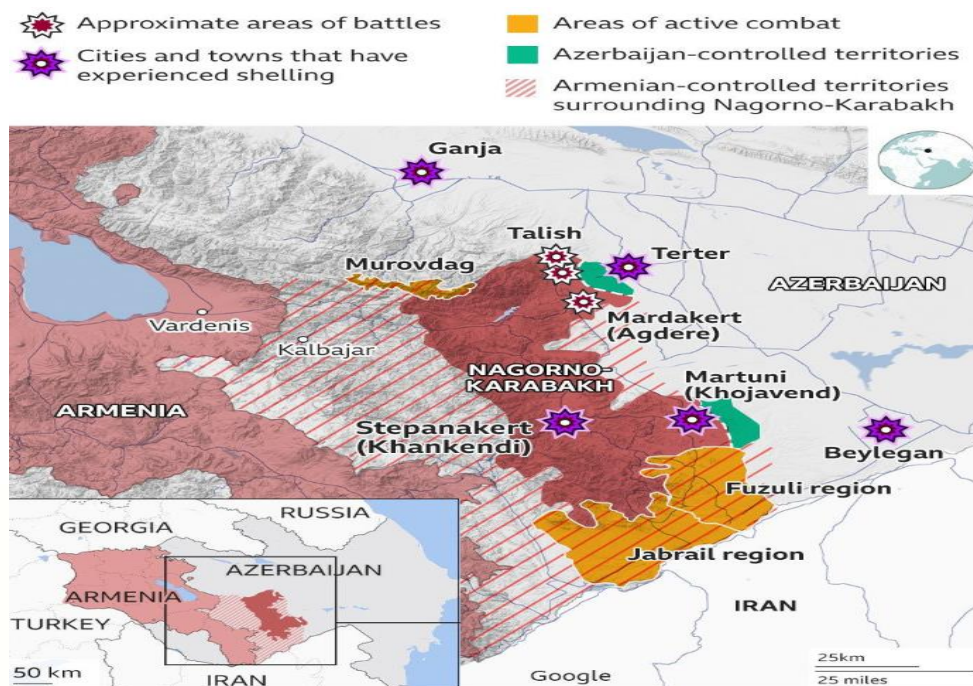


Figure 6 Map of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict zone.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Shirinyan, Y., 2022. “Civil society Organizations’ Submission Concerning the Use of Mercenaries in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War.” *Open Society Foundations-Armenia*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Open-Society-Foundations-Armenia-CFI-WG-Mercenaries-HRC51.pdf>.

¹⁶⁰ Sestanovich, S., 2020. “Has Russia Ended the War Between Armenia and Azerbaijan?” *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/has-russia-ended-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan>.

¹⁶¹ GlobalSecurity.org, 2022. “Nagorno-Karabakh / Republic of Artsakh - 2020” *GlobalSecurity.org*. Figure 6. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/nagorno-karabakh-2020.htm>



Russian Involvement

Russia has previously been accused of supporting de facto states in frozen conflict situations throughout the world, in order to maintain instability, and thus its own continued influence. In the context of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia maintains strong ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, although it is formally allied with Armenia through its [membership](#) in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).¹⁶² At the same time, Russia continues to supply arms and military equipment to both sides, as well as acting as the chief leader in the Minsk format group for peace negotiations (alongside France and the United States). PMCs play a crucial role in many of these activities, including, curiously, their peacekeeping aspect, which appears to be a [unique feature](#) of this region in terms of Russian PMC involvement.¹⁶³

Russian PMC Operations in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus

Russian PMCs are not known to have been involved in the region [before 2016](#),¹⁶⁴ although direct links to the Four-Day War in the context of Nagorno-Karabakh are unclear. Since the outbreak of further hostilities in 2020, there have been [accusations](#) levelled against [both](#) Armenia and Azerbaijan for enlisting the help of foreign mercenaries.¹⁶⁵ Azeri sources report that Russian PMCs operated exclusively for the Armenian side, including the infamous Wagner Group. In line with these allegations, some [500 Wagner Group fighters](#) reportedly arrived between August and September 2020 to engage in Shusha.¹⁶⁶ This area was, in the end, kept by Armenia, largely thanks to Russian volunteers. Further sources state that these forces were to be paid by Armenia, but because of the unofficial nature of the operation, the Armenian government refused to fulfil this responsibility. All the while, Armenia continued to deny these allegations, claiming that photo evidence presented was from Syria, where many Wagner

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Hedenskog, J., Holmquist, E., and Norberg, J., 2018. *Security in the Caucasus: Russian policy and military posture*. Ministry of Defence of Sweden.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dNkd7Igz4inhW_iXbk2sAuDv8F5SUK9o/view.

¹⁶⁴ Katz, B., Jones, S.G., Doxsee, C., and Harrington, N., 2020. *Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies.

<https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.

¹⁶⁵ Contact, 2021. "Russian mercenaries fought against Azerbaijan and may stay in Karabakh." *Turan.az*. <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/1/free/Social/en/630.htm>; TASS, 2020. "Azerbaijan says Armenia using foreign mercenaries in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict." *TASS Russian News Agency*. <https://tass.com/world/1207321>.

¹⁶⁶ Contact, 2021. "Russian mercenaries fought against Azerbaijan and may stay in Karabakh." *Turan.az*. <https://www.turan.az/ext/news/2021/1/free/Social/en/630.htm>



Group operatives gained previous experience. It is important to note that the involvement of this particular PMC has not been confirmed externally.

Similar accusations were levelled against Azerbaijan's conduct in the conflict. However, the presence of Russian PMCs in this instance is also unclear. That is not to say they have not been operating in Azerbaijan, only to point out that their involvement in the clashes of 2020 is unconfirmed. Instead, Azerbaijan is accused of accepting the help of mostly [Syrian mercenaries](#) recruited and supplied by their long term supporter Turkey.¹⁶⁷ Turkish mercenaries have, in fact, been playing a vital role in supporting Azer conflict operations since at least 2016, and [definitely](#) during the eruption of fighting in 2020.¹⁶⁸ These mercenaries were compensated for their combat with the sum of around [USD 2000](#) per month, with additional USD 100 per "beheaded Armenian",¹⁶⁹ according to human rights and other NGOs. The same sources report the ties between these mercenaries and battlefield atrocities, including 38 civilian casualties during the months of 2020. This is compounded by the fact that "[Azerbaijan](#) has persistently banned access of humanitarian actors in Artsakh, especially those territories that remain under the control of the Armenian armed forces or under the mandate of the Russian peacekeepers".¹⁷⁰

It is in the role of peacekeeping that there appears to be greater involvement on the side of Russian PMCs, although this typically does not fall under their responsibilities. Since 2016, a number of PMCs have been operating in Azerbaijan and the Caucasus, [including](#) Redut-Antiterror/Centre R, E.N.O.T., and MAR PMC,¹⁷¹ most of which, unlike the aforementioned involvement of the Wagner Group, have been confirmed by external sources. E.N.O.T. in particular has been reported to engage in running "[military-type training camps](#)" for foreign radical groups and fighters.¹⁷² Other PMCs are, however, also involved with [securing](#) energy resources and [maintaining](#) land corridors in occupied areas after the ceasefire brokered by

¹⁶⁷ The European Parliament, 2021. *Human rights violations by private military and security companies, particularly the Wagner Group*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0482_EN.html.

¹⁶⁸ Tharoor, I., 2020. "Turkey and Russia preside over a new age of mercenary wars." *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/09/30/armenians-azerbaijan-turkey-russia-clashes/>.

¹⁶⁹ Shirinyan, Y., 2022. "Civil society Organizations' Submission Concerning the Use of Mercenaries in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War." *Open Society Foundations-Armenia*. p. 4. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Open-Society-Foundations-Armenia-CFI-WG-Mercenaries-HRC51.pdf>.

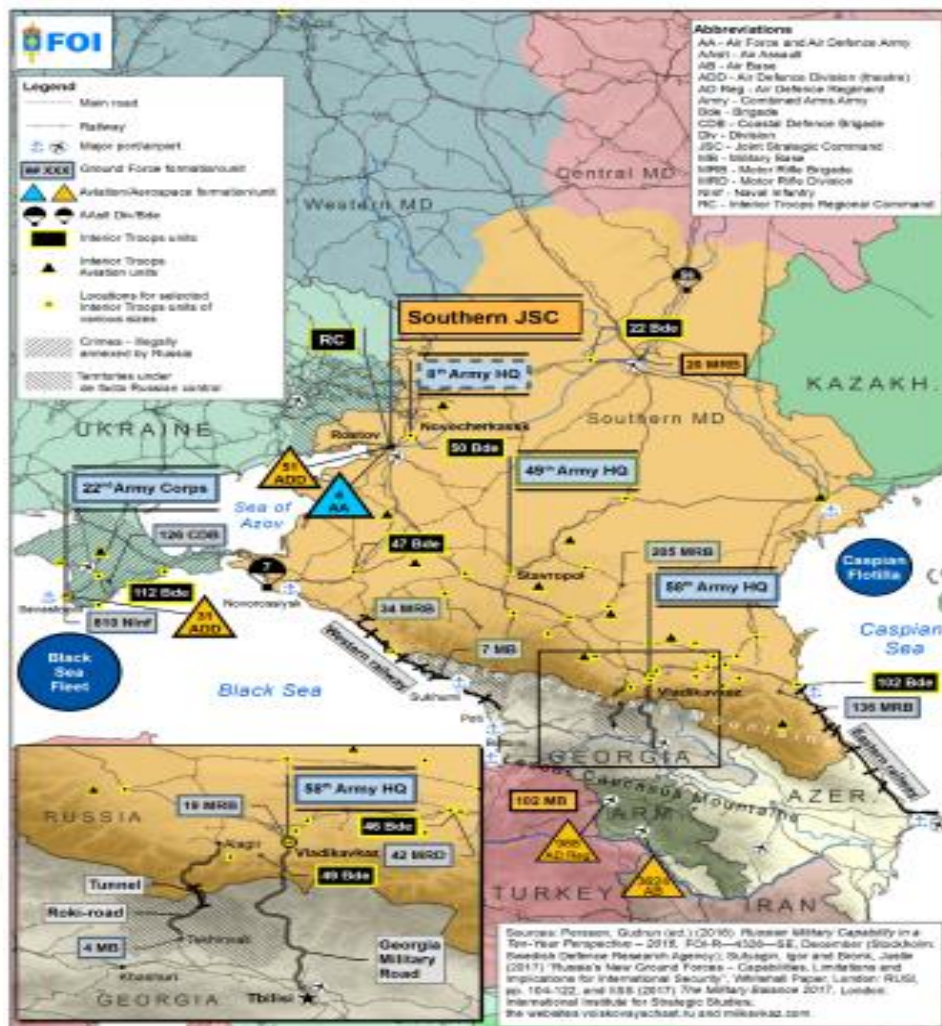
¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 13.

¹⁷¹ Jones, S.G., and Doxsee, C., 2021. *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>

¹⁷² Schroeder, E., Wilde, G., Sherman, J., and Herr, T., 2022. "Hackers, Hoodies, and Helmets: Technology and the changing face of Russian private military contractors." *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/technology-change-and-the-changing-face-of-russian-private-military-contractors/>.



Russia in November 2020.¹⁷³ While this secondary role of peacekeeping is not usual, it is understandable from the point of view of Russian strategic interests. This is because “PMCs also serve as a tool to expand [Russian soft power](#), including themes of “Russian patriotism” and Slavic identity among ideologically minded citizens in the former Soviet states”.¹⁷⁴ At the same time, Russia is engaged in a balancing act between conflict manipulation in the South Caucasus, and containing instability in the North Caucasus, which is part of its own territory. PMCs are therefore often deployed for the purposes of border and regional security as well, in line with their more historical use. This includes Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, but also the de facto states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on Georgian territory.



¹⁷³ Baev, P.K., 2007. “The Russian military focus on tasks in the Caucasus and Central Asia.” *Prio*. <https://www.prio.org/projects/1342>.

¹⁷⁴ Jones, S.G., and Doxsee, C., 2021. *Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies*. Center for Strategic and International Studies, p. 20. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.



*Figure 7 Available Russian military units in the South Caucasus (2016-2017).*¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

Russian use of PMCs in the Caucasus region has been documented at least since 2016, and their continued presence corresponds to Russian geopolitical, economic, and strategic objectives. Russia has an interest particularly in keeping the region embedded in a constant mix of frozen conflicts, since its influence would be greatly diminished if this was not the case. Its use of PMCs in the region thus mirrors these ambiguities of maintaining its economic and geopolitical influence through peacekeeping efforts, while also quasi-maintaining the status quo due to more long-term strategic interests of keeping the region a part of its buffer zone between itself and the Western and Eastern worlds. In line with these objectives, it is likely that Russian PMCs will continue to expand their presence in the region, as well as, and more crucially, expand their scope and methods of operation in order to fit better into this particular conflict environment while staying true to their principles of secrecy and deniability.

2.2. Latin America

Elin Roberts

Venezuela

Elin Roberts

Political Context: A constitutional crisis and a President holding on to power with Russian assistance

2017: A Constitutional Crisis

The 2017 [constitutional crisis](#) of Venezuela and the current political crisis that faces the country dates back to the 6th of December 2015 when the majority of seats, 56.21% of votes, in the National Assembly were won by the opposition compared to the ruling party who won 37.85% of the vote.¹⁷⁶ Since this moment, the country has lived in a socio, economic, and humanitarian crisis whilst also witnessing the breakdown of the legitimacy of the President and the National Assembly.

¹⁷⁵ Hedenskog, J., Holmquist, E., and Norberg, J., 2018. *Security in the Caucasus: Russian policy and military posture*. Ministry of Defence of Sweden. p. 41.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dNkd7Igz4inhW_iXbk2sAuDv8F5SUK9o/view.

¹⁷⁶ Sánchez-Urribarri, R., and García-Soto., 2019. "A Primer to Venezuela's Constitutional Crisis." *IACL-AIDC Blog*.

<https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/crisis-in-venezuela/2019/4/29/a-primer-to-venezuelas-constitutional-crisis>



Following the win of the opposition, Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela's President since 2013) has been looking for ways to consolidate and strengthen his political power. In doing so he had [meddled with both the judiciary and legislative](#) powers.¹⁷⁷ The first instance of this was seen on the 23rd of December 2015 as the outgoing Chavista majority of the National Assembly appointed 13 main magistrates and 21 substitutes to the Supreme Tribunal of Justice of Venezuela, in a record time of less than fifteen days - contrary to [article 264](#) of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela which states that the process must take a minimum of 30 days.¹⁷⁸ In doing so, Maduro took control of the judiciary, having appointed members sympathetic to the cause of the United Socialist Party before the opposition came to power in the National Assembly.

Not only did Maduro use the powers of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice of the country to consolidate more power, he also used the branch to delegitimise the opposition majority of the National Assembly. For instance, the Supreme Tribunal suspended the swearing in of three members of the Assembly based on allegations of electoral irregularities and declared the National Assembly of being in contempt of court for swearing the members in question into the Assembly. Furthermore, the Tribunal declared many of the activities of the Assembly as being unconstitutional.

During this period, public discontent towards Maduro increased due to the deteriorating economic factor and there was a call to hold a recall referendum against the President. However, this was unsuccessful due to delays and administrative blocks caused by the electoral authority and the criminal courts. In an attempt to continue holding power and to be rid of Maduro's opposition, in March 2017 the Supreme Tribunal stripped the National Assembly of its legislative powers through [decision N° 155 and 156](#).¹⁷⁹ The Organisation of American States described this as a "self-coup". This decision was later reversed by the Supreme Tribunal following months of protests which saw high levels of political repression within the country.

¹⁷⁷ Brewercarías, A. R., January - June 2016. "El desconocimiento judicial de la potestad de la Asamblea Nacional para revisar y revocar sus propios actos cuando sean inconstitucionales: El caso de la revocación de los actos de designación de los magistrados del Tribunal Supremo." *Revista de derecho público*. 145-146: 23-49.

<http://allanbrewercarias.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/9789803653699-txt.pdf>

¹⁷⁸ Justicia Venezuela., 1999. "Artículo 264." *Justicia Venezuela*.

<https://venezuela.justia.com/federales/constitucion-de-la-republica-bolivariana-de-venezuela/titulo-v/capitulo-iii/#:~:text=Art%C3%ADculo%20264%20Los%20magistrados%20o,determinar%C3%A1%20el%20procedimiento%20de%20elecci%C3%B3n.>

¹⁷⁹ Villagrán Sandoval, C. A., 2017. "Análisis de las Sentencias 155 y 156 de la Sala Constitucional del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia de Venezuela, sus efectos y respuesta." *IACL-AIDC Blog*.

<https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/test-3/2018/5/26/anlisis-de-las-sentencias-155-y-156-de-la-sala-constitucional-del-tribunal-supremo-de-justicia-de-venezuela-sus-efectos-y-respuesta>



As discontent and protesting grew within the population, Maduro decided to hold a National Constituent Assembly in July 2017, a decision that was unconstitutional in itself. The Constituent Assembly elections were boycotted by the opposition for not being free nor fair. As a result, Maduro had total control over the Constituent Assembly which he used as a legislative body instead of the National Assembly in order to legitimise himself in front of the population. It is important to note here that only the National Assembly of Venezuela can make financial decisions and is the only body that can legally sign financial agreements and contracts.

2018: The Presidential Elections

Having consolidated the powers of the judicial branch as well as the legislative branch, Maduro turned Venezuela into a dictatorship, however, the question lay in whether he could survive the 2018 presidential elections.

Despite the fact that Maduro was [re-elected as President](#),¹⁸⁰ the results of the 2018 elections have been rejected by many international actors such as the Organisation of American States, the European Union, and the Lima Group due to electoral irregularities. For example, the election was initially to be held in December 2018, which changed to April 2018, and which were finally held in May 2018. In addition to this, the electoral turnout was the lowest ever seen in Venezuela since its democratic transition in 1958. Despite the irregularities, it is important to note that the results of the 2018 elections were recognised and accepted by China, Russia, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Cuba, Iran, Turkey, as well as by other Maduro sympathisers. It was very evident that the 2018 elections were used by Maduro as a way of legitimising his powers in front of his people - however many members of the Venezuelan population and of the international community describe the elections as being false and purely symbolic.

2019: Venezuela and its Two Presidents

Maduro was sworn in as President by Maikel Moreno, Chief Justice of the Supreme Tribunal in a public act aimed at increasing Maduro's legitimacy domestically and internationally, different to the usual tradition of being sworn in in front of the National Assembly. Simultaneously, the National Assembly (the official legislative body of the country) elected Juan Guaidó as President of the Assembly in December 2018 and was later sworn in on the 5th of January 2019.

As Guaidó was sworn in he highlighted the need to form a transitional government, to hold free and fair elections and to bring an end to the usurpation seen under the government of Maduro. Hence, Guaidó invoked article 333 of the constitution calling upon all citizens to implement the constitution despite the fact that the government ceased to apply it. Furthermore,

¹⁸⁰ BBC News., 2018. "Venezuela election: Maduro wins second term amid claims of vote rigging." *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-44187838>



on the 23rd of January 2019, Guaidó invoked article 233 of the 1999 Constitution to act as [interim President](#) having refused to recognise Maduro as the President following the unconstitutional presidential elections of 2018.¹⁸¹ Guaidó was recognised as President of Venezuela by the Organisation of American States, the European Union, the US, as well as by many other countries. Guaidó also sent his own representatives to represent Venezuela in countries that recognised him as President. However, his attempt to become the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was short lived as Maduro remained in power. Furthermore, Guaidó was never recognised as President of Venezuela by Russia, China, Cuba, Nicaragua, Iran, nor by other Maduro sympathisers.

After having explored the political situation of Venezuela, we will now look at its relationship with Russia, with particular focus on military and security cooperation.

Russian - Venezuelan Economic and Military Relations

Diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Venezuela were established on the 3rd of March 1945, however, relations between both countries were broken off on the 13th of June 1952 as the Venezuelan government deported suspected Russian spies during the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. However, relations between both countries were re-established on the 16th of April 1970.

In March 2021, the former foreign minister of Venezuela, Jorge Arreaza, celebrated the [76th anniversary](#) of the first establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries,¹⁸² whilst highlighting that the relationship began to flourish under the presidency of Hugo Chávez and continued doing so under the presidency of Nicolas Maduro. Cooperation between both countries have been seen in regard to [health, economy, as well as military and security](#).¹⁸³ Within this report, we'll focus upon the military relations between both countries, with focus on the intention to keep Maduro in power. In doing so, we will also look at the economic support that Russia has offered Venezuela as this is linked with its military activities in the Latin American country.

According to the former head of Armament for the National Bolivarian Armed Force, Carlos Molina Tamayo, since the 2000s Russia has delivered weapons worth more than \$15 billion to Venezuela. Venezuela has become an important market for Russian energy companies and

¹⁸¹ Rendon, M., 2019. "Juan Guaidó: Venezuela's Interim President." *Center for Strategic & International Studies*.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/juan-guaid%C3%B3-venezuelas-interim-president>

¹⁸² Tele Sur TV., 2021. "Venezuela y Rusia conmemoran 76 años de vínculos diplomáticos." *Tele Sur TV*.

<https://www.telesurtv.net/news/rusia-venezuela-aniversario-diplomacia-20210315-0006.html>

¹⁸³ Brown, A., 2020. "An Enduring Relationship – From Russia, With Love." *Center for Strategic & International Studies*.

<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/enduring-relationship-russia-love>



arms producers. For instance, Venezuela used a [\\$4 billion](#) Russian credit to buy arms between 2005-2008.¹⁸⁴

In addition to this, Russia has invested a lot of money in Venezuela whilst offering the country numerous loans. In terms of loans related to weaponry, as of July 2019, Venezuela owes Russia \$10 billion for the purchase of 36 Russian Su30MK2s fighter jets. Furthermore, as of July 2019, the Russian oil company, Rosneft, had invested \$1.1 billion into oil field development projects in Venezuela and according to the Economic Development Ministry of Russia, Venezuela has received over \$4 billion in investment.

Looking further at the military cooperation between both countries, how did Russia support Maduro during Venezuela's constitutional crisis, which we may say is ongoing? Russia first intervened in this crisis in December 2018 after Juan Guaidó had been voted as President of the Assembly by sending two TU-160s. On one hand this showed Moscow's ability to place strategic weapons close to the US, however, it was somewhat ineffective as it could not stop the Venezuelans from calling for the ousting of Maduro as President.

As Guaidó proclaimed himself as the President of Venezuelans and having had the approval of many countries, Maduro's power began to weaken. As a result, at the beginning of 2019, Putin gave Maduro S-300 (missile) systems - the same weapons Moscow had provided to Bashar-al Assad in Syria. Supplying Venezuela with such weapons meant that on one hand Venezuela would have been able to defend itself in the case of a military intervention by the US and the west as they had recognised Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela. On the other hand, giving Venezuela such weaponry was used as an opportunity to increase Russia's military influence in the country by offering experts to provide security for Maduro. Moscow has described its military presence in Venezuela as being there for [consulting and advisory purposes](#).¹⁸⁵

Many sources describe the "experts" that Russia sent to Venezuela as soldiers or paramilitaries, known as the secretive group, [Wagner](#),¹⁸⁶ who have been known to have participated in the Russian annexation of Crimea, in the Syrian War, and in the current war in Ukraine. It is estimated that 400 Russian soldiers were sent to Venezuela at the beginning of 2019. On one hand they were sent to protect Maduro and to ensure that he remained in power despite the

¹⁸⁴ Herbst, J.E. and Marczak, J., 2019. "Russia's intervention in Venezuela: What's at stake?" *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russias-intervention-in-venezuela-whats-at-stake/>

¹⁸⁵ Camilleri De Castanedo, I., 2021. "Russian Paramilitary Presence in Venezuela?" *Grey dynamics*. <https://greydynamics.com/russian-paramilitary-presence-in-venezuela/>

¹⁸⁶ Sahuquillo, M. R., 2019. "Paramilitares rusos viajaron a Venezuela para proteger a Maduro." *El País*. https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/01/25/actualidad/1548446228_210395.html



protests throughout the country. On the other hand, Wagner was sent to Venezuela to [protect key Russian infrastructures](#) from the protesters such as Rosneft's sites.¹⁸⁷

In addition to this, Russian paramilitaries have been used to train the *colectivos*, known as one of the paramilitary organisations used by the Maduro government to minimise threats from the opposition. The *colectivos* describe themselves as being promoters of democracy, of political groups, and cultural activities. However, by members of the public they have been described as armed or paramilitary groups. *Colectivo* members have [attacked](#) protesters, journalists, students, clerics, and people suspected of being critical of the government, sometimes with the consent of security forces and in some cases even openly coordinating with them.¹⁸⁸ In 2019, the *colectivos* were categorised as being terrorist groups by Venezuela's National Assembly under Juan Guaidó. On one hand the *colectivos* are used by the government to control the opposition, yet on the other hand, they [get away with multiple crimes](#).¹⁸⁹

Relations between Russia and Venezuela [continue to flourish](#) today despite the ongoing war in Ukraine.¹⁹⁰ On the 16th of February 2022 during the visit of Russia's deputy Prime Minister, Yuri Borisov, Maduro stated that the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela fully supports Russia whilst highlighting decisions made on future military corporations between both countries.

Why is Russia Maintaining Military Relations with Venezuela?

One of Russia's main motives to be active in Venezuela and to offer military and security support to the country is to have power within the US' sphere of influence. Furthermore, it's a way for Russia to expand its power reach and to be recognised as a global power by competing against the US' hegemony. We may also argue that Russia tries to destabilise the Americas and control the US' approach to issues dealing with Russia. For instance, Russia sent TU-160 strategic bombers to Venezuela for a joint naval [exercise in the Caribbean Sea](#) [16] in 2008 as a warning to the US pushing for a pro-Western Ukraine and for supporting Mikheil Saakashvili during the Georgian war.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, the presence of Wagner in Venezuela is a way for Russia to show the US' that it also has influence in the Americas. Despite this, if the US were

¹⁸⁷ Camilleri De Castanedo, I., 2021. "Russian Paramilitary Presence in Venezuela?" *Grey dynamics*. <https://greydynamics.com/russian-paramilitary-presence-in-venezuela/>

¹⁸⁸ Wallis, D., 2014. "Venezuela violence puts focus on militant 'colectivo' groups." *Reuters*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20140226160034/http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/13/venezuela-protests-colectivos-idUSL2N0LI14W20140213>

¹⁸⁹ Camilleri De Castanedo, I., 2021. "Colectivos: Maduro's Venezuelan Militias." *Grey dynamics*. <https://greydynamics.com/colectivos-maduros-venezuelan-militias/>

¹⁹⁰ Diálogo., 2022. "Russia-Venezuela Military Partnership A Threat to Latin America." *Diálogo*. <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/russia-venezuela-military-partnership-a-threat-to-latin-america/#.Y1mjuuxBxQK>

¹⁹¹ Romero, S., and Levy, C. J., "Russia and Venezuela Confirm Joint Military Exercises." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/world/americas/09venez.html>



to intervene in Venezuela, we know that Russia couldn't move quickly enough to its geographical distance.

Conclusion

As we see that Maduro is becoming weaker and weaker in Venezuela, we notice Russia's involvement within the country. We may argue that this is to ensure that Maduro remains in power as he is a close ally of Putin which allows Russia to have some influence within the American hemisphere. However, we must remember that Russian paramilitaries in Venezuela have been focused on protecting Russian infrastructure from the destruction of protests in the country. Here we must also consider the lack of information available on the specific activities of the Wager Group in Venezuela. Looking at the ongoing war in Ukraine, Maduro continues to support Russia's military activities and we may conclude that Maduro's support will continue throughout the war.

2.3 Middle East and North Africa

Mariam Morsy, Katie Luk, and Sarah Kuszynski

Syria

Mariam Morsy

The Syrian Crisis 2011

During an [interview](#) with The Wall Street Journal in January 2011,¹⁹² following popular protests in Egypt and Tunisia that had ousted their long-term autocrats, President Bashar al-Assad was confident that a similar uprising is unlikely to occur in Syria despite his acknowledgement of the deteriorating economic situation in the country, as he believed that his government's anti-west stances along with his confidence in his people would spare his regime from such demands. However, it was soon proved that he was too confident, and anti-regime protests erupted in Syria in March 2011, less than two months after the interview. Protestors demanded an end to the authoritarian regime of the Assad family that has been ruling the state since Hafiz al-Assad (Bashar's father) came into power in 1971, and ever since, both have been using violent oppression and extensive military and police forces to eliminate any potential pro-democracy uprising. The peaceful protests first began in the southern city of Dar'a, after a group of teenagers had been arrested from their classrooms and tortured by the military police for writing an anti-regime graffiti, and the protests turned into a mass uprising

¹⁹² "Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad" (2011)
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>



soon after as the security forces continued to use deadly violence and conducting mass arrests against protestors.

The harsh response by the government and the brutal involvement of the military forces in the suppression gradually led to demonstrations turning unpeaceful, as the Syrian opposition started forming local militias and later on a military wing. [Sectarian preferences](#) had been dominating the military-regime relations in Syria for decades,¹⁹³ with high military commands and senior officers belonging to the same sect as the Assad family, the ‘Alawite religious minority, while junior officers and conscripts belonging to the Sunni majority. This sectarian dimension caused a great number of Sunni officers and conscripts to dissent from the military and join the opposition, and later on form the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, which had been the military wing of the Syrian opposition and carried out combats and military operations against the Syrian Armed Forces of the regime, leading to a civil war. The civil war emerged as a government-against-rebels conflict, but soon developed into a [multi-actor](#) proxy war with both domestic and foreign forces involved in the fight against the Syrian government and also against each other in some occasions.¹⁹⁴

Foreign Interests: A Proxy War Playground

As the conflict arose, regional and world powers started taking sides. The United States and the European Union along with other Syria-neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey formed an anti-Assad block by August 2011, demanded him to step down and imposed sanctions on members of the regime’s elite. The United Nations and the Arab League had attempted on some occasions to reach an agreement between the conflict’s parties, but with no outcome, nonetheless. On the other hand, Assad’s regime continued to receive support from its long-standing allies Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia. In October 2011, Russia and China casted a veto against a UN Security Council Resolution condemning al-Assad. Both blocks started escalating their support for each party by late 2012. [Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia](#) along with the US and the EU began providing arms and funds for rebel groups, mainly the FSA,¹⁹⁵ while [Iran](#),¹⁹⁶ and [Hezbollah](#),¹⁹⁷ sent weapons and militants to fight with Assad’s military. Russia’s indirect involvement began in 2013 by [sending mercenaries](#) through its PMCs,¹⁹⁸ this synchronised the emergence of ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/or Syria [ISIS])

¹⁹³ Droz-Vincent, P. (2016) “The Syrian Military and the 2011 Uprising.” *Armies and Insurgencies in the Arab Spring*, H. Albrecht, A. Croissant & F. H. Lawson (Eds.), University of Pennsylvania Press, (8), 168-184.

¹⁹⁴ ["Syria's civil war explained from the beginning"](#). Al Jazeera. [Archived](#) from the original on 30 April 2017. Retrieved 29 April 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Mazzetti, M., Chivers, C. J. and Schmitt E., Taking Outsize role in Syria, Qatar Funnels Arms to Rebels, NY Times, 29 June 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Fisk, R. (2013) “Iran to Send 4,000 Troops to Aid President Assad Forces in Syria,” *The Independent*.

¹⁹⁷ Rome, H. (2013) “Elite Hezbollah Fighters are Spearheading Battle in Syria, IDF Commander Warns,” *Jerusalem Post*.

¹⁹⁸ (zlobnig_v_2), “Istoriya Slavyanskogo korpusa 2,” *Livejournal*, October 26, 2015, <https://zlobnig-v-2.livejournal.com/1142672.html>.



and other Islamist militia groups to take part in the conflict. In 2015, the Russian government started its direct support through [deploying troops](#) and providing warplanes, ammunition, rocket launchers and anti-aircraft systems to the Syrian army.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, some operations were held directly by Russian army groups and were claimed to target ISIL, but it was later on proved to target any rebel groups that fought against al-Assad's regime. Alesksandr Dvornikov, Colonel-General of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, who commanded the Russian groups in Syria in 2015-2016, stated that operations preparing was carried out by officers from [Russia's Aerospace Forces, Navy, and Special Operations Forces](#) due to the low efficiency of the Syrian army.²⁰⁰

The situation in Syria now remains very dark. The country is absolutely torn apart after 12 years of civil war, with more actors getting involved in the fight such as the Turkish, Kurdish and even Israeli forces. Atrocities are being committed daily, and Syrians are facing increasing living hardships and human rights violations from multiple sides. According to [UNHCR](#), more than 6.8 million Syrians have been forced to flee the country since the conflict erupted in 2011, and another 6.9 million have been internally displaced.²⁰¹ Russia -along with Iran- remains in active support of its ally. Ever since its direct involvement in 2015, the Russian military has committed various international crimes in Syria by targeting civilians, hospitals, schools, and water and food resources. Various massacres have been [reported](#) by the Russian military or its PMCs using illegal weapons like cluster munitions.²⁰² Just recently in January 2022, [Russian warplanes bombed a major water station](#) feeding more than 200,000 people in the rebel-controlled city of Idlib. In return, the Kremlin has reached multiple [strategic goals and economic investments](#) in Syria, by winning a five oil contracts since 2013, and another 84 million dollars contract to build flour mills.²⁰³ It also helped the Syrian government rebuild some of its destructed schools, and by this, it imposed [Russian to be taught as a second language](#) instead of French.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ Grajewski, N. (2021) "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria." Center for Strategic and International Studies.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ USA for UNHCR, "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained." July 8, 2022. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#:~:text=More%20than%206.8%20million%20Syrians,in%20T%C3%BCrkiye%2C%20Lebanon%20and%20Jordan.>

²⁰² Pro-Justice (Edt. Shehab el-Din, Kh). "Russian's Massacres and Violations against Syrian Civilians." 2019. Pro-Justice.

²⁰³ Dadouch, S. (2021) "After backing Assad, Iran and Russia compete for influence and spoils of war." The Washington Post.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

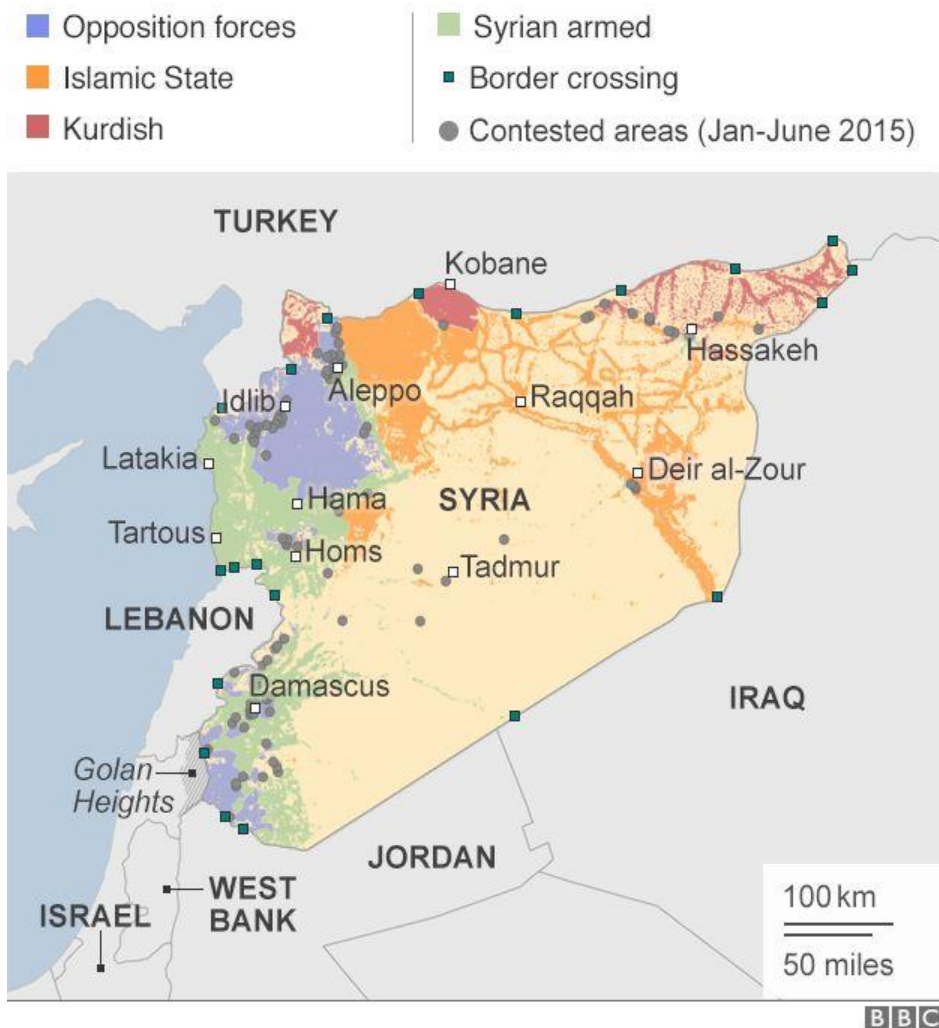


Figure 8 Syria's military situation 2015-2016

Russian PMCs in Syria

The Creation of Slavonic Corps Limited

After the failed attempt of the [FDG Corp.](#), Russia's first private military company (PMC), to successfully enter the global commercial security market in the 1990s with its western competitors,²⁰⁵ another potentiality was seen after conflicts in Syria and Libya broke out. Mercenary companies are seen as a useful tool for foreign states to achieve geopolitical and economic gain without participating directly.²⁰⁶ When a Middle East ally was threatened to be

²⁰⁵ Sukhankin, S. "From 'Volunteers' to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts," In *War by Other Means*, The Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/from-volunteers-to-quasi-pmcs-retracing-the-footprints-of-russian-irregulars-in-the-yugoslav-wars-and-post-soviet-conflicts/>.

²⁰⁶ Ageev, A. "Silovaya ekonomika I smena mirovogo gegemona," *Strategicheskie priority* no. 2 (6) (2015): 27-48.



overthrown by public protests, Russia revived the usage of PMCs in Syria as its public would not have [tolerated actual troops](#) to be sent for a deadly fight.²⁰⁷ In January 2012, Slavonic Corps Limited was registered in Hong Kong by the Russian firm Moran Security Group with an aim to take advantage of the conflicts. It mainly consisted of retired military officers and [experienced professionals](#) who had previously served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, East Africa and other places.²⁰⁸ Some believe that in 2013, [the Kremlin recommended](#) providing military support to al-Assad's regime by sending quasi-PMC to fight in Syria.²⁰⁹ However, the most probable theory is that the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources [proposed](#) support from Moran Security Group and requested sending groups of professionals to protect "critical infrastructure related to extraction, transportation and processing of hydrocarbons."²¹⁰ The company then decided to send a proxy force, thus, creating the Slavonic Corps to test the ground. In October 2013, two former managers of Moran (Vadim Gusev and Yevgeniy Sidorov) [formed a group](#) of 267 militants that would get \$5,000 per month for protecting oil and natural gas facilities in Syria, in addition to \$20,000 pay-out for injuries and \$40,000 in case of death that would go to the fighter's family.²¹¹ Upon arriving to Syria's [Latakia military base](#),²¹² the group was organised into two sub-units; one included [Cossacks](#) from the Kuban region and the other included ethnic-Russians. The latter group was reportedly led by [Dmitri Utkin](#) (later known by his *nom de guerre* "Wagner"), who is a professional soldier retired with the rank of lieutenant colonel and previously took part in two Chechen wars, he also commanded the Military Intelligence (GRU) *Spetsnaz* unit located in Pskov Oblast.²¹³ He will later on reappear in Ukraine with the Wagner Group.

The Slavonic Corps' first military combat took place near al-Sukhnah in eastern Syria in October 18, 2013, and it was a big defeat, however, it still demonstrated the capacities of the group's members, as they had high operational skills (with only [six men](#) wounded during the fight),²¹⁴ and good orientation on the ground. The defeat had other reasons; first, the Syrian Armed Forces did not share adequate information with the group regarding potential

²⁰⁷ Galeotti, M. "The Wagner Group and beyond: proxy Private Military Companies." Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/108294/html/>

²⁰⁸ "O nas," *Slavyanskiy Korpus*, accessed September 10, 2019,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20140214022550/http://slavcorps.org/ru/about>.

²⁰⁹ (zlobnig_v_2), "Istoriya Slavyanskogo korpusa 2," *Livejournal*, October 26, 2015, <https://zlobnig-v-2.livejournal.com/1142672.html>.

²¹⁰ Irek Murtazin, "Pervyj i poslednij boy 'Slavyanskogo korpusa'," *Novayagazeta.ru*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/05/74081-pervyy-i-posledniy-boy-slavyanskogo-korpusa>.

²¹¹ Sergey Khazov-Kassiya, "Proekt 'Myasorubka'. Rasskazyvayut tri komandira 'ChVK Wagnera'," *Radio Svoboda*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html>; "Poslednij boy 'Slavyanskogo korpusa'," *Fontanka.com*, November 14, 2013, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2013/11/14/060/>.

²¹² "[The Insane Story of Russian Mercenaries Fighting for the Syrian Regime](#)." *Huffington Post*. 21 November 2013. Retrieved 25 August 2014.

²¹³ "Utkin Dmitrij Valerevich," *Myrotvorets*, December 16, 2016, <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/utkin-dmitrij-valerevich/>.

²¹⁴ "[Industry Talk: The Slavonic Corps—A Russian PMSC In Syria](#)". *Feral Jundi*. 14 January 2014. Retrieved 25 August 2014.



adversaries and provided no aerial support nor sufficient battlefield coordination. Second, the group was poorly equipped. Weapons consisted of fighting vehicles produced in 1979, a number of mortars dating to 1939, outdated T-72 main battle tanks that did not work due to their poor condition, and several Hyundai buses and JMC jeeps reinforced with armours. Additionally, the group had machine guns, rocket launchers and small mortars manufactured in 1943. Third, the primary goal, which was only to [protect oil and gas facilities](#) in Deir ez-Zor,²¹⁵ was not as straightforward as it was originally made. The reality was that the majority of that area was controlled by rebel forces that outnumbered the mercenaries (2,000 to 6,000 militants), which had to be destroyed first in order to gain control over the oil facilities, and the mercenary group was not prepared for such missions, and this information was also never shared by the Syrian government.

The group returned to Russia after the defeat, and upon arriving at Vnukovo International Airport, they were detained by the Federal Security Service (FSB) on suspicion of being mercenaries, which is a crime under Article 359 of the Russian Law. The two [Moran managers](#) and owners of the Slavonic Corps, Gusev and Sidorov, were also charged and convicted in October 2014.²¹⁶ This paved the way to a new PMC, the Wagner Group.

The Wagner Group's Redeployment to Syria

The Group emerged between 2014 and 2015 as a well-organised paramilitary formation fighting in eastern Ukraine, then it was redeployed to Syria to fight with al-Assad's forces. The Wagner group is not officially registered in Russia or elsewhere in the world, this is why the Russian government constantly denied any knowledge of the group, however, it is often referred to as "Putin's secret army." The number of Wagner personnel first deployed to Syria is reportedly [2,349 men](#), this is why the PMC had an [army-like C2](#) structure that follows a template of the Russian Armed Forces;²¹⁷ a [higher level](#) of the commander-in-chief and a managing director, a middle level of an administrative group (388 personnel), a general staff (19 personnel), and a control group (36 personnel), and a bottom level of the rest of the fighters (1,904 men).²¹⁸ Between 2014 and 2018 the total number of deployed mercenaries is estimated to exceed [5,000 men](#).²¹⁹ Regarding their payments in Syria, this should be divided into two terms; between 2015 and 2016, the official average salaries reached \$3,800 monthly, but then increased in early 2017 due to hostilities becoming more intense, and the monthly salaries went

²¹⁵ Leviev, Ruslan (28 March 2019). [В Сирии появилась новая ЧВК родом из Украины](#) [In Syria, a new PMC hails from Ukraine]. *citeam.org* (in Russian). Archived from [the original](#) on 30 March 2019. Retrieved 28 February 2020.

²¹⁶ ["Last battle of the Slavic Corps"](#). *Fontanka*. 14 November 2013. Retrieved 25 August 2014.

²¹⁷ Denis Korotkov, "Spisok Wagnera," *Fontanka*, August 21, 2017, <http://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

²¹⁸ Sergey Sukhankin, "Continuing War by Other Means': The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East," *Russia in the Middle East*, The Jamestown Foundation, July 13, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/>.

²¹⁹ "Nazvano chislo naemnikov, vovavavshykh v sostave 'ChVK Wagnera'," *Donpress*, August 4, 2018, <https://donpress.com/news/04-08-2018-nazvano-chislo-naemnikov-voevavshih-v-sostave-chvk-vagnera>.



up to \$8,000. However, some sources claimed that actual salaries ranged [between \\$4,000 and \\$4,800](#), and it was increased depending on the fighter's proved qualifications.²²⁰ According to an anonymous Wagner fighter, the wages of Wagner mercenaries were relatively higher than [regular Russian soldiers](#) in Syria from the Russian Armed Forces, as a regular fighter would earn approximately between \$3,100 and \$3,700 per month.²²¹ In 2017, the Wagner group was [financed directly by the Syrian government](#), which led to “chronic delays in payments and growing discontent”,²²² this resulted in a decrease in equipment and training qualities.

Activities

The military operations carried by the Wagner group in Syria had been crucial in helping Assad's armed forces in their fight against the rebels. [A former Wagner member](#) in Syria said that the group was responsible for being on the front lines of the fights, and helping the aviation and artillery forces, then when combats ended, the Syrian officers appear and TV channels interview them to report.²²³ [Igor Girkin](#), a Russian mercenary in Donbass, claimed that the main tasks of the Wagner group in Syria were carrying tactical offensive military operations that were celebrated by the media as “victories of the Syrian army”.²²⁴ In 2015, the group's activities did not include any major operations, this period only revolved around minor military encounters with anti-Assad forces after the deployment. Then in 2016, confrontations intensified, with the group having a bigger operation of liberating Palmyra. The groups suffered major losses during this period, with 32 deaths and around 80 serious injuries, however, the number of members may have risen to [approximately 2,000 men](#).²²⁵ It is also said that the group during this period tried to demonstrate its capacities to the Syrian government in order to gain more finances, using the best possible weapons and ammunitions, yet it still acted independently from al-Assad's forces. The deep involvement stage started in 2017, where the group showed high level operative skills that was reflected in the evolution of tasks from *de facto* military operations to paramilitary-style missions concerned with recapturing areas of oil and gas fields near Palmyra, Latakia and Aleppo. The main goal, which the group was paid for, was to protect oil and gas fields, but they had to [confront nearby rebel forces](#) in order to do so.²²⁶ Following this, the weaponry and equipment provided to the group by the Syrian

²²⁰ Ilya Rozhdestvensky, Anton Baev, Polina Rusyaeva, “Prizraki voyny: kak v Sirii poyavilas rossiyskaya chastnaya armiya,” *RBK*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/57bac4309a79476d978e850d>.

²²¹ Katerina Fladung, “Zarplaty, nagrody i gostayny: chem boyets ChVK otlichaetsya ot voyennykh,” *Ridus.ru*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.ridus.ru/news/271232?from=more>.

²²² Anastasiya Yakoreva, Svetlana Reyter, “‘Restorator Putina’ perestal byt lyubimym podryadchikom Minoborony,” *The Bell*, March 2, 2018, <https://thebell.io/restorator-putina-perestal-byt-lyubimym-podryadchikom-minoborony/>.

²²³ Denis Korotkov, “Oni srazhalis za Palmiru,” *Fontanka.ru*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/print.html>.

²²⁴ Igor Strelkov (Girkin), “Igor Strelkov: ‘Chastnik’ (Chast 1-4),” *Vbloknot*, July 14, 2018, <https://vbloknot.com/18446-igor-strelkov-chastniki.html>.

²²⁵ Yuriy Gavrilov, “Siriya: russkiy grom,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, March 23, 2016, <https://rg.ru/2016/03/23/aleksandr-dvornikov-dejstviiia-rf-v-korne-perelomili-situaciiu-v-sirii.html>.

²²⁶ Sergey Khazov-Kassiya, “Kak rabotat ‘ChVK Wagnera’. Rasskazy komandirov,” *Nastoyashchee vremya*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29084493.html>.



government [worsen](#), and the qualities of Wagner personnel decreased, as well as their payments.²²⁷

Deir ez-Zor battle and Wagner's defeat



Figure 9 Battle of Khasham, al-Assad's forces on the left side of the river and US-backed rebel forces on the right

[The Battle of Khasham](#) of 2018 is considered significant in the decline of Wagner activities in Syria after suffering a defeat, along with al-Assad's army, against the [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) ([SDF] anti-Assad forces) backed by the US military. The background story goes back to 2017, when the US and Russia agreed on creating "de-escalation zones" between the Euphrates River, with the river becoming a natural border separating the SDF and al-Assad's forces. This resulted in important oil and gas fields being entirely under SDF control (along with Syrian Kurds), and the pro-Assad forces' goal became to regain control over these areas, as they form a crucial part of the Syrian state's budget. On February 7, 2018, the Assad's regime deployed a diverse armed forces including the Wagner Group to target the Conoco oil field (the first time for the Wagner to be directly a part of the pro-Assad forces). Apparently,

²²⁷ Denis Korotkov, "Spisok Wagnera," *Fontanka.ru*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.



this operation was not discussed with the Russian military commander and [Syrian militants did not coordinate](#) their actions with the headquarters of the Russian operative group.²²⁸

A former Wagner member gave [details about that battle](#), saying that on February 8th, around 600 men of the pro-Assad forces including the Wagner Group, were destroyed while attempting to cross the Euphrates River. The forces were heavily armed with light firearms, artillery and main battle tanks. He stated; “The majority of the group consisted of Russian-speaking fighters, and only a smaller share included the so-called ISIS Hunters... This was a *de facto* fortified battalion of the Wagner Group... They had no man-portable air-defence systems, no air support, which, to be frank, had not been promised anyway. The idea was to first carry out an artillery assault and then to dash on the Kurds, entering into a close battle. In this regard, the Americans would not have intervened [out of concern of] shooting their own allies”.²²⁹ The reason for the defeat is apparently that the Syrian forces underestimated the technological superiority of the US backed side, which made the pro-Assad forces defenseless. [Anti-Assad forces used](#) F-15E Strike Eagle fighters, MQ-9 multi-mission aerial vehicles (UAV), Lockheed AC-130 gunships, B-52 Stratofortress jet-powered bombers and AH-64 Apache helicopters.²³⁰ [Some sources](#) say that losses suffered by the Russian PMC group are about 100 deaths and 200 injuries,²³¹ while [official sources](#) from the Wagner Group claim that the number of deaths is only 14 men.²³²

Human Rights Violations

On the 10th anniversary of the Syrian revolution in 2012, three prominent advocacy groups filed a complaint against the Wagner PMC Group in Russian courts, in an attempt to charge the group of its committed atrocities in Syria. This is the [first case ever](#) to be brought against such groups, following a number of torture-related cases held in Europe against Syrian regime officials.²³³ The case revolved around a video published in 2017 by an unknown source showing five Russian-speaking men in military uniform violently torturing a Syrian man in civilian clothes. An extended version was then posted in 2019 showing the men beheading and

²²⁸ “Popavshyje pod udar koalitsii SShA siriyskiye opolchentsy ne soglasovali operatsiyu s RF,” *Interfax.ru*, February 8, 2018, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/599096>.

²²⁹ Maksim Solopov, Maksim Yusin, Marianna Belenkaya, Valeriya Mishyna, Yelena Chernenko, Ivan Safronov, “Chastniki boyevykh deystviy,” *Kommersant*, February 14, 2018, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3548170>.

²³⁰ “Kak ubivali ChVK Wagner v Sirii,” *Vse obo vsem*, February 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90nm_2Fv-LI.

²³¹ “Reuters uznal o gibeli i raneniyakh 300 chastnykh rossiyskikh voyennykh v Sirii,” *Vedomosti*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2018/02/16/751218-gibeli-raneniyah-300-rossiyskih-voennih>.

²³² “V Sirii pogiblo 14 chelovek – rukovoditel ChVK ‘Wagner’ Troshev Andrey,” *Pravda.ru*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.pravda.ru/news/world/1371126-troshev/>.

²³³ France24. “NGOs file landmark legal case against Russian mercenaries in Syria over torture”, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210315-ngos-file-landmark-legal-case-against-russian-mercenaries-in-syria-over-torture>



mutilating the body of the Syrian victim Mohamed Raha Ismail al-Abdullah (known by Hammadi Bouta). The perpetrators were identified as Wagner members after an [investigation](#) by the independent Russian media group, Novaya Gazeta.²³⁴

This case is considered an initiation in investigating Russian Criminal Code violations that punishes any Russian citizen who had committed crimes outside Russian territories, including murder, war crimes and mercenary. However, [the Basmany court in Moscow rejected](#) the complaint claiming that it did not establish elements of a crime committed by Russian citizens, as it the nationality of the men accused is merely a suggestion.²³⁵ The complexity of this case lies on current legal systems being unequipped enough to handle cases of non-state actors' war crimes. However, the case has opened potentiality in addressing mercenary violations that had occurred in Syria, Libya and other parts of the world.

Conclusion

The Russian intervention has been fundamental in the al-Assad regime's survival. Getting its PMCs operating in Syria allowed the Russian government to support its ally without being directly involved in the battlefield, which would save it from its domestic opposition. The Wagner Group had been financially profiting from its activities in Syria along with providing Russia with its geopolitical and economic goal in the region, and Syria was only the experimental phase of the PMC, as it will go on to operate in other parts of the world and become Russia's secret card for political and economic gains.

Libya

Sarah Kuszyński

Russian Interests in Libya and Accelerated use of PMCs

Strategic Background- Why does Russia Wish to Influence Libya and Utilise PMCs?

Libya plays a pivotal role in Russia's Middle East activities, in the sense that Russia aims to [turn Libya into a proxy war playground](#).²³⁶ Crucially, Libya has been part of a struggle for access to resources and warm water ports, which has often formed a central part of various Russian leader's efforts to make the country the central player in European politics.

²³⁴ "Holding Wagner to Account for Russian Abuses in Syria." The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/holding-wagner-to-account-for-russian-abuses-in-syria/>

²³⁵ "Wagner in Syria: Ruling by Russian court entrenches impunity for brutal murder." Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression. <https://scm.bz/en/scm-statements/wagner-in-syria-ruling-by-russian-court-entrenches-impunity-for-brutal-murder>

²³⁶ "Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya." Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya | Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 25, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya>.



Libya has the [largest proven oil reserves in Africa](#),²³⁷ and many European countries [rely on Libya for oil](#).²³⁸ If Russia were to gain control over Libya's oil, it would provide Russia with leverage over Western Europe. Some scholars and defence officials believe that Russia's interest in Libya is also related to Libya's strategic location on NATO's southern flank.

The level of importance of relations with Libya to Putin was shown by his overtures to the Libyan government very soon after becoming president in 2000, and from his meeting with Qadhafi in 2008. Notably, the Russian government [wrote off nearly \\$5 billion debt in exchange for contracts on oil, gas, weaponry, and infrastructure access](#),²³⁹ for example, Qadhafi gave the Russian fleet access to Benghazi port.

Activities from 2011-2018

Libya erupted into violence during the 2011 Arab Spring. The subsequent NATO intervention helped rebel forces overthrow and kill Qadhafi in October 2011, leaving Libya without a legitimate successor leading rival militias to compete for control of Libyan territory. The two core rival factions are the [UN-backed Government of National Accord \(GNA\)](#), and the [Libya National Army \(LNA\)](#), led by [Khalifa Haftar](#) and financially supported primarily by Saudi Arabia and the UAE — [the two countries are also using PMCs to sure up their respective positions in Yemen](#).²⁴⁰

After the 2011 fall of Qadhafi, Putin provided Haftar's government with military advice, diplomatic support at the UN, to aid the LNA's fight its war against the UN Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The [main countries entangled in Libya's ongoing civil war](#) include: Italy, Qatar, and Turkey support the GNA, while France, Chad, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Russia support the LNA.²⁴¹

²³⁷ Stebbins, Samuel. "These 15 Countries, as Home to Largest Reserves, Control the World's Oil." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, May 22, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/05/22/largest-oil-reserves-in-world-15-countries-that-control-the-worlds-oil/39497945/>.

²³⁸ "Russia's Growing Interests in Libya." The Washington Institute. Accessed October 26, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-growing-interests-libya>.

²³⁹ "Digital." NewEs_J, September 26, 2022. <https://www.esjnews.com/the-art-of-denial-russia-s-mercenaries-in-libya>.

²⁴⁰ "Russia's Escalating Use of Private Military Companies in Africa." Institute for National Strategic Studies, November 24, 2020. <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2425797/russias-escalating-use-of-private-military-companies-in-africa/>; Riedel, Bruce. "Saudi Arabia and the UAE Consolidating Strategic Positions in Yemen's East and Islands." Brookings. Brookings, March 9, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/05/28/saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-consolidating-strategic-positions-in-yemens-east-and-islands/>.

²⁴¹ "Who's Who in Libya's War?" Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whos-who-libyas-war>.



From 2015 onwards, there were growing journalistic and military reports of various PMCs on the ground in Libya.²⁴² The PMC activities had a particular focus on protecting oil assets, which is in line with Putin’s strategic objectives of resource access and power projection. Russia is focusing on exploiting natural resource concessions, in return for the deployment of PMC forces. On top of natural resources, the Kremlin’s economic interests in Libya revolve around arms exports to the continent. Pursuing these economic interests is essential for keeping Russia’s various foreign interventions going and financing the defence industry.

The key PMC acting in Libya since 2015 has been the Wagner Group, which by 2018 had deployed several hundred mercenaries to multiple training sites, airfields, forward bases, and key energy and infrastructure sites, thus supporting the LNA and securing Russian interests.²⁴³ In short, PMC activity from 2011-2018 enabled Russia to gain and maintain access to such resources.

²⁴² “Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies.” Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies | Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 19, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.

²⁴³ Sukhankin, Sergey. “Continuation of Policy by Other Means: Russian Private Military Contractors in the Libyan Civil War.” Jamestown, February 7, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/continuation-of-policy-by-other-means-russian-private-military-contractors-in-the-libyan-civil-war/>.



2019 - Present

LIBYA Battle for Tripoli

Libya, a major oil producer, has been mired in conflict since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising against longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

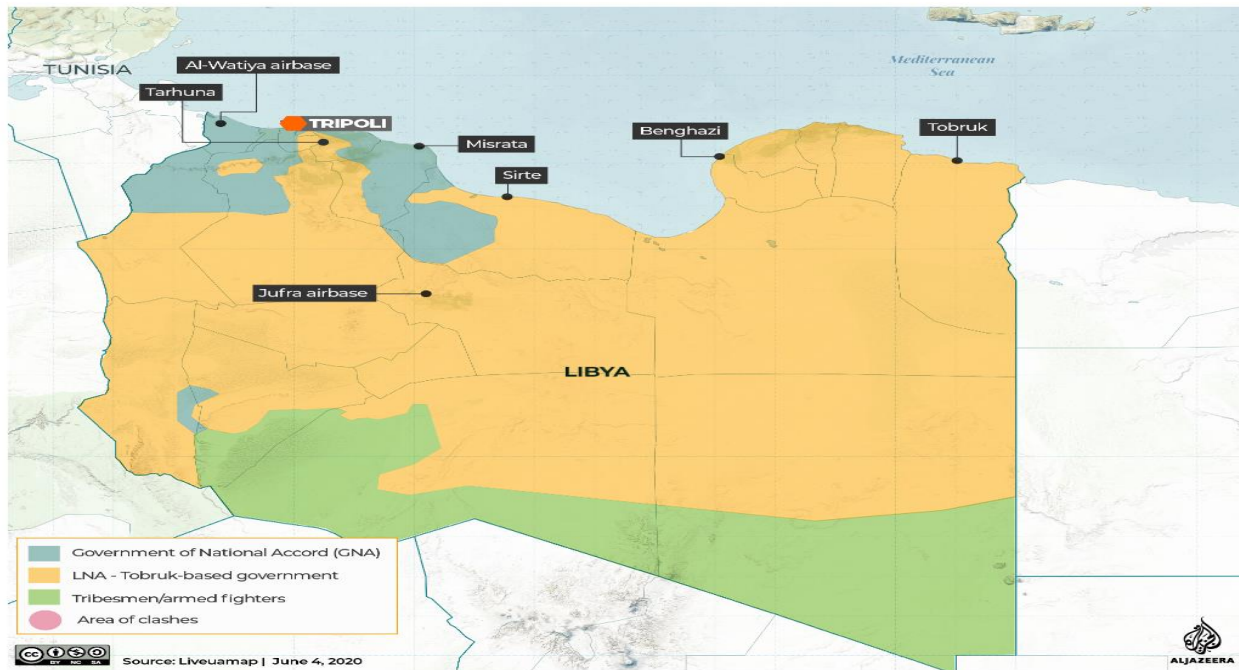


Figure 10 courtesy of [CSIS](#)

Russian PMC activity surged in the summer of 2019 to bolster Haftar’s flagging western Libya campaign and enable an [LNA offensive](#) against Tripoli.²⁴⁴ By early 2020, up to [1,200 Wagner mercenaries](#) were on the ground in Libya, to then be supported from the air with the arrival of Russian combat aircraft.²⁴⁵ Moreover, by 2020 it was [reported](#) that other Russian companies, namely the Moran Security Group, have joined Wagner in supplying mercenaries to fight in Libya.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ David. “Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War.” The New York Times. The New York Times, November 5, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/world/middleeast/russia-libya-mercenaries.html>.

²⁴⁵ Nichols, Michelle. “Up to 1,200 Deployed in Libya by Russian Military Group: U.N. Report.” Reuters. Thomson Reuters, May 6, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-sanctions-idUSKBN22I2XW>.

²⁴⁶ “Two Russian Firms Join Wagner Group in Supplying Haftar With.” The Libya Observer. Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/two-russian-firms-join-wagner-group-supplying-haftar-mercenaries>.

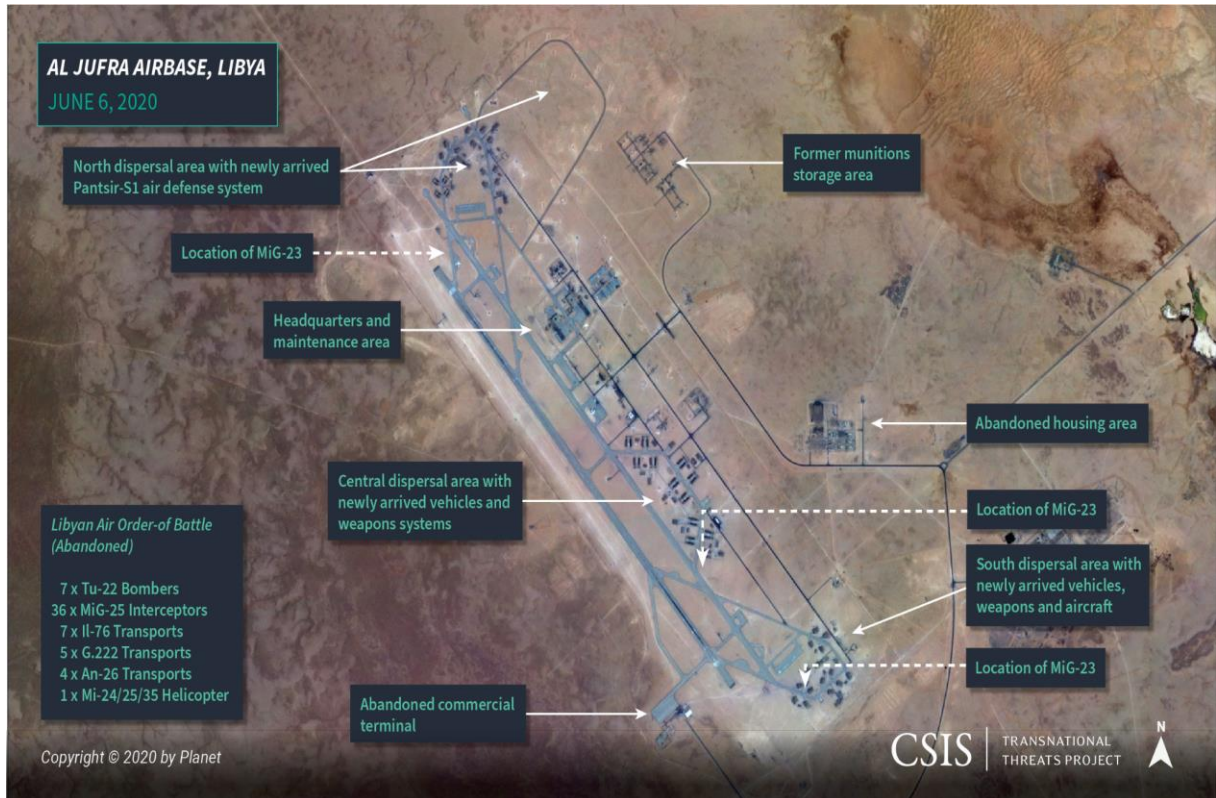


Figure 11 courtesy of [CSIS](#)

Following the Wagner Group’s defeat around Tripoli in the spring of 2020, however, Russia began to deploy previously unobserved heavy military equipment to support Russian PMC forces in Libya. [Satellite imagery from May 2020 produced by U.S. Africa Command \(AFRICOM\)](#) displayed Russia’s deployment of at least 14 combat aircraft, including Su-24 attack, MiG-29 fighter, and Su-35 interceptor escort aircraft to Libya’s Al Khadim and Al Jufra air bases.²⁴⁷ These two bases serve as critical transport and staging areas for forward-deployed Wagner and LNA units operating around Tripoli. The Wagner group’s [Al Khadim and Al Jufra activity represented an expansion of PMC ground forces.](#)²⁴⁸

While Russian PMC personnel have been training and equipping LNA forces in 2017 for a variety of ground, air, and air defence missions, [in 2019 Wagner Group began to take on direct](#)

²⁴⁷ Omondi, Jerry. “U.S. Publishes Satellite Images to Prove Russia Military's Involvement in Libya.” CGTN Africa, July 24, 2020. <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/07/24/u-s-publishes-satellite-images-to-prove-russia-militarys-involvement-in-libya/>.

²⁴⁸ “Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya.” Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya | Center for Strategic and International Studies, . <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moscows-next-front-russias-expanding-military-footprint-libya>.



[combat roles for the Tripoli offensive](#). Several hundred Wagner Group specialists have forward deployed with LNA units in and around Tripoli, employing snipers, anti-tank guided missiles, electronic warfare, reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles, SAMs, and precision-guided artillery, to execute vital combat tasks.

Russian PMC activity in [Libya diverges from the pattern of Russian PMC activity](#) across many parts of Africa. Namely in the deployment of heavy military equipment For example, Wagner troops have been observed using Russian-made equipment--such as [mortars and Kornet anti-tank missiles](#) that are typically the preserve of the Russian Military.²⁴⁹

Crucially, Russian PMCs were - even if only for a short period - able to achieve LNA territorial gains in Libya while strengthening Moscow's geostrategic position. However, Haftar's Wagner-enabled assault on Tripoli, revealed the limits of its PMC-led proxy warfare approach. The Tripoli operation triggered a large-scale escalation from Turkey, deployed proxy forces, including thousands of Syrian fighters, to stall LNA advances in 2020.

Despite this and the resulting withdrawal of hundreds of Wagner Group mercenaries from Tripoli, Russia almost certainly remains committed to supporting Haftar and will continue to provide military support to the LNA, including at strategic locations and bases such as Al Jufra.

Core Capabilities of Russian PMCs in Libya

Hard Power Capabilities

Firstly, PMC personnel have been training LNA forces on ground warfare tactics and weapons systems, including tanks, artillery, attack aircraft, and UAVs, especially since 2019. Hundreds of forward-deployed PMC fighters in direct combat in the Tripoli offensive, who utilised heavy military equipment and personnel from RSB Group [and Wagner have deployed at key oil, gas, infrastructure, and port facilities, including Benghazi, and Sirte, to provide security](#).²⁵⁰

Soft Power Capabilities

Russian PMCs cultivate relationships with Libya officials, in order to control the information space. Thereby, reinforcing RT and Sputnik Arabic. Relatedly, PMC-run media companies have acquired regional media outlets and [conducted social media influence operations to propagate pro-Haftar and anti-GNA, Turkey, and U.S. disinformation](#).

²⁴⁹ Wehrey, Frederic. "With the Help of Russian Fighters, Libya's Haftar Could Take Tripoli." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed October 27, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/12/05/with-help-of-russian-fighters-libya-s-haftar-could-take-tripoli-pub-80511>.

²⁵⁰ Brian Katz is a fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair. "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies." *Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies*, March 1, 2014. <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>.



Implications of Russian PMC Activity in Libya

Although Russia's interests in Libya are not immediately relevant to Russian national security, being further away from Russia's typical sphere of influence, [Russian readiness to use PMCs demonstrates a continued willingness to use force further afield](#). Despite its rapidly deteriorating economic outlook and the military stalemate in Ukraine, Russia remains committed to preserving its influence in Libya. Ukrainian officials allege that Hifter agreed to covertly transfer LNA forces to Ukraine under the Wagner Group's auspices.

Russia's level of support for the Wagner Group in Libya further demonstrates that Russia is willing to use PMCs to fight in direct contravention of U.N. resolutions and international law. Russia deployed PMC forces and weapons to Libya, despite a [UN arms embargo](#) on the country.²⁵¹

On a different note, although Russian PMCs are not entirely controlled by Putin, as [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#),²⁵² owner of the Wagner PMC firm, is mainly focused on Libya's energy resources. The Wagner group's operations in Libya still remain closely interlinked with the Kremlin and other Russian multinationals. For example, after the Wagner Groups involvement in the Tripoli offensive, Gazprom resumed operations in Libya in May 2021. The firm concurrently jumpstarted its pre-planned infrastructure expansion projects to boost gas production.

Conclusion

In short, Russia's PMC-led intervention met its limit on the frontlines of Tripoli, yet it has ensured for Moscow a new strategic foothold in North Africa and on the Mediterranean. Now, despite high casualties in the Ukraine war, as Turkey continues expanding its military training efforts in Libya, Russian PMC forces are likely to remain in Libya for the foreseeable future. Moscow benefits from simply staying put in order to secure resources access, as such PMCs will likely be an enduring instrument for Moscow to influence in Libyan affairs.

Iraq

Katie Luk

²⁵¹ "Un Arms Embargo on Libya." SIPRI, August 20, 2020.

https://www.sipri.org/databases/embargoes/un_arms_embargoes/libya/libya_2011.

²⁵² "Russian Private Military Companies in Syria and Beyond." Russian Private Military Companies in Syria and Beyond | Center for Strategic and International Studies. Accessed October 27, 2022.

<https://www.csis.org/npfp/russian-private-military-companies-syria-and-beyond>.



Context of Bilateral Iraq-Russian Relations

2003-2011: Economic and Security Cooperation in Post-Saddam Iraq

Since the Cold War, Iraq has been a playground between US-Soviet tensions and conflicts. Russia's [historical friendly ties](#) with Iraq²⁵³, strategic interest in Iraq as a client state to [rival US hegemony](#), and economic interests prompted a cooperative relationship between the two countries.²⁵⁴ However, it was relatively minimal in this period.

During the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Russia strongly opposed US military action alongside Germany and France. Russia referred the case to the United Nations Security Council, hoping to cooperate with other countries against US unilateralism.²⁵⁵ The Russian government also provided Saddam Hussein with [military intelligence](#) on the military plans and locations of the US forces. However, Russia was pressured to [withdraw their oppositional stance](#) and tactically align with the US's military campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein.²⁵⁶ This strategic alignment allowed Russian companies to cooperate with both the US and the new Iraqi government. Shortly after, Russia energy companies Gazprom and Lukoil signed major [oil contracts](#) with Iraq in 2009 and oil and gas contracts with the Iraqi Kurdistan Region in the following years, forming a close business partnership.²⁵⁷ However, expanding US presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq– Russia's '[traditional backyard](#)'– was perceived as an American attempt in creating a new regional order in the Middle East and a military threat.²⁵⁸

2012-2020: Closer Economic and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Russian foreign policy on Iraq during this period is characterised by closer security cooperation on the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the general regional turmoil and instability following the Arab Spring in 2011. Iraq was cooperating with the US on counterterrorism at the same time.

Russia was concerned about the rise and spread of extremism near its borders, especially since ISIS attracted a large number of [Russian volunteer fighters](#).²⁵⁹ In September 2015, the Russia-

²⁵³ Jokar A. Akbar. "Russia-Iraq Relations: From Economic Interests to Geopolitical Objectives." Institute for Political and International Studies, 2020. <https://www.ipis.ir/en/subjectview/609262/russia-iraq-relations-from-economic-interests-to-geopolitical-objectives>

²⁵⁴ Samuel Helfont. "From Iraq to Ukraine: A new perspective on the Russian-western confrontation." War on the Rocks, 2022. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/from-iraq-to-ukraine-a-new-perspective-on-the-russian-western-confrontation/>

²⁵⁵ Robert Burns. "Russia 'gave Saddam intelligence on invasion.'" The Independent, 2006. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-gave-saddam-intelligence-on-invasion-6105665.html>

²⁵⁶ Helfont, "From Iraq to Ukraine"

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Arman Mahmoudian. "Russia and Iran's Relations in Iraq." Middle East Centre, 2021. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/07/02/russia-and-irans-relations-in-iraq/>

²⁵⁹ Jethro Nullen, Yousuf Basil. "Iraq agrees to share intelligence with Russia and Syria." CNN, 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/27/middleeast/iraq-russia-iran-syria-intelligence-deal/>



Syria-Iraq-Iraq security coalition (RSII) was formed against ISIS. The intelligence sharing and security cooperation alliance contains six members from each nation, including two Russian one-star generals. One of the two headquarters was set up in the ‘Green Zone’ in Baghdad, Iraq– once the headquarters of the US occupation. An [Iraqi official](#) claims the ‘full-blown military alliance’ is useful in ‘formalising the relationship with Iran, Russia and Syria’ and restoring the third of Iraqi territory that was captured by ISIS.²⁶⁰ Russian air forces, Iran-backed Shi’a militias and Iraqi military personnel launched airstrikes and cruise missile attacks against ISIS across the Iraq and Syrian borders– the first Russian external military operation in three decades. The cooperation also blocked ISIS’s [logistical system](#) of sending ISIS fighters from Iraq to Syria and vice versa.²⁶¹

[US officials](#) have been concerned about the increasing Russian and Iranian influence in Iraq (the latter have been training, supporting, and advising the Iraqi Shiite militias), accusing the Russian military of using counterterrorism as a pretext to suppress Syrian opposition groups with air strikes.²⁶² Iraq also cooperated with the US-led coalition, which launched an aerial bombing campaign to fight ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria. The US similarly supplied advisors, weapons, and training to the Iraqi Armed Forces and Syrian Democratic forces. Col. [Steven Warren](#), spokesperson for the US coalition claims they ‘remain committed to working closely with Iraq to defeat ISIL (ISIS)’.²⁶³ By 2017, the Iraqi and Syrian militaries successfully liberated all major captured cities and the de facto capital of ISIS, eroded its financial and military structure, and drove all forces underground.

The tightening military cooperation between Russia and Iraq extended to providing arms as support and arms deals. In June 2012, Russia provided the Iraqi army with two Russian fighter aircrafts in the battle against ISIS. The 2012 [\\$4 billion Russian deal](#) made Iraq the second largest Russian weapons purchaser after India, according to a report from Rostec, Russia’s state corporation for defence industries.²⁶⁴ Iraq further ordered \$1 billion of Russian tanks in 2017 and received T-90 tanks from Russia in 2018. However, Iraq was prevented from purchasing the Russian [S-400 air defence system](#) in 2020 under the 2017 Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) on Russian weapons manufacturers and potential opposition from Russian partners.²⁶⁵ Russia’s first offered the S400 to protect [Iraqi](#)

²⁶⁰ “Iraq liaises with Syria, Russia and Iran to bomb ISIL.” Al Jazeera, 2015.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/14/iraq-liaises-with-syria-russia-and-iran-to-bomb-isil>

²⁶¹ Dayle Harvey, Nour Engueleguele, Cédric Foisseau, Elsie Kiarie. “Private Military Companies: Ethics and responsibility.” Finabel: European Army Interoperability Center, 2021.

<https://finabel.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/4.Private-Military-Companies-1.pdf>

²⁶² “Iraq liaises with Syria”

²⁶³ Nullen, Basil. “Iraq agrees to share intelligence”

²⁶⁴ Farzad, Ramezani Bonesh. “Russia’s goals and approach to Iraq.” Al-Bayan Center, 2022.

<https://www.bayancenter.org/en/2022/06/3338/>

²⁶⁵ Joyce Karam, Robert Tollast, Sinan Mahmoud. “US sanctions on Russia’s weapon makers could cause problems for Iraq.” The National, 2022.



[airspace](#) after Iran launched missiles at a US airbase in western Iraq to retaliate the assassination of the chief of Iran Quds Force months before.²⁶⁶

Russia's longstanding investments in Iraq's oil and gas industries is another field that boosts Russian economic power and elevates its position in the global energy sector. Russia forgave \$8-\$12 billion in [Iraqi debt](#) from the Soviet era after offers of lucrative contracts in the energy and reconstruction industries.²⁶⁷ Gazprom, Lukoil, and other Russian oil companies such as Neft, Rosneft and Soyuzneftegaz have invested more than [\\$12 billion](#) in Iraq in 2022.²⁶⁸ Kurtashev, the Russian ambassador in Iraq, noted the large number of Russian employees in Iraq is a 'good example of our serious will to work in this country and develop bilateral cooperation'.²⁶⁹ In 2019, 16 Russian-Iraqi Joint Economic Commission agreements were signed for various industries, and meetings have been convened regularly.²⁷⁰

2020-2022: The Ukraine War and Decreasing Economic Ties

Iraq has been taking a neutral stance since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It abstained from condemning Russian aggression or assigning responsibility in both the [Arab League](#) statement²⁷¹ and the United Nations [General Assembly](#) votes.²⁷² Iraq took a hit from the war and cooperation is likely to decrease in the near future.

The war exacerbated partisan and factional divides. Spill overs from rising global prices were detrimental to Iraqi food imports— of which Russia imports make up 50%— leading to a [food crisis](#).²⁷³ Arms and energy deals are hampered by sanctions, and the Iraqi economy took the [brunt](#).²⁷⁴ which some believe rising oil prices may mitigate. Kutashev maintains optimism about Iraqi-Russian cooperative ties, emphasising decades of Russian business experiences in Iraq and that Russia allocated 20-25% of their budget on [Iraqi security](#)— the additional investments would be a deterrent to alternative foreign investors.²⁷⁵ However, Iraqi officials

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/03/22/us-sanctions-on-russias-weapon-makers-could-cause-problems-for-iraq/>

²⁶⁶ Alex MacDonald. "Russia suggests selling S-400 missile system to Iraq amid row over US troops." Middle East Eye, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-suggests-selling-s-400-iraq>

²⁶⁷ Helfont, "From Iraq to Ukraine"

²⁶⁸ Akbar, "Russian-Iraq Relations"

²⁶⁹ Rebaz Ali. "Russia reaffirms interest in Iraq and Kurdistan Region." Rudaw, 2022.

<https://www.rudaw.net/english/world/010320221>

²⁷⁰ Akbar, "Russian-Iraq Relations"

²⁷¹ Mohammed. Abu Zaid. "Arab League following Ukraine developments with 'great concern'." Arab News, 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2033381/middle-east>

²⁷² "The UN Resolution on Ukraine: How Did the Middle East Vote?" The Washington Institute, 2022.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-resolution-ukraine-how-did-middle-east-vote>

²⁷³ "The Iraq Report: Ukraine turmoil triggers food crisis." *The New Arab*, 2022.

<https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/iraq-report-ukraine-turmoil-triggers-food-crisis>

²⁷⁴ Samuel Ramani. "What does Russia's war in Ukraine mean for Iraq?" Middle East Institute, 2022.

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/what-does-russias-war-ukraine-mean-iraq>

²⁷⁵ Ali. "Russia reaffirms interest in Iraq"



are likely to embrace a multipolar energy foreign policy and [divest from Russian investments](#) in the coming years.²⁷⁶ Iraq received investment interest from European and American oil companies as Western countries scramble for alternative suppliers. The Iraqi Central Bank and Trade Bank also discouraged money flow to Russia in order to prevent economic sanctions.²⁷⁷

Russian PMCs in Iraq

Influx of PMCs since 2003

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, PMCs have flooded into the region. NATO and the US-led coalition used PMCs to provide military and security support services to their and their allies' armies.²⁷⁸ The Iraq and Afghanistan war were the propellers of a [double increase](#) of 79 new international PMCs in 2003, and the number of contractors was equal to or more than the number of American soldiers in the period.²⁷⁹

[US officials](#) contracted British PMC Aegis to oversee the coordination of all PMC activities in the region, but in the words of Professor Sean McFate (Georgetown), 'In the early days of Iraq, it was a goldrush... nobody had any control. Anybody doing anything with firearms in this country could say they're a private military company'.²⁸⁰ As the US forces moved out of Iraq, PMCs started subcontracting cheaper fighters from less developed countries such as Uganda and Sierra Leone to cut costs. The American and British governments also contract Russian PMC personnel to this day.²⁸¹

Russian PMCs Operating in Iraq

The [Antiterror-Orel Group](#) consists of several organisations of engineers, military and special forces veterans.²⁸² It trained and prepared soldiers to perform special tasks in high-risk zones, hence its other name '[non-governmental education centre](#)'.²⁸³ Headed by Sergei Isakov and set up with the assistance of the Russian Union of Paratroopers, the group started with [mine clearing operations](#) and protection of energy infrastructures in Iraq in the late 1990s.²⁸⁴ Direct support from the Federal Security Service (FSB) helped the group gain a foothold in the

²⁷⁶ Salam Zidane. "Russian invasion of Ukraine has sharp impact on Iraq's economy." *Al-monitor*, 2022.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/russian-invasion-ukraine-has-sharp-impact-iraqs-economy>

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ Ori Swed, Daniel Burland. "The Global Expansion of PMSCs: Trends, Opportunities, and Risks." 2020.

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Mercenaries/WG/ImmigrationAndBorder/swed-burland-submission.pdf>

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Harvey, Engueleguele, Foisseau, Kiarie. "Private Military Companies"

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² 'Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror.' *InformNapalm*, 2016.

<https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/>

²⁸³ Grzegorz Kuczyński. "Putin's Invisible Army." *The Warsaw Institute*, 2018.

<https://warsawinstitute.org/putins-invisible-army/>

²⁸⁴ Igor Popov. "Soldat Na Prokat (Soldiers for Rent)." *Forbes.ru*, 2010. <http://archive.ph/UQOOhl#selection-1615.367-1615.374>



country.²⁸⁵ According to the [Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project \(OCCRP\)](#), Emercon Demining— the Russian state-owned corporation that supervised Antiterror-Orel personnel won Russian governmental contracts for the group.²⁸⁶ These mine clearing and infrastructure protection operations aligned with state-affiliated Gazprom and Transneft's endeavours to expand offshore extractions and pipeline constructions. PMC personnel under [Emercon](#) became some of the biggest beneficiaries of Russian state endowment then.²⁸⁷ Antiterror-Orel was also able to expand its scale in the region as Russian businesses saw the Iraq war as a business opportunity and increased cooperation in the energy and arms sectors. The group was contracted to protect [oil and gas infrastructures](#) of Tatneft, Energoincherniering, and the Russian Engineering Company in the mid-2000s (Kononov and Valetskii, 2013).²⁸⁸ It also undertook [non-military operations](#) escorting cargo.²⁸⁹

The Antiterror Orel Group reconsolidated under the auspices of [RusCorp](#),²⁹⁰ around 2008— it was usual practice for PMC leaders to [rebrand](#) or register as new entities when problems arose with their business model or when new opportunities were presented.²⁹¹ RusCorp was similarly contracted by Russian state enterprises like Gazprom.²⁹² Its now archived [website](#)²⁹³ and [Facebook](#) account²⁹⁴ called itself an 'international security holding company' with offices in Iraq, Nigeria, the US, the UK, and other European countries— which is essentially a holding company for other Antiterror Group affiliated PMCs. The company is also a private protection group specialising in security risk analysis and intelligence, business intelligence, VIP and general protection services in Iraq. It is often described to have a '[gun toting](#)' reputation.²⁹⁵ According to an [interview](#) head of Ruscorp Alexey Danilyants did for the VZGLYAD newspaper in 2008, Iraq was classified as a red zone—in a state of war or open armed conflicts.²⁹⁶ Ruscorp personnel are needed to accompany and support Russian businesses, as he claims, 'practically no one does it except us... in one of the most risky areas in the world'.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ Roman Anin, Oleya Shmagun, Jelena Vasic. "Ex-Spy Turned Humanitarian Helps Himself." *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, 2015.

²⁸⁷ Candace Rondeaux. "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare." *New America*, 2019. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/tracing-wagners-roots/>

²⁸⁸ Bukkvoll Tor, Åse G. Østensen. "The emergence of russian private military companies: A new tool of clandestine warfare." *Special Operations Journal*, 6(1), 2020. <https://publications.ffi.no/nb/item/asset/dspace:6751/1811576.pdf>

²⁸⁹ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. "War to become a private affair." *Russia Beyond*, 2016.

https://www.rbth.com/articles/2012/10/17/war_to_become_a_private_affair_19219.html

²⁹⁰ Archived Ruscorp Website <https://web.archive.org/web/20120501230158/http://www.ruscorp.ru>

²⁹¹ Rondeaux. "Decoding the Wagner Group"

²⁹² Fedor Butsko. "Rossiya sozdayet biznes-armyu (Russia Creates a Business Army)." *Vzglyad*, 2008

²⁹³ Archived Ruscorp Website

²⁹⁴ Ruscorp Facebook Page <https://m.facebook.com/RUSCORP-wwwruscorpru-126473527426121/about/>

²⁹⁵ Tor, Østensen. "The emergence of russian private military companies"

²⁹⁶ Fedor Butsko. "Россия создает бизнес-армию (Russia creates a business army)." *Vzglyad*, 2008. <https://vz.ru/society/2008/3/21/153822.html>



Security, business intelligence, and legal consultation services were reserved for exclusive, selective clients, including supplying convoys for American units in army centres. Prices were kept lower than American or British PMCs to keep them competitive. He also states Ruscorp ‘focus not on threat zones, but on the interests of private businesses’ to enable Russian corporations to expand safely throughout the world. His interview also demonstrates the amicable relationship between the dominating Western PMCs and Russian PMCs, revealing Ruscorp trains their personnel ‘based on the experience of American and European colleagues’ and that they ‘cannot yet compete with them’ and so took on an ‘associative approach’.



Figure 12 Vadim Gusev on duty for TigrTop-RusCorp in Baghdad in 2005.²⁹⁷

[Tigr Top-Rent Security](#)²⁹⁸ and Antiterror-Redut were both affiliated detachments of the Antiterror-Orel Group in Iraq. Both groups drew personnel from Special and Airborne Force veterans and the Redoubt Centre for Operational-Tactical Tasks, a training club for paratroopers. The former existed briefly in 2005-2006 in Iraq before its members went on to other PMCs.

²⁹⁷ Archived Photo Album of Tigr Top-Rent activities <https://archive.ph/YTqGD>

²⁹⁸ Rondeaux. “Decoding the Wagner Group”



The Antiterror-Redut (also called Center R) was formed in 2006. It trains sniper and anti-sniper specialists, combat and radio engineers, shooters, and rapid response fighters. Their combat specialists participated in the Iraq war and peacekeeping operations. According to their [website](#), Center R also provides data, security and safety services to Russian businesses in Iraq, personal protection services, and the protection of convoys and personnel for demining operations or diplomatic trips under UN Security Council guidelines²⁹⁹.

The [Fort Defense Group](#) (FDG Corp) was founded by American and Russian co-partners in 1996³⁰⁰. It provided ships and cargo protection services, land and sea transportation, military intelligence and consultation, training security teams and special units for high-risk operations, and one-time special operations. The FDG SEAL contains highly professional counterterror personnel/ swimmer guards operating both on land and underwater. Notably, the FDG participated in the protection of roadblocks in the Anbar region in 2006-2007, the 1998 bombing of Iraq (or 'Desert Fox' Operation), the 1991 Desert Storm aerial bombing Operation in the Gulf War, and escorting oil tank transport from the Umm Qasr port in Southern Iraq to Indochina countries. The company saw significant legal and structural changes in 2010 when co-partner Russian officer D. [Smirnov](#) came to leadership to optimise future Iraq operations³⁰¹.

Another Russian PMC present in Iraq are the [Cossacks](#)³⁰². Half the 67 thousand Russian residents identifying as Cossacks are [registered ethnic Cossacks](#) according to the 2010 census³⁰³ – meaning subordinated under Russian authorities and part of the volunteer citizen militia. Although the group have a relatively lower level of expertise than other Russian PMCs, they are the [oldest running](#) Russian PMC with much tradition, experience and high administrative management capabilities³⁰⁴. Apart from providing security for Russia, units are also tasked with [territorial defence](#), border protection, and fighting terrorism³⁰⁵. They also have a history of destabilising neighbouring states of Russia under Russian leadership and the Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs. While it is known the PMC have been present in Iraq, not much is known about the activities they performed there.

²⁹⁹ Antiterror-Redut website <http://redut-czentr.narod.ru/index/0-6>

³⁰⁰ Alex Kemeroff. "War for money. Leading private military companies of the world." *Medium*, 2018. <https://medium.com/smartaim-tech/war-for-money-leading-private-military-companies-of-the-world-eab9f9fe2de8>

³⁰¹ Nikolai Larin. "Business on Blood: What Is Known About Russian Private Military Companies." *Forbes*, 2018

³⁰² Justin Bristow. "Russian Private Military Companies: An Evolving Set of Tools in Russian Military Strategy." Foreign Military Studies Office, 2019. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-12-47-39/2019_2D00_08_2D00_26-Russian-Private-Military-Companies_2D00_An-Evolving-Set-of-Tools-2800_Bristow_2900_.pdf

³⁰³ Kurenov, Denis. "Skol'ko Na Samom Dele Kazakov v Rossii I Na Kubani." *Yuga*. August 19, 2016. Accessed May 28, 2019. <https://www.yuga.ru/articles/society/7524.html>.

³⁰⁴ Bristow. "Russian Private Military Companies"

³⁰⁵ Anne M. Dwyer "The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy." *PISM*, 2018. https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy



The [Feraks](#) group also operated in Iraq. Consisting mainly of Russian armed force veterans, its personnel has combat experience in most hot spots in the world³⁰⁶. The group provides [security](#) and armed protection services and ‘preventative measures’³⁰⁷. However, not much is known about their activities in Iraq apart from their involvement in hostilities in the region³⁰⁸.

Conclusion

To conclude, Russian PMC activity in Iraq originated from the 1990s and boomed in the conflict- plagued 2000s and rising demands for security and economic cooperation with Russian businesses in the 2010s. Most founders of the PMCs and their personnel are veterans from Russian forces.

Russian PMCs’ work on oil and gas infrastructure protection, convey protection services, and mine clearing operations (part of security investments) in Iraq secured economic interests for the Russian government. This is especially since the 2010s when there was tighter economic cooperation between Russia and Iraq and as Western PMCs moved out of Iraq. Personal security, convey protection services, and business intelligence and consulting were also provided for Russian businesses and individuals. While there are records of Russian PMCs present in Iraq and their general activities, there is little information on their clientele, specific statistics on their personnel, and metrics of their activities, especially in recent years. Russian PMCs are likely to work less on Iraqi energy projects as Iraq decreases its dependence on Russian oil and gas investments at present.

Russian PMCs in Iraq also don’t necessarily operate according to Russian geopolitical interests. Apart from the Cossacks and Antiterror-Redut group (who participated in the Iraq war), available records did not show PMCs engaging in Russia’s war against terrorism or act as proxies for state rivalries against Western presence in Iraq. In fact, Antiterror-Redut, Tigr Top-rent, Ruscorp and FDG also work as subcontractors for Western governments or companies– especially the US and UK as they moved out of Iraq– and collaborated with Western PMCs.

Afghanistan

Katie Luk

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³⁰⁶ Anna Maria Dyer, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy”, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

³⁰⁷ “Private Military Companies (PMCs),” VK, 2020. https://vk.com/wall-191790490_12

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*



2001-2014: Stabilisation Policy, Minimal Economic Cooperation and Diplomatic Interest

Since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Russia's policy in Afghanistan centred on regional security, securing financial interests, and diplomacy to strengthen its regional and international standing.

Russia adopted a stabilisation policy in Afghanistan and a position of strategic dichotomy towards US presence. Moscow was concerned Afghan instability will lead to a rise in Islamic extremist and rebel activities, which may spill over into Central Asia.³⁰⁹ It worked on Afghanistan security by bringing the Karzai administration into the Central Asian regional framework through head of state meetings, and cooperated with China and India through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and trilateral security meetings.³¹⁰ Russia also provided aid to the war-torn Afghanistan— including \$30 billion worth of helicopters and military equipment to the Afghan army in 2005³¹¹ and logistical aid to support reconstruction— a cooperation institutionalised by the NATO-Russian Council.³¹²

Russia has been wary of Western military presence in its traditional backyard as the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and PMCs contracted NATO allies flooded into the region.³¹³ However, Russia tolerated their presence in Afghanistan as its aims converged with the US in prioritising Afghan stability, curbing Afghan drug production, and to topple terrorist groups— especially Al-Qaeda.³¹⁴ It also feared the negative implications of the withdrawal of ISAF troops.³¹⁵ Russia even opened up its airspace for NATO and the US to transport their troops and weaponry, and publicly endorsed President Obama's Afghanistan strategy in 2009.³¹⁶

Russia also saw the Afghan situation as an economic opportunity. As a part of NATO's supply chain, Russian companies reaped financial benefits from weaponry and air carrier trades.³¹⁷ The trade turnover of Russian business with Kabul nearly reached \$1 billion USD in 2014,

³⁰⁹ Józef Lang, "Afghanistan: the view from Russia," European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2014. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_10-Afghanistan_view_from_Russia.pdf

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ "Tourists flee devastated flood area," Chicago Tribune, 2005. "Russia will supply Afghanistan's fledgling army with helicopters and equipment worth \$30 million" <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-10-10-0510100251-story.html>

³¹² Waslat Hasrat-Nazimi, "Russia's New Role in Afghanistan: From Foe to friend," Deutsche Welle, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-new-role-in-afghanistan/a-19087432>

³¹³ Arman Mahmoudian. "Russia and Iran's Relations in Iraq." Middle East Centre, 2021. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/07/02/russia-and-irans-relations-in-iraq/>

³¹⁴ Julia Gurganus. "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy," Foreign Affairs, 2018.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2018-01-02/russias-afghanistan-strategy>

³¹⁵ Dmitri Trenin, Alexia Malashenko. "Afghanistan: A view from Moscow," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010, p14.

<https://carnegiemoscow.org/2010/04/27/afghanistan-view-from-moscow-pub-40672>

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ Lang. "Afghanistan," 2014



which included military weapons maintenance, oil and petrol export, and subcontracts for infrastructural projects.³¹⁸ Nonetheless, Russia was [less committed](#) to economic investment in Afghanistan than other Central Asian regions, which has less US influence, Chinese competition, and had richer resources.³¹⁹ This [sceptical attitude](#) also stemmed from split opinions on collaborating with the US within the Russian regime, worries about the longevity of the Karzai administration, and doubts about Western commitment.³²⁰

Afghanistan was an opportunity for Russia to [strengthen](#) its regional and international position³²¹. Russian officials have repeatedly called for closer cooperation within the Russian-led Central Security Treaty Organisation (an alliance of 6 Central Asian countries) and NATO, which would be a sign of Western recognition of Russian [regional primacy](#).³²² It also pushed for the presence of [Russian troops](#) in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan.³²³

Combatting drug trafficking from Afghanistan has consistently been one of Russia's foreign policy goals. Since the fall of the Taliban, [narcotic production](#) in Afghanistan has grown 44 times and accounted for more than 80% of the global opium and heroin market.³²⁴ Alarmed about the rapid growth of Russian drug consumers, Moscow officials [collaborated](#) with the US in curbing drug production and smuggling operations.³²⁵ However, not all advances were welcomed as president Karzai [reprimanded](#) Russia for entering and "violating Afghan sovereignty" in a US-Russian joint mission in 2010.³²⁶

Influx of US and NATO Contracted PMCs

During this period, both the US and NATO relied heavily on PMCs.³²⁷ From 2002 to 2022, the US Department of Defense spent [\\$108 billion](#) on contractual deployments to Afghanistan, and a further \$1 billion to 17 PMCs since 2021.³²⁸ [NATO](#) also contracted PMCs from different

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ Trenin, "Afghanistan," 2010.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ Lang, "Afghanistan," 2014

³²⁴ "Afghan opiates supply 8 out of 10 opiate users worldwide, UNODC finds, as experts meet in Vienna to combat illicit trafficking," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021.

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2021/November/afghan-opiates-supply-8-out-of-10-opiate-users-worldwide--unodc-finds--as-experts-meet-in-vienna-to-combat-illicit-trafficking.html>

³²⁵ Trenin, "Afghanistan," 2010.

³²⁶ "Not an enemy anymore': Russia's outreach to Taliban full of opportunities and risks," Firstpost, 2021.

<https://www.firstpost.com/world/not-an-enemy-anymore-russias-outreach-to-taliban-full-of-opportunities-and-risks-9900101.html>

³²⁷ Sofia Staderini. "PMCs: The future frontier of warfare in Afghanistan?" Grey Dynamics, 2022.

<https://greydynamics.com/pmcs-the-future-frontier-of-warfare-in-afghanistan/>

³²⁸ Heidi Peltier. "Wartime Contract Spending in Afghanistan since 2001," Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2022.

<https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2022/Peltier%20->



countries during its leadership of the ISAF from 2001 to 2014³²⁹. While every US soldier deployed in conflict zones was supported by at least one PMC contractor, the number was even [higher](#) in Afghanistan as the war was unpopular with the public.³³⁰ The heavy reliance on PMC contractors for ground maintenance is often cited as the reason the Afghan military quickly [disintegrated](#) after the ISAF withdrawal.³³¹

2014-2020 Closer Security, Economic, and Cultural Cooperation

Russia sought to build a [closer relationship](#) with Afghanistan as its relationship with the West soured in the wake of the Ukrainian invasion.³³² Moscow also sought its own strategy, having lost confidence in US's strategy and commitment in Afghanistan.³³³

A security agreement signed in 2015 signified the start of closer cooperation and diplomacy between the two countries.³³⁴ Security talks involving Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan were held in 2017, including the revived [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) contact group on Afghanistan.³³⁵ Russia's diplomatic efforts and role as a host positioned itself as a key player in maintaining regional and Afghan security.³³⁶ Since 2016, Russia further [expanded its presence](#) in Afghanistan through military aid, economic investment proposals (on agriculture, transport, and mining sectors), and cultural programmes.³³⁷ They also provided the Afghan administration with tens of thousands of [rifles](#) and million rounds of ammunition.³³⁸ Since Western nations started withdrawing their economic support, the Afghan administration welcomed these investments. These collaborations were advantageous to Russian military personnel and diplomats, many of which had [experience](#) during the Soviet-invasion of Afghanistan, as well as to Afghan officials and military officers who were trained and educated in Russia.³³⁹

[%20Wartime%20Contract%20Spending%20in%20Afghanistan%20-%20CORRECTED%20Aug%209%202022.pdf](#)

³²⁹ Elke Krahnemann, "NATO contracting in Afghanistan: the problem of principal-agent networks," *International Affairs*, 92:6, 2016.

<https://shibbolethsp.jstor.org/start?entityID=urn%3Aace%3Aac.uk%3Asdss.ac.uk%3Aprovider%3Aidentity%3Aadur.ac.uk&dest=https://www.jstor.org/stable/45238139&site=jstor>

³³⁰ Molly Dunigan, Ben Connable. "Russian Mercenaries in Great-Power Competition: Strategic Supermen or Weak Link?" RAND Corporation, 2021.

<https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/03/russian-mercenaries-in-great-power-competition-strategic.html>

³³¹ Staderini. "PMCs," 2022.

³³² Hasrat-Nazimi, "Russia's New Role in Afghanistan," 2016.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ Gurganus, "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy," 2018.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.*

³³⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Soft Power Push in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, 2017.

<https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/russias-soft-power-push-in-afghanistan/>

³³⁸ "Russia gives a gift of 10,000 automatic rifles to Afghanistan," Reuters, 2016.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-russia-arms/russia-gives-a-gift-of-10000-automatic-rifles-to-afghanistan-idUSKCN0VX1BJ>

³³⁹ Gurganus, "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy," 2018.



At the same time, Moscow worked closer with the Taliban on Afghan security since 2015, despite past enmity.³⁴⁰ Moscow had an [informal diplomatic relationship](#) with the Taliban since 2007, where talks on drug trafficking in Afghanistan were held.³⁴¹ As the threat of ISIS grew in 2015, Russian cooperation with the Taliban grew and communication links for intelligence were established.³⁴² Putin also [removed](#) the Taliban from its list of extremist organisations and provided them with arms.³⁴³ Moscow believes while ISIS poses as a transnational risk, the Taliban were only interested in expanding within Afghanistan and [aligned](#) with Moscow's agenda to defeat ISIS and resist US threat.³⁴⁴ The [Taliban for international talks](#) was held in Moscow in 2016 to further cooperation,³⁴⁵ and another round of [talks with the Taliban](#) delegation was held in 2019 to seek peace amidst the Taliban insurgency.³⁴⁶ Moscow's peace negotiations from 2017-2019 to end the Afghanistan conflict often included the Taliban delegation and excluded President Ghani, showing Russian belief that the Taliban are [trustworthy partners](#) and creating a closer link between the two parties³⁴⁷.

2020 to Present: Russian Deterrence and Diplomacy with the Taliban

Since the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in 2021, Moscow adopted a double approach of [diplomacy and deterrence](#) with the new political order.³⁴⁸ Official Russian statements extended interest in collaboration with the Taliban, and Russian diplomats praised the Taliban's efforts against ISIS and in securitising Kabul.³⁴⁹ However, these underlay growing uncertainties on the Taliban's longevity, its ability to stabilise Afghanistan, and commitment to counterterrorism.³⁵⁰ The violence inherent in the Taliban rule may destabilise the region further, and the [influx of terrorists](#) from Arab nations to fight with the Taliban since 2016 have and may cause more violent conflicts in northern Afghanistan.³⁵¹ Combined with the [economic](#)

³⁴⁰ Hasrat-Nazimi, "Russia's New Role in Afghanistan," 2016.

³⁴¹ Samuel Ramani, "Russia and the Taliban: Prospective Partners?" RUSI, 2021.

<https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-taliban-prospective-partners>

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ Gurganus, "Russia's Afghanistan Strategy," 2018.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ Ann M. Simmons, "Taliban Face Pressure Over New Afghan Government at Russia Conference," Wall Street Journal, 2021. https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-faces-difficult-balancing-act-as-it-hosts-taliban-in-moscow-11634722296?mod=article_inline

³⁴⁶ "Hosting Taliban Delegates, Russia Calls for Withdrawal of Foreign Forces from Afghanistan," RFERL, 2019.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-envoys-arrive-in-moscow-to-meet-afghan-politicians-tribal-elders/29967224.html>

³⁴⁷ Ramani, "Russia and the Taliban," 2021.

³⁴⁸ Ramani, "Russia and the Taliban," 2021.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ Hasrat-Nazimi, "Russia's New Role in Afghanistan," 2016.



[meltdown](#) since the withdrawal of Western forces, Russian officials are worried the region would revive as breeding grounds for extremist groups.³⁵²

Despite reservations, the informal diplomatic relationship with the Taliban is important for Moscow as they continue collaboration on security issues, drug trafficking, and economic projects³⁵³. Russian officials have proposed [mining investments](#) and regional transport and energy projects to the Taliban.³⁵⁴ While Moscow have yet to diplomatically recognise the Taliban, it accredited a [Taliban appointee](#) as the diplomat in charge (charge d'affaires) in the Afghan Embassy of Moscow in 2022.³⁵⁵

Growth in Russian PMCs and Chinese PSCs, increasing employment of Afghans in Russian PMCs

Since most Western PMCs left Afghanistan, [Russia and China](#) have been the biggest benefactors.³⁵⁶ With increased economic and security cooperation between both countries and Afghanistan, Russian PMCs and Chinese PSCs are piling into the region to advance these projects. The number of Russian PMCs and Chinese PSCs are projected to grow in 2022 and 2023.³⁵⁷

The Russian military have been [recruiting](#) Afghan military personnel through PMCs to fight in Ukraine.³⁵⁸ Tens of thousands of personnel from the Afghanistan National Defense, Security, and Army Commando Corps (who trained and fought alongside the ISAF) have been left behind when Western PMCs moved out of the region.³⁵⁹ As the Taliban hunted and executed loyalists of the former administration, many fled Afghanistan, waited for resettlement in the US or Britain, or were in hiding.³⁶⁰ This made former personnel susceptible to recruiters, who most US and former Afghan officials believe to be from the [Wagner Group](#).³⁶¹ In the words of a [former Afghan commando](#), “The only entity that recruits foreign troops [for Russia] are Wagner Group, not their army. It’s not an assumption; it’s a known fact”.³⁶² [Recruitment offers](#) include Russian citizenships for them and their families, extensions for Iranian visas (for those who fled), a monthly payment of \$1500, and guarantees of safety from Taliban execution.³⁶³

³⁵² Ramani, “Russia and the Taliban,” 2021.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ “Russia Latest Country to Establish Diplomatic Ties With Taliban,” Voice of America, 2022.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-latest-country-to-establish-diplomatic-ties-with-taliban/6521949.html>

³⁵⁶ Staderini. “PMCs,” 2022.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ Lynne O’Donnell, “Russia’s Recruiting Afghan Commandos”, Foreign Policy, 2022.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/25/afghanistan-russia-ukraine-military-recruitment-putin-taliban/>

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ “Russia recruiting Afghan special forces who fought with US to fight in Ukraine”, The Guardian, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/31/afghan-special-forces-russia-ukraine-recruitment>

³⁶² Donnel, “Russia’s Recruiting Afghan Commandos”, 2022.

³⁶³ “Russia recruiting Afghan special forces,” 2022.



While many former Afghani personnel regarded Russia as an enemy due to the 1979 Soviet Invasion, many had no choice but to join the Wagner Group for safety.³⁶⁴

Russian PMCs Operations in Afghanistan

Tigr Top-Rent Security and Antiterror-Redut operated in Afghanistan during 2004-2006.³⁶⁵ They were both affiliated detachments of the early Antiterror-Orel Group in Iraq. Their origins can be traced to the Soviet subunits that led the Storm-333 assassination of Hafizullah Amin (Second President of Afghanistan) in 1979, which later formed the core intelligence units in the Soviet-Afghan war.³⁶⁶ Both groups drew personnel from Special and Airborne Force veterans and the Redoubt Centre for Operational-Tactical Tasks, a training club for paratroopers. Their missions included protection of military bases, convoys, oil company personnel and Russian diplomats in Afghanistan.³⁶⁷ Many later joined the Slavonic Corps and the Wagner Group to serve in Ukraine and Syria.³⁶⁸

The latter (also called Center R) also trained sniper and anti-sniper specialists, combat and radio engineers, shooters, and rapid response fighters.³⁶⁹ Apart from the stated, Antiterror-Redut also provided data, security and safety services to Russian businesses in Afghanistan, personal protection services, protection of personnel for demining operations, and combat specialists to participate in peacekeeping operations.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Candace Rondeaux. “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare.” *New America*, 2019. <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/tracing-wagners-roots/>

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁷ Grzegorz Kuczyński. “Putin’s Invisible Army.” *The Warsaw Institute*, 2018. <https://warsawinstitute.org/putins-invisible-army/>

³⁶⁸ Archived journal memorialising TigrTop Rent <https://archive.ph/4j2cB>

³⁶⁹ Antiterror-Redut website <http://redut-czentr.narod.ru/index/0-6>

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*



Figure 13 TigrTop Rent Detachment in Afghanistan, 2006.³⁷¹

The [Fort Defense Group](#) (FDG Corp) also operated in Afghanistan. It was founded by American and Russian co-partners in 1996.³⁷² It provided ships and cargo protection services, land and sea transportation, military intelligence and consultation, training security teams and special units for high-risk operations, and one-time special operations. The FDG SEAL contains highly professional counterterror personnel/ swimmer guards operating both on land and underwater. Notably, the FDG participated in the [protection](#) of a veteran delegation during the 9th Roteh memorial in Afghanistan in 2011.³⁷³ There are little records of their other specific involvements in Afghanistan. The company saw significant legal and structural changes in 2010 when co-partner Russian officer D. [Smirnov](#) came to leadership to optimise future Afghan operations.³⁷⁴

Another Russian PMC present in Afghanistan are the [Cossacks](#)³⁷⁵ Half the 67 thousand Russian residents identifying as Cossacks are [registered ethnic Cossacks](#) according to the 2010

³⁷¹ Rondeaux. "Decoding the Wagner Group," 2019.

³⁷² Alex Kemeroff. "War for money. Leading private military companies of the world." *Medium*, 2018. <https://medium.com/smartaim-tech/war-for-money-leading-private-military-companies-of-the-world-eab9f9fe2de8>

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ Nikolai Larin. "Business on Blood: What Is Known About Russian Private Military Companies." *Forbes*, 2018

³⁷⁵ Justin Bristow. "Russian Private Military Companies: An Evolving Set of Tools in Russian Military Strategy." Foreign Military Studies Office, 2019. https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-12-47-39/2019_2D00_08_2D00_26-Russian-Private-Military-Companies_2D00_An-Evolving-Set-of-Tools-2800_Bristow_2900_.pdf



census³⁷⁶— meaning subordinated under Russian authorities and part of the volunteer citizen militia. Although the group have a relatively lower level of expertise than other Russian PMCs, they are the oldest running Russian PMC with much tradition, experience and high administrative management capabilities.³⁷⁷ Apart from providing security for Russia, units are also tasked with territorial defence, border protection, and fighting terrorism.³⁷⁸ They also have a history of destabilising neighbouring states of Russia under Russian leadership and the Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs. While it is known the PMC have been present in Afghanistan, not much is known about the activities they performed there.

The Feraks group also operated in Afghanistan. Consisting mainly of Russian armed force veterans, its personnel has combat experience in most hot spots in the world.³⁷⁹ The group provides security and armed protection services and ‘preventative measures’.³⁸⁰ However, not much is known about their activities in Afghanistan apart from their involvement in hostilities in the region.³⁸¹

Conclusion

During the early days of US-intervention in Afghanistan, there was a heavy reliance on Western PMCs. Yet, there is limited Russian PMC activities despite the opportunities of a conflict-torn zone. This is due to the reserved cooperation between Russian and Afghanistan, overwhelming PMC competition, and Russia’s focus on other Central Asian countries. As Western allies and their PMCs moved out in 2014, Russia increased security and economic cooperation with Afghanistan. With more state-affiliated projects, less competition, and expanded clientele in Afghanistan, the presence of Russian PMCs there greatly increased. From available sources, Tigr Top-Rent and Antiterror-Redut mostly worked on profit and state-interest led projects such as protection of oil infrastructures, military bases, convoys, and clientele; they engaged less in warfare. While we know the FDG, Cossacks and Feraks participated in hostilities and counterterrorism, there is no specific information on their involvement. We know that there is a significant amount of Russian PMCs in Afghanistan today, and that the number is still increasing. However, there is little information on which PMCs are active and the activities they perform. While there is no indication the Wagner group

³⁷⁶ Kurenov, Denis. "Skol'ko Na Samom Dele Kazakov v Rossii I Na Kubani." Yuga. August 19, 2016. Accessed May 28, 2019. <https://www.yuga.ru/articles/society/7524.html>.

³⁷⁷ Bristow. "Russian Private Military Companies"

³⁷⁸ Anne M. Dyer "The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy." PISM, 2018. https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy

³⁷⁹ Anna Maria Dyer, "The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy", The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

³⁸⁰ "Private Military Companies (PMCs)," VK, 2020. https://vk.com/wall-191790490_12

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*



are operating in Afghanistan, they are recruiting a large number of ex-Afghanistan special forces to join their PMC to fight the Ukraine War.

2.4 Africa

Cherifa Bourchak, Camille Victor, George Barber, Hugo Claus, and Jeffrey Love.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Cherifa Bourchak and Jeffrey Love

DRC Context and Relationship with Russia

The Democratic Republic of Congo has been rife with ethnic conflict and civil war, in part due to the massive inflow of refugees fleeing the [Rwandan genocide](#) from 1994 and the outbreak of the Second Congo War.³⁸² DRC's borders with conflict heavy countries such as Rwanda and Uganda has made its borders susceptible to attack and a [battleground for proxy wars fought by neighbouring countries'](#) armed militia groups.³⁸³

One of the most prominent rebel groups to emerge in the aftermath of the war are the [March 23 Movement](#) (M23),³⁸⁴ made up primarily of ethnic Tutsis who were allegedly supported by the Rwandan government. Since early 2009, the [M23 movement has taken control of several towns](#) and villages in North Kivu region of DRC, and have continued to commit war crimes and horrific abuses against civilians.³⁸⁵ The group resurged in June 2022, [reportedly killing 17 civilians](#) in routine armed attacks.³⁸⁶

The Armed Democratic Forces (ADF) is the second major known armed militia in the DRC, operating out of the eastern region. The ADF is a long-standing insurgent group with Ugandan roots and has reported affiliation to ISIS. The ADF [controls many mines](#) in the north of Beni,³⁸⁷ and partly finances its activities by [illegally exporting other minerals such as wolframite, coltan](#)

³⁸² BBC, "Rwanda Genocide: 100 Days of Slaughter," *BBC News*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-26875506>.

³⁸³ "How the DRC Became the Battleground of a Proxy War over Precious Resources," *Financial Times*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/26125730-3113-4946-982a-989e2acbe472>.

³⁸⁴ "Q&A: DR Congo's M23 Rebels," *BBC News*, November 5, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20438531>.

³⁸⁵ "DR Congo: Resurgent M23 Rebels Target Civilians," Human Rights Watch, July 25, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/25/dr-congo-resurgent-m23-rebels-target-civilians>.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁷ Ken Matthyssen, "IPIS Briefing January 2021 - Armed Groups Challenging Opportunities for Responsible Gold Mining in Beni," IPIS, February 9, 2021, <https://ipisresearch.be/weekly-briefing/ipis-briefing-january-2021-armed-groups-challenging-opportunities-for-responsible-gold-mining-in-beni/>.



[and cassiterite](#),³⁸⁸ which are rich in DRC. As of 2013, the [ADF increased its violent attacks on the Congolese military](#), and at present continue armed attacks on locals and state officials.³⁸⁹

The fighting in the eastern region has become as much about [control of the country's natural riches as political power](#),³⁹⁰ with rebel groups linked to many neighbouring DRC countries. Felix Tshisekedi was sworn in as president in January 2019, following long-delayed and disputed national elections, which contained widespread irregularities, voter suppression, violence, and interference from armed groups. Tshisekedi has been vocal in his [desire for nationwide reform and mending relations with his neighbours](#),³⁹¹ but has struggled to control the rising rebel violence in the eastern regions. The UN estimates that there are currently [4.5 million internally displaced persons](#) in the DRC,³⁹² and over [800,000 refugees](#).³⁹³ Weak governance of militia groups has spiked increases in violence, human rights abuses and extreme poverty. In May 2021, [Tshisekedi declared a “state of siege”](#) to replace civilian authorities with military personnel to combat armed groups in the North Kivu and Ituri provinces.³⁹⁴ This included [state-sanctioned plans](#) allowing Uganda to deploy troops to fight ADF in DRC and Burundian soldiers to battle the RED-Tabara rebel group.³⁹⁵ These interventions are causing fresh upheaval in a country that has suffered greatly from regional rivalries, and in inviting neighbouring countries to fight in DRC, the country risks opening a Pandora’s Box of further exploitation and conflict.

Russian Influence

There is little official information on direct Russian influence in the DRC in the post-Soviet era. In 2015, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that Russia wanted to [develop deeper relations with in ‘every direction’](#) with the DRC, alluding to strong interest in

³⁸⁸ MOHAMED DAGHAR, RICHARD CHELIN, and MOHAMED HAJI, “Expansion of the Allied Democratic Forces Should Worry East Africa,” ISS Africa, March 3, 2022, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/expansion-of-the-allied-democratic-forces-should-worry-east-africa>.

³⁸⁹ Jared Thompson, “Examining Extremism: Allied Democratic Forces,” www.csis.org, June 29, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-allied-democratic-forces>.

³⁹⁰ “Why Ugandan Troops Have Entered DR Congo - Again,” *BBC News*, December 4, 2021, sec. Africa, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59507543>.

³⁹¹ “Easing the Turmoil in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes,” www.crisisgroup.org, May 25, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo-uganda-burundi-rwanda/easing-turmoil-eastern-dr-congo>.

³⁹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” UNHCR, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/democratic-republic-of-the-congo.html>.

³⁹³ “Situation DRC Situation,” data2.unhcr.org, 2022, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/drc>.

³⁹⁴ “Democratic Republic of the Congo: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/freedom-world/2022>.

³⁹⁵ “Easing the Turmoil in the Eastern DR Congo and Great Lakes,” www.crisisgroup.org, May 25, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/great-lakes/democratic-republic-congo-uganda-burundi-rwanda/easing-turmoil-eastern-dr-congo>.



the region.³⁹⁶ This is particularly due to DRCs vast mineral wealth, of which Russia has experience in extractions. In 2008, it was reported that Russian company Alrosa, which [accounts for 95% of Russia's diamond production](#), had met with then President Kabila and reached an agreement to permit the company to prospect in the DRC.³⁹⁷ This officially came into fruition in September 2021, with Alrosa and Societe Miniere de Bakwanga (MIBA), a leading government-owned diamond mining company in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, [signed an MOU](#) with the intention of ['driving sustainable development of the diamond mining industry'](#).³⁹⁸ It is estimated that DRCs resources [exceed \\$24 trillion, and hold 70% of the world's coltan and over 30% of global cobalt](#).³⁹⁹ Coltan, a mineral which contains niobium and tantalum, the latter of which is used to produce tantalum capacitors widely found in electronics. In the current context of Russia's war with Ukraine, and global supply shortages for the electronic industry, it is clear why the DRC would be of strategic interest to Russia.

Russian PMC Presence in the DRC

The Democratic Republic of Congo has continuously denied any intervention from Russian military groups in its domestic affairs and claims to maintain independent decision-making. There is no clear evidence of any Russian PMCs operating in DRC, with most of the speculative presence attributed to spillover from neighboring countries such as Rwanda and the Central African Republic. [The CSIS has reported Russian PMC presence from as early as 2016](#),⁴⁰⁰ yet officially, Russian military presence was first [mandated in 2014](#) under UN peacekeeping operations after the second Congolese War.⁴⁰¹ From 2013 to 2014, the DRC government sent four groups of officers [to complete 2-month training courses in Russia](#).⁴⁰² This was followed by Russia offering police and military personnel from the [DRC extended 6-year scholarships](#)

³⁹⁶ "Russia Has the Ability to Help Democratic Republic of Congo Reach Its Potential," Внешняя политика - аналитическое агентство, October 11, 2015, <http://www.foreignpolicy.ru/en/analyses/russia-has-the-ability-to-help-democratic-republic-of-congo-reach-its-potential/>.

³⁹⁷ Emman El-Badawy et al., "Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa," institute.global, March 1, 2022, <https://institute.global/policy/security-soft-power-and-regime-support-spheres-russian-influence-africa>.

³⁹⁸ "Alrosa, DR Congo's MIBA Sign Memorandum of Understanding," interfax.com, September 9, 2021, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/72648/>; Emman El-Badawy et al., "Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa," institute.global, March 1, 2022, <https://institute.global/policy/security-soft-power-and-regime-support-spheres-russian-influence-africa>.

³⁹⁹ "Russia Has the Ability to Help Democratic Republic of Congo Reach Its Potential," Внешняя политика - аналитическое агентство, October 11, 2015, <http://www.foreignpolicy.ru/en/analyses/russia-has-the-ability-to-help-democratic-republic-of-congo-reach-its-potential/>.

⁴⁰⁰ "Private Military Contractors Bolster Russian Influence in Africa," France 24, February 4, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220204-private-military-contractors-bolster-russian-influence-in-africa>.

⁴⁰¹ "MONUSCO," United Nations Peacekeeping, 2010, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/monusco>.

⁴⁰² Andrew Davenport, "Strategic Analysis: Russian Business Activity in the Democratic Republic of Congo" Janes IntelTrak, May 17, 2016, <https://www.rwradvisory.com/russian-activity-in-the-democratic-republic-of-congo-abstract/>.



designed for a highly comprehensive training regimen.⁴⁰³ This lends itself to speculation of state-sanctioned Russian private military contractors used to train local forces, which corresponds with the ongoing conflict at the time.

Given DRC's vast mineral wealth, having a PMC presence in the country is highly beneficial to Russia and could protect valuable Russian assets in DRC such as [the Alrosa company mining operations](#).⁴⁰⁴ According to current public knowledge, there are no reports of exactions or violence committed by mercenaries, which is attributed to the limited information on active PMCs in DRC. As of October 2022, the president of the DRC spoke at the FT Africa Summit, and [directly refuted the need for Russian mercenaries](#) to help defeat the growing conflict with M23 rebels and the [Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces in the eastern region](#).⁴⁰⁵ This comes after Western diplomats expressed concern about the deployment of the Wagner Group forces to the Congo following talks between the DRC and Russia. Given the heavy instability in the country and continued relations with Russia, it is possible that state-sanctioned PMC operations will be needed in DRC, but it is expected that information on this development will be restricted.

Sudan

Emily Tucker

Russian PMC Activity in Sudan

Since formally gaining its independence from Great Britain and Egypt in 1956, Sudan has seen a tumultuous recent history. Substantial internal conflict has weakened its ability to be a leader in the region. South Sudan seceded in 2011 and became the 54th independent state of Africa. This led to multiple economic shocks, most notably the loss of oil revenue and [95% of its exports](#).⁴⁰⁶ With high rates of crime and conflict, there is a large population of refugees and internally displaced persons, resulting in more instability. The Juba Peace Agreement was signed by military opposition groups to the government in 2020 after [over thirty years of inflation and other grievances](#).⁴⁰⁷ A year later, in October 2021, a military takeover took place. Government structures were dissolved, and the Prime Minister stepped down. The country

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ Emman El-Badawy et al., "Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa," institute.global, March 1, 2022, <https://institute.global/policy/security-soft-power-and-regime-support-spheres-russian-influence-africa>.

⁴⁰⁵ "DR Congo Leader Rules out Deploying Russian Mercenaries to Quell Rebels," *Financial Times*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/8e720aa2-1cb3-474c-b4eb-805c03504f8f>; Andrew McGregor, "Violence and Viruses: How a Poorly Armed Insurgency in the Congo Poses a Global Threat," Jamestown, November 2, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/violence-and-viruses-how-a-poorly-armed-insurgency-in-the-congo-poses-a-global-threat/>.

⁴⁰⁶ "Overview," World Bank, 2011, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sudan/overview>.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*



suffered heavily during the COVID-19 pandemic, including record setting floods in 2020 and 2022, resulting in billions of dollars' worth of damage. Internal political conflict remains an issue.

As in other neighbouring African countries, the Sudanese government held official senior discussions with Moscow, asking for support against US aggression. In this, Sudan was essentially agreeing on Russian access and the notion that Russia will provide some form of 'local [assistance](#)'.⁴⁰⁸ Legally, this gives legitimacy to the presence on Russian contractors. Of these, the Wagner Group, led by Prigozhin, is the most prolific.

There are numerous instances accusing the Wagner Group of human rights abuses. In March 2022, two Sudanese miners were attacked by Wagner mercenaries said they were detained and [tortured](#).⁴⁰⁹ This follows a broader pattern of mercenary activity across African states.

Russia is interested in the oil, mineral and [financial sectors](#) of the Sudanese economy.⁴¹⁰ It is noted that the goal of mining for gold is an effort to compensate for Russia's economic losses due to western economic sanctions. The leader of the Wagner Group, is also owner of the Sudanese mining company Meroe Gold, according to US State Department [Intelligence](#).⁴¹¹ This is something Prigozhin has [denied](#).⁴¹²

As a direct consequence of the agreement between Russia and Sudan, within one month of the meeting between Putin and President al-Bashir Russian mining company M Invest received preferential access to Sudanese gold mines. Additionally, official Russian statistics showed an increase in Russian citizens [travelling](#) to Sudan by the end of the year.⁴¹³ By at least July 2018, Russian PMCs appeared in training camps in Sudan, in addition to equipping the Sudanese military.

Through the involvement of the Wagner group, Russia has secured survey and mining rights, but also helped to delegitimise opposition to Bashir and train the Sudanese military. Even after

⁴⁰⁸ Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Role of Russian Private Military Contractors in Africa," The Washington Institute, August 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa>.

⁴⁰⁹ ADF, "Wagner Group Terrorizing Sudanese Gold Miners," Africa Defense Forum, July 19, 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/07/wagner-group-terrorizing-sudanese-gold-miners/>.

⁴¹⁰ Andrew McGregor, "Russian Mercenaries and the Survival of the Sudanese Regime - Jamestown," Jamestown, February 6, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mercenaries-and-the-survival-of-the-sudanese-regime/>.

⁴¹¹ "Russian PMC Mining Gold in Sudan to Replenish Russia's Reserves - Media," www.ukrinform.net, 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3500650-russian-pmc-mining-gold-in-sudan-to-replenish-russias-reserves-media.html>.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

⁴¹³ "Russian Contractors Are Training the Army in Sudan, Says Moscow," *Reuters*, January 23, 2019, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-sudan-contractors/russian-contractors-are-training-the-army-in-sudan-says-moscow-idUSKCN1PH23T>.



Bashir fell from power in 2019, Russia [remains](#) interested in securing a base there. According to the NYT, a week after the fall of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, Prigozhin's plane arrived in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, with a Russian military delegation. He then returned to Moscow, bringing high-ranking Sudanese defence officials along with him.⁴¹⁴

Sudan is strategically important for Russia. In wanting to secure access to the Red Sea, Russia has its sights on Port Sudan as a key naval base. This comes as part of a wider overhaul focusing on Russian naval and commercial shipping capabilities. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Sudan's military leaders have expanded ties with Russia. According to [Al-Monitor](#),⁴¹⁵ the military in Sudan has once again become positive about the prospects of the Russian military logistics centre, since they are under serious international pressure as Western structures demand that they adopt the [constitutional declaration signed](#) with civilian forces from the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC).⁴¹⁶

For the broader grand strategy, establishing bases across Africa with PMC activity serves as a useful tool to chip away at the US global order, essentially attempting to erode the norms of behaviour in a balance of power world where Russia cannot confront the US directly. For Russia it is the achievement of economic and military objectives, but for Sudan, the PMCs are exploiting the country's residents and resources.

Chad

Camille Victor

Chad Political Context

Mahamat Idriss Déby has been in power as Chad's transitional president since the death of his father, Idriss Déby Itno, on 19 April 2021. He quickly received [international support](#),⁴¹⁷ particularly from France, whose troops are fighting armed Islamist groups in the Sahel alongside the Chadian army, considered the regional pillar of the anti-jihadist coalition.

Idriss Déby Itno - a key ally of Western powers in the fight against jihadist organisations in the Sahel - was one of Africa's longest serving leaders, ruling with an iron fist for three decades

⁴¹⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Role of Russian Private Military Contractors in Africa," The Washington Institute, August 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/role-russian-private-military-contractors-africa>.

⁴¹⁵ Anton Mardasov, "Russia Eyes Port Sudan as Key Naval Hub - Al-Monitor: Independent, Trusted Coverage of the Middle East," www.al-monitor.com, August 5, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/russia-eyes-port-sudan-key-naval-hub>.

⁴¹⁶ SudanTribune, "Sudan's FFC Will Propose New Constitutional Declaration," Sudan Tribune (Sudan Tribune, August 3, 2022), <https://sudantribune.com/article262237/>.

⁴¹⁷ Daniel Pelz, "Why France Is Backing Chad's New Leader, Mahamat Idriss Deby." *Deutsche Welle*. April 23, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/why-france-is-backing-chads-new-leader-mahamat-idriss-deby/a-57316728>.



before being [killed during an operation against rebels](#) from the most powerful insurgent group active in the country, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT).⁴¹⁸

[Violence erupted](#) in the aftermath of the 11 April 2021 elections - guaranteeing Déby another term in power - and his death. Security forces used excessive force against opposition-led demonstrations in late April and May, arresting over 700 people, many of whom reported ill-treatment, including torture, in detention.⁴¹⁹

When taking over the country's lead in April 2021, Mahamat Idriss Déby promised that civilian rule would be restored after 18 months in power, and that he would not take part in the elections that would follow. This promise was [revisited](#) during a nationwide forum staged by Déby as the 18-month deadline neared.⁴²⁰ On 8 October 2022, Déby was named [president of a \("Tchad : Mahamat Idriss Déby, président d'une "transition" prolongée de deux ans" 2022\)n extended two-year "transition" towards "transparent" elections during the forum, during which it was also declared that he could be a candidate in the poll.](#)⁴²¹

In August 2022, after years of upheaval, more than [30 rebel and opposition factions signed a contract with Chad's transitional authorities](#),⁴²² agreeing to participate in further negotiations, while the FACT refused to participate. This instantly raised the question of whether the agreement would be sufficient to assure the success of the discussions as the planned 18-month transition from military rule to democracy came to an end.

Since its independence from France in 1960, Chad has had a long history of coups and political turmoil. During his long reign, the elder Déby resisted several attempts to depose him by rebels crossing from Libya and Sudan. He was [backed by France](#),⁴²³ which saw him as a valuable ally in its fight against jihadism in the Sahel. France quickly endorsed his son as his heir.

⁴¹⁸ "Chad's President Idriss Déby Dies after Clashes with Rebels." *BBC News*. April 20, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-56815708>.

⁴¹⁹ "World Report 2022: Rights Trends in Chad." 2021. *Human Rights Watch*. December 17, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/chad>.

⁴²⁰ Zeinab Mohammed Salih, "Unity 'the Only Way Forward' Says Chad PM as Anti-Junta Anger Rises." *The Guardian*. October 18, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/18/new-chad-pm-saleh-kebzabo-unity>.

⁴²¹ "Tchad : Mahamat Idriss Déby, président d'une "transition" prolongée de deux ans." 2022. *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20221009-tchad-mahamat-idriss-d%C3%A9by-pr%C3%A9sident-d-une-transition-prolong%C3%A9e-de-deux-ans>.

⁴²² Andrew Mills, "Chad Signs Peace Pact with Rebels, but Main Insurgents Stay Out." *Reuters*. August 8, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-rebels-sign-peace-deal-2022-08-08/>.

⁴²³ Zeinab Mohammed Salih and Jason Burke, "Dozens Dead in Chad Capital as Security Forces Fire on Protesters." *The Guardian*. October 20, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/20/chaos-chad-police-protests-journalist-prime-minister-democracy>.



However, the [country's clear discontent](#) with Déby's push to entrench power was visible at the inauguration ceremony on October 10.⁴²⁴ France and the EU were solely represented by an ambassador. Furthermore, only one foreign head of state - Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari - attended the ceremony, indicating regional opposition to failed promises.

Wagner: Ally of Chadian Rebels, Enemy of the State

Over the past few years, Wagner has been linked to activities - both inside and outside of the country's territory - threatening Chad's current regime. In September 2021, the Chadian Foreign Minister, Chérif Mahamat Zene, declared that there was [no proof of Wagner's presence](#) in Chad, but that there was "reason to be concerned about the presence of these mercenaries", warning against outside interference in the country as it would pose various serious problems to Chad's security and stability.⁴²⁵ Despite the lack of certainty regarding Wagner's active presence on Chadian soil, Zene declared that the rebels who killed Idriss Deby Itno had been trained by Wagner. He added that an attack on Chad near the Central African border on May 30 was "certainly backed" by the Russians.

Indeed, Wagner has been accused of supporting rebels in Chad. In May 2021, Chadian security sources said that Wagner mercenaries had [infiltrated neighbouring Chad](#),⁴²⁶ and other sources claimed they were providing weapons to rebels in the country. In December of that year, a [clash](#) between Chadian forces and Russian paramilitaries in the Chadian village of Djormère, located near the Central African borders, resulted in "one death and one hostage on the side of the Chadian army".⁴²⁷ "Russians" crossed the border from the Central African Republic and caused several material and human damages to civilians, which led the Chadian army to intervene. On 16 February 2022, the governing junta accused the leader of the powerful Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), Timan Erdimi, of [seeking the help of Wagner](#) mercenaries to derail a national reconciliation process and topple the regime in place.⁴²⁸ According to Abderaman Koulamallah - former Minister of Communication and current Minister of State for National Reconciliation - an [incriminating phone conversation](#),⁴²⁹ leaked on social media, proved Erdimi's guilt. In it, Erdimi is heard talking to an "adviser to the Central African

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁵ "Chad FM Warns against Russian Interference." *France 24*. September 23, 2021.

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210923-chad-fm-warns-against-russian-interference>.

⁴²⁶ Betül Usta, "Russian Wagner Group's Presence in Libya Endangers North Africa." *Daily Sabah*. May 20, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/russian-wagner-groups-presence-in-libya-endangers-north-africa>.

⁴²⁷ Lassaad Ben Ahmed, "Tchad: un soldat porté disparu à proximité des frontières centrafricaines." *Anadolu Agency*. December 14, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tchad-un-soldat-port%C3%A9-disparu-%C3%A0-proximit%C3%A9-des-fronti%C3%A8res-centrafricaines/2446912>

⁴²⁸ "Chad Junta Accuses Rebel Head of Seeking Russian Mercenary Help." *Arab News*. February 16, 2022. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2026306/world>.

⁴²⁹ "Des Paramilitaires Russes Au Tchad?" *VOA Afrique*. February 17, 2022. <https://www.voafrique.com/a/6445403.html>.



Republic President Faustin Archange Touadera”, requesting him to ask the “Russians” to come and help him in Chad “to drive out Mahamat (Déby) and France”.

Russian PMCs as a Hindrance or Catalyst for Securing Russian Interests?

Chad is [strategically important](#); Paris requires stability in its former colony, and N'Djamena is home to thousands of French soldiers involved in counter-terrorism special operations.⁴³⁰ Located between Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Niger, and Nigeria, the country lies at the crossroads of regional and global geopolitical and economic interests. France and the United States are both present. Russia has a renewed interest in the region, and at the time of Deby's death, the Kremlin already had personnel stationed in Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, as well as a mission in Nigeria. Chad thus represents an excellent chance for Russia to hurt Western interests while also gaining access to West and Central Africa. Conflict in the region only serves to advance these objectives. The escalation in Chad and anti-French sentiment following Deby's killing, as well as the army's seizure of power, are positive developments for Russia and its African policy.

On 13 October 2022, Russia's foreign affairs minister signalled the government's determination to “strengthen Russian-Chadian cooperation in its many facets, including interaction in the political, trade and economic spheres, investments and others”. However, Wagner's recent activities in Chad - which represent a threat to the current regime by supporting rebels and representing a menace both to civilians and security forces in the country - seem to inhibit a rapprochement between the current Russian and Chadian governments. Firstly, Cherif Mahamt Zene - Chad's Foreign Minister until his resignation on 19 September 2022 - strongly [warned against external interference](#) in the region, referring to Russian paramilitaries operating in neighbouring countries.⁴³¹ Zene declared in September 2021 that rebels responsible for Idriss Deby Itno's death had been trained by the private security Wagner Group. Moreover, despite [cooperating militarily](#) with Russia since 2017,⁴³² [Chad voted in favour of a resolution](#) that asks Russia to reverse its “illegal annexation attempt” of four Ukrainian regions following “so-called illegal referendums” at the UN General Assembly on 12 October 2022.⁴³³ Nonetheless, if the rebels supported by Wagner succeed in toppling Chad's current regime, this could lead to a major shift in the new leadership's foreign policy towards Russia.

⁴³⁰ Ruslan Trad, “How Russia Could Capitalise on Chad's Instability.” *The New Arab*. 2021. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/how-russia-could-capitalise-chads-instability>.

⁴³¹ “Chad FM Warns against Russian Interference.” *France 24*. September 23, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210923-chad-fm-warns-against-russian-interference>.

⁴³² “Heads of Military Departments of Russia and Chad Signed Military Cooperation Agreement at the Army 2017 Forum: Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.” *Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation*. 2017. https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12139347@egNews.

⁴³³ “UN Condemns Russia's Annexation Move: How Did Countries Vote?” *Al Jazeera*. October 13, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/13/un-condemns-russias-annexations-in-ukraine-how-countries-voted>.



Mozambique

Jeffrey Love

Context

In 2017, a radical extremist group going by the name of Al-Shabab (not to be confused with the Somalian Al-Shabaab) began launching raids on police and military installations in Northeastern [Mozambique](#).⁴³⁴ The group used local grievances with the federal government of Mozambique as a justification for their violence. The province of Cabo Delgado in Northeastern Mozambique is one of the poorest in the country, with little investment from the federal government into basic services such as education, healthcare, employment. Food security is a pressing issue in the region. There is also a religious divide between the Cabo Delgado province's largely Muslim population and the Christian-dominated federal government.

These issues were compounded by the discovery of large liquid natural gas fields in the Cabo Delgado province in [2010](#).⁴³⁵ Local populations expected domestic and foreign investment into infrastructure, jobs, and basic services in the region to follow. However, as the rights to these fields were auctioned off to Western oil and natural gas companies, investment remained squarely focused on extraction and processing facilities. As a result of this, a discontented group began launching attacks on police stations, military installations, and other government facilities in 2017. The group, which aligned itself with the Islamic Jihad and named itself [Al-Shabab](#),⁴³⁶ captured weapons from these raids and gained popularity. Al-Shabab conducted raids on local villages as well, massacring and dismembering villagers. Al-Shabab also grew its membership through intimidation of villagers in this manner.

Mozambique's initial response to the terrorist threat was slow and insufficient. Local police forces were enlisted to respond to Al-Shabab. However, their poor training in counterinsurgency operations meant that the local security forces were unable to do much to counter the increasing intensity of Al-Shabab's attacks. In fact, their poor training meant that Al-Shabab was able to easily target their operations, raiding weapons and other [supplies](#).⁴³⁷ Al-

⁴³⁴ Fasanotti, Federica Saini. "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure." *Brookings*, Brookings, 9 Mar. 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

⁴³⁵ "Energy Is Reinventing Itself, Total Is Becoming Totalenergies." *Total Mozambique LNG Project*, <https://mzlng.totalenergies.co.mz/en>.

⁴³⁶ Tom Van Rentergem, "EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 281," June 2022, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/06/PB-281-Tom-VR_Al-Shabab-in-Mozambique.pdf?type=pdf.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*



Shabab continued to grow in size and potency amidst local security forces' attempts to combat their rise. Importantly, the Mozambican government attempted to downplay the seriousness of the insurgency, declining offers for international assistance, and intimidating journalists in the Cabo Delgado region.

In response to the failure of Mozambique's security forces, Maputo requested the assistance of Private Military Corporations. The Dyck Advisory Group and Wagner Group were both hired to perform counter-insurgency operations.

The Wagner Group

The Wagner Group was the only Russian Private Military Corporation contracted to work in Mozambique. While Mozambique entertained offers from a number of Private Military Corporations from Russia, the United States, and elsewhere, it chose the Wagner Group and Dyck Advisory Group in September of 2019. The two Private military Corporations were hired to engage in counter-insurgency operations and train local forces. The Wagner Group was selected to provide 200 militants for these purposes. The selection of the Wagner Group was conditioned by an abnormally low cost of operation and Russia's recent decision to forgive 90% of Mozambique's [debt](#).⁴³⁸ Historical gratitude was a part of President Nyusi's decision to select the Wagner Group, as the USSR provided substantial aid to the country during its wars of independence.

The Wagner Group's contract was accompanied by separate [deals](#) granting Russian companies the right to extract oil and natural gas from Cabo Delgado.⁴³⁹ However, these separate deals were conditional on the success of the Wagner Group in combatting the terrorist insurgency in the region.

The Wagner Group's arrival in Mozambique was accompanied by a number of Russian military helicopters, including a Hind gunship. Drones and other electronic warfare devices were imported into Mozambique to aid in counter-insurgency operations. Russia also reportedly signed a resolution allowing for military ships to dock in Mozambique ports to facilitate the transport of weapons and supplies into Mozambique for the Wagner Group.

Impact

⁴³⁸ "Russian Mercenaries: A String of Failures in Africa." *Geopolitical Monitor*, 24 Aug. 2020, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russian-mercenaries-a-string-of-failures-in-africa/>.

⁴³⁹ Opperman, Jasmine. "Mozambique Insurgency: Op-Ed: An Expanded Russian Interest in Northern Mozambique Could Be a New Game Changer." *Daily Maverick*, 13 Oct. 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-10-14-an-expanded-russian-interest-in-northern-mozambique-could-be-a-new-game-changer/>.



The Wagner Group was unsuccessful in combatting Al-Shabab. In October of 2019, two ambushes by Al-Shabab on the Wagner Group killed nearly a dozen militants and over twenty local security forces. The relationship between local security forces and the Wagner Group was further weakened after an incident of friendly fire where Wagner Group militants were killed by Mozambican forces. Less than one month later in November, the Wagner Group [withdrew](#) from Cabo Delgado.⁴⁴⁰

The Wagner Group's failure was attributed to two key factors: failure to integrate with the local Mozambique forces and a lack of experience with counter-insurgency operations in Cabo Delgado's challenging [Terrain](#).⁴⁴¹ The Wagner Group considered local forces to be too ['undisciplined'](#) and unprepared to engage in counterinsurgency operations,⁴⁴² and thus struggled to train and engage in joint operations with them. Likewise local forces deemed the Wagner Group to be too nonchalant, inconsiderate of local customs, and overconfident. Moreover, the Wagner Group was not successful in adapting to Cabo Delgado's terrain. The dense jungle was difficult to traverse on foot, and thus the Wagner Group preferred to be ferried around by helicopter. Its Mozambican counterparts did not always have the same luxury, thus compounding existing divides with the Wagner Group.

The Wagner Group's operations in Mozambique were limited in scope, only lasting about two months. During that time press suppression was taking place as well. Therefore, there are no reliable documented instances of the Wagner Group engaging in human rights violations while operating in Mozambique.

Conclusion

The Wagner Group's operation in Mozambique is both an interesting and highly consequential example of the failure of Russia's use of Private Military Corporations to advance its foreign policy. The failure of the Wagner Group meant that the oil rights it secured for Russian companies were revoked. However, it is debatable how valuable those rights are given that they apply to territories held by Al-Shabab. Moreover, by withdrawing from the conflict in such a decisive and embarrassing manner, Russia's relationship with Mozambique was weakened rather than strengthened.

⁴⁴⁰ Tom Van Rentergem, "EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 281," June 2022, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/06/PB-281-Tom-VR_Al-Shabab-in-Mozambique.pdf?type=pdf.

⁴⁴¹ "Russian Mercenaries: A String of Failures in Africa." *Geopolitical Monitor*, 24 Aug. 2020, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/russian-mercenaries-a-string-of-failures-in-africa/>.

⁴⁴² Balestrieri, Steve. "Wagner Group: Russian Mercenaries Still Floundering in Africa." SOFREP, 19 Apr. 2020, <https://sofrep.com/news/wagner-group-russian-mercenaries-still-floundering-in-africa/>.



Central African Republic

Jeffrey Love

Context

In 2012, Seleka rebels began a military campaign against the government of the Central African Republic. In 2013 the rebels captured the capital of the Central African Republic and removed the former government under President François Bozize. Rebel tactics include indiscriminate killing and [dismembering](#) of civilians.⁴⁴³ After the fall of the Capital, militia groups formed to fight against the Seleka rebels. These militia groups engaged in reprisal attacks against civilians in Seleka-held territories as well as Muslim minority populations throughout the Central African Republic. In 2014, the African Union and France intervened militarily in the capital and managed to capture it from Seleka forces. The United Nations created MINUSCA, a peacekeeping mission to take over from the African Union and France in late 2014. [MINUSCA](#) is still operating in the Central African Republic, combatting the many factions that Seleka divided into after the UN intervention.⁴⁴⁴

The Wagner Group

In 2018, the Central African Republic and Russian Federation signed an agreement on military cooperation. The agreement reportedly allows for a maximum of [1,135](#) Russian military ‘instructors’ to be in the Central African Republic at any time.⁴⁴⁵ A UN panel of experts determined that the majority of these instructors were former officers of the Russian military that had been recruited by the Ministry of Defense. However, a number of instructors are also from the Wagner Group, and engage in regular combat, as opposed to the purely self-defensive right to force for instructors.

By December 2020, mercenaries from the Wagner Group had been deployed to the majority of front lines in conflict. French officials stated that the Wagner Group is a ‘deeply destabilizing’ force in the region. However, a security advisor to Central African Republic’s President Touadéra denied that the Wagner Group in the conflict. However, according to a report by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, three companies are involved in the Wagner Group’s contract. Of them, Lobaye Invest SARLU is of particular interest, as it is owned by the Russian company M FINANCE and is seeking mineral concessions in exchange for the supply of advisors from the Wagner Group. The Central African Republic is rich in

⁴⁴³ “Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces.” Human Rights Watch, 5 May 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces>.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*



diamonds, gold, and [uranium](#).⁴⁴⁶ Information regarding the involvement of the Wagner Group in the Central African Republic is actively suppressed by both the government of the Central African Republic, the Wagner Group, and other actors in theater. In 2018, three Russian journalists filming a documentary on the Wagner Group's involvement in the Central African Republic were killed, however the perpetrators of the killings haven't been [found](#).⁴⁴⁷

Humanitarian Abuses

While Russian forces in the Central African Republic were officially meant to train local forces in combatting rebel entities, the Wagner Group has reportedly engaged in offensive operations which have involved violations of international humanitarian law.

The OHCHR outlined multiple cases of indiscriminate targeting of civilians by Wagner Group forces. Between December 2020 and February 2021, over 20 civilians were killed in attacks that included the use of excessive force, such as the shelling of civilian installations such as a mosque and IDP [Camp](#).⁴⁴⁸ Another documented instance was the shooting of 12 unarmed civilians at a checkpoint in July of [2021](#).⁴⁴⁹

The Wagner Group reportedly engaged in mass torture and execution of prisoners in Landja-Mboko in December 2020. Human Rights Watch identified multiple instances of torture, including the [severing](#) of a finger in 2019 by Russian fighters.⁴⁵⁰ Further allegations of looting, including the systematic looting of captured towns in multiple provinces in February 2021 have also been lodged against 'Russian mercenaries.'

In response to reports of the Wagner Group's human rights abuses in the Central African Republic, the European Union imposed [sanctions](#).⁴⁵¹ As a result of this, the European Union decided that it would not train local Central African Soldiers because of their ties to the Wagner Group. Amongst the sanctions individuals and entities is Valery Zakhrov, a security advisor to President Touadera. The European Union's decision was predicated on a pattern of behavior by the Wagner Group that was observed across multiple conflicts including those in Libya and Syria.

⁴⁴⁶ "Russian Mercenaries behind Central African Republic Atrocities - HRW." BBC News, BBC, 3 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-61311272>.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ "Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries." OHCHR, UN, AL RUS 5/2021, May 2021, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=26305>

⁴⁴⁹ "Russian Mercenaries behind Central African Republic Atrocities - HRW." BBC News, BBC, 3 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-61311272>.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ "Wagner Group: Why the EU Is Alarmed by Russian Mercenaries in Central Africa." BBC News, BBC, 19 Dec. 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59699350>.



Conclusions

The Wagner Group's operations in the Central African Republic reflect the brutal tactics and blatant disregard it employs in its operations. The clear link between Russian mineral interests and the success of the Wagner Group are a reflection of Russia's strategy of exchanging military services for natural resources in sub-Saharan Africa. The extent to which the Wagner Group engaged in abuses of humanitarian law is alarming, particularly so because of the difficulty of accessing information related to its activities.

Botswana

Hugo Claus

Domestic Context and Relationship with Russia

Botswana is ruled by the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) since its independence in 1966. Under the BDP, Botswana has experienced a considerable economic and political transformation with some of the highest performances in Africa in terms of income, political institutions and freedoms. Using the country's diamond resources and prudent fiscal policies, Botswana is one of the [fastest growing economies](#)⁴⁵² in Africa.

Whilst the BDP has ruled Botswana since independence, the country remains a democracy. The last legislative elections in 2019 were deemed [free](#)⁴⁵³ even though the opposition highlighted the hegemony of the BDP on the public scene. The BDP was dominated by Ian Khama who became president in 2008 and served two terms until 2018. He was succeeded by Mokgweetsi Masisi in 2018 who was re-elected in 2019. Khama who has left the BDP has criticised Masisi for [stifling dissent](#)⁴⁵⁴ as well as questioning his domestic and foreign policy.

Botswana's foreign policy can be characterised by its coherence and stability. It has sought to develop friendly relationships with its neighbours despite tensions with Zimbabwe due to the [regime in Harare and refugee influx](#). On a regional scale it is supportive of international cooperation and seen as a stabilising force in the region. Botswana also enjoys a strong relationship with the US. It has been a significant recipient of US aid particularly in dealing with the HIV/AIDS crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic more recently. Botswana and the US have also partnered to open an International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) bureau in

⁴⁵² BTI. (2022) *Botswana Country Report 2022*. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BWA> (Accessed: 01 November 2022)

⁴⁵³ "Botswana pulls off all-round incident free election", *AfricaNews*. October 26, 2019.

<https://www.africanews.com/2019/10/26/botswana-pulls-off-all-round-incident-free-general-election/>

⁴⁵⁴ Carien du Plessis, "Botswana: Former president Khama slams successor Masisi, says he will sue for defamation", *The Africa Report*. August 24, 2021. <https://www.theafricareport.com/121254/botswana-former-president-khama-slams-successor-masisi-says-he-will-sue-for-defamation/>



Gaborone in operation since 2003. This strong partnership has not prevented Botswana from pursuing relations with other actors including Russia.

Botswana and Russia have had a cordial relationship since the collapse of the USSR. They have a trade agreement signed in 1987 and an agreement on economic and technical cooperation signed in 1988. Scope of cooperation expanded to the security sector when Botswana signed a cooperation agreement on [joint peacekeeping operations and joint military training](#)⁴⁵⁵ in August 2018. The conflict in Ukraine seems to have created some tensions between both parties. Ex-president Ian Khama has called on Botswana to [support Ukraine](#)⁴⁵⁶ in the South-African *Daily Maverick*. Botswana has either condemned or abstained on a number of initiatives relating to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the UN general assembly.

The Presence of Russian PMCs in Botswana and its Implications

Information on the presence of Russian private military mercenaries in Botswana is limited. According to a [UN Report](#)⁴⁵⁷, the private security sector is heavily restricted in Botswana. However, it is possible that within the 2018 cooperation agreement, some of the activities are in fact performed by private mercenaries rather than the Russian military. According to the [Emirates Policy Center](#)⁴⁵⁸, there were 20-30 Wagner group operatives which complemented 100 Russian military personnel who worked as advisers and trainers in 2020. It is important to highlight that we lack more recent figures and information. Thus, it is not possible to determine whether Botswana's stance in the conflict has had an impact on these activities.

The presence of private military contracts seems to have been sanctioned by the state; however, the scope of the action of these mercenaries seems to have been restricted by the state. Activities are probably limited to military training considering the political and social stability in Botswana compared to other African states. According to our knowledge there is no reports of exactions or violence committed by these mercenaries. This can be probably explained by

⁴⁵⁵ Institute for the Study of War. (2020) *Russian Security Cooperation Agreements July 2014-May 2020*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/List%20of%20Russian%20Security%20Cooperation%20Agreements%20Post-2014.pdf> (Accessed: 01 November 2022)

⁴⁵⁶ Seretse Khama, "Why Africa must care about Ukraine's struggle for freedom", *Daily Maverick*. October 02, 2022. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-10-02-why-africa-must-care-about-ukraines-struggle-for-freedom/>

⁴⁵⁷ Patricia Arias *et al.*, (2022) "Research on national regulation of private and military and security companies". https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361512013_Research_on_national_regulation_of_private_military_and_security_companies_Botswana_Ghana_the_Gambia_Kenya_Lesotho_Mauritius_Namibia_Nigeria_Sierra_Leone_South_Africa_Swaziland_Uganda_and_Zimbabwe_Ann (Accessed: 01 November 2022)

⁴⁵⁸ Ahmad Askar, "The increasing presence and role of private security firms in Africa: The Russian company "Wagner" as a model", *Emirates Policy Center*. June 06, 2020. <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-increasing-presence-and-role-of-private-security-firms-in-africa-the-russian-company-wagner-as-a-model>



the limited nature of PMC's in Botswana. It is likely that this activity will remain limited as there is no evidence of conflict or instability in the future.

Zimbabwe

Hugo Claus

Domestic Context and Relationship with Russia

Zimbabwe's situation is associated with Robert Mugabe who ruled the country from 1980 to 1987 as Prime minister and 1987 to 2017 as President. Zimbabwe's economy has experienced decline since the 1990s due to the failure of land reform, military intervention in [neighbouring countries](#)⁴⁵⁹ and subsequent economic sanctions. Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) have transformed the country into a one-party state. Effectively Zimbabwe has been facing a multi-faceted crisis throughout the 21st century resulting in a situation of insecurity and instability.

The departure of Robert Mugabe in 2017 provided hope that the economic and political situation could change. However, the new president Emmerson Mnangagwa has failed to address any challenges. The currency crisis has accentuated with a peak inflation of [837%](#)⁴⁶⁰ in July 2020 and a humanitarian crisis. The government cracked down on protests over Zimbabwe's situation in January 2020 and there is a trend towards the militarisation of public institutions since 2018. Mnangagwa and the ZANU-PF have failed to put in place necessary reforms.

Zimbabwe has been isolated on the international scene since the early 2000s. The EU and US have put in place sanctions on Zimbabwe due to the Mugabe regime. There were attempts to put in place [UN sanctions](#)⁴⁶¹ in 2008 which were vetoed by Russia and China. In 2003, Zimbabwe established the "[Look East](#)"⁴⁶² policy in response to the EU and US sanctions. As a result it developed its relationship with China in particular as well as Russia to some extent. As stated by [Alexander Rouser](#)⁴⁶³, "Zimbabwe historically and ideologically will be leaned

⁴⁵⁹ BTI. (2022) *Zimbabwe Country Report 2022*. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/ZWE> (Accessed: 01 November 2022)

⁴⁶⁰ Ray Ndlovu, "Zimbabwe annual inflation soars to 837%, statistics agency says", *Bloomberg*. August 15, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-08-15/zimbabwe-annual-inflation-soars-to-837-statistics-agency-says?leadSource=verify%20wall>

⁴⁶¹ Dzvinka Kachur, "Russia's resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique", *Africa Portal*. November 27, 2020. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russias-resurgence-africa-zimbabwe-and-mozambique/>

⁴⁶² Andrey Maslow and Vadim Zaytsev, "What's behind Russia's newfound interest in Zimbabwe", *Carnegie Endowment for Peace*. November 11, 2018. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/77707>

⁴⁶³ Columbus Mavhunga, "Zimbabwe leaning to Russia as others shun Moscow for invading Ukraine", *Voice of America*. June 08, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-leaning-to-russia-as-others-shun-moscow-for-invading-ukraine-/6608224.html>



more to Russia and China than the Western international community”. There were hopes that the change of regime in Harare would change the situation; however, attempts to re-engage with the West have failed which potentially explains Zimbabwe’s turn towards Russia to complement its relationship with China and neighbouring African countries.

Zimbabwe and Russia’s relationship stems from Soviet involvement in the Rhodesian bush war and support for the rival of the ZANU-PF. Thus, the relationship between Zimbabwe and the Soviet Union/Russia can be characterised as cold until the early 2000s. During this period the sanctions pushed Zimbabwe to [pursue relations](#)⁴⁶⁴ with Russia as part of its “Look East” policy. Zimbabwe sanctioned Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014 and was one of the first countries to send a delegation in 2015. According to the political commentator Rejoice Ngwenya, Zimbabwe sees [“self-interest and self-preservation”](#)⁴⁶⁵ in pursuing a relationship with Russia. In 2012 both parties concluded a [bilateral investment and promotion agreement](#)⁴⁶⁶ (BIPPA) as well as an agreement on the supply of weapons and cooperation in producing military products in 2015. The increased cooperation and increased Russian investment have thus enabled greater Russian influence in the country, where PMC’s have played a particular yet significant role.

The Presence of Russian PMCs in Zimbabwe and its Implications

Information on the presence of Russian military contracts in Zimbabwe is limited which is explained by the limited nature of their activities in the country. One of the main activities of Russian PMC’s such as the Wagner group is in political advising and consulting. There are a number of accounts which state that Russian political consultants played a role in the 2018 election for the ruling ZANU-PF. The [opposition](#)⁴⁶⁷ has accused Russian advisors associated with Prigozhin and the Wagner group of exerting influence in these elections in favour of Mnangagwa. This suggests that PMC’s have diversified the services they provide to the political sector. However, the activity of PMC’s in Zimbabwe seems to be limited to political

⁴⁶⁴ Dzvinka Kachur, “Russia’s resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique”, *Africa Portal*. November 27, 2020. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russias-resurgence-africa-zimbabwe-and-mozambique/>

⁴⁶⁵ Columbus Mavhunga, “Zimbabwe leaning to Russia as others shun Moscow for invading Ukraine”, *Voice of America*. June 08, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/zimbabwe-leaning-to-russia-as-others-shun-moscow-for-invading-ukraine-/6608224.html>

⁴⁶⁶ Dzvinka Kachur, “Russia’s resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique”, *Africa Portal*. November 27, 2020. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russias-resurgence-africa-zimbabwe-and-mozambique/>

⁴⁶⁷ Christian Putsch, “Putin’s shadowy army: Russian mercenaries enter African wars”, *Worldcrunch*, June 27, 2021. <https://worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/putin39s-shadow-army-russian-mercenaries-enter-african-wars>



strategists occasionally “boosted”⁴⁶⁸ by bodyguards according to an investigation of the Russian website “Proekt”. However, there is potential for this to change.

As stated above, Zimbabwe suffers from both economic and to a certain extent political instability. At the same time, Zimbabwe has strengthened economic cooperation with Russia who has invested in the country such as [ALROSA-Zimbabwe](#)⁴⁶⁹ to mine diamonds. There is also the potential for Russia to invest in the Darwendale Platinum Project which could generate up to [\\$3 billion](#)⁴⁷⁰. This increased investment entails increased stakes for Russia who might be tempted to secure control by promoting PMC’s. Similarly, to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe’s situation is an ideal place for PMC’s to potentially prosper.

Mali

Camille Victor

Political Context

Colonel Assimi Goïta was [sworn in](#) as Mali’s interim president in June 2021, following a second coup in only nine months.⁴⁷¹ Indeed, Goïta led the August 2020 coup that deposed elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, before leading a second coup and seizing power in May 2021, after less than a year as vice president in a civilian-led administration.

After [talks](#) with opposition and civil society groups and pressure from West African leaders,⁴⁷² the interim government agreed to an 18-month transition timeline to return to civilian rule in September 2020, a month after the first coup. The transitional administration confirmed in April 2021 that legislative and presidential elections would be held on February 27, 2022.

When he took power in the second coup, Goïta stated that he was committed to the agreed-upon election schedule. At his inauguration, he stated his [commitment](#) to “the organisation of

⁴⁶⁸ C. Dan, “Sympathy for the devil: Russian mercenary operations around the world as a case study for future geopolitics”, *The Institute of World Politics*, January 14, 2021.

<https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2021/01/14/sympathy-for-the-devil-russian-mercenary-operations-around-the-world-as-a-case-study-for-future-geopolitics/>

⁴⁶⁹ Dzvinka Kachur, “Russia’s resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique”, *Africa Portal*. November 27, 2020. <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/russias-resurgence-africa-zimbabwe-and-mozambique/>

⁴⁷⁰ Henry Meyer, “Putin’s notorious ‘Chef’ is now meddling across Africa”, *Bloomberg*, November 20, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-11-20/putin-chef-yevgeny-prigozhin-is-now-meddling-in-africa#xj4y7vzkg>

⁴⁷¹ “Mali Coup Leader Goita Sworn in as Interim President and Appoints PM”, *Reuters*, June 7, 2021.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-coup-leader-assimi-goita-sworn-transitional-president-2021-06-07/>

⁴⁷² “Mali Coup: Military Agrees to 18-Month Transition Government”, *BBC News*, September 12, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-54134614>.



credible, fair, and transparent elections that are held as scheduled".⁴⁷³ He has, however, extended his leadership of the transition period since then.

Despite continued [pressure](#) from ECOWAS,⁴⁷⁴ the Economic Community of West African States, the transitional authorities indicated in late 2021 that they [would not meet the February 2022 deadline](#).⁴⁷⁵ Following a proposal to hold election in 2026, quickly [revisited to 2025](#) in response to ECOWAS pressures,⁴⁷⁶ the community upheld sanctions following the coup, as well as imposed [new economic and financial ones](#),⁴⁷⁷ closed Mali's land and air borders, and froze most commercial and financial transactions. This led to another [revision](#) of the election schedule by the Malian authorities, announcing an end to the transition in 2024.⁴⁷⁸

Although some individual sanctions remain in place, ECOWAS responded by [lifting](#) economic and financial sanctions and opening borders. Mali is still barred from participating in ECOWAS decision-making bodies.⁴⁷⁹

Mali's ongoing crisis stems from events in 2012, when northern separatists and Islamist armed groups drove government forces out of northern Mali and the military overthrew the government. Fresh elections in 2013 and 2018, as well as a peace agreement in 2015 between the government and two northern separatist movements, provided hope for stability.

The situation in Mali is, however, continuously degrading. A prevailing Jihadist insurgency and attacks by various armed groups, little progress in implementing the 2015 accords, and [anti-government protests](#) by a coalition of opposition forces culminated in the August 2020 coup.⁴⁸⁰ Additionally, hundreds of civilians have been killed and thousands more have been

⁴⁷³ "Mali Coup Leader Goita Sworn in as Interim President and Appoints PM", *Reuters*, June 7, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-coup-leader-assimi-goita-sworn-transitional-president-2021-06-07/>.

⁴⁷⁴ "ECOWAS Delegation Visits Mali, Seeks Assurance on Elections", *Africanews*, October 18, 2021. <https://www.africanews.com/2021/10/18/ecowas-delegation-visits-mali-seeks-assurance-on-elections/>.

⁴⁷⁵ "Mali's Leader Promises Election Timetable by New Year", *Al Jazeera*, December 12, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/12/malis-leader-promises-election-timetable-by-new-year>.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ "Mali 'Strongly Condemns' ECOWAS Sanctions; Closes Land Borders", *Al Jazeera*, January 10, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/10/mali-strongly-condemns-ecowas-illegal-sanctions>.

⁴⁷⁸ "Post-Coup Mali Sets Timetable for Vote ahead of Key Summit", *France 24*, June 30, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220630-post-coup-mali-sets-timetable-for-vote-ahead-of-key-summit>.

⁴⁷⁹ Annie Risemberg, "ECOWAS Lifts Sanctions against Mali", *VOA News*, July 4, 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/ecowas-lifts-sanctions-on-mali-burkina-faso-/6644141.html>.

⁴⁸⁰ "Mali Coup: Thousands Take to Bamako Streets to Celebrate", *BBC News*, August 21, 2020. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53868236?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c78q34zzqy5t/mali-coup&link_location=live-reporting-story.



internally displaced in recent years as a [result of insecurity, poverty, and the effects of climate change](#).⁴⁸¹

Goïta has also indicated a shift in his approach to using international forces to address Mali's security issues. On the one hand, [tensions are growing](#) with the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA, as state authorities have restricted its freedom of movement and paused the rotation of forces at times.⁴⁸² On the other hand, Mali's former colonial power, France, withdrew its military forces - deployed as part of operation Barkhane in place since 2013 - and ended its nearly decade-long counter-terrorism operation in August 2022 due to deteriorating relations and a shift in foreign policy in favor of Russia. Indeed, France was [pushed out](#) by Mali's military authorities six months after the arrival of paramilitaries from the Wagner Group.⁴⁸³ France and its international partners said in a [statement](#) that "the political, operational, and legal conditions are no longer met to effectively continue their current military engagement in the fight against terrorism in Mali".⁴⁸⁴

Goodbye France, Hello Russia: A Major Pivot in Malian Foreign Policy

Already in 2019, paramilitaries from the Wagner group were [seen](#) in Mali's capital, Bamako.⁴⁸⁵ This visit took place a few months after the Russian and Malian ministers of defense signed a military cooperation agreement in June 2019, signalling Russia's investment in its relations with Mali in the name of the fight against terrorism. This seemed like a beneficial move for both states. On the one hand, Russia had been facing Western economic sanctions for the past five years following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and could thus have better access to new markets and natural resources. On the other hand, Mali's security situation kept continually degrading, especially in the north of the country, despite French military support and presence through operation Barkhane since 2013.

It is only in December 2021, however, that the [official deployment](#) of paramilitaries from the Wagner group to Mali took place with the support of the Russian armed forces, signalling a drastic pivot in Mali's foreign policy towards Russia.⁴⁸⁶ The move was immediately

⁴⁸¹ Louisa Brooke-Holland, "UK Military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022", *House of Commons Library*, October 25, 2022. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9634/>.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

⁴⁸³ "Les Derniers Soldats Français de l'Opération Barkhane Ont Quitté Le Mali", *France Bleu*, August 15, 2022. <https://www.francebleu.fr/infos/international/les-derniers-soldats-francais-de-l-operation-barkhane-ont-quitte-le-mali-1660571253>.

⁴⁸⁴ "Joint Declaration on the Fight against the Terrorist Threat and the Support to Peace and Security in the Sahel and West Africa." 2022, *Elysee*, February 17, 2022. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/02/17/joint-declaration-on-the-fight-against-the-terrorist-threat>.

⁴⁸⁵ "Bamako et Moscou, Une Proximité Qui Ne Date Pas d'Hier", *Deutsche Welle*, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/fr/bamako-et-moscou-une-proximite%20qui-ne-date-pas-dhier/a-51614205>.

⁴⁸⁶ "Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali", *CSIS*, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.



condemned by Mali's international partners such as the United States and numerous European nations, including their long-term military ally, France, who ultimately removed its last troops from the country on 15 August 2022 as relations between France and Mali had sharply deteriorated. Indeed, the French foreign ministry had already [announced](#) in September 2021 that an intervention by Wagner would be “incompatible with the efforts carried out by Mali's Sahelian and international partners engaged in the Coalition for the Sahel for security and development in the region”, and France clearly stood by this.⁴⁸⁷

The conditions for Wagner's presence in Mali were specified in a contract between the Malian state and the paramilitary group drafted in September 2022. The [document](#) stipulated that 1,000 Russian mercenaries would be deployed to Mali to train local forces and provide security services and protection for senior officials amid growing political insecurity in the country.⁴⁸⁸ In exchange, the Wagner group would be [paid roughly 6 billion CFA francs](#) (8 million pounds),⁴⁸⁹ and would secure valuable access to natural resources including [uranium, diamond and gold mines](#) as likely pay offs whilst pursuing Moscow's geopolitical goals.⁴⁹⁰

This new cooperation with the Malian state is [consistent](#) with Wagner's pattern of engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁹¹ In partnering up with resource-rich states with weak governance, it trades security services such as intelligence, combat, paramilitary and disinformation services in exchange for financial gain and the opportunity to further Russian interests in the region. This new partnership is mutually beneficial whilst adding to the threat to civilians: Wagner is well known for its lengthy and widespread human rights violations and in contrast with Western nations such as France, Moscow is unlikely to hold the Malian junta accountable for its breaches to the rule of law, given its own history of violence against civilians.

A Win for the Russian State and PMC

As mentioned above, Wagner's presence in Mali is both a source of profit for the company and a way for Russia to secure not only geopolitical but also economic interests. Firstly, as an [anti-](#)

⁴⁸⁷ John Irish and David Lewis, “EXCLUSIVE Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries into Mali Is Close”, *Reuters*, September 13, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁰ Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure”, *Brookings*, February 8, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

⁴⁹¹ “Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali”, *CSIS*, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.



[French sentiment](#) had been gaining ground in Mali over the past years,⁴⁹² Russia saw an opportunity to strong-arm France out of the country. There is evidence that [Russia is seeking to disseminate misinformation](#) about France's counterterrorism efforts in the country,⁴⁹³ presenting them as a front for uranium mining in the Sahel and neocolonialism disguised as counterterrorism. This coordinated propaganda echoes local dissatisfaction with France's presence in Mali. Another clear illustration of this is the failed attempt by Wagner mercenaries to [stage evidence of French atrocities](#) near an army base in Gossi (northern Mali). On 22 April 2022,⁴⁹⁴ the French military released satellite imagery and drone footage showing Wagner troops arriving at the base and arranging corpses in shallow mass graves to falsify evidence of mass killings by French forces. [Russian-linked social media accounts](#) were quick to blame the French military for the killings in a series of posts,⁴⁹⁵ constituting yet another attempt in an ongoing campaign aimed at discrediting French efforts in the region and promoting Russian partnerships.

In a more indirect way, a new cooperation between Russia and Mali could considerably help Russia secure economic interests in the country as well. Indeed, as relations between Mali and France continue to deteriorate, the Russo-Malian rapprochement is bolstered not only in geopolitical terms but also economically. The recent [discussions](#) between the Malian and Russian representatives at the 'Russian Energy Week' international forum illustrate this move towards a strengthened partnership between the two countries;⁴⁹⁶ they focused on strengthening cooperation in the field of electricity with Russia's support for the resolution of Mali's energy problems, in particular through the construction of hydroelectric, thermal and solar power plants, as well as the provision of fuel at a lower price from Russia.

A Threat to Malian Security

Almost a year since its deployment to Mali, Wagner's mercenaries have already significantly impacted the security climate of conflict-ridden Mali, adding to the country's current instability. Wagner has proven unsuccessful in contributing to the fight against the jihadist

⁴⁹² Paul Melly, "Why France Faces so Much Anger in West Africa", *BBC News*, December 5, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59517501>.

⁴⁹³ Hassan Kyle, "Russian Disinformation Is Taking Hold in Africa", *Centre for International Governance Innovation*, November 17, 2021. <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/russian-disinformation-is-taking-hold-in-africa/>.

⁴⁹⁴ Jason Burke, "France Says Russian Mercenaries Staged 'French Atrocity' in Mali", *The Guardian*, April 22, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/22/france-says-russian-wagner-mercenaries-staged-french-atrocity-in-mali>.

⁴⁹⁵ "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali", *CSIS*, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

⁴⁹⁶ "Le Mali Se Tourne Vers La Russie Pour Résoudre Ses Problèmes D'électricité", *Alwihda Info*, 2022. https://www.alwihdainfo.com/Le-Mali-se-tourne-vers-la-Russie-pour-resoudre-ses-problemes-d-electricite_a118073.html.



threat, which continues to rise in the country. More than [900 civilians have been killed](#) in north-eastern Mali since the start of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) offensive in March.⁴⁹⁷ While the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) has been protecting residents in the north of the country for more than six months, it continues to seek aid from the Malian armed forces (FAMA). Despite Wagner's presence and expected training of the FAMA, the army is unable to fulfil its position as the principal security guarantor; thus far, it has not sent any personnel on the ground, neither during the battle nor since, to guard or rescue displaced residents.

Wagner's most significant impact on Mali's security situation, however, is the increased level of insecurity caused by the considerable rise in human rights violations against civilians. Indeed, violence against civilians has [drastically increased](#) in number and severity since the group's arrival in December 2021.⁴⁹⁸ This is clearly a consequence of the fact that an alliance with Moscow offers African governments the freedom to conduct counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations without restrictive human rights obligations imposed by Western powers. A notable example is the massacre that took place in the central town of Moura at the end of March 2022. The FAMA, aided by Wagner mercenaries, slaughtered over 300 civilians during a five-day siege, making the attack "the [worst single atrocity reported](#) in Mali's decade-long armed conflict".⁴⁹⁹ This is one of the several instances where Wagner troops were seen accompanying the FAMA as they executed civilians since their deployment.

If they continue to kill civilians in such an indiscriminate fashion, the FAMA and Wagner [will exacerbate instability](#) in Mali. Faced with such brutally violent security forces,⁵⁰⁰ civilians will be increasingly obliged to seek security and basic services elsewhere, such as toward communal militias and jihadists. While jihadist groups like Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) have committed similar acts of brutality against civilians, they have also showed an ability to build political order, settle property disputes, and defend local communities. "We live in fear," one [Gossi resident told](#) the French publication *Le Figaro*.⁵⁰¹ "We fear Wagner much more than the terrorists really. The terrorists, they have never come to destroy markets."

⁴⁹⁷ David Baché, "Mali: Dans Le Nord-Est à Talataye, l'Urgence Est à l'Évacuation Des Déplacés", *RFI*, September 14, 2022. <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20220914-mali-dans-le-nord-est-%C3%A0-talataye-l-urgence-est-%C3%A0-l-%C3%A9vacuation-des-d%C3%A9plac%C3%A9s>.

⁴⁹⁸ "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali", *CSIS*, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

⁴⁹⁹ "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers", *Human Rights Watch*, April 5, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ Elisabeth Pierson, "'Nous Sommes Devenus Un Jouet Entre Les Forces Armées' : à Gossi, La Population Otage de La Guerre Informationnelle Entre Wagner et Barkhane", *Le Figaro*, May 3, 2022. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/nous-sommes-devenus-un-jouet-entre-les-forces-armees-a-gossi-la-population-otage-de-la-guerre-informationnelle-entre-wagner-et-barkhane-20220503>.



Nigeria

George Barber

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, and also boasts Africa's largest economy. The West African state is also rich in natural resources, one of which is oil, which has led to its [membership](#) in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting States (OPEC).⁵⁰² Petroleum is not Nigeria's only valuable natural resource, as the nation also possesses natural gas, tin, iron ore, coal, limestone, niobium, lead, and zinc. These characteristics, and the fact that Nigeria sits on the continent of Africa, make Nigeria of special interest to Russia. In 2019, Vladimir Putin [stated](#),⁵⁰³ "Today, the development and strengthening of mutually beneficial ties with African countries and their integration associations is one of Russia's foreign policy priorities." One of the ways in which Russia has been able to extend its reach in the region is through the activities of PMCs, including activity in Nigeria. In the realm of security, Russia's heavy sales of arms to African states is also indicative of both its desire and capacity to make inroads on the continent with [Nigeria](#) being one of its leading customers.⁵⁰⁴



Figure 14 courtesy of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background

Since 2011, one of Africa's largest Islamist militant groups, Boko-Haram, has been conducting [terrorist attacks](#) in Nigeria.⁵⁰⁵ Political groups, religious groups, police, and civilians have all been the targets of attacks that spread fear and insecurity in Nigeria, especially in the north-eastern region. The terrorist organisation has also burned villages and carried out attacks in

⁵⁰² "Nigeria." OPEC. Accessed October 24, 2022. https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/167.htm.

⁵⁰³ "Interview to TASS News Agency." President of Russia, October 21, 2019. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61858>.

⁵⁰⁴ "Russia's Strategic Goals in Africa." Africa Center for Strategic Studies, March 15, 2022. <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-strategic-goals-africa/>.

⁵⁰⁵ "Nigeria's Battle with Boko Haram." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations. Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/nigerias-battle-boko-haram>.



markets. As a result, measures to counteract the influence and destruction of Boko-Haram have been a top priority of the Nigerian military. Fighting Boko-Haram has not proved to be an easy task, given that the group is estimated to have thousands of trained militants. The activities of Boko-Haram since 2011 have been the latest episode of [instability](#) in Nigeria,⁵⁰⁶ a country that since gaining independence in 1960 has seen many coups and a civil war that killed up to two million people from 1967-1970.

PMC Activity

Nigeria has [received training](#) and resources for counter-terrorism measures from states such as Israel and South Africa, but Russia has also provided training for Nigerian personnel.⁵⁰⁷ This sort of support was well received, as the inability of the Nigerian Army to sustain pressure on Boko-Haram would leave the insurgents with ample time to regroup and mount counterattacks. However, the arrival of PMCs with specialised technology and manpower would enable the Nigerian forces to achieve more success in their operations, simply by being able to sustain attacks over longer periods of time and use more efficient equipment.

In the event that European states or the USA do not offer assistance to a state like Nigeria that faces this type of situation, the possibility is opened for another great power to provide assistance and forge a relationship. In the case of Nigeria, this happened as a result of the US and UK's slow response to a Nigerian request for help in 2014. Nigeria then [turned to Russia](#) for assistance for counter-terrorism training and military equipment.⁵⁰⁸ This opportunity serves Russian interests well as it fosters goodwill and can function to set precedent for future cooperation between Russia and Nigeria or even one of its neighbours.

Groups such as ChVK Wagner and Moran Security Group, both linked to the Russian Ministry of Defence, have been [reported](#) to have been operative in Nigeria.⁵⁰⁹ In addition to boots on the ground, the [Internet Research Agency](#) has also been [established](#) in Nigeria.⁵¹⁰ The Internet

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁷ Hummel, Kristina. "Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: The Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, June 23, 2022. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/undermining-democracy-and-exploiting-clients-the-wagner-groups-nefarious-activities-in-africa/>.

⁵⁰⁸ Hedenskog, Jakob. "Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation in Africa." Swedish Defence Research Agency, n.d. <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604>.

⁵⁰⁹ Jones, Seth G., Catarina Doxsee, Brian Katz, Eric McQueen, and Joe Moye. "Russia's Corporate Soldiers." CSIS, n.d. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721_Jones_Russia%27s_Corporate_Soldiers.pdf?7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586.

⁵¹⁰ Dawson, Andrew, and Martin Innes. "How Russia's Internet Research Agency Built Its Disinformation Campaign." *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (2019): 245–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.12690>; Eschroeder. "Hackers, Hoodies, and Helmets: Technology and the Changing Face of Russian Private Military Contractors." Atlantic Council, August 1, 2022. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/technology-change-and-the-changing-face-of-russian-private-military-contractors/>.



Research Agency is a company that creates fake social media profiles to influence people on behalf of the interests of Russian companies and interests. The presence of this group in Nigeria means that Russia has expanded capabilities in the cyber realm in Africa as well, which could implicate future interference in elections or influence of public opinion towards Russia in world affairs.

Moran Security Group was involved in an incident in 2012 in the port of Lagos in which nine of its private guards were arrested for carrying arms contrary to Nigerian law. After Russia's Foreign Ministry was able to negotiate a deal for the men's release, they were allowed to return home roughly a year later. This incident demonstrates the Russian Foreign Ministry's desire to stand up for a PSC abroad in Nigeria defending its commercial interests, showing how important these groups are to Russian foreign policy in Africa.

2.5 Indo-Pacific

Lāsma Kokina

Sri Lanka

Lāsma Kokina

The History of Ethnic Conflicts in Sri Lanka

[Sri Lanka](#) is an island country located in the Indian Ocean.⁵¹¹ It has a population of about 21.6 million people.⁵¹² The island has a variety of natural resources, and has a diverse economy based on the sectors of agriculture, mining, fishing, manufacturing, and tourism.⁵¹³ In 1931 Sri Lanka became the first in Asian country to gain the right to vote, despite still being under colonial rule.⁵¹⁴

After gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka seemed to be moving toward becoming a stable and wealthy democracy.⁵¹⁵ It had one of the highest human development indices in Asia at the time, along with a vibrant economy and an allegedly stable parliamentary system passed on by the British. The general consensus was that Sri Lanka was a country set up for success. However, this initial evaluation turned out to be too optimistic. There were growing tensions

⁵¹¹ John Major "Sri Lanka: An Introductory Essay." Center for Global Education. <https://asiasociety.org/education/sri-lanka>

⁵¹² "Sri Lanka Population". Worldometer. September 25, 2022. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sri-lanka-population/>

⁵¹³ Major, John, "Sri Lanka: An Introductory Essay." Center for Global Education. <https://asiasociety.org/education/sri-lanka>

⁵¹⁴ Kingsley Muthumun de Silva *A History of Sri Lanka*, (Colombo, Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2017), p. 522.

⁵¹⁵ John Major "Sri Lanka: An Introductory Essay." Center for Global Education. <https://asiasociety.org/education/sri-lanka>



between the two major ethnic groups in the country, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, over distribution of supplies and goods, and the ideological direction of Sri Lanka. As tensions rose, each side became increasingly connected to an exclusivist nationalism. In addition, each side viewed itself as the genuinely aggrieved party. The country's political system proved incapable of resolving the conflict, resulting in violence, political conflict, and a costly war.⁵¹⁶

Since the 1950s, Sri Lanka has been affected by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. The Sinhalese make up around 75% of the population, with Tamils at around 15%, and Muslims at 10%. Sinhalese Sri Lankans have long had advantages in relation to access to universities and government positions. This has had a detrimental effect on not only the country's minorities but also its governance. Consequently, Sri Lanka has ended up with a system that focuses on ethnocracy rather than merit, being ruled by one dominant group. As a result, nepotism and corruption have become widespread.⁵¹⁷ Thus, since the 1970s, Sri Lanka has been suffering from violent conflicts between the two main ethnic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils.⁵¹⁸

Thus, to fully understand the current political struggles of Sri Lanka, one must briefly consider its history in relation to its ethnic groups. Ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka have an ancient history. Sinhala and Tamil communities both tend to see their relationship in relation to events stretching back for at least 2500 years. These histories support the opposing assertions of the two communities and make conflict between them seem unavoidable. For the Sinhala community, history supports their claim to impose their rule over the whole Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, for Tamils, history is also used to justify demands, in the past for autonomy for Tamil-dominated areas, and in current times for complete separation from the Sinhala-dominated parts of the country. However, when considering the shorter historical term, we see evidence that during the colonial period violent clashes broke out between groups based on religious affiliation instead of groups defining themselves as Sinhala and Tamil.⁵¹⁹

It is worth briefly considering the Sinhala and Tamil representations of the past. Generally, Sinhala people argue that, despite not being the first inhabitants of the island, a status they allow to the 'primitive' Veddas, they were the first 'civilised' settlers of Sri Lanka. Their argument states that they descended from north Indian Aryan ancestors who spoke an Indo-European language which developed into Sinhala. In addition, Sinhala people claim that Prince Vijaya, the mythical ancestor of the Sinhala people, and his followers arrived on the shores of Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha's death; with Sri Lanka having had a close relationship

⁵¹⁶ Ahmed S. Hashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 2.

⁵¹⁷ Elisabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat 'The generation of communal identities' in Jonathan Spencer *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, (1999, London and New York, Routledge), 19.

⁵¹⁸ John Major, "Sri Lanka: An Introductory Essay." Center for Global Education.
<https://asiasociety.org/education/sri-lanka>

⁵¹⁹ Elisabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat 'The generation of communal identities' in Jonathan Spencer *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, (1999, London and New York, Routledge), 19.



with the Buddha even before Vijaya's arrival. As claimed by the island's ancient chronicle histories, the Buddha had visited the island on several occasions and had stated that in Sri Lanka his 'doctrine should...shine in glory'.

Despite that, the Sinhala were only converted to Buddhism in the third century BC. Since that time, as claimed by Sinhala people, they have with few exceptions always been Buddhist. During the Anuradhapura period (circa third century BC—ninth century AD), a great Sinhala-Buddhist civilization prospered in Sri Lanka. The state was frequently under pressure from South Indian Tamil-speaking Hindus. In time, pressure from the Tamil invaders forced the Sinhala to retreat southwards, first to Polonnaruwa, followed by various other capitals until the last phase of Sinhala independence, which centred on Kandy. The Kandyan kingdom was ultimately given up to the British in 1815. Some of the Tamil invaders of earlier times remained in Sri Lanka and their heirs make up the current communities of Tamils in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. However, the Sinhala argue that these Tamil communities never, or only occasionally, formed separate political units. Instead, once settled in Sri Lanka, they accepted the power and control of the Sinhala kings.⁵²⁰

Unsurprisingly, the Tamil version of the history differs. In its 'soft' version it is acknowledged that Sinhala people were living in Sri Lanka long before the Tamils arrived. However, it is emphasised that Tamils have lived in Sri Lanka for at least 1000 years and formed their own individual political units that did not depend on Sinhala control. Satchi Ponnambalam, a leading Sri Lankan Tamil lawyer and judge, for instance, argued that the original inhabitants of Sri Lanka were really Tamil, with the Sinhala originally being Tamils who adapted Buddhism and started using Sinhala, the language of the Buddhist texts. The historical arguments are endless, but as it is the Sinhala who hold more political power in the island, the Sinhala history dominates the debate. In spite of these two histories being opposed versions of the history, each emphasising the arguments of the community which generates it, they have many common features. Both reflect on the history in relation to the interaction of two contrasting entities, Sinhala and Tamil, who have at all times been as separate as they are in the current times. Second, they discuss arguments over events which reportedly happened between the fourth century BC and the tenth century AD. Third, they show the two communities as historically and constantly being in conflict with each other through warfare, connecting an ancient past to the present. Fourth, the histories are both related to a "national people's" claim to their own territory. Finally, each side of the conflict presents the other side as barbarians. Both sides in the current political context strengthen their respective statements through the selective use of history and evidence. In addition, each side has been willing to destroy, or reinterpret evidence which would back up the statements of the other party.⁵²¹ Thus,

⁵²⁰ Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat 'The generation of communal identities' in Jonathan Spencer *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, (1999, London and New York, Routledge), 20.

⁵²¹ Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat 'The generation of communal identities' in Jonathan Spencer *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, (1999, London and New York, Routledge), 21.



history suggests that the Sinhalese and Tamil communities have experienced tension from the very beginning due to power disputes.⁵²²

During British imperial rule, [the conflict between the two groups](#) worsened. The Sinhalese people felt threatened by the Tamil group's affluence partially due to the British pro-Tamil bias during its occupation of Sri Lanka. Due to Tamil communities also existing in a number of other British colonies like India, South Africa, and Singapore, Sri Lankan Tamils profited from wider commercial networks and more opportunities. In addition, British colonial authorities frequently opened English language schools in primarily Tamil areas, thus offering Tamils more civil sector and professional opportunities than the Sinhalese. This pattern of pro-Tamil bias left the Sinhalese feeling isolated and hegemonised. In spite of the conflicts between these two groups before British colonisation, the events that happened after Sri Lankan independence indicate that imperial rule had provoked the conflict that followed in the future. Indeed, shortly after British occupiers left Sri Lanka in 1948, Tamil dominance changed drastically.

After gaining independence, many Sinhalese gained high-ranked government positions, eventually passing acts effectively depriving the Tamils of their privileges. One of those acts was the Sinhala Only Act that made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka, producing obstacles for Tamil people trying to use government services or looking for public employment. Former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga describes the act as a way to cultivate and regain a Sri Lankan identity after a long period of British rule.⁵²³

Another conflict-inducing policy was standardisation, which produced more educational opportunities for underprivileged Sinhalese students. The policy entailed asking Tamil students to get higher exam scores than the Sinhalese people to get offers from Sri Lankan universities. As such, standardisation took away opportunities from Tamil students, some of whom had aimed to gain education to make up for their lack of professional civil service opportunities. Therefore, this legislation was unsuccessful with levelling the playing field, instead putting Tamil students at a disadvantage. Consequently, shortly after, several militant Sri Lankan Tamils organised an uprising.⁵²⁴

The Sri Lankan Civil War

The tensions between the two groups eventually led to the [Sri Lankan Civil War](#), which started as a low-level insurgency in July 1983, with ethnic riots breaking out in Colombo and other

⁵²² Harvard International Review, "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020", August 31, 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁴ Harvard International Review, "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020", August 31, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>



cities. Tamil Tiger rebels, a Tamil militant organisation fighting to create an independent Tamil state, killed 13 army soldiers, causing violent counter attacks against Tamil civilians by the Sinhalese across Sri Lanka.⁵²⁵ The soldiers' funerals were emotionally charged, starting the worst intercommunal violence Sri Lanka had experienced. Groups of Sinhalese civilians went on a rampage in the south, with Tamil businesses and houses being set on fire, and hundreds of Tamil civilians, including women and children, being killed.⁵²⁶ Between 2500 and 3000 Tamils died, with many thousands more fleeing to Tamil-majority regions. The Tamil Tigers declared the "First Eelam War" (1983-87) with the goal of creating a separate Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka called Eelam. Over the next few years, violence levels increased with the Tamil insurgents using car bombs, suitcase bombs, and landmines against Sinhalese military and civilian aims.⁵²⁷

In 1987, India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, made the decision to directly get involved in the Sri Lankan Civil War by sending peacekeepers. India had concerns about separatism in its own Tamil region, Tamil Nadu, as well as being worried about a high number of refugees from Sri Lanka. The peacekeepers' aim was to disarm militants on both sides of the conflict in order to get ready for peace talks. However, the Indian peacekeeping force was not only not able to put an end to the conflict but also started fighting with the Tamil Tigers. The Tamil Tigers were unwilling to disarm, used female bombers and child soldiers to attack the Indians. In May 1990, Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa made India recall its peacekeepers.⁵²⁸

After the peacekeepers withdrew, the Sri Lankan Civil War entered an even more extreme phase, which the Tamil Tigers named the [Second Eelam War](#).⁵²⁹ This second stage of the war was characterised by unprecedented brutality and terrorism carried out by the the Tamil Tigers, and equally strong response by the government forces.⁵³⁰ The conflict started when the Tamil Tigers seized between 600 and 700 Sinhalese police officers in the Eastern Province in 1990 with the aim to decrease the government control in the region. The police surrendered to the militants after the Tamil Tigers assured them they would not be harmed. Nevertheless, the militants brought the policemen into the jungle, forcing them to kneel, and killed all police officers. This led to the announcement of the Sri Lankan Minister of Defense, "From now on, it is all out war." Consequently, the government stopped all medicine and food supplies to the Tamil stronghold on the Jaffna peninsula and started an intensive aerial bombing. In return,

⁵²⁵ Szczepanski, Kallie. "The Sri Lankan Civil War," ThoughtCo, July 8, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-sri-lankan-civil-war-195086>

⁵²⁶ Ahmed S. Hashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 2.

⁵²⁷ Kallie Szczepanski, "The Sri Lankan Civil War," ThoughtCo, July 8, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-sri-lankan-civil-war-195086>

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁰ Ahmed S. Hashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 99.



Tamil Tigers killed hundreds of Sinhalese and Muslim villagers. In 1991, 5000 Tamil Tigers surrounded the government's army base for a month. As a result, over 2000 people on both sides had been killed, making it the most severe conflict in the entire civil war.⁵³¹

In 1995, the conflict was followed by the [Third Eelam War](#), which saw the Tamil Tigers sign a peace agreement with the new government of Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, three months later the Tamil Tigers put explosives on two Sri Lankan naval gunboats, destroying the ships and ending the peace agreement. The government responded by declaring a "war for peace," in which Air Force jets attacked civilian sites and refugee camps on the Jaffna Peninsula, with ground troops committing a number of massacres against civilians. As a result, by December 1995, Sri Lanka was under government control for the first time since the start of the Civil War. However, the Tamil Tigers reacted to the loss of Jaffna in 1996 by starting an eight-day attack on the town of Mullaitivu, resulting in a decisive Tiger victory. More than 1200 of the government soldiers were killed.⁵³²

The Efforts to End the Conflict

In 2000, Norway started trying to negotiate a settlement to end the seemingly endless conflict. The Tamil Tigers announced a unilateral ceasefire in December 2000, creating the hope that the civil war was coming to an end. Nonetheless, in 2001, the Tigers ended the ceasefire and attacked the north of Jaffna Peninsula again. In July 2001 Tiger suicide attack in Bandaranaike International Airport destroyed several military aircrafts, sending Sri Lanka's tourism industry into a tailspin.⁵³³

In 2002 and 2003, the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers agreed on various ceasefires and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the help of Norway. The two sides came up with a federal solution, rather than fulfilling the Tamils' request for a two-state solution or the government's demand for a unitary country. However, in October 2003, the Tigers announced themselves to be in full control of the north and east regions of the country, which caused the Sri Lankan government to announce a state of emergency. Following this, in just over a year, Norway recorded 300 breaches of the ceasefire by the army and 3000 by the Tamil Tigers.

After October 2006 peace talks in Geneva did not produce any positive results, the Sri Lankan government started a large offensive in eastern and northern parts of the islands to defeat the Tamil Tigers. The 2007-2009 eastern and northern offensives caused tens of thousands of civilians getting killed, with whole villages being left depopulated and destroyed in what a

⁵³¹ Kallie Szczepanski, "The Sri Lankan Civil War," ThoughtCo, July 8, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-sri-lankan-civil-war-195086>

⁵³² *Ibid.*

⁵³³ *Ibid.*



U.N. spokesman described as "a bloodbath." In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared that the Tamil Tigers had been defeated. On the next day, the official Tamil Tiger website conceded defeat.⁵³⁴

The Current Political Situation in Sri Lanka

In spite of the Civil War ending in 2009, the current situation in Sri Lanka has only partly gotten better. A large part of the Tamil population continues to be displaced. While there are not as many political and civil rights conflicts, cases of torture and forced disappearances have not ceased to exist even in recent years. In addition, the Sri Lankan government frequently monitors, and tracks people linked to the Tamil Tigers. Furthermore, The Sri Lankan military is still placed mostly in Tamil areas considered to be "high-security zones".⁵³⁵

In addition, via the process of "Sinhalezation," Sinhalese culture is gradually replacing the Tamil one. Sinhalese monuments, road signs, street and village names, and Buddhist places of worship are seen more frequently in predominantly Tamil areas. These efforts have infringed upon, and in some cases even erased, the Tamil perspective on Sri Lankan history, as well as Tamil and Hindu elements of the country's culture.⁵³⁶ In 2022, Sri Lanka continues to be as segregated as ever, with the Sinhalese Buddhist-majority mostly located in the wealthy south, with the Tamils residing in the less-developed and heavily militarised north and east. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) which was passed in 1979, continues to create tension enabling arbitrary arrest, detention without charge or evidence, forced confessions and torture of anyone suspected of terrorism, adversely affecting Tamils living in Sri Lanka. A 2020 report by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka found evidence that 84% of PTA prisoners were tortured after arrest and kept in prison for between five and 10 years without trial, the situation which the [European parliament](#) recently declared that the act "breaches human rights, democracy and the rule of law".⁵³⁷

Past hopes for the law's repeal ended in late 2019, when Gotabaya Rajapaksa, an unrelenting Sinhalese nationalist who was leading the military in the last, bloodiest years of the civil war and was accused of overseeing war crimes, was elected as president. The presidency has been associated with the abuses of PTA becoming more open and brazen, with the human rights organisations and the UN reporting an increase in the harassment, surveillance, and arbitrary detentions of Tamils. Facing growing global pressure, The Rajapaksa government has

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁵ Harvard International Review, "The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020", August 31, 2020. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/>

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁷ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Tamils fear prison and torture in Sri Lanka, 13 years after civil war ended", *The Guardian*, March 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/26/tamils-fear-prison-and-torture-in-sri-lanka-13-years-after-civil-war-ended>.



dismissed all claims about the abuses of the PTA. However, in order to address the criticism, the Rajapaksa government passed a bill making changes to the PTA. However, UN experts, human rights groups, and the political opposition were critical of the amendments that had arguably “left “intact some of the most egregious provisions of the PTA”.⁵³⁸ In other words, the ethnic tensions are far from being resolved.

In 2022, Sri Lanka is experiencing a severe political crisis, partly caused by Gotabaya Rajapaksa who served as the president of Sri Lanka between 2019-2022. Rajapaksa has been accused of using his name and identity in a nationalistic sense, focusing on Sinhalese Buddhist identity, while ignoring other policies and causing about division. In addition, critics argue that the Rajapaksa administration’s financial dealings have caused Sri Lanka’s economic difficulties that left Sri Lanka unable to pay off its huge foreign debt. Sri Lanka has since defaulted on its loans.⁵³⁹ The dissatisfaction with Rajapaksa caused the 2022 Sri Lankan [protests](#) which started in March 2022 against the government of Sri Lanka. The government was accused of mismanaging the economy, which caused a subsequent economic crisis which was associated with high inflation, daily blackouts, fuel shortage, and lack of essential goods. The main request of the protesters was the resignation of Rajapaksa and main officials from the Rajapaksa family.⁵⁴⁰

In addition, the protesters expressed their [dissatisfaction](#) with corruption, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and police misuse of force. The government authorities responded by using a militarised approach, including the misuse of force on peaceful protesters.⁵⁴¹ Eventually, the events caused Rajapaksa to [step down](#) in July 2022.⁵⁴² This was followed by [swearing in Ranil Wickremesinghe](#) as Sri Lanka’s president on 21 July 2022. However, despite the change of the president, the Sri Lankan public remained dissatisfied with the political situation. Wickremesinghe’s appointment remains highly controversial, with the public accusing him of being [“as bad and corrupt as Gotabaya”](#).⁵⁴³

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁹ Elliott Davis, “EXPLAINER: The Crisis in Sri Lanka”, US News, July 15, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2022-07-15/explainer-how-sri-lanka-descended-into-crisis-and-protests>.

⁵⁴⁰ Amrit Dhillon "Sri Lanka: 50 injured as protesters try to storm president's house amid economic crisis," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/sri-lanka-protesters-try-to-storm-presidents-house-as-economic-crisis-deepens>

⁵⁴¹ Amnesty International, “Sri Lanka: Penalized for Protesting: Sri Lanka’s Crackdown on Protesters,” September 8, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/5986/2022/en/>.

⁵⁴² Emily Schmall, Skandha Gunasekara, and Mujib Mashal “Sri Lanka’s President Resigns After Months of Protest”, *The New York Times*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/14/world/asia/sri-lanka-president-rajapaksa-resigns-protests.html>.

⁵⁴³ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Sri Lanka swears in interim president after Gotabaya Rajapaksa resigns”, *The Guardian*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/15/sri-lanka-mps-to-elect-new-president-after-gotabaya-rajapaksa-officially-resigns>.



Evidently, Sri Lanka continues to be in turmoil. In addition to the ethnic persisting ethnic tensions, it is dealing with a massive public distrust in the political elites and the president and severe financial crisis, with its [inflation hitting record 73.7 percent](#) in October 2022. Consequently, its people are suffering from tariff increases for power and water, while the country is also unable to pay for key imports including food, fuel, fertiliser, and medicine.⁵⁴⁴

Curiously, the crisis in Sri Lanka seems to have strengthened its cooperation with Russia. After suffering from fuel shortage in the country, the former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa sought support to import fuel to Sri Lanka in a conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin. In addition, Rajapaksa discussed matters of bilateral trade and economic cooperation in energy, agriculture, and transport. Furthermore, the newly appointed Sri Lankan Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Sabry has expressed the wish to continue cooperating with Russia.⁵⁴⁵ This stance illustrates the importance of inspecting the current bilateral relationship between the two countries.

The Relationship with Russia

The Valdai Discussion Club, a Moscow-based think tank and discussion forum that is believed to be closely associated with Russian President Vladimir Putin, [has described Sri Lanka as “one of Russia's closest partners and good friends in South Asia”](#).⁵⁴⁶ Indeed, this echoes the 2022 statement of Putin [who argues that the relationship between Russia and Sri Lanka are of traditionally friendly nature](#).⁵⁴⁷ Indeed, Sri Lanka has traditionally had strong diplomatic connections with Russia”, with the two countries marking 65 years of diplomatic relations in 2022.⁵⁴⁸

The Valdai Discussion club notes that Russia is hoping to collaborate with Sri Lanka on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, including building nuclear power plants, in addition to the usage of nuclear technology in medicine and agriculture. Furthermore, it mentions potential cooperation in the civil aviation, construction, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁴ Al Jazeera, “Inflation in Sri Lanka hits record 73.7 percent”, October 21, 2022,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/10/21/inflation-in-sri-lanka-hits-record-73-7-percent>.

⁵⁴⁵ Business Standard, “Crisis-hit Sri Lanka looks forward to enhancing ties with Russia: Report”, August 1, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/crisis-hit-sri-lanka-looks-forward-to-enhancing-ties-with-russia-report-122080100097_1.html.

⁵⁴⁶ Andrey Gubin, “Russia-Sri Lanka Relations: The Eurasian Role of the 'Emerald Island'”, Valdai Discussion Club, 21 April, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-sri-lanka-relations-the-eurasian-role/>.

⁵⁴⁷ Colombo Gazette, “Putin counting on Ranil to develop Russia-Sri Lanka relations”, 25 July, 2022, <https://colombogazette.com/2022/07/25/putin-counting-on-ranil-to-develop-russia-sri-lanka-relations/>.

⁵⁴⁸ Meera Srinivasan, “Reports of Sri Lankans rescued in Ukraine put Colombo in spot”, *The Hindu*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/reports-of-sri-lankans-rescued-in-ukraine-put-colombo-in-spot/article65927452.ece>.

⁵⁴⁹ Andrey Gubin, “Russia-Sri Lanka Relations: The Eurasian Role of the 'Emerald Island'”, Valdai Discussion Club, 21 April, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-sri-lanka-relations-the-eurasian-role/>.



In addition to these fields, the Valdai Discussion Club emphasises cooperation in the field of security, arguing that the Sri Lankan side “has repeatedly noted that the USSR and Russia have consistently supported the government in the fight against the threats of terrorism and separatism”.⁵⁵⁰ Another aspect stressed by the Valdai Discussion club in relation to bilateral cooperation is the 2021 agreements on holding joint military exercises, getting education, and the training of the Sri Lankan military personnel at the universities of the Ministry of Defense of Russia. Specifically, Sri Lankan observers are invited to the manoeuvres planned in Russia for 2022, while Russian observers have been welcomed to join exercises and seminars on combat operations in the jungle in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is stated that Sri Lanka has expressed interest in Russian armoured vehicles, including those for the army and police; helicopters, and the training of pilots and aviation engineers. Russia has also expressed a promise to Sri Lanka to gain access to the FSB data bank on individuals and organisations involved in terrorist activities in Sri Lanka. Military-technical issues have also been discussed as important in the bilateral relationship, with Russia providing Sri Lanka with an export loan of \$500 million to pay for part of the purchase of Russian weapons. At the same time, Russia has positively acknowledged Sri Lanka’s readiness to give preferential terms to Russian warships for calling at Sri Lankan ports that was implemented in October 2021.⁵⁵¹

Notably, bilateral military cooperation has played a key role in the relationship in the past, with Sri Lanka having bought \$300 million-worth military equipment from Russia in 2010 after the end of its Civil War. In addition, Russia, was one of the main arms suppliers during Sri Lanka’s Civil War apart from China and India, also supporting the Sri Lankan government on several occasions at the Geneva human rights council over the actions during the Civil War.⁵⁵² Similarly, Russia rejected calls by Western nations for a global investigation into alleged war crimes in the final phase of the Sri Lankan Civil War, opposing the concerns about the alleged crimes by the United States and Britain.⁵⁵³

It is evident that the bilateral relationship can largely be described as positive, which is echoed by the officials. In 2022, Russian Ambassador in Sri Lanka Yury B. Materiy has stated that both countries have continued developing their bilateral relations in “an environment of friendship, mutual understanding and amiability”, with there being no contradictions or

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵² Ranga Sirilal, “Russia to lend post-war Sri Lanka \$300 mln for arms”, Reuters, February 6, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSSG61500Q>

⁵⁵³ Shihar Aneez, “Russia rejects proposed war crimes probe for Sri Lanka”, Reuters, February 14, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-srilanka-russia-rights-idUSBREA1D17520140214>.



unresolved issues in our relations. Furthermore, Russia has been called [one of Russia's closest friends](#)”.⁵⁵⁴

It is clear that the good relationship is partly based partly on Sri Lanka's foreign policy stances that have so far managed to satisfy Russia. Indeed, Materiy has emphasised that the relationship between Russia and Sri Lanka has always been founded on “the principles of equality, trust, mutual respect and [consideration for one another's interests](#).” Evidently, this is related to the countries allegedly having similar approaches to key foreign policy matters. This includes Sri Lanka supporting Russia's initiatives at the UN General Assembly, with Materiy listing examples like resolutions on countering the glorification of Nazism, the prevention of an arms race in outer space, efforts to promote international information security, arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation.⁵⁵⁵ Similarly, the [Valdai Discussion Club article](#) particularly stresses the importance of the fact that Sri Lanka has a neutral position in the competition between the US and China or China and India.⁵⁵⁶ Similarly, Sri Lanka has decided to take a neutral position on the war in Ukraine,⁵⁵⁷ also abstaining in the UN General Assembly resolution vote to condemn Russia's illegal annexation of regions of Ukraine.⁵⁵⁸

Russian PMCs Operating in Sri Lanka

Reportedly, there are several Russian PMCs operating in Sri Lanka, with the most frequently mentioned example being *Rossiskie System Bezopasnosti* (RSB) Group. RSB Group is a private military company (PMC) that has close links to Russia's intelligence services, providing private security forces.⁵⁵⁹ Officially, it claims to be operating in areas with unstable political situations in cooperation with the legitimate governments of other countries.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁴ Daily News, “Russia, Sri Lanka: An everlasting friendship”, 23 February, 2022, <https://www.dailynews.lk/2022/02/23/features/273221/%E2%80%98russia-sri-lanka-everlasting-friendship%E2%80%99>.

⁵⁵⁵ Daily News, “Russia, Sri Lanka: An everlasting friendship”, 23 February, 2022, <https://www.dailynews.lk/2022/02/23/features/273221/%E2%80%98russia-sri-lanka-everlasting-friendship%E2%80%99>.

⁵⁵⁶ Andrey Gubin, “Russia-Sri Lanka Relations: The Eurasian Role of the 'Emerald Island'”, Valdai Discussion Club, 21 April, 2022, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-sri-lanka-relations-the-eurasian-role/>.

⁵⁵⁷ Arundathie Abeyasinghe, “As world slaps sanctions on Russia, Sri Lanka looks to deepen trade with Moscow”, *Tamil Guardian*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/world-slaps-sanctions-russia-sri-lanka-looks-deepen-trade-moscow>.

⁵⁵⁸ *Tamil Guardian*, “As the world condemns Russia's annexation of Ukraine, Sri Lanka remains silent”, 12 October, 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/world-condemns-russia-s-annexation-ukraine-sri-lanka-remains-silent>.

⁵⁵⁹ War and Sanctions, “Sanctioned Companies”, War and Sanctions, n.d., <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/sanction-company/1694/>.

⁵⁶⁰ Inform Napalm, “Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror”, 24 November 2015, <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/>.



It employs highly trained Russian Special Forces combatants, including veterans of Russia's intelligence services.⁵⁶¹ RSB Group offers a wide range of services, from the protection of oil and gas installations and airports to the supplying of escorts for convoys in conflict areas or cargo vessels in piracy-affected waters. Besides this, RSB also provides mine-clearing services, military training, intelligence and analysis.⁵⁶² The [company itself describes its activities](#) as specialising in armed protection of all forms of ownership in territories with high terrorist activity and political instability that are located outside Russian. It is stated that RSB Group provides countries with “competitive intelligence and analytics, security equipment, military consulting services” and “armed protection from pirates”.⁵⁶³ In addition, RSB Group has reportedly founded its own cyber defence detachment in 2016 that was capable of both defensive and offensive activities.⁵⁶⁴ Indeed, RSB's owner Oleg Krinitsyn has stated that, “If we're under assault, we enter the battle, of course, to protect our lives and the lives of our clients...According to military science, a counterattack must follow an attack. That means we would have to destroy the enemy.”⁵⁶⁵ In addition, by carrying out operations abroad and provided its links to Putin, the RSB Group has provided Russia the chance to keep its influence abroad without a uniformed state presence.⁵⁶⁶ For example, the RSB Group has provided assistance to the rebels supported by Russia in Donbas and contributed to the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁵⁶⁷

In relation to its activities in Sri Lanka, RSB has publicly announced the formation of its base. Reportedly, the base “Mount Lavinia” in Sri Lanka can provide the stay of about 30 people at the same time. RSB reports that they have signed the agreements and licences for storing weapons, as well as gaining permits for RSB Group employees to access the neutral waters to escort the vessels, which are on the way to the Suez Canal. In addition, RSB has also gained permission from the Sri Lankan customs and border services to use the port Galle and Colombo. Based on the agreement, the RSB Group can also make decisions on the matters related to other private military companies storing weapons in the “Mount Lavinia” base, and

⁵⁶¹ War and Sanctions, “Sanctioned Companies”, War and Sanctions, n.d., <https://sanctions.nazk.gov.ua/en/sanction-company/1694/>.

⁵⁶² Paul Saulreuil, “Believe It or Not, Russia Dislikes Relying on Military Contractors”, Medium, March 9, 2016, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/believe-it-or-not-russia-dislikes-relying-on-military-contractors-8bad373f4793>.

⁵⁶³ RSB Group, “About the company”, n.d., <https://rsb-training.ru/en/about/>.

⁵⁶⁴ Margarete Klein, “Private military companies— a growing instrument in Russia's foreign and security policy toolbox”, Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis, June 2019, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Strategic-Analysis-17-2019.pdf>, 3.

⁵⁶⁵ Maria Tsvetkova, “Exclusive: Russian Private Security Firm Says It Had Armed Men in East Libya,” Reuters, March 10, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-libya-contractors-idUSKBN16H2DM>.

⁵⁶⁶ Kimberley Martin, “Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:3, 181-204, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2019.1591142.

⁵⁶⁷ Aivaras Giedraitis, “Private Military Companies in the Foreign and Security Policy of the Russian Federation in 2014–2019”, *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review*, 152.



stationing their contractors in the “Mount Lavinia” base. Additionally, the RSB Group” is allowed to facilitate the delivery of the contractors to the vessel.⁵⁶⁸

Furthermore, a representative of Sri Lanka in the United Nations- major Rajapaksa- has expressed his great appreciation of the company’s approach to operate in the Indian Ocean, providing defence of merchant vessels from the pirates’ attacks. Rajapaksa has also publicly praised the RGB Group’s wish to assist Sri Lanka in any problem concerning the maritime matters in the region.⁵⁶⁹ It is thus evident that the Sri Lankan officials are open about the state’s cooperation with the RGB Group. The information on the [RGB Group’s website](#) suggests that the cooperation has not ended since the start of the war in Ukraine.⁵⁷⁰

In addition to the RGB Group, there are reports of several other Russian PMCs operating in Sri Lanka. One of those is the Feraks Group, a PMC consisting mainly of ex-Russian armed forces officers.⁵⁷¹ [As reported by the Russian website oxrana1.ru](#), Feraks (known in Russian as Феракс), is among the largest and most successful PMCs on the Russian market whose employees worked in Iraq, are usually called, Afghanistan, Kurdistan and other dangerous regions.⁵⁷² According to the [Russian website vk.com](#), Feraks Group provides a full range of security and armed protection services, both in Russia and abroad. The personnel reserve of PMCs consists of reserve officers who served in special forces of various branches of the armed forces and have combat experience in hot spots of the world. In addition to places listed by [oxrana1.ru](#), [vk.com](#) lists several additional countries where Feraks employees have participated in conflicts- Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Kurdistan.⁵⁷³ In addition to participation in battles, Feraks is reported to provide “preventative measures”.⁵⁷⁴

Nonetheless, Feraks Group does not publish information about its owners and the address of the office; does not have an English version of the site and has only one public email address in addition to the option to send resumes directly on the site. In addition, there is no information about the Feraks Group in the Russian register of legal entities.⁵⁷⁵ Therefore, as expected, the

⁵⁶⁸ RSB Group, “The formation of the military base in Sri Lanka has been finished”, n.d., <https://rsb-group.org/news/completed-formation-of-base-sri-lanka>.

⁵⁶⁹ RSB Group, “The formation of the military base in Sri Lanka has been finished”, n.d., <https://rsb-group.org/news/completed-formation-of-base-sri-lanka>.

⁵⁷⁰ RSB Group, “The formation of the military base in Sri Lanka has been finished”, n.d., <https://rsb-group.org/news/completed-formation-of-base-sri-lanka>.

⁵⁷¹ Anna Maria Dyer, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy”, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, May 4, 2018, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

⁵⁷² Oxrana1.ru, “Chvk vs Rossii segodnya zavtra”, 11 August, 2021, <https://forum.oxrana1.ru/viewtopic.php?t=5490>.

⁵⁷³ Vk.com, “Chastniye voennye kompanii v Rossii”, February 8 2020, https://vk.com/wall-191790490_12.

⁵⁷⁴ Pavel Luzin, “Rossiyskie CHVK- tochki nad i”, February 20, 2019, Riddle, <https://ridl.io/ru/rossijskie-chvk-tochki-nad-i/>.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*



Feraks Group does not share specific details on its military operations abroad, including the ones carried out in Sri Lanka.

Another known Russian PMC player in Sri Lanka is the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group is known as a private military company that has a strong connection to the Russian political elite and thus to the Russian state.⁵⁷⁶ [The Guardian reports](#) that the Wagner Group was founded in 2014 to provide support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.⁵⁷⁷ It has even been described as “de facto private army of Vladimir Putin.”⁵⁷⁸ However, there is no official legal PMC called the Wagner Group in Russia. Nonetheless, the company has become known in relation to some of Russia’s shadowy deployments around the world. The company is associated with Yevgeniy Prigozhin – often described in the media as Vladimir Putin’s “private chef”, also believed to be behind the so-called Troll Factory in St. Petersburg.⁵⁷⁹ In spite of this information, Russia continues to deny the company’s existence and status, which makes it hard to identify the national laws and regulations which should regulate the group’s actions. This has resulted in a lack of accountability and highly limited possibilities for prosecution for abusing human rights.⁵⁸⁰

In terms of the services offered, the Wagner Group often offers a multitool package that features both an armed military component and information for carrying out operations. On-site, Wagner frequently establishes connections with locally registered companies involved in the extraction of natural resources, with the purpose of getting a direct payment for the group’s services or for securing business access for other Russian companies.⁵⁸¹

Over the past years, the Wagner Group has gained a lot of international attention. This is largely due to their growing engagement in Africa, with the company currently having operations across the continent, with the largest number of personnel based in the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Libya and possibly Mali. There is also evidence of other missions, for example, in Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Madagascar. This development serves as evidence that the Wagner Group serves as a key element in the Russian strategy to grow its influence in Africa.⁵⁸² The Wagner Group has also played a key role fighting together with the

⁵⁷⁶ *Sri Lanka Guardian*, “Secrets Behind Putin's Wagner Group”, February 17, 2022, <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2022/02/secrets-behind-putins-wagner-group.html>.

⁵⁷⁷ Pjotr Sauer, “Russia’s private military contractor Wagner comes out of the shadows in Ukraine war”, *The Guardian*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/07/russias-private-military-contractor-wagner-comes-out-of-the-shadows-in-ukraine-war>.

⁵⁷⁸ *The Times of India*, “Deadly Wagner Group mercenaries operating in Ukraine: all you need to know”, The Times of India, March 30, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/deadly-wagner-group-mercenaries-operating-in-ukraine-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/90525075.cms>.

⁵⁷⁹ *Sri Lanka Guardian*, “Secrets Behind Putin's Wagner Group”, February 17, 2022, <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2022/02/secrets-behind-putins-wagner-group.html>.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*



Russian army in support of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.⁵⁸³ In addition, the company has been connected with taking part in military operations in Ukraine after the Russian army experienced heavy losses. Almost all men in the group taking part in the war in Ukraine are reported to be a part of elite military or security services. However, Russia has denied using the Wagner Group to carry out military operations in Ukraine on its behalf.⁵⁸⁴

Although the Wagner Group [has been reported to be active in Sri Lanka](#) by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the exact tasks carried out by the company are not known or reported by the media.

Indonesia

Lāsma Kokina

Political Context

Having a population of 240 million, Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia and the most populous Muslim-majority country globally.⁵⁸⁵ Indonesia is officially a secular state but has seen an increase of conservatism with some politicians arguing in favour of a larger role for Islam, and some groups calling for an Islamic state.⁵⁸⁶ The Republic of Indonesia was declared in 1945, with a proclaimed jurisdiction over the entire area of the former Dutch East Indies. Although the Netherlands kept a large part of this region in its possession (including Papua), a provisional capital was established in Yogyakarta. After the struggle for independence in 1949, the Republic of the United States of Indonesia was founded. However, the federal system did not last, with the federated governments returning to a centralised form of government and the name Republic of Indonesia in 1950. After some initial difficulties, the constitution of 1945 was reinstated by presidential order. This constitution has continued to serve as the basis of Indonesia's government, although a few key amendments were made during a period of reformation around the turn of the 21st century.⁵⁸⁷

Given its size, its emerging democracy, economic developments, and its strategic position across critical sea lanes connecting the Middle East with East Asia has resulted in perceiving

⁵⁸³ Pjotr Sauer, "Russia's private military contractor Wagner comes out of the shadows in Ukraine war", *The Guardian*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/07/russias-private-military-contractor-wagner-comes-out-of-the-shadows-in-ukraine-war>.

⁵⁸⁴ *The Times of India*, "Deadly Wagner Group mercenaries operating in Ukraine: all you need to know", *The Times of India*, March 30, 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/deadly-wagner-group-mercenaries-operating-in-ukraine-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/90525075.cms>.

⁵⁸⁵ Everycrsreport.com, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", 31 January, 2011, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32394.html>.

⁵⁸⁶ Agustinus Beo Da Costa, "Indonesia urges public to report civil servants over 'radical' content", *Reuters*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-politics-islam-idUSKBN1XM1A6>.

⁵⁸⁷ Britannica, "Government and society", October 26, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia/Government-and-society>.



it as an emerging middle-tier power.⁵⁸⁸ While Indonesia has become one of the world's largest emerging economies, it struggles with demands for independence in several provinces, including the West Papua province,⁵⁸⁹ and a growing number of attacks by Islamist armed groups.⁵⁹⁰ Indeed, over the past two decades Indonesia has suffered from a number of vicious terrorist attacks and the presence of terrorist networks that are linked to either the militant Sunni Islamist Al-Qaeda group, the Southeast Asian militant Islamist organization Jemaah Islamiyah, or terrorist militant group Islamic State (IS). These facts serve as evidence of the existence of a radical Muslim community in Indonesia that hold the belief that Islam should be the only guidance in life, thereby acting against and undermining the secular government and Indonesia's pluralist society. In addition, these groups are known to be willing to employ extreme measures, including violence, to change the existing conditions.⁵⁹¹

In addition, Indonesia has made significant democratic progress since the collapse of an authoritarian regime in 1998, creating significant pluralism in politics and the media and making multiple, peaceful shifts of power between parties. Nonetheless, the country continues to battle systemic corruption, discrimination, and violence against minority groups, and the politicised usage of defamation and blasphemy laws. Indeed, [The Human Rights Watch reports](#) that acts of religious intolerance and violations of religious freedom have been on the rise in Indonesia since 2016. Many cases of religious intolerance involve government entities, including local government administrations and police. A widely known example of religious intolerance is the involvement of Indonesian officials and police for the brutal forced eviction of more than 7000 members of the Gafatar religious community from their farms on Kalimantan Island in 2016.⁵⁹² Gafatar is a religious group which has been reportedly mixing teachings from different religions. This has resulted in the group being seen as blasphemous.⁵⁹³

In addition, non-state actors linked to religious intolerance incidents including the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), a semi-official umbrella organisation of Islamic groups, and the Islam Defenders Front (FPI), a militant Islamist group that promotes the imposition of Sharia. The rise in religious intolerance and the attached violence can be traced back to 2005, when the then President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono effectively legitimised religious intolerance by

⁵⁸⁸ Everycrsreport.com, "Indonesia: Domestic Politics, Strategic Dynamics, and U.S. Interests", 31 January, 2011, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32394.html>.

⁵⁸⁹ Tasha Wibawa, "Why nearly 2 million people are demanding an independence vote for West Papua province", ABC News, January 29, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-30/west-papuans-fight-for-another-independence-referendum/10584336>.

⁵⁹⁰ BBC News, "Indonesia country profile", 2 October, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14921238>.

⁵⁹¹ Indonesia Investments, "Radical Islam in Indonesia", n.d., <https://www.indonesia-investments.com/business/risks/radical-islam/item245?>

⁵⁹² Andreas Harsono, "Indonesia's Religious Minorities Under Threat", Human Rights Watch, 2 February 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/02/indonesias-religious-minorities-under-threat>.

⁵⁹³ Sarine Arslanian, "Religious intolerance grows in Indonesia", Lifegate, 3 February, 2016, <https://www.lifegate.com/eviction-repatriation-reeducation-gafatar-members>.



introducing harsh measures against “deviant beliefs.” During his rule, Yudhoyono was known to ignore worsening acts of religious intolerance and aggression by militant Islamists against religious minorities.

The existing Indonesian legal system contributes to the discrimination against religious minorities. The laws having an adverse effect include the house of worship regulation, which asks the minorities to get official approval to build or renew houses of worship, and the blasphemy law, which “punishes deviations from the six officially protected religions with up to five years in prison.” Thus, it is believed that until the government rids the country of these regulations and punishes police and government officials for any taking part in religious bigotry, religious freedom in Indonesia will continue to be under threat.⁵⁹⁴

It should, however, be noted that the ideological conflict between different groups in Indonesia goes back in history. Thus, it is vital to provide a brief outline of the events related to ideological conflicts in the modern history of Indonesia.

Ideological Conflict in Indonesian History

Conflict over ideology has characterised political life in Indonesia since the early days of the nationalist movement. However, the reasons behind conflicts have changed with the vagaries of national and global politics. At times the key discussion has been between supporters and opponents of an Islamic state. At other times the main division has been between Java and the outer islands, between communists and anti-communists, or between pluralists and authoritarians. Provided that, any debate on the divisions and ways of thinking must be viewed within their historical context.⁵⁹⁵

From the time Indonesia emerged as an idea in the beginning of the 20th century, there were contrasting ideas about what kind of nation-state it should be. Secular nationalists imagined a modern social democratic state associated with capitalist economic development, education and social justice. Meanwhile, Indonesia’s communists agreed with some of the ideals of the secular nationalists but took a more extreme line against the Dutch. Their promotion of Lenin’s idea that colonialism was the logical result of capitalism helped to unite Indonesians and organise them against Dutch colonial rule. A third stream, which was more diverse than the other two, was Islam. The most dominant Islamic organisations were the modernist Sarekat Islam and Muhammadiyah, which were primarily focused on the promotion of the interests of Muslim traders. These organisations were powerful forces connecting together hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people who were looking forward to an independent state based

⁵⁹⁴ Andreas Harsono, “Indonesia’s Religious Minorities Under Threat”, Human Rights Watch, 2 February 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/02/indonesias-religious-minorities-under-threat>.

⁵⁹⁵ David Bourchier, Vedi R. Hadiz, *Indonesian Politics and Society: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.



on Islamic principles. Finally, a fourth group were the cultural nationalists, having their roots in a mix of ethnic associations predating Indonesian nationalism. The most enduring were the Javanese cultural nationalists linked with the colonial administrative elite, who hoped to see Indonesia based on traditionalist principles in which “a hereditary caste would preside over a mass of contented villagers.”⁵⁹⁶

In addition, there was also a populist variant of Javanese nationalism that promoted a range of more or less egalitarian millenarian peasant movements. The ideas of these groups ebbed, changed, and affected each other. For instance, communists and Muslims, worked together closely for some years before their split in the early 1920s. In addition, many of the secular nationalists had leftist tendencies and many were devout Muslims. Thus, Sukarno, the former President of the Republic of Indonesia, who acted as the most powerful voice of Indonesian nationalism after 1927, made a deliberate effort to join together what he saw as the three major streams of Indonesian thought, Marxism, Islam and nationalism, also including a Javanese populism.⁵⁹⁷

After gaining formal independence in 1949, Indonesia adopted the system of a parliamentary democracy in which a number of large and small parties were fighting for support. Indonesia was ruled by a series of coalition cabinets that were controlled by three parties: the secular nationalist Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI); Masjumi, the party of modernist Muslims, and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the traditionalist Muslim party. The social democratic Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) and two conservative aristocratic parties, the Greater Indonesia Party (Parindra) and the Greater Indonesia Unity Party (PIR), also gained representation.⁵⁹⁸

In short, Indonesian modern history paints a fragmented and diverse political picture. This invites the question of whether political and religious divides continue to persist. To address this question, one can explore the results of the 2019 Indonesian election. The election saw President Joko Widodo being re-elected, gaining 55.5 percent of the vote, while his opponent Prabowo Subianto, known for his support for hard-line Islamists, gained 44.5 percent of the vote. The good news for the prospects of resolving ideological conflicts is the fact that Joko Widodo is known for celebrating Indonesia’s religious and ethnic diversity, which highly contrasts Prabowo’s divisive vision of the country. However, notably, religious and ideological divisions have not ceased to exist. An example of this is Widodo only gaining 14 percent of

⁵⁹⁶ David Bourchier, Vedi R. Hadiz, *Indonesian Politics and Society: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

⁵⁹⁷ David Bourchier, Vedi R. Hadiz, *Indonesian Politics and Society: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

⁵⁹⁸ David Bourchier, Vedi R. Hadiz, *Indonesian Politics and Society: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.



the vote in Aceh, a region where Shariah law is instituted.⁵⁹⁹ Thus, while a pro-diversity President is a step forward, divisions among the population of Indonesia continue to be an issue that will have to be tackled by the governing elites.

Relationship between Indonesia and Russia

The cooperation between Indonesia and Russia has been ongoing for more than 70 years, since 1950.⁶⁰⁰ For Russia, Indonesia has been seen for a long time as an asset in its eastward policy. Since 2012, Russia has been eager to develop deeper relations with Asia, a wish that was strengthened by the deterioration of Russia's relationship with the West.⁶⁰¹ In 2016, Vladimir Putin stated that Russia and Indonesia are “linked by long-standing and close ties”. In addition, Putin expressed his intentions to continue and deepen cooperation in business.⁶⁰² At the same time, Indonesia’s President Widodo expressed the interest of Indonesia to increase cooperation with Russia in trade, politics, and culture.⁶⁰³ Furthermore, in 2021, Russia and Indonesia announced the intention to expand its military and military-technical cooperation, while also discussing ways to tackle terrorism, organised crime, and trafficking.⁶⁰⁴

It must also be noted that Indonesia has a long history of buying weapons from Russia. As reported by the Russia News Agency TASS, Russia has provided weapons valued more than \$2.5 billion to Indonesia since 1992. During this period, Russia has “delivered BTR-80A armored personnel carriers and BMP-3F infantry fighting vehicles, 100th series Kalashnikov assault rifles, Su-27SK and Su-27SKM, Su-30MK and Su-30MK2 planes, Mi-35 and Mi-17 helicopters, and also other weapon systems and military hardware.”⁶⁰⁵ Indeed, in 2007, Russia was reported to become Indonesia’s main weapons supplier.⁶⁰⁶

⁵⁹⁹ Hannah Beech and Muktita Suhartono, “Joko Wins Re-Election in Indonesia, Defeating Hard-Line Former General”, *The New York Times*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/20/world/asia/joko-widodo-indonesia-election.html>.

⁶⁰⁰ Hendra Manurung, “Indonesia-Russia Strategic Partnership in Southeast Asia Region”, *Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional*, 17(1): 77.

⁶⁰¹ Anton Tsvetov, “What stands between Russia and close ties with Indonesia?”, East Asia Forum, 3 June, 2018, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/03/what-stands-between-russia-and-close-ties-with-indonesia/>.

⁶⁰² Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, “Putin: Russia and Indonesia are Linked by Long-standing and Close Ties”, 19 May, 2016, <https://setkab.go.id/en/putin-russia-and-indonesia-are-linked-by-long-standing-and-close-ties/>.

⁶⁰³ Jakarta Globe, “As Russia Faces Colder Relations With West, Indonesia Opens a Door”, April 5, 2018, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/russia-faces-colder-relations-west-indonesia-opens-door/>.

⁶⁰⁴ ANI, “Russia increases military co-operation with Indonesia”, 14 December 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/russia-increases-military-co-operation-with-indonesia20211214160837/>.

⁶⁰⁵ TASS, “Russia’s arms exports to Indonesia top \$2.5 bln over 25 years”, 21 February, 2018, <https://tass.com/defense/991061>.

⁶⁰⁶ Mathias Hariyadi, “Putin in Jakarta, Russia becomes Indonesia’s main weapons supplier”, Pime Asia News, 9 June 2007, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Putin-in-Jakarta,-Russia-becomes-Indonesia%E2%80%99s-main-weapons-supplier-10227.html>.



However, the bilateral relationship got slightly more complex after Russia's invasion in Ukraine. In 2022, Indonesia voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution to condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine, as well as supporting the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights decision to form an independent commission to examine alleged human rights violations. Despite this, Indonesia has refused to impose sanctions on Russia or clearly condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine. Ben Bland, the director of the Asia-Pacific programme at Chatham House, argues that this, “reflects Indonesia's relatively good relationships with both Ukraine and Russia before the invasion, its longstanding tradition of non-alignment, and its wariness of being drawn into conflicts further afield when it faces so many challenges at home.”⁶⁰⁷

Interestingly, as [reported by Al Jazeera](#), the Indonesian social media reactions to the war in Ukraine seem to be pro-Russian, contrasting the official stance of Indonesia. Reportedly, part of the problem is caused by the dislike of the US by some Indonesians, despite them previously protesting against Russia's wars in Chechnya and its attacks on Syria. Much of the distrust goes back to the period after 9/11 and the Indonesian reaction to the American “War on Terror” in Indonesia, that a Muslim-majority nation. It is reported that the Pro-Russian Indonesians do not have trust in the United States due to its past attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq due to reasons that were seen as made up. However, there has so far been no study providing numerical evidence to explore if the Indonesian general public's support for Russia is widespread.⁶⁰⁸ What is clear is that almost half of Indonesia's general public support keeping ties with Russia, as reported by the non-profit organisation Alliance of Democracies that asked respondents whether they think their governments “should cut economic ties with Russia over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.” The fact that the number of respondents supporting keeping ties with Russia is the second highest of the 52 countries surveyed, indicates that a significant part of Indonesia's population favours keeping a positive relationship with Russia.⁶⁰⁹

Indeed, the president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, has expressed the wish for Indonesia to serve as a “bridge of peace” between Russia and Ukraine. After his visit first to Ukraine and then Russia at the turn of June and July as the first Asian leader to do it after the start of the war, some Indonesian politicians and public figures have even stated that Widodo should gain the Nobel Peace Prize for his attempts to facilitate dialogue between Russia and Ukraine. While

⁶⁰⁷ David Hutt, “Jokowi's tightrope walk”, Qantara.de, 19 July, 2022, <https://en.qantara.de/content/indonesias-ties-with-russia-and-the-west-jokowis-tightrope-walk>.

⁶⁰⁸ Al Jazeera, “Why are Indonesians on social media so supportive of Russia?”, 19 March, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/19/why-are-indonesians-on-social-media-so-supportive-of-russia>.

⁶⁰⁹ David Hutt, “Jokowi's tightrope walk”, Qantara.de, 19 July, 2022, <https://en.qantara.de/content/indonesias-ties-with-russia-and-the-west-jokowis-tightrope-walk>.



Widodo's contribution is not clear, the President has received praise in Indonesian media, stating that he had made a courageous decision in his efforts to promote peace.⁶¹⁰

Russian PMCs Operating in Indonesia

The Wagner Group, a private Russian military company which has close ties to the Russian President Vladimir Putin and has been used in war zones across the world⁶¹¹, has been reported to be operating in Indonesia since 2014.⁶¹² ⁶¹³ However, the exact services offered by the Wagner Group in Indonesia are not listed in public sources. Given the nature of the company, this does not come as a surprise. Indeed, as reported by *The New York Times*, the Wagner Group “operates in a situation of opacity”, having “a real lack of transparency.”⁶¹⁴

In addition, Indonesia is believed to have links to Yevgeniy Prigozhin. Prigozhin is a financier and the head of the Wagner Group, also known as “Putin's chef” due to his restaurants and catering businesses that hosted dinners attended by Putin.⁶¹⁵ It has also been speculated that Prigozhin is considering a role in the Russian government⁶¹⁶, being a close ally of Putin. It is believed that Prigozhin has used the Wagner Group to pursue the interests of the Kremlin, financing creative schemes to pursue the Kremlin's geopolitical goals.⁶¹⁷ Prigozhin has allegedly received billions in government contracts, also being connected to the Russian-based “troll farm” used to carry out online propaganda and social influence operations, representing Russian political interests and taking part in global disinformation campaigns.⁶¹⁸ Given

⁶¹⁰ TVP World, “Indonesia “bridge of peace” between Russia and Ukraine: Indonesian president”, 16 August, 2022, <https://tvpworld.com/61857102/indonesia-bridge-of-peace-between-russia-and-ukraine-indonesian-president>.

⁶¹¹ Victoria Kim, “What is the Wagner Group?”, *The New York Times*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/wagner-group-russia-ukraine.html>.

⁶¹² Biancamaria Vallortigara, “Mercenary Fighters in Libya and Ukraine: How Social Media Are Exposing the Russian Wagner Group”, BeeHive Middle East Social Media, May 31, 2022, https://dayan.org/content/mercenary-fighters-libya-and-ukraine-how-social-media-are-exposing-russian-wagner-group#_ednref8.

⁶¹³ Joshua Keating, “The Wagner Group: Putin's ‘chef,’ a Nazi-obsessed commando, and the story of the Kremlin's private army”, Grid, October 4, 2022, <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/10/04/the-wagner-group-putins-chef-a-nazi-obsessed-commando-and-the-story-of-the-kremlins-private-army/>.

⁶¹⁴ Victoria Kim, “What is the Wagner Group?”, *The New York Times*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/wagner-group-russia-ukraine.html>.

⁶¹⁵ Sumitra Nair, “Explained: The Wagner Group, mercenaries close to Russia, recently sanctioned by EU”, *The Week*, December 18, 2021, <https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/12/18/explained-the-wagner-group-mercenaries-close-to-russia-recently-sanctioned-by-eu.html>.

⁶¹⁶ Pjotr Sauer, “Russia's private military contractor Wagner comes out of the shadows in Ukraine war”, *The Guardian*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>.

⁶¹⁷ Amy Mackinnon, “Putin's Chef” Steps Out of the Shadows”, *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/03/yevgeny-prigozhin-wagner-group-putin/>.

⁶¹⁸ Tim Mcmillan, “HAS “PUTIN'S CHEF” AND WAGNER BOSS, YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN, BECOME A CHALLENGE TO THE HOUSE OF PUTIN?”, *The Debrief*, October 25, 2022, <https://thedebrief.org/has-putins-chef-and-wagner-boss-yevgeny-prigozhin-become-a-challenge-to-the-house-of-putin/>.



Prigozhin's connections to Putin and the Kremlin, questions arise about the nature of Prigozhin's connections to Indonesia. However, as with the Wagner Group, there is a lack of clarity of the matter.

Another Russian PMC operating in Indonesia is Redut-Antiterror (Center R), a unit consisting mainly of ex-Russian special forces⁶¹⁹, especially from the Russian 45th Special Forces unit,⁶²⁰ [described by the Defence and Security Foresight Group](#) as “highly-qualified professionals”.⁶²¹ It is a military-trade union of organisations, which includes professional military, special forces, airborne forces, among others. All employees must have combat experience and must participate in special operations and peacekeeping operations. PMC was founded in 2008, with its creators being scouts and veteran paratroopers. The services offered by the Redut-Antiterror include security activities, training of close protection groups, certification of specialists for the provision of private security services.⁶²² Redut-Antiterror (Center R) has also been linked to the Orel Anti-Terror family of companies⁶²³, a private Russian security organisation established before the creation of the Wagner Group. The Orel Anti-Terror is organised by military and special operations veterans, collaborating with a high number of offshoot agencies and affiliated organisations over the years.⁶²⁴ It was registered in the city of Orel as a private security firm that was called Antiterror-Tsentr in 2005, with the company officially closing in 2016. In 2011 Antiterror-Orel reportedly registered as a training and education site established by special forces veterans. However, as with other Russian PMCs, no record of it can be seen in the standard database of current and former Russian juridical entities.⁶²⁵

There are also indications that Redut-Antiterror (Center R) has provided military advice and training for Abkhazian units during the 2008 Caucasus War. Later it was deployed in Iraq,

⁶¹⁹ Anna Maria Dyner, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy”, PISM, 4 May, 2018, https://pism.pl/publications/The_Role_of_Private_Military_Contractors_in_Russian_Foreign_Policy.

⁶²⁰ Åse Gilje Østensen and Østensen Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies- the implications for European and Norwegian Security FFI-RAPPORT”, CMI, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329736854_Russian_Use_of_Private_Military_and_Security_Companies-the_implications_for_European_and_Norwegian_Security_FFI-RAPPORT, 24.

⁶²¹ Sergey Sukhankin and Alla Hurska, Russia's Private Military Contractors: Cause for Worry? Defence and Security Foresight Group, October 2020, https://uwaterloo.ca/defence-security-foresight-group/sites/ca.defence-security-foresight-group/files/uploads/files/dsfg_sukhankin_hurska_workingpaper_0.pdf, 4.

⁶²² Vk.com. “Chastnye voennye kompanii v Rossii”, Vk.com February 8 2020, https://vk.com/wall-191790490_12.

⁶²³ Keir Giles and Valeriy Akimenko, “Use and Utility of Russia's Private Military Companies”, n.d., https://www.queensu.ca/psychology/sites/psychwww/files/uploaded_files/Graduate/OnlineJournal/Keir_Giles_and_Valeriy_Akimenko-Use_and_Utility_of_Russias_Private_Military_Companies.pdf, 11.

⁶²⁴ New America, “Appendix: Glossary of Terms”, n.d., <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/appendix-glossary-of-terms/>.

⁶²⁵ Kimberly Marten, “Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35:3 (March 2019): 190.



Syria, Somalia, Caribbean countries, former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Indonesia.⁶²⁶ Its services include the use of snipers and sappers. In addition, the company's employees have been deployed to protect convoys, military installations, oil well personnel, and Russian diplomats in Lebanon, Palestine and Afghanistan. The company is reported to have a very close relationship with the Russian Ministry of Defence.⁶²⁷ Indeed, in order to be able to establish itself in the Iraqi environment, the company received direct support from the Russian Federal Security Services.⁶²⁸

Despite being known to be active in Indonesia, similarly to the case of the Wagner Group, the specific services provided by Redut-Antiterror (Center R) in Indonesia are not listed in publicly available sources.

⁶²⁶ Sergey Sukhanin, "From 'Volunteers' to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts", Jamestown Foundation, 27 June, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Paper-3-Volunteers-to-Quasi-PMCs-1.pdf>, 11.

⁶²⁷ Åse Gilje Østensen and Østensen Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies- the implications for European and Norwegian Security FFI-RAPPORT", CMI, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329736854_Russian_Use_of_Private_Military_and_Security_Companies-the_implications_for_European_and_Norwegian_Security_FFI-RAPPORT, 24.

⁶²⁸ Grzegorz Kuczyński: Putin's Invisible Army. Warsaw Institute, 30 March, 2018, <https://warsawinstitute.org/putins-invisible-army/>.



Section 3) Comparative Analysis of Russian PMC Operations, Regions, and Organisations.

In this section, we utilise a comparative lens to identify any trends, differences, or general comparisons that can be made based upon Russian PMC activity in different regions, across different Russian PMC organisations, and in different operations. These include;

- How these groups might operate in different environments (hybrid, low-intensity, and high intensity theatres) and how these environments affect their behaviour.
- The scale of human rights abuses in different contexts.
- How their legal grey zone helps.
- If the Russian state favours one PMC group over others in regard to pursuing its geopolitical aims.
- How Russian PMCs compete on the market compared to their Western counterparts,
- How they compare to the growing number of Chinese Private Security Contractors operating globally.

1. Comparisons regarding PMC Activities and their Contractors

Hybrid Involvement in Latin America

Elin Roberts

In this section, we will be analysing the difference in activities of the Wagner group. In doing so, we will look at Wagner's activities around the world in two main categories: we will look at its high-intensity military activities as well as its low-intensity activities which include political indoctrination and economic aid. What determines the activities of Wagner and the amount of violence they resort to is the national context of each country, and to a lesser extent the contracting actor.

In analysing Wagner's activities in Venezuela, we notice that the group did not exercise a lot of violence in the country and that the aim of its presence there was to ensure that Nicolás Maduro remained in power⁶²⁹ despite the growing protests against him in the country and the fact that many global actors such as the United States⁶³⁰, the European Union, and the

⁶²⁹ Camilleri De Castanedo, I., 2021. "Russian Paramilitary Presence in Venezuela?" *Grey dynamics*. <https://greydynamics.com/russian-paramilitary-presence-in-venezuela/>

⁶³⁰ Price, N., 2022. "U.S. Recognition of Venezuela's 2015 National Assembly and Interim President Guaidó". *US Department of State*. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-recognition-of-venezuelas-2015-national-assembly-and-interim-president-guaido/>



[Organisation of American States](#)⁶³¹, did not recognise him as the President of Venezuela, and instead recognised Juan Guaidó as President. Here we must note that since 2021, the [EU](#)⁶³² no longer recognised Juan Guaidó as the President of Venezuela. During its presence in Venezuela, the Wagner group was mandated to [protect Russian infrastructure](#)⁶³³ in case protests would turn violent and destroy the property of Russian companies. Furthermore, the group offered military equipment and training to the Venezuelan military and government in case that there would be US intervention on Venezuelan soil in an attempt to oust Maduro and place Guaidó as president. Moreover, having Wagner's presence in Venezuela was a way to exercise influence within the US sphere of influence despite the fact that the group is not directly linked to the Russian government and that it legally does not exist. Hence, the activities of Wagner in Venezuela mostly consisted of military training, as well as potential military intervention if Maduro was ousted from power as Maduro is one of Russia's allies in the Americas.

Looking at Wagner's activities in Asia, specifically in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, these are very [secretive](#)⁶³⁴ and are not as clear as what we have seen in Venezuela. However, we may say that their activities are based upon technical support and indoctrination which is what was seen in Venezuela.

Low-Intensity Activity in Africa

Hugo Claus

Examining Wagner's activities in Africa we can perceive the projection of Russian soft power throughout the continent in complementarity with hard power. The Wagner Group projects this power in four different aspects. Through media and press projects, economic projects, political cooperation, and lobbying interests in multilateral organisations. One characteristic of this soft power projection is the cooperation with [politically isolated leaders and parties](#)⁶³⁵. Prigozhin has offered political consulting services to several countries including Madagascar, South Africa, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

⁶³¹ OAS., "Member State: Venezuela". *OAS*.

https://www.oas.org/en/member_states/member_state.asp?sCode=ven

⁶³² Reuters Staff., 2021. "EU states no longer recognise Guaido as Venezuela's interim president". *Reuters*.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-eu-idUSKBN29U1A3>

⁶³³ Camilleri De Castanedo, I., 2021. "Russian Paramilitary Presence in Venezuela?" *Grey dynamics*.

<https://greydynamics.com/russian-paramilitary-presence-in-venezuela/>

⁶³⁴ CSIS., 2020. "Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State". <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>

⁶³⁵ Joseph Siegle. "How Russia is pursuing state capture in Africa", LSE Blogs. March 21, 2022.

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2022/03/21/how-russia-is-pursuing-state-capture-in-africa-ukraine-wagner-group/>.



In Madagascar, the Wagner Group supported the [election of Andry Rajoelina](#)⁶³⁶ in 2019 through the control of a major Malgasy newspaper. In South Africa, it provided political consultation to the ruling African National Congress (ANC) about forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2019. In Sudan, it provided political support for the government led by [General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#)⁶³⁷, reportedly conducting disinformation campaigns to promote the junta and discredit the protestors. In Zimbabwe it provided “electoral support” to the ZANU-PF during the [election of Emerson Mnangagwa](#)⁶³⁸.

In all the cases we can see that ruling leaders and parties use services offered by Wagner to secure control and stabilise the situation in their respective states. In this process it has also gained access to contracts and resources. Therefore, there is also an economic dimension to this soft power projection. Some also interpret the increasing presence of Russian PMCs and their soft power projection as an attempt to [undermine the regional influence of other powers](#)⁶³⁹ such as France and the United States. For example, in 2018, Wagner Group employees flew to the Comoros via Belarus to see if political technologies could be used to inflame the row between the Comoros and France over the island of Mayotte.

Russian PMC’s such as the Wagner Group thus position themselves as multipurpose security providers in Africa offering a range of services to leaders and states. This reflects Russia’s vision of Africa as a [new strategic hub](#)⁶⁴⁰ in its foreign policy, ensuing its increasing isolation since 2014. The nature of Wagner’s activities in some of these countries suggest that Russian presence is likely to be an increasingly important influence for the foreseeable future.

High-Intensity Activity in Syria Mali and Ukraine

Mariam Morsy

Russian PMCs operations showcase different levels of involvement in different parts of the world. While it is determined that operations had both economic and geopolitical goals for the Russian side, the intensity of military interventions were shaped by one of two factors; the first factor is the contractor’s willingness to engage the groups into fights. In the Syrian context, the government of Syria had a strong will to use Russia’s PMCs in defeating rebel groups,

⁶³⁶ Luke Harding and Jason Burke, “Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa”, The Guardian. June 11, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

⁶³⁷ Joseph Siegle. “How Russia is pursuing”.

⁶³⁸ Andrey Maslow and Vadim Zaytsev, “What’s behind Russia’s newfound interest in Zimbabwe”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. November 11, 2018. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/77707>.

⁶³⁹ Harding and Burke, “Leaked documents reveal Russian”.

⁶⁴⁰ Joseph Siegle, “Russia and Africa: Expanding influence and instability”, in *Russia’s Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach-security-and-statecraft-assessment/chapter-10-russia-and-africa-expanding-influence-and>, 80-90.



considering the high quality of Wagner fighters in combat. We see that the Syrian government contracted the PMCs to protect its valuable [rebel-controlled oil and gas fields](#),⁶⁴¹ and it was also responsible for their [payments](#).⁶⁴² Thus, PMCs got involved in high-intensity military operations against anti-regime forces under the government's auspices. The same scenario occurred in Mali, where the Malian government gave PMCs the freedom to commit [atrocities against civilians](#) in the name of counterterrorism.⁶⁴³ This resulted in high levels of [human rights violations](#) sponsored by the Russian-Malian alliance.⁶⁴⁴ While it seems that violent operations intensify when the contractor is the state, the real reason behind this is the ability of governments to provide wider patronage for PMC groups, considering their sensitive connection to the Russian state, while it is harder for rebel groups to do the same.

The second factor is the strategic importance of the intervention to the Russian state. This is seen within the context of Ukraine, where the importance of Russian military operations was of high value to the Russian state in order to secure its geopolitical and financial interests against the West. Russian PMCs were deeply involved in carrying out [violent operations](#) in Ukraine along with the Russian armed forces, as well as training pro-Russia separatists for combat.⁶⁴⁵ The military involvement of PMC groups was also determined by the intensity of the situation in each country and how much the contractor needs back-up fighters. As seen in Syria, Ukraine and Mali, the situation in all three countries (among other countries where Russian PMCs operated) was highly escalated and needed PMCs to support Russian allies in their fights.

2. Human Rights Abuses Committed by Russian PMCs in Collaboration with Contracting States

Camille Victor and Christopher Healey

Building on the previous points delving into human rights abuses, more widely human rights abuses and war crimes are virtually indissociable from Russian PMCs. Nonetheless, there seems to be a variation in the scale of violations committed by the paramilitaries depending on whether they have been contracted by and/or work alongside state security forces or rebels. For

⁶⁴¹ Leviev, Ruslan (28 March 2019). [В Сирии появилась новая ЧВК родом из Украины](#) [In Syria, a new PMC hails from Ukraine]. *citeam.org* (in Russian). Archived from [the original](#) on 30 March 2019. Retrieved 28 February 2020.

⁶⁴² Denis Korotkov, "Spisok Wagnera," *Fontanka.ru*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/18/075/>.

⁶⁴³ "Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers", *Human Rights Watch*, April 5, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers>.

⁶⁴⁴ "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali", *CSIS*, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

⁶⁴⁵ Sukhankin, Sergey. "Unleashing the PMCS and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas." Jamestown. Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/unleashing-the-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-ukraine-crimea-and-donbas/>.



instance, Wagner mercenaries contracted by the Malian government — which does not hold the former accountable for their violent abuses — have [significantly contributed](#) to the rise in human rights violations against civilians since their deployment.⁶⁴⁶ This contrasts with the [much lower amount](#) of (known) abuses committed by Wagner mercenaries accused of helping rebels in Chad,⁶⁴⁷ which are less directly involved in conflict and whose activities mostly consist of [providing weapons and training](#) to the insurgents.⁶⁴⁸

The cooperation of Russian mercenaries with state security forces therefore seems to be related with higher levels of human rights violations, stemming from their “legitimate” presence in the country and the climate of impunity they usually operate in. Thus, if more states turn to Russian PMCs to provide them with security services, this will likely lead to increased levels of abuses and insecurity which will in turn feed insurgency and instability.

Moving away from the African context, Wagner’s activities in Ukraine provide valuable insight on this trend. Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2023, PMC activity writ large was contained to eastern Ukraine in support of separatist rebels (with the exception of PMC activity in Crimea during the 2014 annexation mentioned earlier in this report). While civilian casualties were a continual point of concern during the fighting contained to the east, there was a [lack of adequate reporting done](#) by international agencies and NGOs on the scale of human rights abuses and war crimes.⁶⁴⁹ Although the full scale of human rights abuses and war crimes committed by Russian forces and PMCs in Ukraine since the invasion remains unknown, it is evident thus far that there has been an enormous increase in both. Indeed, the discovery of executed civilians in places such as Bucha and Motyzhyn hints at what is likely to be found wherever Ukrainian territory is reclaimed from Russian forces — regardless of whether or not PMCs are operating in tandem with the Russian military.

Given the aforementioned lack of reporting done in eastern Ukraine prior to the invasion, we cannot say for certain that there is a clear distinction between PMC human rights abuses and war crimes when working alongside rebels or Russian forces in a Ukrainian context. Nevertheless, a clear trend to note is the sheer scale of human rights abuses and war crimes committed when Russian forces seize and control territory during war — a trend made all the

⁶⁴⁶ “Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group’s Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

⁶⁴⁷ Lassaad Ben Ahmed, “Tchad: un soldat porté disparu à proximité des frontières centrafricaines.” Anadolu Agency, December 14, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/tchad-un-soldat-port%C3%A9-disparu-%C3%A0-proximit%C3%A9-des-fronti%C3%A8res-centrafricaines/2446912>

⁶⁴⁸ Betül Usta, “Russian Wagner Group’s Presence in Libya Endangers North Africa.” Daily Sabah, May 20, 2021. <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/russian-wagner-groups-presence-in-libya-endangers-north-africa>.

⁶⁴⁹ “World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Ukraine.” *Human Rights Watch*, January 14, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/ukraine#bb079e>.



more dangerous when supported by PMCs like the Wagner Group who are known to be effective terrorizers of civilian populations.

3. Protection Through a Legal Grey Zone

Polina Encheva

After reviewing the legal status of Russian private military companies within the borders of the Russian federation, it is important to understand the role and meaning of Russian PMCs and their operation within the borders of other countries. It is known that the Kremlin regime uses PMCs to fulfil its foreign policy goals while avoiding both political and legal repercussions. With the domestic ban on [mercenary groups](#) and their operations,⁶⁵⁰ the Russian legal system surrenders to the ‘tyranny’ of private organisations. The extent of power of the legal system is limited to [article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code](#) that bans any non-governmental actors to be involved in matters of defence, security or foreign policy.⁶⁵¹ The complex relationship between PMCs and the state is reduced to a rather simple and performative engagement with the legal system. The lack of legal power over PMCs on domestic level can easily be translated across other countries. Moreover, the Russian legal system never developed the mechanisms to investigate or support any external investigations into the operations of PMCs.

Since the ban from article 359 on mercenary units has not been applied to [Private Security Companies](#) (PSCs),⁶⁵² the lack of legal mechanism to counter potential dangerous activities by PMCs suggests that the Russian state is exercising a form of protectionism both at the domestic and international levels. The conflicting and unclear legal status of PMCs translates across the structures of foreign and international courts and their capacity to prosecute and investigate potential war crimes. To fully understand the legal obstruction surrounding the operations of PMCs, specific case studies are required. Since legal systems exist independently of each other, they are not equipped with the specific laws to make full inquiries into the activities of PMCs on their sovereign territory. Often international legal courts are also helpless and do not provide appropriate mechanisms or frameworks to take on extensive investigations and actually prosecute PMCs. This legal paradox conveniently keeps the hands of Russian lawmakers clean and steers the state clear from any direct political backlash. It could be argued that the refusal of the current political elite in Russia to set a domestic legal framework for PMCs, they exploit

⁶⁵⁰ “What Laws Constrain This Russian Private Military Company?” Lawfare, August 31, 2021. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-laws-constrain-russian-private-military-company>.

⁶⁵¹ “Criminal Code Russia - Imolin.”

https://www.imolin.org/doc/amlid/Russian_Federation_Criminal_Code.pdf.

⁶⁵² International Committee of the Red Cross. “Russian Federation: Regulating Private Military and Security Companies.” International Committee of the Red Cross, April 24, 2019.

<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/russian-federation-regulating-private-military-security-companies>.



PMCs to pursue foreign policy goals and commit war crimes without suffering any repercussions.

4. The Wagner Group has far closer links to the Russian State than other PMCs, but also Presents a Growing Risk to it.

Cherifa Bourchak and Sarah Kuszynski

The Wagner Group has long been considered ‘Putin’s Private Army’ and drawn international attention for its closeness to the Russian government. Unlike other Russian PMCs, it is [not registered in Russia or anywhere else](#).⁶⁵³ As such, [there is a limit in competition](#),⁶⁵⁴ which ensures that only favoured groups such as Wagner are allowed to operate. This is further evident in the strong links between the Wagner Group and the Russian military, which is highly unusual for traditional PMCs. The CSIS has noted several documented occasions where Wagner operatives used transport infrastructure related to Russia’s Ministry of Defense, including arriving in Venezuela to assist President Nicolas Maduro in a [Russian Air Force aircraft](#) and flying in and out of Syria in [military planes](#).⁶⁵⁵ Wagner extensively depends on key Russian military infrastructure that extends beyond transport to [sharing bases](#) and using known military health care services.⁶⁵⁶ Close links with official military is atypical of PMCs, which all points to a favourable position for the Wagner Group, which combined with its known networks to the Kremlin, likens the group to a proxy Russian organisation.

The Russian state has previously gone to great lengths to hide its affiliation with Wagner. For example, in 2018, a team of [Russian journalists who went to the Central African Republic](#) to report on PMC activities were killed in what is suspected to have been a planned attack.⁶⁵⁷

[Anna Borshchevskaya](#) of the Foreign Policy Institute, points out that the Russian state outlawing PMCs is not only due to a desire for deniability, but also an underlying fear that such groups could overtake the state. This is a very real fear for the Kremlin elite as the Wagner

⁶⁵³ “Putin Chef’s Kisses of Death: Russia’s Shadow Army’s State-Run Structure Exposed,” Bellingcat, August 14, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>.

⁶⁵⁴ Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (March 26, 2019): 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586x.2019.1591142>.

⁶⁵⁵ Joseph Trevithick, “Russian Transport Aircraft Deliver Men and Materiel to Venezuela Direct from Syria,” The Drive, March 25, 2019, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/27143/russian-transport-aircraft-deliver-men-and-materiel-to-venezuela-direct-from-syria>; “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict,” 2017, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fainberg_russian_spetsnaz_syrian_conflict_2017.pdf.

⁶⁵⁶ “Как выглядит лагерь ЧВК Вагнера под Краснодаром,” www.znak.com, 2022, https://www.znak.com/2018-03-05/kak_vyglyadit_lager_chvk_vagnera_v_krasnodare.

⁶⁵⁷ Luke Harding, “Russian Journalists Killed in CAR ‘Were Researching Military Firm,’” the Guardian, August 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/01/russian-journalists-killed-central-african-republic-investigating-military-firm-kremlin-links>.



Group's popularity in [Russia](#) has surged since it bolstered Russian ranks in Ukraine and was thereby able to claim that it could act as an alternative to wider mobilisation.

⁶⁵⁸

Furthermore, the Wagner Group's connections to the Russian state are more entrenched than those of other PMCs, such as the RSB Group. It has been argued that [the Wagner Group and their leaders now have as much political influence in the Kremlin as the foreign minister](#) and the defence minister. For instance, Prigozhin was behind the recent appointment of General Sergey Surovikin to head the military operation in [Ukraine](#). Prigozhin is generally increasingly involved in day-to-day decision-making with regards to the war in Ukraine.⁶⁵⁹

Relatedly, Putin awarded military honours to senior Wagner commanders. Prigozhin [was granted](#) the title 'Hero of the Russian Federation'.⁶⁶⁰ This is a marked change of course from the Kremlin denying connection to the group, especially in relation to the group's activities in Syria, Libya and various other central African nations.

The RSB Group and The Moran Security Group's treatment by the state is closer in line with Western military contractors as defined by the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\) in 2008 which outlines their defensive nature](#), focused on armed guarding and protection of convoys, buildings and other places; maintenance and operation of weapons.⁶⁶¹

For example, in Syria, the [Slavonic Corps were](#) assigned to "guard" several oil fields in Deir ez Zor in eastern Syria before it emerged that the Corps were tasked to wrestle the oil fields from rebel control.⁶⁶² Hence, even groups that tend toward more private than state-based operations are also leveraged by the Kremlin to serve its own interests.

In short, The PMC-Kremlin, in particular the Wagner-Kremlin nexus, has expanded since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between private and state-sponsored groups.

⁶⁵⁸ Patrick Wintour, "Russia's Wagner Group 'Have as Much Power in Kremlin as Ministers,'" the Guardian, November 1, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/01/russias-wagner-group-have-as-much-power-in-kremlin-as-ministers>.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁰ Mary Ilyushina, "In Ukraine, a Russian Mercenary Group Steps out of the Shadows," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/17/ukraine-russia-wagner-group-mercenaries/>.

⁶⁶¹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model," *www.fpri.org*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model/>.

⁶⁶² "Slavcorps.org," *slavcorps.org*, 2022, <http://slavcorps.org/en/>.



5. Comparing Russian PMCs and their Western Alternatives

Lāsma Kokina and George Barber

There are currently [11 known Russian PMCs](#) that carry out missions outside Russia: RSB Group, Antiterror, MAR, MSGroup (Morgan Security Group), Centre R (other names include Center R, ‘Tiger Top-rent security’, and ‘Redut AntiTerror’), ATKGroup, Slavonik Corps, Wagner Group, E.N.O.T., Cossaks, and Patriot.

Some of these PMCs have substantial experience. The longest-existing Russian PMC is the Cossacks who have been active in war zones since 1992 when they first took part in the armed conflict in Moldova (Transnistria). South Ossetia, Crimea, and Donbas were among the places for their latest activities. However, Cossacks-type infantry units have been gradually replaced by well-equipped assault troops with a clear command-and-control structure similar to that of the Russian Army. MAR, E.N.O.T. Corp., Wagner Group, and Patriot are all examples of Russian traditional proxy warfare with private military companies remodelled and redeployed on land instead of sea.⁶⁶³ Russian PMCs offer a range of [different services](#), including combat operations, intelligence collection and analysis, protective services, training, site security, and information operations and propaganda.⁶⁶⁴ According to [CSIS data](#),⁶⁶⁵ the number of countries where Russian PMCs operate has increased from 4 countries in 2015 to 27 in 2021 due to Russia’s ambition to increase its influence.

Russian PMCs are slightly different in terms of the [services](#)⁶⁶⁶ they offer. Arguably the most frequently mentioned Russian PMC is the Wagner Group, which is associated with several activities – training of elite forces, direct participation in battles,⁶⁶⁷ including application of irregular warfare (ambushes, raids, and diversionary attacks), and military advisory and human intelligence.⁶⁶⁸ Other Russian PMCs associated mainly with warfare operations include Centre

⁶⁶³ “The role of Russian PMCs in armed conflicts”, Inform Napalm, accessed 4 November 2022, http://informnapalm.rocks/pmc_rush.

⁶⁶⁴ “Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies”, CSIS, accessed 2 November, 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721_Jones_Russia%27s_Corporate_Soldiers.pdf?7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586.

⁶⁶⁵ “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies”, CSIS, accessed 2 November, 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721_Jones_Russia%27s_Corporate_Soldiers.pdf?7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586.

⁶⁶⁶ “Russian Private Military Companies”, Asymmetric Warfare Group, accessed 2 November, 2022, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/329271/download>.

⁶⁶⁷ “Private Military Companies in the Russian Federation Foreign and Security Policies in 2014–2019”, Aivaras Giedraitis, accessed 3 November, 2022, <https://journals.lka.lt/journal/lasr/article/603/file/pdf>.

⁶⁶⁸ “Wagner Group: The Extended Hand of the Russian Federation’s Hybrid Activities and the Clenched Fist of Russian Global Expansion”, Ondrej Cabelka, accessed 3 November, 2022, <https://www.securityoutlines.cz/wagner-group-the-extended-hand-of-the-russian-federations-hybrid-activities-and-the-clenched-fist-of-russian-global-expansion/>.



R, Cossacks, Patriot, ATK Group, and Slavonic Corps who are associated with their military operations in places such as Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine and Syria.⁶⁶⁹

Other Russian PMCs have a slightly different profile, focusing more on security service provision. For example, RSB Group's activities include protection of naval and VIP, mine clearance, and rebel support.⁶⁷⁰ As mentioned on the [RSB Group website](#), the company's focus is security, offering arm protection and security services.⁶⁷¹ Another Russian PMC, PKSK Mar, also emphasises the security aspect, offering armed protection of objects and transport, maintenance of public order in extreme conditions, and fire suppression. Similarly, E.N.O.T. Corp. provides security services in the form of rescue of people and security increase for "compatriots", although it is also known to be engaged in preventative fights against illegal immigration, fights against organised crime and drug trafficking, and ideological education.⁶⁷² Consequently, while there is some diversity in the Russian PMC market depending on the services one is looking for, there are companies with similar service profiles.

In terms of salaries, Russian PMCs are generally expected to pay \$1,500 to \$3,600 a month depending on the tasks carried out by their contractors,⁶⁷³ much less than the American and British PMC employees who are believed to earn as much as £10,000 a month, tax-free.⁶⁷⁴ However, there are indications of Russian PMCs offering different ranges of compensation. For example, the salaries paid by Patriot to its fighters (\$6,300–15,800 per month) is much more generous than the ones paid by Wagner (\$2,500–3,500 per month).⁶⁷⁵ Thus, companies are able to compete with each other based on the compensation offered.

Unlike Russia, the U.S. and the UK are participants of the [Montreux Document](#), an agreement produced in 2008. While this document does not provide a globally recognised definition of PMCs, it emphasises their defensive nature, focused on "armed guarding and protection of persons and objects, such as convoys, buildings and other places; maintenance and operation of weapons systems; prisoner detention; and advice to or training of local forces and security

⁶⁶⁹ "Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror", Inform Napalm, 1 November, 2022, <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/>.

⁶⁷⁰ "Private Military Companies in the Russian Federation Foreign and Security Policies in 2014–2019", Aivaras Giedraitis, accessed 3 November, 2022, <https://journals.lka.lt/journal/lasr/article/603/file/pdf>.

⁶⁷¹ "Armed protection and provision of security services", RSB Group, viewed 1 November, 2022, <http://rsb-group.org/>.

⁶⁷² "Private Military Companies in the Russian Federation Foreign and Security Policies in 2014–2019", Aivaras Giedraitis, accessed 3 November, 2022, <https://journals.lka.lt/journal/lasr/article/603/file/pdf>.

⁶⁷³ "Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror", Inform Napalm, 1 November, 2022, <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/>.

⁶⁷⁴ "Britain is the world centre for private military contractors – and it's almost impossible to find out what they're up to", Ian Overton, Elisa Benevilli, and Laura Bruun, viewed 4 November 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/britain-is-world-centre-for-private-military-contractors/>.

⁶⁷⁵ "Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa?", Sergey Sukhankin, accessed 2 November, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-new-pmc-patriot-the-kremlins-bid-for-a-greater-role-in-africa/>.



personnel.”⁶⁷⁶ Furthermore, Western PMCs operate according to two key principles: complete legality and non-military function with the rare exception of using weapons in self-defence on missions. In contrast, Russian PMCs were established for completely opposite purposes, also being *de jure* non-existent and illegal according to the Russian Penal Code. As such, it is challenging to provide a direct comparison between Russian and Western PMCs.

However, arguably, Russian PMCs would be most likely to compete with the [biggest Western PMCs](#) for military services in the world’s hotspots, such as Somalia, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Gaza, and Afghanistan, to name a few. Some of the well-known big PMCs are Blackwater (now known as Academi), FDG Corp, DynCorp., MPRI in the U.S., G4S, Aegis Defence Service, Erinyes International in the UK, and an American-British company Northbridge Services Group. These PMCs are likely to take part in international peacekeeping operations. For example, FDG Corp lists [services](#) such as the “protection of ships and cargo, military logistics, maritime and land transportation, the training of special units and security teams for operations in high-risk areas, military counselling.”⁶⁷⁷ Therefore, at least officially, the Western PMCs are more security-focused than their Russian counterparts. Nonetheless, there is a lot of secrecy in their actions. For example, Blackwater, now Academi, opened fire on Iraqi civilians in September 2007, killing 17 and causing injuries to further 20. Similarly, in 2007, the guards of Aegis Defence Services were reported to be using their weapons at civilians. These examples illustrate a bigger issue- a lack of transparency among the Western PMCs.⁶⁷⁸

Russian PMCs operate in a wide range of locales and do not all have the same operational goals. The list of countries that Russian PMCs operate in has [grown substantially](#)⁶⁷⁹ since 2015, increasing influence all over the globe in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America. An important function of these PMCs that are in competition with Western PMCs is to build stronger relationships with the countries in which their clients are located, or a state itself if they are contracted with a state. The geopolitical stakes are high, with PMCs vying for clients in many places around the world. Russian PMCs see a greater opportunity to garner influence in places with less law and order and greater instability.

⁶⁷⁶ “Russian Private Military Companies: Continuity and Evolution of the Model”, Anna Borshchevskaya, viewed 1 November 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-model>.

⁶⁷⁷ “War for money. Leading private military companies of the world”, Alex Kemeroff, viewed 5 November, 2022, <https://medium.com/smartaim-tech/war-for-money-leading-private-military-companies-of-the-world-eab9f9fe2de8>.

⁶⁷⁸ “Britain is the world centre for private military contractors – and it's almost impossible to find out what they're up to”, Ian Overton, Elisa Benevilli, and Laura Bruun, viewed 4 November 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/britain-is-world-centre-for-private-military-contractors/>.

⁶⁷⁹ “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies”, CSIS, accessed 6 November, 2022, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210721_Jones_Russia%27s_Corporate_Soldiers.pdf?7fy3TGV3HqDtRKoe8vDq2J2GGVz7N586.



A lack of transparency regarding the activities of PMCs has been an issue of debate. Russian PMCs and Western PMCs alike have undertaken many clandestine actions that have raised questions about transparency regarding the contracts they receive, where they are operating, their short and long term objectives, and what mechanisms are in place to keep them accountable. This lack of transparency can make it difficult for citizens of democratic countries to be properly informed about geopolitical events when they go to vote. PMCs accuse each other of unfair competition and conflicts of interest. For Western policymakers, the lack of transparency from Russian PMCs could be exploited by bringing to light past Russian PMC failures and abuses making this a double-edged sword for Moscow politically.

6. Russian PMCs and their Chinese counterparts

Noah Trowbridge and Katie Luk

Whilst Russian PMCs have concentrated international attention, it is worth examining why their Chinese counterparts have seemingly gone under-the-radar. Essentially, this is down to a divergence in both countries' incentives for exporting security services in Africa. Whilst Russian PMCs intervene on behalf of a country with a limited economic and demographic footprint in Africa and that seeks greater political influence and economic gain – an allegiance which will never be formally recognised by Moscow –, Chinese contractors are mandated to protect the existing Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) in areas that cannot be safeguarded by Chinese peacekeepers or the People's Liberation Army across the continent.⁶⁸⁰ This clearer affiliation with Beijing ensures that their companies comply with Chinese arms control legislation, meaning they should be differentiated from their Russian counterparts as Private Security Companies (PSCs) as their personnel cannot bear arms.⁶⁸¹

That said, two trends could lead to a break away from this *status quo*. Firstly, as the Chinese diaspora in Africa grows and increasingly becomes a privileged target of kidnapping and theft, Beijing may seek to strengthen its PSCs' capabilities. Secondly, if the commercial terms of BRI contracts become less appealing to African governments, the latter may seek security services in return for access to raw materials, in which case Beijing may turn to the Russian model. However, at the time of writing, these scenarios remain unlikely.

The 2018 MERICS report shows only some [30 to 40 Chinese PSCs](#) are operating overseas compared to the 7000 operating domestically⁶⁸². The small and immature sector generally has poor abilities and are slow to adapt to the demands of BRI growth since 2013. Compared to Russian PMCs who have been operating in high risk areas since 1990s, there is a major [gap](#) in

⁶⁸⁰ Helena Legarda, "Guardians of the Belt and Road," MERICS, 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/report/guardians-belt-and-road>.

⁶⁸¹ Sukhankin, Sergey. "Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects." *China Brief* 20, no. 9 (2020): 18-24.

⁶⁸² Legarda. "Guardians of the Belt and Road".



terms of language skills, intelligence gathering structures, essential local connections, and a shortage of experienced personnel⁶⁸³. In the words of Tian Buchou, who manages security of Chinese companies in the Middle East and Africa, “more than 80% of Chinese security personnel have just a basic education... are directly led by people who are just military enthusiasts and love playing war games”.⁶⁸⁴ China’s arms restrictions also meant PSCs could only operate in [fenced/gated compounds](#) and hire local armies or foreign PMCs to guard the grounds.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸³ Max Markusen. “A Stealth Industry: The Quiet Expansion of Chinese Private Security Companies,” CSIS, 2022.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/stealth-industry-quiet-expansion-chinese-private-security-companies>

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁵ Alessandro Arduino. *China’s Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road*. 2018.

https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=4FJDDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=arduino+china%27s+private+army&ots=X_Dpgpcw6s&sig=O1-WvVZRSumiz2VwDi2hvDEyqkE&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=arduino%20china's%20private%20army&f=false



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