

Russia's (not so) Private Military Companies

Private military companies (PMCs) provide military services to governments and corporations. What sets PMCs apart from regular units is that they are: driven by profit rather than politics; structured as multinational companies; capable of exercising deadly force; and willing to operate in extreme conditions, including active war zones.

Russian companies largely missed the opportunity to gain a foothold on the international market for such services when it was being formed in the 1990s, so the PMC industry has foremost been associated with the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. The few commercial Russian PMCs that did exist worked on an ad-hoc basis, many of them seemingly created for a single international mission and then disappearing. As of early 2019, only one Russian company, RSB Group, qualifies as a relatively independent, profit-driven PMC that has existed for more than a decade.

Russian PMCs operate in an unclear domestic legal environment. Such companies are not regulated per se. Article 359 of the Russian Criminal Code outlaws mercenaries and their financing. Moreover, Article 208 outlaws all armed formations not stipulated in federal law, and a similar prohibition is found in Article 13 of the Russian Constitution. These laws have either not been applied at all, or only in an arbitrary, politicised manner.

Several lawmakers have attempted to regulate the PMC industry, most recently in 2018. The main reason for their failure seems to have been a disagreement between different power ministries and security services about which part of the state apparatus should be tasked with overseeing the PMCs. Many within the security establishment are sceptical toward the idea of relinquishing the monopoly of force to private actors. All in all, letting PMCs linger in legal uncertainty makes it easier for the government to deny links to such groups.

For a long time, the Russian PMC industry received minimal attention in the media and elsewhere. This changed with the outbreak of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, which allegedly featured several Russian PMCs. A closer look reveals that most of these so-called PMCs were little more than ragtag groups lacking both business plans and the capability to provide military services.

The exception is the Wagner Group, which has become well known for its willingness to participate directly in battle, despite heavy casualties. Media reporting often describes the group as a PMC, but its close ties to the Russian military intelligence service (GRU) and the Ministry of Defence have led many analysts to label Wagner as either a paramilitary group or even a GRU-controlled special force. The administrative and financial control of Wagner lies in the hands of the influential businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, who owns several companies that have lucrative contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence. Prigozhin is also accused of running the “troll factory” – the Internet Research Agency – which attempted to influence the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States.

Wagner was formed sometime in 2013 and its first known mission was to support the disarmament of Ukrainian soldiers during the annexation of Crimea in early 2014. Shortly thereafter, the group dispatched contract soldiers to Donbas in eastern Ukraine, where they took an active part in the fighting. According to the Ukrainian security service, SBU, over 200 Wagner contractors participated in the battle for Debaltseve, in January-February 2015, during the course of which the group lost over 50 contractors.

Some pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine claim that Wagner carried out assassinations of several pro-Russian separatist leaders who were refusing to take orders from Moscow. There is no direct evidence

to implicate Wagner in these killings, but a former employee of Prigozhin's own security detail admits to having participated in the assassination of an assistant to a high-ranking separatist leader in the city of Luhansk.

By spring 2015, Wagner started to prepare for its next campaign: to support President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Among other things, Wagner played an important role in the efforts to seize the city of Palmyra from the Islamic State. During the first two years of the Syria campaign, the Russian Ministry of Defence backed Wagner considerably. At its peak strength, in 2016, Wagner had equipment and manpower equivalent to an infantry regiment, with access to tanks, rocket artillery, howitzers, and air support, from the Russian Ministry of Defence.

It seems that much of Wagner's operations in Syria after 2016 have been financed by deals between Prigozhin's companies and the Syrian government. One such contract details how Wagner contractors were to seize and protect energy installations, in exchange for a quarter of their revenue.

Concurrently with a general diplomatic push by the Kremlin in Africa, there were several indications in 2018 that Wagner had expanded into Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), and possibly Libya. In Sudan and the CAR, Wagner is to provide various military services in exchange for the natural resources going to companies controlled by Prigozhin, but the group's influence might go even deeper. In the CAR, the national security adviser since 2018 has been Valery Zakharov, a Russian citizen who is known to have worked for Prigozhin in the past.

In the CAR, reports have appeared about the presence of two other Russian PMCs: Sewa Security Services and Patriot. It has not been conclusively established whether these actually exist. Perhaps they are merely an effort to rebrand Wagner, or perhaps they act as a front for regular GRU forces. In any case, the activities of Russian PMCs in the region (regardless of their names) are coordinated with Russian state organs, which have the final say.

So, what conclusions can one draw about Russian PMCs? The conflicts in Ukraine and Syria show that the Russian government is prepared to rely on PMCs to achieve some of its military and political objectives, when deniability is important. PMCs can be understood as new tools in a long history of Russian involvement via proxy in foreign conflicts. By relying on PMCs and other irregular groups, Russia has been able to minimise the use of regular troops, while maintaining manoeuvrability for smaller ground operations. Compared with reports of casualties in the Armed Forces, those about losses among private contractors evoke only muted reaction in Russia. This gives PMCs another distinct advantage.

A breakthrough in the legalisation debate seems distant, and the emergence of truly independent Russian PMCs on the global market even more so. Given the scepticism within the different Russian power ministries and security services toward the privatisation of force, such a development might not be desirable for key decision-makers. There is a risk that PMCs become too independent and uncontrollable, which could ultimately undermine the state's monopoly of force.

Nevertheless, experience from Ukraine and Syria demonstrates that regime-controlled PMCs can be useful in military operations in which deniability is important. The shadowy nature and flexibility of PMCs allow them to disappear and then reappear under a different name and form. Not-so-private military companies are thus also likely to feature in future conflicts.

Nils Dahlqvist

Please visit www.foi.se/russia to find out more about the FOI Russia and Eurasia Studies Programme and register to our Newsletter.