War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests

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Introduction

The employment of private military contractors for achieving specific geo-political/economic objectives is by no means new for Russia: dating back to the 16th century,[1] this phenomenon (while changing names and forms) has accompanied the state throughout its development. Namely, during the pre-1917 period, private military forces (predominantly composed of non-Russian people) were mainly used as a force of colonization and solving internal problems (suppression of revolts and public discontent); whereas during the Soviet period, so-called "military instructors" (state-sponsored active military) acted as a force that promoted Moscow's geopolitical interests in countries of the third world (the Middle East, Africa and Latin America). This visible continuity and tradition notwithstanding, the issue suddenly started to widely attract the attention of foreign and domestic observers after the "Russian Ilovaysk"[2]—the decimation of the Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner Group in Syria (near Deir ez-Zor) by US-led coalition forces in early 2018, which claimed the lives of approximately 200 Russian mercenaries.[3] The deadly clash resulted in a spree of publications and journalistic investigations that uncovered other details pertaining to Russia's illegal employment of private military contractors in various regions stretching from East-Central Europe and the Balkans to the Sahel zone and Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper—the first one in a series of publications comprising the project entitled "War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad"—seeks to provide a general picture of Russian PMCs as a relatively new phenomenon (yet with deep historical roots) that is rapidly changing and being employed in drastically different ways from how such private security firms are utilized in the West.

A Surreptitious Tool for Challenging the West

When it comes to Russia's growing reliance on non-linear forms of warfare (including the employment of irregular forces), it is most important to consider the conspicuous discrepancy

between Russia's ambitions and actual capabilities. Vladimir Putin's infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference was meant to signify Russia's reemergence on the international arena as an assertive power, ready to challenge the existing configuration of the world order by reentering theaters abandoned by Moscow in the tumultuous 1990s. This approach reflected a strategy originally formulated during that time by former foreign minister and later prime minister Yevgeni Primakov. However, as a power in decline, plagued by economic and demographic problems, suffering from technological inferiority, and lacking strong allies, Russia has had difficulty engaging in an open competition with the West.

In 2009 (amidst the global financial crisis), Primakov argued that the main criteria of a country`s stability and attractiveness is a vibrant and robust economy, which Russia clearly lacks—40 percent of its GDP comes from the export of raw commodities. Primakov stated that a number of attempts to turn Russia into an island of stability in a sea of crisis have all failed; and in 2012, he reiterated this view.[4]

The Russian political leadership has placed the emphasis on foreign policy above domestic economic development. In so doing, it has opted to challenge the West as a means of achieving internal consolidation as well as to restore Russia's traditional "sphere of influence" in the so-called "near abroad" (and the "Great Limitrophe"[5] zone) and later beyond this area. This policy course has been increasingly exacerbating Russia's confrontation with the West and led to a series of regional disputes during the first half of Putin's reign that clearly highlighted the country's weaknesses.

Between 1999 and 2010, four pivotal developments occurred that re-shaped Russia's perceptions of the enemy, its capabilities and forms of response:

- The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) operation in the former Yugoslavia (1999);
- The US-led operation in Iraq (2003);
- The "color revolutions,"[6] primarily in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004); and
- The Arab Spring (started in 2010).[7]

The Kremlin saw the above-mentioned developments as a forceful toppling of "legitimate" political regimes through the employment of social mass media (as a means of public mobilization), resulting in a civil war and (in some cases) the loss of statehood.[8] In Russian official parlance, this collective phenomenon became known as "hybrid warfare," which, by 2016, came to be defined as "a military strategy that combines conventional war, small war and cyber war."[9] The Russian side has drawn a number of key lessons from these supposed examples of Western "hybrid warfare" operations,[10] but two of them are of particular interest:

First, modern warfare confers a qualitatively new (in many ways, decisive) role to Information Operations (IO).[11] According to Russia's prominent military writer Vladimir Slipchenko "information has become a destructive weapon just like a bayonet, bullet or projectile."[12] Indeed, a closer look at Russia's post-2011 legislation in the realm of information/cyber security[13] reveals these changing perceptions of the concept of "information," which is increasingly seen as an integral part of contemporary conflict.[14]

Second, is the realization of the increasing role of tactical mobile groups ("special operations forces") and Private Military Companies that, according to Russian discourse, played a decisive role in dismantling the aforementioned political regimes during the first decade of the 21st century.[15] In particular, Russian sources ascribe the rapid collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime as the direct result of the active involvement of Western PMCs in Libya. Scholar Natalia Komleva argues pointedly, "the role of such entities in terms of smashing the undesirable political regimes will grow."[16] Taken together, these two aspects have ended up forming an essential pillar of Russia's "asymmetric actions" strategy[17] as a means to confront the West by turning the enemy's strengths against it.

Background: What Are Russian PMCs?

Russia's growing emphasis on non-linear forms of confrontation (including the employment of irregular forces) is not a unique trend. Rather, it is a by-product of a merger between Russia's own experience and global trends in contemporary warfare:

1. The changing nature and evolution of warfare—a trend originally predicted by Evgeny Messner (this first appeared in his 1960 book *Mutiny, or the Name of the Third World War*[18]). It is reflected in the growing necessity to confront so-called non-state actors (guerilla forces, terrorists, pirates) within the scope of counter-insurgency campaigns (CIC). This idea is also visible in the writings of Slipchenko, who puts special emphasis on the changing nature of the "front line," which is becoming ever less defined.[19] Combined, these two ideas have had a visible effect on Russian contemporary military thought. For example, it has been argued that PMCs/irregular formations could be of immense use in non-contact military operations, including with the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV).[20]

2. The Public perception of war casualties and Russia`s particularly bitter experiences in Afghanistan (1979–1989) and Chechnya (1994–2000).

3. The new tasks and challenges faced by armed forces, requiring prompt and non-standard actions.

Reflecting on these trends, many Russian analysts have converged in opinion that the US and South Africa (and other Western countries with various degree of success) have demonstrated an impressive ability to deal with these challenges by "privatizing war" and using PMCs in combat zones.

Based on the Western experience, Russian sources indicate four main types of PMCs:

1. Military provider companies (*kompanii voyennykh uslug*)—which offer their clients tactical support during military operations (including direct participation in hostilities[21]);

2. Military consulting companies (*konsaltingovyie kompanii*)—which consult clients on questions related to strategic planning and the reform of military forces, directly help with

training of military personnel, as well as provide guidance on working with new types of weaponry;

3. Military support companies (*logisticheskije kompanii*)—which provide auxiliary functions (including services in IT and military spheres);

4. Private security companies (*chastnuje okhrannyje kompanii*)—which deal with crisis management, risk assessment, security consulting, de-mining, or training of local law enforcement.

The validity of this classification is, naturally, debatable (and will be discussed later in this paper). However, the most crucial aspect that the absolute majority of Russian experts agree on is that such enterprises are hugely profitable and, importantly, enjoy a clear legal status in the West. In contrast, Russian PMCs and private military contractors do not officially exist. Joining and/or organizing a PMC is construed as engaging in illicit "mercenary" (*naemnichestvo*) activity, as stipulated by article 359 of the Penal Code of the Russian Federation. Despite several rounds of intense debates and repeated false hopes, the legalization of PMCs in Russia has still not occurred, to date. The last unsuccessful attempt was made on March 27, 2018; all key ministries—including the security services (*siloviki*) faction—unanimously rejected the idea, despite previously expressed enthusiasm.[22]

Nonetheless, despite being locked in legal limbo, both official and unofficial evidence[23] has on numerous occasions revealed that Russian PMCs not only do exist, but that their employment (in terms of both the number of personnel and rapidly expanding geography) has also increased dramatically since 2013–2014. In order to better understand this perplexing mismatch, it is essential to analyze two aspects: the trajectory of the Russian intellectual debate on the matter as well as the main functions/tasks *de facto* performed by the country's private military contractors.

PMCs in the Russian Intellectual Debate

The Russian state's expanding (though officially denied) employment of private military contractors outside of Russian territory, as well as some crucial remarks made by top officials in Moscow, have sparked an intense, cross-sectional debate (virtually nonexistent before) on PMCs and their status inside the country.

Academia

Academic discourse has assumed a somewhat narrow approach, primarily concerned with legal aspects, which is loosely connected to Russian realities. Russian academia is prone to apply a Western model (rather selectively), frequently ignoring the model that has actually emerged in Russia. The most frequently quoted Russian definition of PMCs belongs to Professor Alexander Volevodz, who stated that "private military and security companies are non-state entities, rendering contractual military and security services to legal personalities, private individuals and the state. Military services include military operations, strategic planning, collection of information, operative and logistical support, preparation of military personnel, and technical-material support."[24]

However, after 2014–2015 (apparently, under the influence of military experts and practitioners), Russian academic and scholarly debates on the matter began to take on a somewhat more realistic and specific approach, which acknowledges that:

- PMCs are owned *by* and acting *in* the interests of the state;[25]
- PMCs operate *outside of* their country of origin;[26]
- PMCs are used *for the purpose* of solving military-political objectives *for* the state but *without* its direct participation.[27]

Perhaps, the most spot-on description of functions performed by PMCs (fitting actual Russian practices), which appeared in an academic piece, argued that:[28]

- PMCs are a force not merely acting on behalf of the government (which makes the word "private" superfluous), but are in fact a governmental structure and a tool of the state's foreign policy making;
- PMCs are a force equal in importance to the regular armed forces, which empowers these structures to solve "special tasks" that cannot be assigned to regular armed forces;
- PMCs will play a much more visible role in future armed conflicts and wars.

Military Strategists

Military strategists and practitioners assume a more practical approach, and one that is unique to Russia's situation. One of the first allusions to PMCs and their legalization in Russia were made by Ivan Konovalov (2006), in his article "War, Business and Reform."[29] However, the issue did not enjoy significant attention until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and growing rumors/evidence of Russia's direct and indirect support for embattled President Bashar al-Assad. The year 2013 witnessed a number of policy-related publications discussing the current state and future prospects for private military contractors in Russia. An article by Vladimir Neelov[30] arguing for the legalization of PMCs, urged Russia to emulate the Chinese experience, According to the author, such an approach could turn these structures into "a smart instrument assisting the Russian Federation in its conduct of foreign policy." Furthermore, Neelov suggested that "it would not be necessary for the state to conclude contracts with PMCs—these structures could work in the interests of private persons, companies, corporations and even international organizations… the state could use their services only in exceptional cases… to relieve its armed forces from non-typical functions."[31]

However, during 2013–2015, the development of Russian PMCs as a phenomenon took a markedly different trajectory under the influence of a combination of internal and external developments. This path differed significantly from common internationally adopted practices, causing bitter disappointed among the mainstream of Russian military practitioners. For instance, one of the country's top military experts, Boris Chikin, argued, in 2015, that while the West

witnessed an evolution of the industry "from heroes to merchants and bankers," the Russian government and entrepreneurs/businesses were slow to react, and were unwilling to play by universally adopted rules guiding private military firms.[32]

At this juncture, three main trends in the Russian intellectual discourse regarding PMCs can be identified:

First, a formula defining private military contractors as highly qualified technical specialists not directly involved in military operations (with emphasis on quality and non-military functions) gradually gave way to a focus on quantity and military-related functions. Namely, many authors noted that lumping PMCs in with the *Kadyrovtsy* (a paramilitary organization in Chechnya that provides protection for the republic's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov), Cossacks and the South Ossetians—in other words, a return to the pre-1917 tradition of using non-Russian peoples as a backbone of irregular forces—would be a good option.[33]

Second, the role of the Russian state in its support for PMCs has been redeemed. As argued by Valetsky, since Russia is unable to openly compete with Western PMCs on the global market (also due to the fact that "Russians will never be allowed into this business"), Moscow has to take matters into its own hands and assume a decisive position in terms of coordinating the activities of PMCs. Valetsky also made an interesting inference, stating that "in the rest of the world, PMCs are controlled by people who realize that they should be bringing economic benefits; whereas in Russia, PMCs are taking the form of a military unit."[34]

Third, by 2017, the concept that PMCs are a tool of the state in wartime became fully justified and even gained popularity among mainstream Russian warfare experts. Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Moscow-based Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), argued that Russian success in Syria was, among other aspects, secured by the employment of PMCs, which allowed the Russian side to:[35]

- Avoid the massive deployment of its armed forces;
- Prepare Syrian forces (such as the 5th Assault Corps); and
- Dodge negative public reactions on casualties.

Other military thinkers also maintained that PMCs should:

- Adopt the structures of regular armed forces; and
- Be prepared to carry out military functions.

Research entitled *Three Scenarios of the Global Power-Military Confrontation* (2018) argued that, given the fact the West has already declared war on Russia, "not merely Russia's Armed Forces, but the entire military structure should be altered to be able to face challenges posed by contemporary warfare," which can only be achieved via a synergy between "asymmetric actions and the employment of a counter network-centric strategy."[36] Comparable points appeared in another piece, which asserted that PMCs have become new and effective players in contemporary conflicts, thus "as the war in Ukraine has demonstrated, a war can be carried out though the

synthesis of various means… including the employment of 'hard power'… and such means as PMCs."[37]

The Siloviki

Military circles and the Ministry of Defense (MoD) have also entered the domestic debate over PMCs. In 2014, an unnamed MoD source stated that the issue of PMCs is under the direct supervision of Colonel General Arkady Bakhin (retired in 2015),[38] who was quite sympathetic to the idea. Pavel Popovskikh (the chairperson of the Central Council of the Union of the Russian Airborne Troops), who was a member of the working group dealing with the legalization of PMCs in Russia, stated that "the idea is good, but rather unfinished." He added that private security activities and participation in regional military conflicts abroad are two separate topics and thus should be dealt with separately.[39] The same position was reportedly expressed by individuals closely associated with the Federal Security Service (FSB).

In 2017, Alexander Kolmykov the head of the Volunteer Society for Cooperation With the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF),[40] stated that his organization had, in fact, launched a pilot project—a private company primarily dealing with sapper work.[41] At the same event, Viktor Volodatsky, a former head of the Don Cossack Army, now serving as a deputy director of the State Duma (lower chamber of parliament) on relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian integration and ties with Russian compatriots, claimed that the DOSAAF could indeed become a "good foundation for Russian PMCs."[42] In turn, Colonel General (ret.) Vladimir Shamanov, a former commander-in-chief of the Russian Airborne Troops and currently head of the State Duma defense committee, argued that "Russia has to adopt a law and legalize PMCs."[43] An extremely interesting episode occurred on February 20, 2018, when a military commissar of Tatarstan, Sergey Pogodin, was asked about the number of local residents enlisted in PMCs fighting in Syria. He deflected from a direct response, stating that "participation in PMCs is the personal business of those who are engaged in it."[44]

Political Leadership

The position (or rather its evolution) taken by Russian political elites is exemplified by that of Vladimir Putin. In 2012, Putin (serving at the time as prime minister) stated that "such companies are a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state."[45] In 2018, however, Putin claimed that "if the Wagner Group is violating any Russian law, the General Prosecutor should conduct an investigation. If they [the Wagner Group] violate no Russian law, they can pursue their business interests in any part of the world."[46] This phrase, first of all, illustrates that Putin directly acknowledges the existence of private military contractors (forbidden by Russian law) and the fact that they take part in various military missions abroad. Furthermore, his remarks explain the vacillating trajectory of development of Russian PMCs and the staunch refusal of Russian authorities to legalize these entities. Russian elites value, first and foremost, the plausible deniability that comes from maintaining Russian PMCs in their current legal limbo; once legalized, this quality would disappear.

Why the Western Experience Did Not Work for Russia

This highly controversial (and still largely unexplored) issue of why Russia has not adopted the West's approach to dealing with PMCs can be distilled down to four main factors: national security, competitiveness, publicity and homeland security.

National Security

The national security argument hinges on the notion that if Russia were to legalize PMCs, this business sector would suddenly be subjected to the rules and regulations of the World Trade Organization (WTO), meaning that Moscow would be obligated to grant local market access to various foreign private military firms. Such a scenario seems highly unlikely, especially following the sharp degradation of relations with the West since 2013/2014.

Competitiveness

Despite the universally acknowledged thesis in Russia of the "superb fighting qualities" of Russian soldiers, Boris Chikin (based on his huge experience of working with Western PMCs in the Middle East and Africa) argues that "the global market of private military contractors was long ago dominated by the US and the UK, which are able to offer services of very high quality… the only advantage Russian contractors have is that they work for less money and do not ask for luxurious washrooms and plasma TVs… Also, Russian contractors speak English at an inadequately low level." Furthermore, Chikin argued, "Western PMCs mainly operate in areas/regions of instability—their former colonies—areas that still find themselves under significant influence of their former metropolis," which means that Russian opportunities in these areas are extremely limited.[47]

Publicity

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to reference a book, by Russian military expert Ivan Konovalov,[48] entitled *Soldiers of Fortune and the Warriors of Corporations: History of Contemporary Mercenaries* (2015). This study devotes considerable attention to the activities (and lessons) of US PMCs operating in Afghanistan (after 2001) and Iraq (after 2003). While admitting some notable successes (especially, from a pecuniary point of view) of Western PMCs, the author points to a number of weaknesses and inherent imperfections. First, Konovalov notes a number of unsavory episodes that resulted in international scandal, thus tainting the image of US private military contractors. The most well-known case was the "Baghdad Massacre," a tragic episode involving Blackwater that occurred on September 16, 2007, in the Iraqi capital. The deadly incident led to a special investigation, which revealed that between 2005 and 2007, members of this PMC took part in 195 skirmishes and opened fire first in 84 percent of cases.[49] Second, the author argues that analysis of open sources suggests the Iraqi campaign spotlighted the "inadequately low level of coordination between private military contractors and regular troops." Third, Konovalov contends, Western PMCs fly below the radar and are not beholden to Western governments, as evidence of their involvement in Iraq shows; nor were they blamed by the US government for resulting scandals and transgressions. Therefore, he concludes, as long as Russian PMCs remain legally abstruse, the Russian government is spared the necessity of having to answer for their deeds (especially, given the actual functions they perform) in other regions.

Homeland Security

The issue of homeland security has appeared in writings of various groups, ranging from liberal forces[50] to conservative elements. The argument states that increasing the number of well-trained private military contractors could undermine security and order inside Russia if some of these individuals end up unemployed. On the other hand, it is argued that if PMCs are legalized, they might end up directly competing with official and pre-existing law enforcement structures.

Adding to the above arguments, the different trajectory of development Russian PMCs have taken compared to their analogues in the West may further be explained by the wholly different set of objectives that the Russian state has established with respect to these entities. This is reflected in the actual functions performed by Russian PMCs.

What Russian PMCs Do: War, Business and Ideology[51]

The functions performed by Russian PMCs/private military contractors/irregular forces greatly depend on the theater(s) in which they operate. Without going into detailed analysis of each component, the following key functions should be ascertained:

Military and Paramilitary

(Para)military functions can be divided into two interrelated categories:

- Military operations performed (as discussed earlier) by tactical mobile groups capable of rapidly crossing the changing frontline zone with maximum ease and efficiency;

- Defensive tasks that primarily include the concept of "control of territory," specifically emphasized by Russia's chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov. According to Russian military strategists, this is one of the means to escape the "Yugoslavian," "Iraqi" or "Libyan" scenarios. Specifically, these regimes lost the strategic initiative by forfeiting control over key areas/locations in their countries' rear, thus allowing opponent/protest movements to generate their own forces there.[52]

Both functions are inseparable from the US-elaborated concept of Network Centric Warfare (NCW)—which has preoccupied Russian military writers in earnest since around 2006–2008.[53] As formidable as NCW appears on the surface, Russian thinkers claim to have identified several intrinsic flaws in this approach to warfighting that could be exploited and turned to Russia's advantage. The key idea boils down to a thesis that, despite the current level of military technology, the so-called "human factor" will continue to occupy the key role in armed conflicts.[54] Thus, it would make sense to once again return to Gerasimov, who argued that ingenuity and non-standard thinking on the battlefield will remain the main precursors to success in future conflicts.[55] At the same time, Russian thinkers (on the basis of the US "Iraqi experience") have expressed serious doubts that the NCW approach could work in conditions of close quarter fighting, such as urban warfare—an element that has become one of the most frequently rehearsed exercises after Russia's decision to insert itself into the Syrian civil war.[56]

This argument is directly linked with the principle of "asymmetric measures." Emphasized by Putin in 2006,[57] while declaring that the Russian Armed Forces should be able to participate in several conflicts simultaneously,[58] the idea came to dominate Russian military strategic thinking particularly following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. In this regard, it would make sense to underscore growing interest among Russian military writers to the issue of a transition from "conventional asymmetricity" (the example of the United States' unsuccessful attempt to break the resistance of Vietnamese partisans in the 1960s and 1970s)[59] toward "new asymmetricity," reflected in the deeper analysis of tactics used by international terrorist forces. The key difference underscored by Russian military strategists has the following logic: if "traditional partisans were seeking to achieve symmetricity against their opponent to achieve victory in an armed struggle," then "terrorist groups seek the means to destroy the moral-psychological potential of the opposing party… choosing the weakest spots, merely 'surpassing' all military barriers and defensive mechanisms."[60] Thus, it has been argued that to gain victory in a contemporary armed conflict, "the whole spectrum of asymmetric measures must be activated."[61] Taking into account dominant assumptions that "future conflicts will be brief, selective and distinctive for the precision in destruction of targets," the employment of "mobile armed groups/forces" will be one of the main elements of success.[62]

Geopolitical

Geopolitical functions are concerned with the following two dimensions:

1. "Security export" (*eksport bezopasnosti*)—a concept outlined in a work entitled "Global Threats in 2018: Forecasting Security Challenges for Russia and the World," prepared by experts of the Valdai Club. Among other elements, the document points to "Russian responsibility, along with the United States, China and the European Union, to maintain peace and security in the whole world." It argues that Russia "must export security as a means to strangulate the virus of the Arab Spring."[63] As such, Russia will need to transform itself into "the main supplier of security in the entire Eurasian space." As argued by Sergey Karaganov (a former advisor to both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin), who currently heads the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, Russia's main achievements have been in "halting expansion of the Western bloc […], stopping the series of destabilizing color revolutions […], [and] containment of the US," which has made Russia one of the main players and stakeholders in re-shaping the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.[64]

   Some specific examples of employment of PMCs and irregular forces to provide local security include:

   - Activities of Russian military police in Syria (deployed in 2016, and consisting of a so-called "Chechen battalion"),[65] which, in 2018 (staffed with members of PMCs), assumed a key role in the city of Douma;

   - Russian involvement in Yemen, where preparatory work (initial destabilization) could be done by members of PMCs (relieving Moscow from having to publicly reply to the plea of the Houthis and thus openly becoming a party to the conflict),

and later take the form of a "peacekeeping mission" at the request of the "legitimate political regime (the "Syrian scenario");[66]

- Latin America, where Russia's support for Nicaragua is guised under the façade of training the local armed forces/police for anti-terrorist (counter-insurgency) operations.

2. Expansion of the Kremlin's influence in politically unstable countries/regions—in this regard, the role of private military contractors seems to be indispensable. Aside from providing (para)military support, training local armed forces, and physically protecting local elites (as well as critical infrastructure), these groups could ensure the security of new infrastructure projects. For instance, as noted by Colonel General (ret.) Leonid Ivashov, Moscow's involvement in Nicaragua (the Nicaraguan Canal as a potential direct competitor to the Panama Canal) will allow Russia to "get [physically] closer to the United States."[67]

Geo-Economic/Strategic

Geo-economic and geo-strategic functions are connected to the so-called "power economy" (*silovya ekonomika*) concept, defined as "a state-controlled system of coercion (including a reliance on limited-scale military conflicts, if necessary) aimed at realizing economic goals."[68] First formulated in the early 1920s by Andrei Zayonchkovsky, then a professor at the Frunze Military Academy, this concept has acquired new meaning for contemporary Russian thinkers. For example, Fidel Agumava has argued that "a combination of security guarantees and all-inclusive ways of working with foreign countries is opening up new horizons for Russian economic activities in such 'brittle' regions as Syria, Libya, Venezuela, Egypt and Kurdistan."[69] As the main operative theater, this function of Russian PMCs has been most vividly demonstrated in Africa.

'Hybrid'

"Hybrid" functions present a new and rapidly evolving area of interest. In this regard, it would make sense to refer to a broad alliance of various forces, such as Cossacks, the Night Wolves, certain PMCs (like E.N.O.T.), veterans of local conflicts, and mercenary groups (the Russian Union of Donbas Volunteers), as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. The most pertinent examples include the "Zlatibor affair" (Serbia) and emergence of the Balkan Cossack Army (Montenegro).[70]

Conclusion

The Russian state has never accepted PMCs the same way as they are treated in the West—that is, as a legal "business project" concerned with rendering training, security, protection and consulting services. In Russian practice, private military contractors (never officially legalized) present a peculiar "hybrid"—a tool for achieving a broad range of objectives, including offensive military operations and elements of information confrontation.

Employing PMCs on increasingly frequent occasions, the Russian state opts to distance itself from these bodies, using middle-men to obfuscate the links with government or military bodies.[71] By

doing this, Moscow not only manages to greatly benefit from so-called "plausible deniability" (which profoundly reduces risks and helps to maintain the image of strength internally and abroad), but is also able to (unlike the Soviet Union, or Russia in the 1990s–early 2000s) economically benefit from participating in zones of instability and regional conflicts. As a result, Russian PMCs have emerged as a tool for:

- Securing private and state economic interests;

- Testing non-linear forms of confrontation/warfare and anti-NCW actions (both offensive and defensive). As some Russian sources explicitly claim, using PMCs for this purpose is "much less expensive than regular forces."[72] Some Russian authors suggest that Russia should use PMCs (along with other means) as a counter-hybrid force[73];

- Creating and controlling local military conflicts and zones of instability; and finally,

- Expanding Russia's (geo)political influence abroad.

Thanks to a combination of PMCs' profound flexibility, a highly beneficial "cost-effectiveness" balance, their multi-functional nature, and the government's almost nonexistent responsibility for their actions, Russian private military contractors have become a formidable and much-sought-after foreign policy instrument for the Kremlin. Likewise, Russian PMCs can be used for internal functions. For instance, the aforementioned military thinker Ivan Konovalov has implied that Russia could use its PMCs and other irregular formations as an asymmetric response to US presence in "half of Africa, huge parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia… where Russian troops cannot perform missions directly due to obvious reasons."[74]

Russian "hired guns" are likely to be used by Moscow for dealing with both domestic and external issues and, importantly, as a means to challenge the West (primarily, the US) in its traditional zones of strategic interest. In pursuit of this objective, Russia, as noted by Gerasimov, will actively rely on the principle of asymmetricity and its traditional strength in non-linear warfare (aspects, that the US has had difficulty confronting). As Russian thinking on this topic makes clear, when it comes to such tasks, the role of irregular forces is and will continue to be instrumental.

Appendix. Russian PMCs/Irregular Forces and Their Operative Zones

Name of the PMC	Operational theaters (proven and alleged)	Direct participation in regional conflicts
The Wagner group	Ukraine Syria South Sudan Libya The CAR (via Sewa Security Services) Venezuela	Ukraine Syria
E.N.O.T Corps	Ukraine Serbia Bosnia Montenegro Tajikistan Nagorno-Karabakh	Ukraine
Patriot	Burundi The Central African Republic (CAR) Yemen Sudan Somalia Mozambique The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Libya Gabon	Not detected
RSB-Group	Russia Post-Soviet Space Libya Shri Lanka Sudan Somalia Columbia Countries of the South East Asia	Libya (did not carry out military missions)
Orel Anti-Terror	Iraq Cambodia Serbia Sudan	Not detected
Center R (close ties with the ATK Group, Vizantiya)	Syria Afghanistan Countries of the former Yugoslavia Iraq Somalia Abkhazia Lebanon	Not detected (if participated, primarily performed auxiliary functions)
MAR	Transnistria South Ossetia/Abkhazia Ukraine	Ukraine
Moran Security Group	Syria (via Slavonic Corps) Somalia	Syria
Ferax	Iraq Afghanistan Shri Lanka Kurdistan	Not detected
Cossacks (do not form a separate PMC)	The Balkans Chechnya Syria South Caucasus Ukraine	The Balkans Chechnya Syria South Caucasus Ukraine

(The table was composed by the author of the paper.)

Notes

[1] Russia first employed private military contractors during the Livonian War (1558–1583) to conduct both military operations and propagate economic contacts in the Baltic Sea region. Given Russia's weakness in terms of maritime power, the mercenary forces headed by Karsten Rode were tasked with terrorizing Polish and Swedish merchants, thereby weakening the economic power of Russia's adversaries. Another example was the expedition of Yermak Timofeyevich (1582–1584), organized and financed by the powerful Stroganov family, which paved the way for the Russian conquest of Siberia. The Cossacks played an important role in Russia's imperial expansion and constituted the backbone of the Russian colonization of Siberia.

[2] This notion first appeared in the work by Sergey Sukhankin, "Continuing War by Other Means: The Case of Wagner, Russia's Premier Private Military Company in the Middle East." *The Jamestown Foundation*, July 13, 2018. Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/continuing-war-by-other-means-the-case-of-wagner-russias-premier-private-military-company-in-the-middle-east/.

[3] It should be pointed out that the figures on casualties vary greatly: from five persons (Russia`s official data) to several hundred.

[4] Yevgeni Primakov, "Nam nuzhna novaya industrializatsiya," *Rossiyskaya gazeta – Federalnyy vypusk* № 5804 (131), June 9, 2012. Available at: https://rg.ru/2012/06/09/primakov.html.

[5] V. Tsymburskiy, "Ostrov Rossiya. Tsykly pokhishcheniya Evropy," Available at: http://old.russ.ru/antolog/inoe/cymbur.htm.

[6] Some Russian scholars construe the breakup of Yugoslavia as the first "color revolution," designed and executed by the West.

[7] Developments in Libya (so-called "Libyan scenario") caused the greatest share of alarm among Russian political elites and military strategists. The way how the Libyan dictator was toppled came to be viewed in Russia as a West-elaborated model that might be used in Russia.

[8] M.S. Miroshnichenko, "Rol chastnykh voyennykh kompaniy I 'Neizvestnykh' snayperov v osushchestvlenii 'Tsvetnykh revolyutsyi'," *Kriminologiya: vchera, segodnya, zavtra*, N3 (34), 2014. Available at: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/rol-chastnyh-voennyh-kompaniy-i-neizvestnyh-snayperov-v-osuschestvlenii-tsvetnyh-revolyutsiy.

[9] "SMI: rossiyskie voyennye eksperty hotyat sozdat kontseptsiyu 'myagkoy sily'," *RIA Novosti*, March 1, 2016. Available at: https://ria.ru/20160301/1382237782.html.

[10] For instance, Russia`s increasing efforts in terms of training of the "urban fight"; increasing emphasis on the Artificial Intellect (AI) for military purposes; emphasis on elaboration of means of Electronic Warfare (EW); as well as changing perception of military and non-military ratio in terms of contemporary warfare – these developments is a direct result of lessons learned by the Russians within the above-mentioned period.

[11] S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, "Voennoe Iskustvo na Nachal'nom Etape XXI Stoletya: Problemy i Suzhdeniya," *Voennaya Mysl*, No. 1, 2015.; S.G. Chekinov and S.A. Bogdanov, "Prognozirovanie kharaktera i soderzhaniya voyn budushchego: problemy i suzhdeniya." *Voennaya Mysl*, No. 10, 2015: 44-45.

[12] Makhmut Akhmetovich Gareev and Vladimir Slipchenko, *Future War*, Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, (2007): 33.

[13] Sergey Sukhankin, Sergey, "The Offensive and Defensive Use of Information Security by the Russian Federation." In Ed. by Glen E. Howard and Matthew Czekaj, *Russia's Military Strategy and Doctrine*, Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation (2019).

[14] Incidentally, many military thinkers perceive the Five-Day war with Georgia as a decisive milestone in terms of Russia`s capabilities in the domain of IO`s. For example, Anatoliy Tsyganok, then deputy chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces stated that "Georgia won the information war at the preliminary stage of the conflict but lost at the end of it."

[15] Aleksey Podberezkin, "Novye osobennosti voyn XXI veka," *Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy*, May 18, 2015. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=eksklyuziv/analitika/novye-osobennosti-voyn-xxi-veka.

[16] Natalia Komleva, "Priemptivnaya voyna kak tekhnologiya resursnogo peredela mira," *Akademiya Geopoliticheskikh Problem*, March 1, 2012. Available at: https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/preemptivnaya-voyna-kak-tehnologiya-resursnogo-peredela-mira

[17] Boris Prilenskiy, "Vyzovy globalizatsyy dlya voyennoy bezopastnosti gosudarstv XXI veke," *Byulleten Nauka XXI veka*, № 4 (2009): 81.

[18] For more information see: E. Messner, *Khochesh mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu! Tvorcheskoe nasledie E. Messnera*, Russkiy put, Voyenny universitet: 2005.

[19] Vladimir Slipchenko, "K kakoy voyne dolzhna byt gotova Rossiya," *Polit.ru*., November 18, 2004. Available at: http://polit.ru/article/2004/11/18/slipch/.
[20] Vladimir Neelov, *Chastnyie voennyie kompanii Rossii: opyt i perspektivy ispolzovaniya*. Sankt Peterburg: 2013, 45.
[21] It needs to be pointed out that many Russian sources fail to make a distinction between circumstances under which PMCs are engaged in hostilities. Many authors are convinced that participation in offensive military operations is a normal task performed by PMCs.
[22] Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and 'Hybrid' Warfare: The Case of the Wagner Private Military Company," *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume*: *15 Issue: 60, The Jamestown Foundation (Washington DC)*. Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-hybrid-warfare-the-case-of-the-wagner-private-military-company-part-one/.
[23] The detailed analysis of activities of Russian private military contractors in various regions will be a subject of forthcoming papers.
[24] Alexander G. Volevodz, "O mezhdunarodnykh initsyativakh v sfere pravovogo regulirovaniya deyatelnosti chastnykh voennykh i okhrannykh kompaniy," *Mezhdunarodnoe ugolovnoe parvo I mezhdunarodnaya yustitsiya*, MGIMO, №1, 2009; A.G. Volevodz, "O perspektivakh mezhdunarodno-pravovogo regulirovaniya deyatelnosti chastnykh voyennykh i okhrannykh predpriyatiy," *Mezhdunarodnoe ugolovnoe parvo I mezhdunarodnaya yustitsiya*, MGIMO, №2, 2010: 6–12.
[25] N. Tsepkov, "Chastnye voyennye kompanii: kratkiy obzor mirovogo I rossiyskogo regulirovaniya," *Zakon.ru.*, December 14, 2015.
[26] Y. S. Apukhtin, "Chastnye voyennye kompanii: novaya tsel politicheskoy kriminologii," *Kriminologiya: vchera, segodnya, zavtra*, № 2 (17) 2009.
[27] A.Podberezkin, "Chastnye voyennye kompanii v 5-10 raz vygodnee gosuchastiya v voyennom konflikte," *Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy*, January 17, 2018. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=ekspertnoe-mnenie/podberezkin-chastnye-voennye
[28] K.P. Kurylev, E.V. Martynenko, N.P. Parkhitko, D.V. Stanis, "Fenomen chastnykh voyennykh kompaniy v voyenno-silovoy politike gosudarstva v XXI veke," *Vestnik mezhdunarodnykh organizatsyy*, T. 12. № 4, 2017: 130–149. DOI: 10.17323/1996-7845-2017-04-130 .
[29] Ivan Konovalov, "Voyna, biznes I reforma," *Eksport vooruzheniya*, Tsentr analiza strategiy I tekhnologiy, May 2, 2006.
[30] A Russian military expert working on PMCs, who was detained by Russian authorities (FSB) in 2018 on charges of high treason.
[31] Neelov, 2013.
[32] Boris Chikin, "CHVK, bisnes-razvedka, 'kuptsy i bankiry'," *Mir bezopastnosti*, February 2015. Available at: https://docplayer.ru/56655087-Chvk-biznes-razvedka-kupcy-i-bankiry.html.
[33] Aleksandr Perendzyev, "Rossiyskie 'ChVK' – armii vezhlivykh lyudey," Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy, December 12, 2015. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=vneshniy-istochnik/analitika/rossiyskie-chvk-armii-vezhlivyh.
[34] Oleg Valetskiy, "Uspeshnost raboty rossiyskikh ChVK na mirovykh rynkah budet zaviset ot uspekhov vneshney politiki RF," *Tsentr strategicheskoy konyunktury*, August 18, 2016. Available at: http://conjuncture.ru/chvk-info-18-08-2016/; Oleg Valetskiy, "Zhyznesposobnost rossiyskikh ChVK zavisit ot offitsialnoy podderzhki Kremlya," *Tsentr strategicheskoy konyunktury*, August 9, 2016. Available at: http://conjuncture.ru/chvk-info-09-08-2016/ .
[35]Aleksey Nikolskiy, "Kogo blagodarit za uspekh v Sirii?" *Vedomosti.ru*, December 13, 2017. Available at: https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/12/13/745057-kogo-blagodarit-v-sirii .
[36] "Scenariy 'Globalnogo voyenno-silovogo protivoborstva' kak naybolee veroyatnyy scenariy mezhdunarodnoy obstanovki," In A. Podberezkin ed., *Mir v XXI veke: prognoz razvitiya mezhdunarodnoy obstanovki po stranam I regionam*. Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy, June 4, 2018. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=analitika/scenariy-globalnogo.
[37] "Voyna – politicheskaya 'norma' v nachale XXI veka," *Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy*, September 14, 2017. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=analitika/voyna-politicheskaya-norma .
[38] The source stated that Bakhin was the main person, who was informing Gerasimov about PMCs-related questions.
[39] "Klevye ChVk," *Kommersant*, №227, December 13, 2014: 1. Available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2633187.
[40] DOSAAF has 81 regional branches (including 3,000 local branches, 400 military-patriotic museums, 2,500 sport clubs) that could prepare 80,000 specialists annually.
[41] He pointed out that this idea had been proposed to him by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.

[42] "V Rossii mogut poyavitsya chastnye voyennye kompanii. Ikh sozdaniye budet vozmozhno v ramkakh DOSAAF," *Mk.ru*, January 18, 2017. Available at: https://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/01/18/v-rossii-mogut-poyavitsya-chastnye-voennye-kompanii.html.
[43] "Shamanov: v Rossii neobkhodimo vvesti gosregulirovanie deyatelnosti ChVK," *Bisnes Rosii*, February 14, 2018. Available at: https://glavportal.com/materials/shamanov-v-rossii-neobhodimo-vvesti-gosregulirovanie-deyatelnosti-chvk/.
[44] Andrey Grigoryev, "Voyenkom Tatarstana o ChVK: 'Eto lichnoe delo kazhdogo cheloveka'," *Ideal. Realii*, February 20, 2018. Available at: https://www.idelreal.org/a/29050082.html.
[45] "Putin podderzhal ideyu sozdaniya v Rossii chastnykh voyennykh kompaniy," *RIA Novosti*, April 11, 2012. Available at: https://ria.ru/20120411/623227984.html.
[46] "Putin rasskazal o ChVK Vagnera," *Lenta.ru*, December 20, 2018. Available at: https://lenta.ru/news/2018/12/20/chvk_putin/.
[47] This judgement however appears rather debatable. Subsequent papers (especially concerned with activities of Russian private military contractors in Africa) will contest this point of view.
[48] Ivan Konovalov is a Russian military expert, a former director of the Centre of Political Conjuncture (2012-2016). In 2014, he worked as TASS military correspondent in the Donbas region. He is known for covering major regional conflicts in the post-Soviet are (both wars in Chechnya, Tajikistan), the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia.
[49] Ivan Konovlaov, *Soldaty udachi I voiny korporatsiy. Istoriya sovremennogo naemnichestva*, Pushkino: Tsentr strategicheskoy konyunktury 2015: 201.
[50] "Yavlinskiy: sozdanie neofitsialnykh ChVK ugrozhaet vnutrenney bezopastnosti Rossii," *Infox.ru*, November 16, 2018. Available at: https://www.infox.ru/news/283/social/society/210529-avlinskij-sozdanie-v-rossii-neoficialnyh-cvk-neset-ugrozu-vnutrennej-bezopasnosti-strany.
[51] Tasks and functions performed by Russian PMCs and irregulars will be developed in subsequent papers within the scope of this project, when geographic areas will be discussed in greater detail.
[52] Valeriy Gerasimov, "Tsennost nauki v predvidenii," *VPK*, February 26, 2013. Available at: https://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632.
[53] A.E. Kondratyev, "Obshchaya kharakteristika setevykh arkhitektur, primenyaemykh pri realizatsii perspektivnykh setetsentricheskikh kontseptsiy vedushchikh zarubezhnykh stran," *Voyennaya mysl*, № 12, 2008.
[54] Konovlaov (2015): 26.
[55] Valeriy Gerasimov, "Po opytu Sirii," *VPK*, March 7, 2016. Available at: https://vpk-news.ru/articles/29579 .
[56] Vladimir Demchanko, "IGIL kak podopytnye kroliki: chemu voyennye RF nauchilis v Sirii," *TVzvezda.ru*, August 18, 2017. Available at: https://tvzvezda.ru/news/krasnaya_zvezda/content/201708180840-g0gc.htm; Roman Kretsul, Aleksey Ramm, "Boevye nagrady: kak siriyskaya operatsiya izmenila razvedku," *Izvestiya*, October 24, 2018. Available at: https://iz.ru/803382/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/boevye-pregrady-kak-siriiskaia-operatciia-izmenila-razvedku.
[57] Putin's argument in many ways reiterated the point made by G. A. Leer in two of his works, where he implicitly pointed out the importance of coherence of actions (between various branches of armed forces) in the battlefield and the principle of asymmetricity in terms of adequate concentration and use of one's own strong points to diminish the strengths of an adversary. For more information see: G. A. Leer, *Metody voyennykh nauk*, SPb: 1894, 53-54; G. A. Leer, *Strategiya*, SPb: 1898. (4. 1): 203-204.
[58] "ВС РФ pri lyubykh stsenariyakh dolzhny garantirovat bezopasnost strany," *RIA Novosti*, May 10, 2006. Available at: https://ria.ru/20060510/47918308.html.
[59] S.G. Chekinov, S.A. Bogdanov, "Asimmetrichnye deystviya po obespecheniyu voyennoy bezopasnosti Rossii," *Voyennaya Mysl*, № 3, (2010), 17.
[60] Ibidem.
[61] Ibid, .21
[62] A.V. Serzantov, A.P. Mortofliak, "Analiz osobennostej sovremennykh vojennykh konfliktov," *Voyennaya Mysl*, № 5 (2011), 37.
[63]"Mezhdunarodnye ugrozy 2018. Prognoz vyzovov bezopasnosti Rossii I mira," *Ekspertnaya diskussiya, Valdayskiy klub*, January 22, 2018. Available at: http://ru.valdaiclub.com/multimedia/video/ugrozy-2018-prognoz-diskussiya/ .
[64] "Ekspert: Rossiya stanet glavnym garantom bezopasnosti v novom miroporyadke," *Tass.ru*., October 17, 2017. Available at: https://tass.ru/politika/4654988 .
[65] "Chechenskie istochniki v Sirii podtverzhdayut gibel do 170 rossiyan," *Kavkazr.com*., February 16, 2018. Available at: https://www.kavkazr.com/a/chechenskie-istochniki-syria-gibel-rossiyan/29043747.html .

[66] Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in Yemen: Kremlin-Style 'Security Export' in Action?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation*, Volume: 15 Issue: 144, October 12, 2018. Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-yemen-kremlin-style-security-export-in-action/

[67] Sergey Sukhankin, "Will Nicaragua Become Russia's 'Cuba of the 21st Century?'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown Foundation*, Volume: 15 Issue: 118, August 7, 2018. Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/will-nicaragua-become-russias-cuba-of-the-21st-century/

[68] Aleksandr Ageev, "Silovaya ekonomika I smena mirovogo gegemona," *Strategicheskie prioritety*, No. 2 (6) (2015): 27–48.

[69] "Rossiya dolzhna eksportirovat bezopasnost," *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, January 22, 2018. Available at: https://www.pnp.ru/politics/rossiya-dolzhna-eksportirovat-bezopasnost.html.

[70] In both cases, the pivotal role was played by Russian mercenaries (participants of various regional conflicts that broke out after the dissolution of the Soviet Union) and the E.N.O.T. PMC. For more information, see: Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs, War Veterans Running 'Patriotic' Youth Camps in the Balkans (Part One)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 15 Issue: 151, The Jamestown Foundation, October 24, 2018. Available at: https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-war-veterans-running-patriotic-youth-camps-in-the-balkans-part-one/.

[71] The most remarkable case (which will be discussed in detail in subsequent papers released within the scope of this project) concerns the personality of Yevgeny Prigozhyn, popularly known as "Putin's cook" and an alleged sponsor of the Wagner Group PMC.

[72] A.Podberezkin, "Chastnye voyennye kompanii v 5-10 raz vygodnee gosuchastiya v voyennom konflikte," *Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy*, January 17, 2018. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=ekspertnoe-mnenie/podberezkin-chastnye-voennye.

[73] A.I. Podberezkin, "Povyshenie effektivnosti strategicheskogo sderzhyvaniya Rossii do 2050 goda kak usloviye natsyonalnogo vyzhyvaniya," *Tsentr voyenno-politicheskikh issledovaniy*, September 12, 2018. Available at: http://eurasian-defence.ru/?q=analitika/povyshenie-effektivnosti.

[74] Ivan Konovalov, "Ogromnoe kolichestvo chuzhykh korabley I samoletov stoit okolo nashykh granits," *Biznes gazeta*, February 24, 2018). Available at: https://www.business-gazeta.ru/article/373721 .