



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS

RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES:

CONTINUITY AND EVOLUTION OF THE MODEL

Anna Borshchevskaya



All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Author: Anna Borshchevskaya

Eurasia Program Leadership

Director: Chris Miller

Deputy Director: Maia Otarashvili

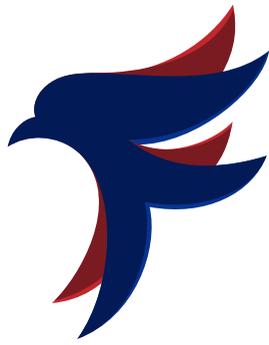
Edited by: Thomas J. Shattuck

Designed by: Natalia Kopytnik

© 2019 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

December 2019

COVER: Designed by Natalia Kopytnik.



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

OUR MISSION

The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to bringing the insights of scholarship to bear on the foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. It seeks to educate the public, teach teachers, train students, and offer ideas to advance U.S. national interests based on a nonpartisan, geopolitical perspective that illuminates contemporary international affairs through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

OFFERING IDEAS

In an increasingly polarized world, we pride ourselves on our tradition of nonpartisan scholarship. We count among our ranks over 100 affiliated scholars located throughout the nation and the world who appear regularly in national and international media, testify on Capitol Hill, and are consulted by U.S. government agencies.

EDUCATING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is paramount for the U.S. to conduct a coherent foreign policy. Through in-depth research and events on issues spanning the geopolitical spectrum, FPRI offers insights to help the public understand our volatile world.

CHAMPIONING CIVIC LITERACY

We believe that a robust civic education is a national imperative. FPRI aims to provide teachers with the tools they need in developing civic literacy, and works to enrich young people's understanding of the institutions and ideas that shape American political life and our role in the world.



RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES: CONTINUITY AND EVOLUTION OF THE MODEL

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Borshchevskaya



Anna Borshchevskaya is a Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East. She is also a Ph.D. candidate at George Mason University. In addition, she is a Fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy. She was previously with the Atlantic Council and the Peterson Institute for International Economics. A former analyst for a U.S. military contractor in Afghanistan, she has also served as Communications Director at the American Islamic Congress. Her analysis is published widely in publications such as *Foreign Affairs*, *The Hill*, *The New Criterion*, and the *Middle East Quarterly*. Until recently, she conducted translation and analysis for the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office and its flagship publication, *Operational Environment Watch*, and wrote a foreign affairs column for *Forbes*. She is the author of the February 2016 Institute monograph, *Russia in the Middle East*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian private military companies or contractors (PMCs) have received much attention in recent years, but the Russian state has a long history in utilizing such groups. Under Vladimir Putin, however, this model is growing, evolving, and expanding. This study reviews the history of semi-state military forces in Russia and explains the unique way the Russian state utilizes PMCs, which is different from how Western governments utilize private contractors. An important aspect of PMCs is that they are officially illegal under Russian law. The study then traces the rise of the PMC model under Putin. It notes that while plausible deniability is a major reason for Moscow to utilize PMCs, it is also linked to other considerations, such as internal rivalries within the Russian government and other domestic reasons. Competition with the West drives the Kremlin's use of PMCs. Paradoxically, the Russian PMC model demonstrates both state strength and weakness. The study reviews PMCs activities in Ukraine, Syria, and Africa, examines who joins these groups and under what circumstances, and concludes with policy recommendations.

A NOT-SO-NEW USE

Russian private military companies (PMCs) have captured widespread attention in the West in the last several years, but use of semi-state military forces is not new to the Russian state. Russian tsars used them for centuries; such groups often were formed by non-ethnic Russians. The most famous of these were the Cossacks, but they included many other groups.¹ These militias even permeate Russian literature. At the end of Leo Tolstoy's classic novel *Anna Karenina*, the main character, Count Alexei Vronsky, voluntarily goes to Serbia to fight against the Ottoman Empire as part of a squadron he formed at his own expense.

The Russian tsars used semi-state forces to pacify internal unrest and on Russia's periphery as Russia expanded its empire. But in 1919, the Cossacks became a target of the Bolshevik Red Terror, thousands of which were murdered in the process of Decossackization. Those who remained lost a degree of autonomy they had enjoyed under the tsars. The Kremlin then repressed the Cossack identity as it did with other minorities. The Soviet Union continued to rely extensively on non-state actors in its military activities. The so-called "voluntary people's druzhina" (Добровольная Народная Дружина in Russian) worked with the Soviet police internally, but the Soviet Union also turned outward in its ambitions, and used "partisans or guerrillas, in various countries, to achieve directed military and policy objectives."² Soviet leaders also used so-called "volunteers" along with Soviet military forces to fight on behalf of foreign governments. The Kremlin formed its objectives within the Cold War global rivalry with chief aim to spread its communist ideology

globally. More broadly, the Soviet Union did not shy away from military involvement without formal declaration of war.

As the Soviet Union crumbled and Boris Yeltsin became the first democratically elected Russian president, so-called "volunteer detachments" appeared to protect interests of the rising oligarchs domestically, as well as in the post-Soviet space and former Yugoslavia.³ At least in 1999, the Russian military sporadically had attempted to make the Spetsnaz "an all-volunteer force," albeit these efforts appeared unmatched by action.⁴ Still, at the end of the 1990s, Russian state-run *RIA Novosti* reported that the Russian military created outside of Moscow "the first center of special operations" (official name "training center for specialists") upon the initiative of then-General Staff Chief Anatoly Kvashin. This center reported to the Russian defense ministry's main intelligence directorate.⁵ The use of PMCs in Vladimir Putin's Russia that emerged in recent years is not new, but builds on centuries-long Russian practice. However, as scholar Kimberly Marten wrote, PMC use under Putin "accelerated and expanded . . . often with a greater role for officials state agencies than was true under Yeltsin."⁶ How are private military companies evolving in Putin's Russia?

1 Sergey Sukhankin provides an in-depth historical overview of the Russian state's use of semi-state forces: Sergey Sukhankin "The Russian state's use of irregular forces and private military groups," April 12, 2019, 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 Christopher R. Spearin, "Russia's military and security privatization," *Parameters* vol. 48, no. 2, (Summer 2018), p. 43, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Summer_2018/7_Spearin.pdf.

3 Kimberly Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, (2019).

4 Mark Galeotti, "The rising influence of Russian special forces," IHS Jane's Intelligence Review, 2014, https://www.janes.com/images/assets/299/46299/The_rising_influence_of_Russian_special_forces.pdf.

5 "День сил специальных операций в России," [Day of Special Operations Forces in Russia], *RIA Novosti* February 27, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180227/1515287149.html>.

6 Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group."



Kuban Cossacks at Victory Parade, Red Square, June 24 1945.

The use of PMCs in Vladimir Putin's Russia that emerged in recent years is not new, but builds on centuries-long Russian practice.



RUSSIA'S UNIQUE WAY OF USING PMCS

Several key issues arise when analyzing Russian PMCs. One is the problem of definition. No single internationally recognized term for a PMC exists. The 2001 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries⁷ provides a definition for a mercenary, but mercenaries differ from PMCs. Mercenaries fight for private gain only. PMCs are companies that have broader interests in their reputation, relation with the state, and building a public client base. More to the point, only 35 countries ratified the convention. Neither the United States nor the Russian Federation are among them.

The most famous Russian PMC is the Wagner Group, owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch close to the Kremlin (known as “Putin’s chef”). However, there are many other groups.⁸ In a February 2018 interview with *Lenta.ru*, an individual working for a PMC said, “Why is this private military company (PMC) allowed to work? This is hard for me to understand. I can assume that the whole thing is in the relationship of a particular person with a specific president. This practice has no world analogues.”⁹ His comment highlights the unique nature of Russian PMCs.

Scholars have divided Private Security Companies (PSCs) into categories based on the types of functions they perform—ranging from analysis,

to provision of goods and services to military forces, to acting as bodyguards. Private military companies, or private contractors¹⁰—PMCs, are a different subset of PSCs and provide a very specific service— “kill or train others to kill” in foreign settings.¹¹ PMCs primarily hire military veterans, “often those with a special-forces background.” Russian PMCs overlap across these categories when it comes to their activities, and at times also engage in mercenary behavior. Not all individuals employed appear to have a special forces background. Some, for example, join these organizations in exchange for removal of their past criminal history. This is not the case with Western PMCs, where the system is more streamlined and transparent, and where PMCs tend to disassociate themselves from mercenary behavior.¹²

Another factor is that unlike Russia, the U.S. and the United Kingdom are among the participant states of the Montreux Document, an agreement produced as a result of an international process launched by the Swiss government and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2008.¹³ This document does not provide an internationally recognized definition of PMCs, but it outlines 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

7 United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, *International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries Adopted and opened for signature and ratification by General Assembly resolution 44/34 of 4 December 1989 Entry into force: 20 October 2001, in accordance with article 19*, Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Mercenaries.aspx>.

8 For more details about these groups beyond Wagner, see, Åse Gilje Østensen and Tor Bukkvoll, *Russian use of private military and security companies-- the implications for European and Norwegian Security*, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), September 11, 2018, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/6637-russian-use-of-private-military-and-security.pdf>.

9 “«Головорезы с тесаками наперевес»» [Cutthroats ready with machetes]. *Lenta.ru*, February 21, 2018, https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/02/21/chvk_interview/.

10 Note that the Russian term “contractor” refers to professionalized military soldiers in employ of the Russian military; therefore, the term “private contractor” is used to make the distinction between these military individuals and those hired by private companies.

11 Quoted in Marten, “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group.”

12 Østensen and Bukkvoll, *Russian use of private military and security companies-- the implications for European and Norwegian Security*, p. 9

13 The Federal Council of Switzerland, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Participating States of the Montreux Document, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/foreign-policy/international-law/international-humanitarian-law/private-military-security-companies/participating-states.html>.



Andrew Butko/Wikimedia Commons

systems; prisoner detention; and advice to or training of local forces and security personnel.”¹⁴

Related to the confusion of definitions is that the need for and use of PMCs arose differently in the West than in Russia. Before the end of the Cold war, Western nations saw the state as the primary (though certainly not exclusive) employer of military power. The end of the Cold War changed that. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, multiple small-scale conflicts broke out worldwide, while the global market flooded with excess military equipment and specialists.¹⁵ While small conflicts and weapons flow proliferated during the Cold

War as well (indeed, the Soviet Union helped fuel conflict and instability), the communist ideology and groups that professed it lost their main backer with the fall of the Soviet Union. Some African states weakened as the result, and coupled with an influx of arms on the global market, it was easy for disparate individuals and groups to carve out areas of influence under the barrel of a gun. In the U.S., PMCs emerged as “a function of decades of decisions underscored by both the strategic requirement for resources and neoliberal thinking. . . . The desired result [was] to recue costs, gain efficiencies, and create economies of scale.”¹⁶ It is in this context that the U.S. (followed by the UK

14 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Montreux Document: On Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States Related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies during Armed Conflict (Geneva: ICRC, 2009), https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0996.pdf, and <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2013/12/09/united-states-response-to-questionnaire-concerning-the-montreux-document-on-pertinent-international-legal-obligations-and-good-practices-for-states-related-to-operations-of-private-military-and-securi/>.

15 Encyclopedia Britannica, “Private Military Company,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/private-military-firm>.

16 Christopher R. Spearin, “Russia’s Military and Security Privatization,” *Parameters* vol. 48, no. 2 (Summer 2018), p.41.

and France) emerged as the global leader in using PMCs and PSCs to facilitate this cost-effective approach to engagement in conflicts. Russia also has PSCs, but this paper's focus is on the PMC.

Moscow, it appears, saw PMCs in a different light—as an option for challenging the West on Moscow's terms. As analyst Sergey Sukhankin wrote, the Russian state understood, based on its experience in 1991-2012, that it was unprepared to compete with the West in the realm of PMCs. Because the Kremlin couldn't challenge Western PMCs within the existing rules of the game, according to Sukhankin, it had to change “the principles of the game itself.”¹⁷ Indeed, this sense of being left behind by the West in the development and use of PMCs is evident in a January 2019 interview with Grigory Lukyanov, senior lecturer at Russia's Higher School of Economics, “It is of course necessary to do this [develop PMCs in Russia]. I'm afraid we're already a bit late with this,” he said.¹⁸

Ambiguity and confusion are other unique features of Russian PMCs. PMCs are illegal under Russian law, specifically the Russian Constitution. Chiefly, Article 13.5 prohibits “public associations” whose aims include “setting up armed units.”¹⁹ Others had pointed out also that article 71 of the Constitution deems matters of defense, security, war and foreign policy to the state²⁰ although this point may reflect an underlying fear that such groups could overtake the state. After all, in Western countries that utilize PMCs do so in full accordance of the law, and these laws give the state power to carry out matters of defense, security, and foreign policy.

Indeed, PMCs clearly have links to the Kremlin, but they are not always controlled by the Russian state.²¹ This opacity provides the Russian state plausible deniability, another key unique feature of Russian PMCs. However, it is not the only unique feature. Opacity fits the pattern of behavior of weak and corrupt authoritarian states, rather than great powers. It is unclear how the illegality of PMCs contributes to plausible deniability for the Kremlin. But the illegality does help the state to maintain power dynamics and ensure loyalty within the rivalries of cronies around Putin. This point about plausible deniability and how the illegality of PMCs is useful to Putin highlights broader theme with regard to Russia—as it does not fit Western notions of great power or weak state behavior. Indeed, as historian Stephen Kotkin wrote, Russia has “almost always been a relatively weak great power.”²² A strong state in the Western understanding of the term would not need to keep PMCs illegal in order to maintain its grip on power by hanging a sword of Damocles over rivaling groups. In this sense, the Kremlin's behavior with regard to PMCs is more characteristic of a mafia group than a strong state.

17 Sergey Sukhankin, “Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas,” Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/unleashing-the-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-ukraine-crimea-and-donbas/#_edn3.

18 “Частные военные компании,” [Private military companies], *Vestifinance*, January 4, 2019, <https://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/112739>.

19 Constitution of the Russian Federation. Available at <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-02.htm>.

20 “Kremlin blocks the bill legalizing Russian private military companies,” *UA Wire*, March 28, 2018, <https://uawire.org/russia-will-not-legalize-mercenaries#>.

21 Kimberly Marten, “Semi-state security actors and Russian aggression,” *Lawfare*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/semi-state-security-actors-and-russian-aggression>.

22 Stephen Kotkin, “Russia's perpetual geopolitics. Putin returns to the historical pattern,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/russias-perpetual-geopolitics>.

THE RISE OF PMCs UNDER PUTIN

As mentioned earlier, the use of semi-state actors by the Russian state is not entirely unique to Putin's regime, but their use intensified under Putin. One incident helps highlight context for the rise of PMCs specifically under Putin. In June 2004, Qatar convicted two Russian citizens of the assassination of former acting President of Chechnya Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.²³ Moscow officially denied involvement, but the damage was done, and the Kremlin did not forget the incident. In the mid-2000s, the "training center for specialists" mentioned earlier was renamed into "Senezh." Fighters from this group reportedly participated in a wide array of conflicts—from Chechnya, to anti-pirate efforts, to training in the former Soviet Union, to Russia's war in Georgia.²⁴

In 2009, as part of major reforms of the Russian armed forces, several units were transferred from the GRU to report directly to then-General Chief of Staff Nikolai Makarov.²⁵ The next year, Makarov suggested publicly the use of PMCs "for delicate missions abroad . . . to avoid the humiliation of 2004,"²⁶ likely referring to the conviction in Doha over Yandarbiyev's murder. The onset of the Arab Spring and fighting in Libya and Syria, "magnified the Russian military strategists' focus on PMCs due to the changing nature of warfare." And in November 2012, Putin publicly supported

the idea of using private military companies.²⁷ When reporting on Putin's comment, *RIA Novosti* highlighted the point that countries that use PMCs abroad are primarily the U.S., Great Britain, and France.²⁸

In early 2012, the general staff unveiled the Special Operations Forces Command (Командование сил специальных операций, КССО in Russian), and in March 2013, Valeriy Gerasimov officially announced the creation of Special Operations Forces (SOF, Силы специальных операций; ССО), as part of the Special Operations Forces Command, which are separate from other branches of the Russian armed forces. The prototype for the SOF appears to have been the units created in 2009-2010 mentioned earlier. Gerasimov said as part of the announcement, "Having studied the practice of the formation, training and use of special operations forces of the leading states of the world, the leadership of the Russian Ministry of Defense has also begun to create them."²⁹ Indeed, Moscow appears to have modelled the unit in part after elite, Western SOF.³⁰ However, Russia's SOF hires exclusively on contract (per Russian definition of the term "contractor"), for officer positions.³¹ SOF operations, carried out usually in secret, are "under the direct control of senior military leaders or commanders-in-chief of the armed forces in

23 Steven Lee Meyers, "Qatar court convicts 2 Russians in top Chechen's death," *New York Times*, June 1, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/01/world/qatar-court-convicts-2-russians-in-top-chechen-s-death.html>.

24 "День сил специальных операций в России," [Day of Special Operations Forces in Russia], *RIA Novosti*, February 27, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180227/1515287149.html>.

25 Пуга Крамик, "Иностранные корни нового российского спецназа, Кто помогал Минобороны готовить зеленых человечков," [Foreign roots of new Russian Spetsnaz. Who helped Defense Ministry to prepare little Green Men], *Lenta.ru*, December 20, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/12/20/specialforces/>.

26 As quoted in Sergey Sukhankin, "Unleashing the PMCs and irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas," Jamestown Foundation, September 3, 2019.

27 "Путин поддержал идею создания в России частных военных компаний," [Putin supported idea of creating Private Military Companies in Russia], *RIA Novosti*, November 11, 2012, <https://ria.ru/20120411/623227984.html>.

28 Ibid.

29 Пуга Крамик, "Иностранные корни нового российского спецназа. Кто помогал Минобороны готовить зеленых человечков." [Foreign roots of new Russian Spetsnaz. Who helped Defense Ministry to prepare little Green Men].

30 Dave Majumdar, "Meet Russia's very own 'Delta Force.' But very much a work in progress," *National Interest*, November 26, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/meet-russias-very-own-delta-force-37147>.

31 "День сил специальных операций в России," [Day of Special Operations Forces in Russia], *RIA Novosti*, February 27, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180227/1515287149.html>.



Special Operations Forces Command (mil.ru)

theaters of war.”³² The SOF has other unique features. According to Sukhankin, they are “able to collaborate with local military formations,” and are able to operate in smaller tactical groups, but without formal approval from the armed forces. The SOF are part of the story when it comes to understanding the origins of Russian PMCs under Putin, even as the SOF is formally part of the Russian armed forces. This model continued to expand and modify in the coming years.

³² Ibid.

CRIMEA, SYRIA, AND BEYOND

In 2013, Slavonic Corps Limited, a private military company, began operating in Syria approximately two years before the official intervention in September 2015. Some recent Russian sources suggest the Slavonic Corps was created specifically to operate in Syria.³³ The Wagner Group, the most well-known PMC, came out of the Slavonic Corp. Indeed, according to one report by a Norwegian Defense Ministry think tank, “The story of Wagner starts with a request from the Syrian government to Moran Security Group in 2013 to assist in retaking from the Islamic State Syrian oil and gas infrastructure that the latter controlled.”³⁴

With the annexation of Crimea and fighting in Eastern Ukraine, Moscow began using Ukraine as a training ground for the SOF, PMCs, and other irregular forces. The Wagner Group became active in Ukraine at least in summer 2014. Russian and Western analysts note that SOF, Wagner, or both played a key role in Crimea’s annexation. Wagner Group as a company appears to have been formally established in early summer 2014 after the annexation. Other sources note that according to Ukrainian special services, evidence of Wagner activity in Ukraine (specifically in Donbas) appeared in May 2014, also after the annexation.³⁵ The SOF carried out “major operative tasks” in Crimea, including effective use of radio

electronic warfare to disable radio and cellphone communication. Putin said that SOF members “‘correctly, decisively, and professionally’ ensure conditions for free expression of the will of the Crimeans.”³⁶ According to the Russian Defense Ministry, the SOF’s primary purpose is to carry out missions abroad.³⁷

Moreover, other irregular forces played a major role in the annexation. These groups included many others, such as the Cossacks, Night Wolves motorcycle gang, so-called “cyber-warriors,” groups that included former Afghan war veterans, and other groups that the Russian government portrayed as independent volunteers but who in fact had been organized by the government. While information available is contradictory and sometimes sparse, the broader key point is that irregular forces played a significant role in Moscow’s ability to annex Crimea. Speaking several years later, on February 27, 2017, on the Day of Special Operations Forces—a unique Russian holiday established by a presidential executive order in 2015³⁸—Putin said Russian Special Operations Forces must be ready to ensure the safety not only of Russia, but also of its allies.³⁹

After Crimea, reports suggested that PMCs appeared in Syria. First reports in Russian about the use of PMCs, specifically the Wagner Group,

33 “Славянский корпус: что он делал в Сирии Об этом сообщает Рамблер,” [Slavonic Corps: What it did in Syria. Rambler reports], *Rambler*, 4 May 2019, https://news.rambler.ru/middleeast/42132857/?utm_content=rnews&utm_medium=read_more&utm_source=copylink; and Mikhail Bushuev, “ЧВК Вагнера: все, что о ней известно,” [PMC Wagner: all that is known about it], *Deutsche Welle*, August 1, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/ru/чвк-вагнера-все-что-о-ней-известно/a-42596738https://www.dw.com/ru/чвк-вагнера-все-что-о-ней-известно/a-42596738>.

34 Østensen and Bukkvoll, *Russian use of private military and security companies-- the implications for European and Norwegian Security*, p 25.

35 Bushuev, “ЧВК Вагнера: все, что о ней известно.” [PMC Wagner: all that is known about it].

36 Ibid.

37 “Russia marks Special Operations Forces’ Day,” February 27, 2018, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12164551@egNews.

38 Ibid.

39 “Путин поздравил военных с Днем Сил специальных операций,” [Putin Congratulated Military with Day of Special Operations Forces], *RIA Novosti*, February 27, 2017, <https://ria.ru/20170227/1488784257.html>.



The Wagner Group became active in Ukraine at least in summer 2014. Russian and Western analysts note that SOF, Wagner, or both played a key role in Crimea's annexation. Wagner Group as a company appears to have been formally established in early summer 2014 after the annexation.

in Syria came from *Fontanka* in August 2017.⁴⁰ *Fontanka* journalist Denis Korotkov, who wrote the story, later said he received threats.⁴¹ A video that circulated in 2017 showed several men inflicting horrific torture and then murdering a Syrian prisoner. Most recently, several independent sources confirmed that the man who filmed the incident was a member of the Wagner Group. Reportedly, the tortured and killed Syrian is Mohammad Taha al Ismail Abdallah, accused of deserting the Syrian army.⁴²

As mentioned earlier, more recent Russian reports suggest that PMCs appeared in Syria before the official military intervention in September 2015. If accurate, this point shows the growing importance the Kremlin had placed after 2012 on utilizing PMCs to advance its foreign policy goals beyond the former Soviet Union. Keeping Bashar al-Assad in power after all had been an important objective for Putin for many years, even before the military intervention.⁴³ Once the military intervention started, it was important for Putin to show a clean and low-cost campaign to the Russian public. One among several reasons for utilizing PMCs appears to have been to show that if Russian citizens did die in Syria, it was because they chose to do so, and were compensated for it financially. An immediate fear arose among some Russian analysts that the Syria adventure would turn into another Afghanistan for Russia. But in fact, the Kremlin made every effort to run a very different campaign from one the Soviet Union ran in Afghanistan, and PMCs were one component

of this broader effort.

Although news about PMCs appeared periodically in both Russian and Western press, PMCs came to the forefront, at least in the West, after the now-famous clash between Wagner and the U.S. military in Syria. On February 7-8, 2018, several hundred of Assad-backed forces that included members of the Wagner Group violated the 2015 deconfliction agreement between the U.S. and Russia in Syria by crossing the Euphrates River and attempting to capture an oil refinery near Deir Ezzor, a city in eastern Syria. These fighters used Russian weaponry to attack a U.S.-supported Kurdish opposition outpost. U.S. forces first shot back in response, but the fighters did not cease. U.S. forces had little choice but to call in larger air strikes in self-defense. They continuously communicated with Moscow before, during, and after the strikes. According to the Pentagon and press reports at the time, between 200-300 fighters died as the result of the strike, most of them from the Wagner Group.⁴⁴ Moscow for its part at first denied any Russian involvement at all, and then downplayed the number of deaths, likely out of considerations for domestic opinion.

The incident raised questions which to this day remain unanswered, chiefly why did Moscow allow this incident to happen in the first place. Given the degree of continual communication with Moscow, it seems implausible that the Kremlin was uninformed, and both sides had no desire for the situation spinning out of control into a bigger conflict that could easily happen if the

40 Denis Korotkov, “Немного бизнеса в сирийской войне,” [A little business in the Syrian war] *Fontanka*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/06/26/084/>; Denis Korotkov, “Кого Россия потеряла в Сирии,” [Whom Russia lost in Syria], *Fontanka*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/08/19/050/>; Aleksandr Yermakov, “Солдат удачи. Как выжить в Сирии, увести миллиард у «Газпрома» и безнаказанно пострелять по полиции,” [Soldier of fortune. How to survive in Syria, steal a billion from Gazprom and shoot police with impunity], *Fontanka*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2018/10/17/086/>; and “Погибший в Сирии петербуржец, боец ЧВК, похоронен в Кронштадте,” [St. Petersburg resident, PMC fighter, died in Syria, buried in Kronstadt], *Fontanka*, March 2017, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/03/20/088/>.

41 “‘Фонтанка’ рассказала об угрозах автору статей о потерях в Сирии,” [Fontanka told about threats to the author of articles on losses in Syria], *RFE/RL*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28695113.html>.

42 Andrew Roth, “Man who filmed beheading of Syrian identified as Russian mercenary,” *The Guardian*, November 21, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/21/man-filmed-killing-torture-syrian-identified-russian-mercenary-wagner?fbclid=IwAR3FxxQYy60zLmIoEqFHm_AE5UA5tHE2W8hECB_kITiEMQc6S0AG3jfxZaw.

43 Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s many interests in Syria,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>.

44 Jeff Daniels, “Dozens of Russian mercenaries killed in U.S. airstrikes in Syria,” *CNBC*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.cnbccom/2018/02/13/dozens-of-russian-mercenaries-killed-in-us-airstrike-in-syria.html>; and Eli Lake, “Don’t be fooled, Russia attacked U.S. troops in Syria,” *Bloomberg*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-02-16/russia-attacked-u-s-troops-in-syria>.



Special Operations Forces Command (mil.ru)

U.S. struck Russian citizens. Although plausible deniability provides part of the answer, as Marten point out, another is likely “ruthless infighting between Russian security forces that goes on regularly, while Russian President Vladimir Putin looks the other way.” She suggests that the events at Der Ezzor “may actually have centered on domestic politics inside Russia — and been directed against . . . Prigozhin.”⁴⁵

Indeed, the issue of Putin’s growing internal anxiety about the security of his regime and fear of protests is reflected in the fact that in April 2016, Putin established, by decree, the National Guard, “Natsgvardia,” which reports directly to Putin and is headed by Viktor Zolotov, Putin’s former chief of personal security service. Officially, the National Guard’s purpose is to secure borders and fight organized crime, but in reality, this force is loyal to the president. The National Guard involves itself in broader domestic activities under the vague guise of fighting “extremism” whenever Putin sees a threat to his regime. This context is relevant to understanding Russian PMCs. It shows internal shifts within Russia’s security services away from loyalty to the country as a whole and serving

individual (in this case the president’s) interests.

After Syria, reports about Russian PMCs soon appeared in Libya, Venezuela, Cuba, Central African Republic, Sudan, and at least a dozen other countries in Africa. Wagner has become the most well-known of these organizations. However, it is important to highlight that many Russian military or former military personnel had never left, at least not from Africa. An expert on both Russian PMCs and Africa who lives in Senegal, Sergey Eledinov, told *RFE/RL* in January 2019, “In fact, Russian, or Soviet, military in Africa . . . never left anywhere. . . . After the collapse of the USSR, Russian military specialists, as well as immigrants from other republics of the Soviet Union in Africa, began to work for themselves.”⁴⁶

Officially, the Kremlin said very little about PMCs. In September 2018, Putin signed a law that made information about non-staff employees who work for Russia’s foreign intelligence service a state secret. The document doesn’t explicitly use the word PMCs or private contractors, but the language implies PMCs.⁴⁷ Then, in December 2018, Putin said, “If they [PMCs] do not violate

45 Kimberly Marten, “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/>.

46 Aleksandr Gostev, “‘Дикie гуси’ или ‘Псы войны’? Российские наемники в Африке: кто, где, почем,” [“Wild geese” or “Dogs of war”? Russian mercenaries in Africa: who, where, how much], *RFE/RL*, January 11, 2019, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/dikie-gu-si-ili-psy-voiny-rossiyskie-naemniki-v-afrike/29703122.html>.

47 “Сведения о внештатных сотрудниках СВР стали гостайной,” [Information about non-staff employees of FIS (Foreign Intelli-

Russian law, they can push their business interests anywhere in the world.”⁴⁸ Then, Putin admitted the presence of Russian PMCs in Syria in June 2019, and even then, he said they are not connected to the Russian state: “As for private security companies, under the auspices of which there are people you mentioned, they really are present there. This is not the Russian state. And they are not participants in the hostilities, unfortunately or fortunately.”⁴⁹

Proekt Media, an independent Russian news outlet, produced four lengthy reports in 2019 examining official Russian documents among other material.⁵⁰ They found that Moscow’s overall growing interest in Africa has gone hand-in-hand with Prigozhin’s activities there. With regard to Libya, one of these reports concludes that Wagner’s actions “are at least coordinated with the military and political leadership of Russia. Several reports on the military-political situation in the country are addressed to the ‘leadership of the Ministry of Defense’ or personally to Minister Sergei Shoigu.”⁵¹

Russian PMCs play an important role in Libya, where Moscow has built connections with both the United Nations-backed government in Tripoli and General Khalifa Haftar, who controls Libya’s oil-rich east and stands against the government. Still, Moscow always leaned closer to Haftar, who

is a U.S. citizen that spent a lot of time in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, because he has looked to Putin to help him secure his leadership position.⁵² Haftar proclaims a shared aversion to Islamist groups, much as the Kremlin does. Despite this proclamation, Haftar has worked closely with Salafists, just as Putin generally partners with any actor if that suits his agenda.

Given Moscow’s approach to Libya (and more broadly to the Middle East), it comes as no surprise that Russian PMCs work with Haftar, but also criticize him. The main issue they raise is whether Haftar would remain loyal to Moscow in the long term, as he refuses to give up his American citizenship and negotiates with European and Arab countries.⁵³ In a recent exclusive interview with well-known and respected Russian activist Evgenia Chirikova, a Libyan activist confirmed that the Wagner Group’s involvement in Libya is far greater than the Russian government acknowledges, and fight on Haftar’s side.⁵⁴ Importantly, Russian PMCs not only support Haftar, but also Ghaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam, and even organized events against Haftar.⁵⁵ These actions illustrate Moscow’s approach of building ties with all major actors to retain flexibility, rather than putting all of their eggs in one basket.

gence Service) became state secret], *RIA*, September 3, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180903/1527750183.html>.

48 Aleksandra Vigrasier, “Головорезы с тесаками наперевес,” [Cutthroats ready with machetes], *Lenta.ru*, February 21, 2018, https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/02/21/chvk_interview/.

49 “Они там действительно присутствуют”: Путин о ЧВК в Сирии,” [‘They are really there,’ Putin on PMCs in Syria], *BBC*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-48708291>.

50 Ilya Rozhdestvenskiy and Roman Baradin, “Шеф и повар. Часть первая. Расследование о том, как Евгений Пригожин возглавил российское наступление в Африке,” [Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa], *Meduza/Daily Beast*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/prigozhin-afrika/>.

51 Maria Zholobova and Olga Churakova, with participation of Maria Zholobova and Mikhail Rubin, “Шеф и повар. Расследование о том, как Россия участвует в гражданской войне в Ливии,” [Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa], *Meduza/Daily Beast*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.proekt.media/investigation/prigozhin-libya/>.

52 Anna Borshchevskaya, “After Syria, Putin’s next move could be Libya,” *The Hill*, February 13, 2017, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/319272-after-syria-libya-could-be-putins-next-move>.

53 Maria Zholobova and Olga Churakova, with participation of Maria Zholobova and Mikhail Rubin, “Шеф и повар. Расследование о том, как Россия участвует в гражданской войне в Ливии,” [Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa].

54 “Евгения Чирикова для M.News World: новые доказательства российского вторжения в Ливию,” [Evgenia Chirikova for M. News World: new proof of Russian intervention in Libya], *M News*, December 3, 2019, <https://mnews.world/ru/evgeniya-chirikova-dlya-m-news-world-novye-dokazatelstva-rossijskogo-vtorzheniya-v-liviyu/>.

55 Maria Zholobova and Olga Churakova, with participation of Maria Zholobova and Mikhail Rubin, “Шеф и повар. Расследование о том, как Россия участвует в гражданской войне в Ливии,” [Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa].

WHO ARE THE PMCs?

The available information suggests that individuals who join Russian PMC groups come from all walks of life—though most have previous military experience. One recruiter reportedly said PMC employees are people “used to resolving all his problems by pulling the trigger, his hands itch. This is the category of people called the ‘people of war.’ They cannot live without war. A private military company always waits for them.”⁵⁶

However, people have other reasons for joining these groups. Yevgeniy Shabayev, a leader of a PMC, explained that the main reason people join PMCs “is that they have no life here. No work and no social or economic status, neither as former military with specific experience nor as simple citizens.”⁵⁷ He further explained that many, including Russian citizens, have been jailed for over three years in Donetsk and Luhansk without any charges or legal representation. For someone in such a situation, when a recruiter comes in and offers a choice between remaining in jail or going to fight and earning some money, the choice to fight is easy.⁵⁸ As a result, the level of professionalism among these individuals varies.

In a number of known cases, the Russian government refused to pay pensions to the families of PMCs killed performing their duties.⁵⁹ The Russian government had used the excuse that these were not military employees, though

the families had at least in some cases considered these “just another military job.”⁶⁰ More to the point, something as fundamental to human dignity as a funeral, and recognition of service to the country, is often absent.⁶¹ That Moscow had first denied, then downplayed, the deaths in Der Ezzor is perhaps the best example of this lack of recognition given the sheer number of deaths. It illustrated again how little lives of Russian citizens matter to the Kremlin. Their efforts were focused on staying in power and hiding Russian death contributed to these efforts.

As one anonymous Wagner employee told *Lenta.ru* in February 2018, Wager’s personnel is not as professional as that of the Russian military, and Russian soldiers and officers tend to look down on them. Moreover, when members of the Russian military die, they are buried with honors, but this doesn’t happen with PMCs. “This is some kind of fantastic level of hypocrisy, when ordinary guys from the backwoods are sent to die the devil knows where for the money, and then they bury in nameless graves.”⁶²

56 Elena Voloshina, “Российские наемники – ‘это категория людей, которые не могут жить без войны,’” [Russian mercenaries - ‘this is a category of people who cannot live without war’], *Liberation*, reprinted in *Inopressa.ru*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.inopressa.ru/article/13mar2018/liberation/vagner1.html>.

57 “Cossack Fighter Laments Russian ‘Utilization’ Of Mercenaries in Syria,” *RFE/RL*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-russian-mercenaries-cossack-shabayev--interview/29056934.html>.

58 *Ibid*.

59 Andrey Zatirko, “Сэкономили на орденах. Вдова погибшего в Сирии рассказала, как Минобороны не хочет платить ей деньги за награду убитого мужа,” [Widow of deceased in Syria told how the Ministry of Defense does not want to pay her money for reward of her murdered husband], *Current Time*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/orden-syria-minoborony-mon-ey/30083061.html>.

60 Andrew Roth, “There’s no one to help’: Russian mercenary industry’s toll on families,” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/26/russia-drive-into-africa-shines-light-on-mercenary-industry>.

61 Nina Nazarova and Ilya Varabanov, “‘Чем мой сын хуже’: мать убитого в Сирии бойца ЧВК борется за его признание солдатом,” [“Why is my son any worse?”: mother of killed in Syria PMC fights for his acceptance as soldier], *BBC*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-43090457>.

62 “‘Головорезы с тесаками наперевес,’” [Cutthroats ready with machetes], *Lenta.ru*.

THE QUESTION OF LEGALIZING PMCS

In this context of government opacity and denial with regard to PMCs, it is not entirely surprising that in late 2018, some PMC fighters had turned to the International Criminal Court.⁶³ Their complaint is that under the guise of “volunteers” they fought in conflicts in many countries, yet at home they can be tried for criminal activities as a result.⁶⁴ To date, the status of this case is unclear.

Discussion in Russia about legalizing PMCs began in late 2017. Some senior Russian officials had raised the need to legalize PMCs. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov noted in January 2018 that the practice of utilizing PMCs is growing more widespread internationally, and said, “I think that here we need to clearly fix the legislative framework so that these people [Russian citizens - PMC employees] are also in the legal field and protected.”⁶⁵ Soon after, Chairman of the Defense Committee of the State Duma Vladimir Shamanov said the committee was ready to work towards legalizing PMC status. Russian Deputy Mikhail Emelyanov told *Rambler.ru* that a draft document to that effect already existed and said, “The experience of operations in Syria shows that we need such military companies.”⁶⁶ Some Russian experts have also spoken in favor of legalizing PMCs.⁶⁷

Prominent Russian military expert Aleksandr



President Vladimir Putin with Night Wolves Motorclub (kremlin.ru)

Golts, however, warned in November 2018 that legalizing PMCs would be dangerous for the internal situation in Russia. “Upon returning to their homeland, these people [PMC fighters] can make up a military force. They are subordinate only to their commanders, they have kasha in their heads”—a phrase meaning that they are deeply confused.⁶⁸ He said that in the event of an internal crisis, these private armies would make matters worse. Moreover, legalizing PMCs would only allow the Russian state to evade responsibility for its actions.⁶⁹

63 Ilya Varabanov, “За родину и ипотеку. История бойца ‘ЧВК Вагнера,’ погибшего в Сирии,” [For homeland and mortgage: story of PMC Wagner fighter that died in Syria], *BBC*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-45724170>.

64 Elena Voloshina, “Российские наемники – ‘это категория людей, которые не могут жить без войны,’” [Russian mercenaries—“this is a category of people that can’t live without war.”], *Liberation*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.inopressa.ru/article/13mar2018/liberation/vagner1.html>; and “Бывшие российские наемники обратились в Международный уголовный суд, требуя официального признания их статуса,” [Former Russian mercenaries apply to the International Criminal Court, demanding official recognition of their status], *Newsru*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.newsru.com/world/20nov2018/naemniki.html>.

65 “ЧВК в законе: зачем Сергей Лавров предлагает легализовать «солдат удачи»,” [PMC-in-law: why Sergei Lavrov offers to legalize “soldiers of fortune”], *RBC*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/01/2018/5a5ca1219a7947afc1b76bfd>.

66 “Умру за родину. Дорого,” [Will die for homeland. Expensively], *Rambler*, February 8, 2018, <https://news.rambler.ru/army/39031779-umru-za-rodinu-dorogo/>.

67 “Эксперт: в странах ОДКБ нужно легализовать частные военные компании,” [Expert: Private military companies should be legalized in CSTO countries], *RIA Novosti*, February 5, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20180205/1513966123.html>.

68 “Александр Голыц: Последствия легализация частных военных компаний опасны для внутренней ситуации в России,” [Alexander Golts: Consequences of legalization of private military companies dangerous for internal situation in Russia] *Echo Moskvy*, November 20, 2018, <https://echo.msk.ru/news/2318842-echo.html>.

69 Ibid.

RUSSIAN PMCs ARE NOT GOING AWAY



From a foreign policy perspective, the Kremlin has concluded the PMC model is a useful tool. It will continue to experiment with PMCs as part of its competition with the West—a struggle in which the Kremlin will use any tool it has in its arsenal, without any concern for human rights, neither of its own citizens nor those of other countries. This means wherever Russian PMCs appear, the West should pay attention, even when the Kremlin denies any knowledge of these groups or downplays their importance.

The evolution of the PMC model shows consistency with Putin's foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa, where Putin has worked to build leverage and connections with all major actors, rather than openly taking sides. PMCs are one tool of many in his arsenal. That Russian PMCs are increasingly showing up in Africa is another indicator that this region increasingly matters to the Kremlin—a trend that began years ago.

If the PMCs are not always controlled directly by the Kremlin, then this raises additional questions for the U.S. As the incident in Der Ezzor demonstrates, Russian PMCs can create more instability and engage dangerous clashes. More broadly, the use of PMCs demonstrates both

creativity in terms of utilizing different tools and methods to achieve foreign policy and military objectives, but the weakness of the Russian state and its inability to control powerful actors in Russia.

The PMC model will evolve and expand insofar as the Kremlin sees it as successful in achieving foreign policy objectives. For Moscow, this means its focus on weakening the West in a zero-sum effort to prop up its own position. Analysts must study PMC groups in greater depth, examining their structure and operations, looking beyond their plausible deniability as the only explanation for their use. In the end, as PMCs play a larger role in the Kremlin's foreign policy, the West needs better solutions for countering Russian them. 

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to producing the highest quality scholarship and nonpartisan policy analysis focused on crucial foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. We educate those who make and influence policy, as well as the public at large, through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

Foreign Policy Research Institute

1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610
Philadelphia, PA 19102

215-732-3774 www.fpri.org