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POLITICAL AND MILITARY IMPLICATIONS OF PRIVATE MILITARY CONTRACTORS IN RUSSIA¹

Lukáš Jakabovič – Pavel Nečas*

ABSTRACT

The topic, which is of personal interest, makes an impression that contractors are only a marginal part of the modern security studies, the academic community of international relations and the public interest. The world is in constant evolution, dominated by more urgent topics and the previous ones are pushed into the background, which specifically in this case poses a great threat. Article focuses on the issue of private military contractors as an alternative to modern privatisation of military and overview of their main differences to the known mercenaries, ethics, and their restrictions with the aim to showcase timelessness and adequate usability of these contractors with the focus on characterising the Russian Private Military Companies and their recent operations. We intend to look at the role of Russian Private Military Contractors and analyse the possible impact that these companies may have and continuously still have in the sphere of international relations and security studies. We offer an updated viewpoint on their place in the current global governance order, and we showcase why and how have they achieved their status. Such findings are crucial for understanding the role of non-state actors in the current security environment.

Key words: Privatisation, Military, Private Military Contractors, Mercenaries, Hybrid Warfare, Wagner.

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Introduction

Mercenaries do not represent some new phenomenon in a society whose rapid rise can be underestimated by an even more rapid decline. The profession is one of the constants in the evolution of conflicts as well as of the humanity itself. A profession combining the two essential instincts of man - combat and the acquisition of profit, it has undergone a unique evolution influenced by the specifics of a given historical period, but it has never completely disappeared. Its popularity or degree of involvement at specific points in history may always be a topic for discussion, but the disappearance of mercenaries has never been, and is not, a relevant premise for the lack of attention given to the subject during the course of the last few decades. The profession evolved and so should our viewpoint. While the number of mercenaries has diminished, the phenomenon of contractors is still on the rise.

The security landscape is currently affected by numerous distinctive threats that are expected to increase. Thus, it is undoubtedly challenging to precisely assess the severity of a particular issue and prioritise it over other security threats that do not pose an immediate risk. Nonetheless, the authors' continued interest in the subject is based precisely on the assertions presented in the preceding section. It is crucial to continually enhance the theoretical development and key concepts related to private military companies and their influence on the global, regional, and national security landscape. Over the past two decades, there has been an unparalleled increase in the military's utilization and dependence on the services of Private Military Companies (PMCs). The use of non-military contracting is not a recent phenomenon, as we can observe it throughout various historical periods. However, the end of the Cold War brought about an unprecedented surge in the private military contracting market. A vast range of ways to conduct contemporary conflicts have started to reap the benefits provided by Private Military Companies. The security industry operates in an environment that is in constant flux, where a broad range of activities and threats affect its security and viability.

The modern-day contractor is considered to have evolved from the mercenary profession which served as a precursor to its development. The distinct growth and evolution of these professions did not occur rapidly or in obscurity. The gradual withdrawal of interest in underdeveloped areas paved the way for the emergence of contemporary Private Military Companies. These firms seized the opportunity to exhibit their prowess and cement their position on the

global arena. Initially, due to public perception, it was challenging to disassociate these contractors from the negative connotations associated with mercenaries. Over time, the security environment and our perception of regional security have evolved due to globalisation. States seek more support from the private sector, and the security market is also pursuing such interests. Living without fear of danger or threats is a fundamental requirement for everyone, regardless of other external factors in our lives. Therefore, this prerequisite must always be met.

The gradual rise in the usage of contractors has resulted in their growing legitimacy. What was formerly deemed unsuitable is now a common practice in modern conflict management. Contractors are a strategic instrument used by states to cope with various crisis situations that emerge, primarily in areas of vulnerable and failed states. An unpredictable and risky security environment is characterized by a weakening state apparatus and subsequent securitization within discussed sector. This creates a fertile environment for the private sector to deliver security and stability. However, these companies can equally pose a threat to one state or region as they offer assistance and alternative options for another state's interests.

1. Research Methodology

Obtaining information on PMCs is always a daunting challenge, particularly when it comes to Russian PMCs. As will be discussed, access to information on PMCs and contractors in these regions is much more difficult and shrouded in secrecy compared to the West. The specificities of these areas also include a lack of transparency and complexity in accessing information.

The article aims to characterise the role and scope of Russian Private Military Contractors and analyse their potential impact on international relations and security studies. The first part derives from collected knowledge and applies scientific methods such as analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, abstraction, generalisation, and comparison. Throughout our article sophisticated thought-based process is employed, particularly when working with sources. We evaluate the literature and available facts to create our own synthesis of knowledge, evaluation and formulation of the issues at hand to gain a deeper understanding of the inner-workings of the Russian PMCs. Information is then integrated into a specific section of our comprehensive research on this subject (Ivančík, 2021).

To achieve a broad range of knowledge while creating the article, we employed textual analysis. This approach allowed us to break down the facts into

smaller parts and notes, facilitating better connections and associations for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The comparative and historical method enabled the extraction of information from the complex historical background, allowing for a clear identification and analysis of the issue within the specific historical and geopolitical context.

The practical information in this text critically presents the operations of Russian PMCs and examines their potential impact on global regional stability, security, and international relations. The analysis was conducted through deduction, induction, and synthesis of relevant data.

For the stated purposes, we adopt the definition formulated in doctoral thesis of Jakabovič (2019), where it is stated that "Private military companies are private companies, potentially hybrid entities² offering a wide range of military and security services, focused on profit, efficiency and professionalism, operating largely beyond the borders of the state of their registered headquarters, supporting the implementation of political interests and governmental activities of the state of their origin in regions of fragile, failing states with dysfunctional state apparatuses and securitization processes.

A significant emphasis should be placed on the typology of Private Military Companies. Objective qualifications, such as comprehensive military experience and training, are already a mandatory requirement for contractors. Additionally, companies tend to hire personnel who possess the potential to participate in a diverse range of activities, such as training, combat, or support. In practice, an individual may engage in training and advising, which was the primary objective of their contract, as well as providing logistical support or protection. Additionally, they may become involved in the field at different stages of the operation due to the changing levels of conflict. The evolving security environment is leading to an increase in staff workloads, consequently shifting more work towards PMCs and individual contracts. These contracts now encompass areas that were solely assigned to a particular contractor type but must now consider unpredictability.

Furthermore, contractors are distinguished by their company's equipment. If a Private Military Company has access to advanced weaponry, it falls into the classic category, whereas possessing small arms and passive protection are

² Hybrid entities meaning that a parent company can incorporate many different subdivisions with various focus of operations.

prerequisites for a private security company.³ Private Military Companies can also be sub-categorised based on their service offerings into specialised firms focusing on a particular activity and multifunctional conglomerates. PMC can be categorised based on the nature of the services offered, including non-combat services in high-risk areas, contracts for state entities, and services aimed at changing the strategic situation. Furthermore, PMC can provide strategic operations, support, and defence, or non-lethal uses (Ivančík - Nečas, 2016).

2. PMCs as a tool of Russian Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid conflicts pose novel and uncertain challenges to states seeking to securitize their individual security sectors and ultimately preserve national sovereignty. NATO was among the earliest organisations to acknowledge and give negative classification to these hazards. This stance was prompted by the Russian annexation of Crimea, whose events effectively showcased the features of hybrid threats. However, despite measures taken to prevent and hedge against these threats, insufficient attention has been given to the numerous ways in which hybrid threats are manifesting. The involvement of Russian contractors in such a conflict, particularly in Ukraine, has not received adequate consideration. It may be partly attributed to the growing interconnection between NATO member states and private companies in developing and executing strategies. The USA's engagement with PMCs forms part of a wider approach to contemporary conflict resolution. The behaviour associated with this approach has been noted in the Russian Federation's 2014 military doctrine. The document highlights new phenomena related to security and specific practices prevalent in hybrid conflicts.

The Montreux Document, an initiative that aims to constrain and regulate PMCs, has not been signed by the Russian Federation, despite its concerted efforts. Although Russia did not sign the Montreux Document, it has endeavoured to regulate PMCs and took part at an intergovernmental level in the pre-preparatory stages of signing the document (FDFA, 2008). There is conjecture that the Russian Federation did not sign the document following the events of Georgia in 2008, which eclipsed the initiative's efforts and evoked a pessimistic response to Russia's actions. However, there is currently a trend to scrutinise,

³ Which mainly differentiates from a PMC in the way they shape the security environment. A modern PMC, like Blackwater or Wagner can have an impact on a foreign resolution and the course of a conflict between various actors of international relations. On the other hand, a typical private security company operates mainly in a stable, low-risk region and on a much smaller scale.

regulate and, most importantly, legalise the private military and security industry.

Russian Criminal Law Article 359 of 1996 defines mercenaries and individuals paid to carry out armed activities. The law has undergone revisions over the years, specifically a 2013 amendment to Amendment No. 208, which criminalised combat operations by Russian citizens overseas, regardless of whether or not they were being paid. However, these modifications were targeted at the increasing number of individuals within the ranks of radical groups, specifically the influx of Caucasian individuals joining ISIS in Syria. In order to prosecute such individuals, it was necessary to amend the law. The operations of the Russian PMC are also affected by Law No. 62015-6 of 2012 regarding the establishment, conduct, and right to acquire military equipment by a PMC providing military or security services. Other attempts to modify contractor legislation have had mixed results and face a clash of different agendas as well as a split in society on the issue. Also, for these reasons, the given room for manoeuvre in the grey zone of Russian law is still enormous and it is also unclear to whom the PMC should be accountable, as proposals have been initiated on the management of the PMC by the Federal Security Service or the inclusion of the PMC in the structures of the so-called army reserves (Duma, 2012).

Thus, the analysis of practice shows that there are close links between private companies and the state. These PMCs are therefore inherently private companies, but they act as an extension of the State. The linkages are often also manifested with respect to a shared vision of the world, politics and the implementation of state policy. Russian PMCs used to carry out the pre-preparatory phases of the conflict, reconnaissance, and the creation of conditions for the entry of Russian troops into the territory of the country. They can also act as a special unit outside the military structure. In both cases, however, they have the ability to carry out offensive operations, violence with the aim of changing the status quo.

The connection between Russian contractors and Russia's deeper geopolitical interests is evidenced by the involvement of the Russian company MAR in the Donetsk Basin area. Described PMC is a smaller one, but upon entering its official website (<http://chvk-mar.ru/>) you are greeted by a short animation where a helicopter, armoured vehicle or other assets wander over an oil well, a seaside area or a desert. In one of the main articles, they stress that they do not engage in mercenary activities on behalf of foreign governments or illegal groups. They mainly carry out armed protection of installations, but they also mention ambiguous public order enforcement activities in extreme cases.

They deny their presence in Ukraine but are prepared to push back enemy lines at the request of the Donetsk People's Republic. There are 70 contractors at the customer's disposal at any time. MAR, which was formed after Putin's positive statements about the PMCs, describes itself as a "military-patriotic organization," which, in an official statement on its website, justified the motivation behind its activities by saying that it cannot just stand by and watch events unfold around the world, emphasising that they fully support the political course set by Russian President Vladimir Putin. It further states that the company is committed to protecting the interests of the Russian people who face the threat of war at home or abroad (MAR, 2016).

3. Engagement outside of the Russian Federation

A prominent attribute of a Russian PMC is the formation of shell firms beyond the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation. The curtailment of transparency in their operations is not solely due to Russia's prohibition on mercenary undertaking but also due to the proclivities of Russian entities to veil corporate activities. Cyprus and Dubai continue to be the favoured sites for incorporation, with Hong Kong gaining traction. Russia's relationship with China plays a significant role in this case. Specifically, the establishment of shell offices and accounts to bypass the Russian Federation's imposed sanctions, which also regulates SWIFT-type transactions, is prevalent (Spearin, 2018).

Furthermore, the next PMC Slavonic Corps operated in Syria, registered in Hong Kong, and provided contractors to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In 2013, reports surfaced regarding the alleged death of a Russian contractor in the vicinity of Homs. Nevertheless, the contractor, who had been operating under the aegis of Slavonic Corps and contracted by Moran Security Group, was eventually discovered to be alive in Russia. These developments drew greater scrutiny to the actions of Russian contractors in Syria. Following a series of investigations, it emerged that the former Federal Security Service member and current director of Moran Security Group, Vyacheslav Kalashikov, recruited 267 Russian contractors through Slavonic Corps to assist in countering Syrian rebels. The contractors were repatriated following a string of unsuccessful missions, resulting in the detention of a number of individuals for questioning. Following Article 359 of the Criminal Code, Vadim Gusev, Vice President of Moran Security Group, was arrested. This highlights the State's ability to disassociate from contractor activities and safeguard its interests. As a result, Russia expressed its

official support for Assad at a later date, separate from contractor activities (Arduino, 2018).

The Moran Security Group, as stated on their website "<http://moran-group.org/en/service/index>", focuses on safeguarding naval vessels and providing armed escorts for ships. It is noteworthy that despite previous engagements, the PMC was officially registered only in 2011. The website details the group's history, which allegedly dates back to 1999 and includes a successful operation in which a hijacked tanker was rescued from pirates. Apart from operations in the Central African Republic, Kenya, or Nigeria, Iraq has been the most frequent location for their operations. The company places emphasis on hiring staff who have previously served in the Russian security forces, armed forces or air force, and have completed at least two tours of duty. The company also operates under the umbrella of Tiger Top Rent Security, a subsidiary association of Redut-Antiterror (Ušiak - Kosárova, 2017).

RSB-Group was registered in Moscow during 2011, but also has offices in Senegal, Turkey, Germany, Cyprus and Sri Lanka. RSB-Group was registered in Moscow during 2011, but also has offices in Senegal, Turkey, Germany, Cyprus and Sri Lanka. PMC is also mainly involved in the protection of naval vessels, but also in demining missions in Libya or the protection of convoys and VIPs in the Middle East. Currently, the company has already set up a division focused on cyber security. RSB declares that it is guided exclusively by Russian legislation and regulations of the countries where it operates in order to protect the interests of Russian companies. They refrain from engaging in conflicts and being hired by suspicious groups with links to criminal or terrorist groups (Ivančík - Ušiak, 2014). Nor do they participate in coups or operations that violate human rights, international law and conventions. The website lists among the reasons for hiring them, in addition to professionalism and an impeccable record of contracts, backed by references, operating under the previously mentioned Western resolutions and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers. They also highlight the fact that they are an official partner and contractor of the United Nations Security Services, with registration number 403872. They have also been awarded ISO 9001:2011 quality management certification (RSB, 2019).

The RSB-Group is also alleged to have participated in the civil war in Sudan or the Donetsk Basin and, according to some evidence, in events related to the annexation of Crimea. The RSB-Group is considered one of Russia's strongest PMCs, also due to its similarities with transatlantic model of PMC. According to

its leader, Oleg Krinitsyn, the PMC was also offered a contract to influence foreign elections, which it firmly rejected. It was stressed that the offer did not come from the Russian Federation. The company operates mostly as a typical private security company, but during the course of its existence and because of their resources and involvement in the affairs of foreign countries, have since become a traditional PMC- pattern applicable to the most of Russian private security companies (Bukkvoll - Østensen, 2018).

Similar in size and focus on Russian politics to MAR, ENOT Corp was founded by former members of Russia's elite special services and gained recognition through its actions in Syria. There is conclusive evidence of PMC's involvement in the Donbas region, with strong ties to its leaders. It is concerning that the organisation has collaborated with Russian neo-Nazi groups, arranging training camps for them (Krutov, 2018).

4. Wagner Group PMC

The most famous Russian PMC of today is Wagner, which has its roots in a network of companies that includes the Moran Security Group. Because they have operated in both Ukraine and Syria, Wagner contractors are the dominant evidence in assessing the rise in popularity of Russian PMCs. Even in a number of cases, Wagner contractors have participated in operations in Ukraine and have subsequently gone to Syria as well. Wagner directly picked up where Slavonic Corps, tied to Moran and the Syrian government's request for assistance, initially failed. The company was headed by Dmitrii Utkin, a former member of Russia's elite forces who was also in Slavonic Corps, but at the time his arrest did not occur. The initial Wagner base was founded nearby an existing Russian army base in Molkino city. Accusations of Wagner's participation in Ukraine, as well as Syria, Sudan, and Libya at the Russian government's request, are highly prominent. The company allegedly provided instruction to military forces throughout their Syrian contract and the liberation battle near Palmyra, where allegedly 2,500 contractors were present. Additionally, the PMC incorporates an unparalleled quantity of equipment in its manoeuvres, such as artillery, tanks, and intelligence divisions. For the most part, they succeed in prepping the platform for the Syrian military to engage in battle. The aggressive nature of Wagner according to Western standards leads to a debate regarding the boundary between the prolonged military arm of the state and the fundamental identity of a private company. The links between Wagner's creators and Russian politics, as

well as its proximity to Russian special forces, give rise to the prospect that the entity was formed with the aid of these forces in an attempt to establish dominance in the execution of hybrid warfare (Bukkvoll - Østensen, 2018).

It is likewise conceivable that the PMC Wagner was involved in the Sudanese civil war, supporting President Omar al-Bashir's side. Allegedly, in the spring of 2018, over 100 contractors provided training for government forces. As compensation, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin was awarded the rights to gold mining in Sudan. Prigozhin was believed to have connections to President Vladimir Putin, as his catering enterprises have provided services for government events and military affairs alike. Prigozhin was linked to Wagner and various oil companies active in Syria with the help of Wagner contractors. Three of his businesses were suspected of involvement in influencing the US presidential election. Wagner itself has faced subsequent sanctions. Wagner contractors also acted as security guards for Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro during the Venezuelan unrest outbreak (Baev - Malkova, 2019).

In Syria, a number of contractors were officially engaged in a diverse range of activities in support of the Russian military, but unofficially, and to a deniable extent, they were also involved in operations on the ground. In this way, approximately 2,500 contractors were involved in the conflict, whose activities were also carried out with the assistance of Russian bases and logistical networks. Wagner's contractors played an important role in the conflict and helped Bashar al-Assad's regime to stabilise its position. Officially, the activities of these individuals have been denied. It included the events of February 2018, when a significant incident occurred near the Syrian town of Khsham. It is now almost a mythical tale that since the end of the Cold War the US and Russian forces have not clashed in direct, open ground combat. The statement is true only to an extent. It was in February 2018 that it was in a way shattered. The official claim labelled the incident as a defensive action by US forces against Syrian government forces. But the key point is that the Syrian forces were supported by Russian contractors from PMC Wagner. A high number of Russian contractors and Syrian forces were killed in the attack. More than 250 deaths and 148 injuries were recorded, including more than 80 deaths among the contractors. However, the exact numbers vary depending on the source. The Russian government has distanced itself from these events, stressing that it bears responsibility only for Russian troops and not for Russian individuals who may be in the area. Given the nexus of the PMC and the governments, the establishment of the PMC as a non-state combat actor, it can be argued that the Khsham incident brought about

the first U.S.- Russian combat encounter since the end of the Cold War, and in a previously unprecedented and unimaginable form. Additionally, the attack itself may have had economic overtones, where it should be pointed out that the US base is located near an oil processing facility (Baev - Malkova, 2019).

In the case of the Russian Federation's contractors, we cannot speak of an evolution of the conduct of the struggle, but rather of a change in the actors carrying out this struggle. The use of proxy units with no demonstrable links to Russia was already present during the Cold War. Even today, the doctrine of conducting a hybrid conflict through proxy troops remains. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, until today, Russia could not rely on former satellite states to play the role of an extended hand in implementing Russia's economic policy abroad. The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine or Syria have demonstrated the role of Russia's PMCs as Russia's new proxy constituents. Their role is not only limited to protecting Russian energy companies and roads, or protecting Russian vessels against pirates. Following the example of their American peers, the Russian PMCs are also becoming a new tool for conflict management and the implementation of state policy. Russia's view of contractors has gone through its own evolution, where, after their secrecy, there have been bans that are now being relaxed, mainly under pressure from oligarchs and corporations. Initially, they began operating secretly in close cooperation with the Russian military, precisely because of legal restrictions on Russian contractors operating abroad. Mercenaries are banned in Russia and thus the current cooperation between the Russian government and the PMCs operates in a grey zone. Russian PMCs operate on the principle of shell companies based abroad, mostly in China. At the same time, they are supported by Russian intelligence services, including the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation. Nowadays there is real talk of a comprehensive reimagining of this situation and the creation of a unified PMC framework.

Russian contractors are mostly veterans over 30 years of age, seasoned professionals. Unlike American and Chinese contractors, however, they are characterized by high casualty rates and are often used on the front lines of combat or in the preparatory intelligence phases. The level of engagement and activity among their Chinese and Western counterparts is still a matter of much debate and market development, but in the case of Russia, contractors are perceived as the most skilled warriors leading the assault (Arduino, 2018).

The engagement of Russian contractors is driven by minimizing political risks and negative impacts, only secondarily by maximizing the economic side of the

issue. For Russia, contractors are not only components of executing plans abroad with reduced accountability, but also a means of employing individuals affected by the previous demobilization of the Russian military and downsizing. Such individuals could also join the local underworld, and thus are more profitably employed in other ways. Although the expansion of Russian PMCs is affected by the nature of the local market, whose growth is not at the level of the West, it has more than enough potential, especially in synergy with China and private companies. These are mostly regions that are no longer favoured by Western PMCs and are looking for an alternative. Thus, the specialization of Russian contractors is also in dangerous areas where Western PMCs do not "dare engage anymore." The nature of the Russian PMC, especially compared to the defensive nature of the Western and Chinese PMC, is in fact offensive in nature. They themselves prefer the true designation of their work- private military company.

Since our original predictions in 2019, we have identified a significant but overlooked issue that Western private military companies initially legitimized. The issue has the potential to dramatically reshape the way conflict is viewed today, particularly given the prominence of hybrid warfare in current international relations. The emergence of Russian PMCs has been an imaginary focal point, necessitating an event that would enable them to expand their activities. That is precisely what occurred in late 2019 and early 2020, when the pandemic swept across the globe, and states swiftly prioritised national security and the pressing COVID-19 issue.

These events further bolstered the activities of Wagner-led Russian PMCs, which subsequently expanded their influence and capability beyond their established sphere of influence. Wagner's influence has been established in Mali, a country experiencing insecurity due to two attempted coups. A military junta without legitimacy is in power and Western forces that previously operated in Mali were facing new challenges. The state has members of the French army working on Operation Barkhane and the EU training mission. However, members of the military junta have confirmed their collaboration with Wagner contractors. The Russian Federation has already exhibited interest in developments in Mali, as reports suggest that the government there approached a Russian PMC for aid; however, Russia has denied any involvement at a governmental level. However, our research suggests that PMCs function as a replacement for the state's official armed forces and serve as a means of exerting influence. In December 2021, these occurrences were condemned by 16 member states of the European Union comprising France, Italy and Germany among others. The Malian government

was compelled to refute any connection with Wagner and explained that they only shared an interstate partnership with Russia, their long-standing ally (Lister - Shukla, 2021).

In December 2021, the European Union temporarily suspended its training mission in the Central African Republic due to reports of increased Wagner activities in the region. Wagner progressively engaged in training indigenous troops. Concerns regarding compliance with international humanitarian law and overlapping activities arose, prompting the suspension of the original training mission, as the contractors not only trained but also utilized the locals for field purposes. The EU mission comprised more than 70 instructors. According to Stroobants (2021), it has been reported that 1,135 Russian troops are supporting the rebels who previously attempted to overthrow the newly elected President Touadéra.

Throughout 2021, the unfolding of Wagner-related events has confirmed our predictions and our characterisation of the Russian 'branch' of private military contractors, culminating in the EU's December 2021 sanctions against Wagner officials, with Utkin at the forefront. Even the EU itself has admitted that the issue has been neglected for too long and presents an unprecedented challenge going forward, despite Russia's perception of the situation as Western hysteria. Amid ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Wagner played a prominent role in major battles, recruitment of prisoners, and scandals, ultimately enabling them to seize the offensive and become a key player in the conflict, despite being a non-state actor (Chao-Fong - Belam - Sullivan, 2023).

Back in 2019, when we commenced our research, we couldn't have predicted that the events which unfolded over the summer of 2023, though expected, would occur so swiftly and chaotically. As the world now knows, on June 23rd, the tensions that had arisen from the prolonged conflict and errors made during Russia's invasion of Ukraine came to a head. The Wagner private military company has played a crucial role in perpetuating the ongoing conflict and maintaining the cohesion of the Russian army - a significant development that we had correctly anticipated. It marks the triumph of a private entity over a state army, albeit of a major power. However, as we have observed before, innovative "armoured hierarchy" is unlikely to be sustainable, especially when the state seeks to reassert its authority.

Prigozhin and his company grew increasingly frustrated with the Russian Ministry of Defence's lack of cooperation, effort and equipment, which ultimately led to an unprecedented revolt. The "March on Moscow" and subsequent seizing

of Rostov on that day remain a mystery, demanding long-term investigation of the ripple effects as more background information is uncovered. Prigozhin aimed to demonstrate their power by swiftly moving through Russian territory, causing collateral damage along the way. It appeared as though a conflict was unfolding on Russian soil and heading towards Moscow, but then abruptly halted. It has been indicated by several sources that the Kremlin and Moscow were preparing to defend themselves, indicating that they viewed Prigozhin and his convoy as a significant threat. However, that day ended with Wagner being exiled to Belarus. The status of Wagner and its leadership remained shrouded in a mysterious and unclear cloud in the weeks that followed. The prevailing hypothesis suggests that Prigozhin sought a means of redirecting Wagner's attention towards African nations, where lucrative opportunities awaited. Additionally, it suggests that he was unencumbered by Kremlin authority (Al Jazeera, 2023).

However, the chapter ended predictably and unsurprisingly two months later, on a poetically coincidental day. A plane crash on Russian soil, north-west of Moscow, caused the deaths of Prigozhin, Utkin, and most of the Wagner leadership (BBC, 2023).

Despite the Kremlin distancing itself from the events, evidence points towards the deliberate downing of the plane as a demonstration of power and potential act of vengeance. The upheaval caused by the Wagner group within Putin's administration is an alarming development, particularly amidst a long-standing conflict with Ukraine. Nevertheless, Prigozhin's astute leadership skills suggest that he would have foreseen the repercussions of such a revolt and anticipated retribution. As such, the senselessness of both the rebellion and Prigozhin's death have become even more apparent in hindsight, underscoring the importance of continued investigation and research. There are significant unknowns pertaining to these events. While we had anticipated most of them, more research is still required to determine the specifics. Currently, the status of Wagner remains fluid. Putin has acknowledged that they were funded by the state, thus corroborating our long-term research findings. Additionally, Putin has directed Wagner fighters to pledge allegiance or risk being charged as mercenaries. Our research into other Russian PMCs reveals that similar scenarios have occurred in the past with other companies. It is noteworthy that the current situation involves a company like Wagner, known for its reputation and status. The use of war instruments as an effective tool in modern combat is clear, as is the disavowal of them when they become too risky to manage. The situation has completed a full cycle, and we think it is likely to repeat again soon. Like much

of our history, there are fixed and varying factors, but the pattern has repeated itself entirely.

Conclusions

After the events concerning Wagner and Ukraine, there is no doubt that of the three directions the PMC is currently taking, the Russian one is the most offensive. With the overall perception of Russian foreign policy and the internal state or prevailing sentiments in societies, the prerequisites for such an offensive character are obvious. Russia is not considered a law state with strong rule of law. On the contrary, it is dominated by ties between individual companies and their connections to state bodies and officials. In such an environment, it is easier to shape these companies in a direction that ultimately also makes them an extended arm of the state. In the case of the Russian Federation and the Russian PMC, it is also very important to mention the ideological aspect. Since the end of the Cold War, hostility towards the West has emerged as a form of frustration. The region appears to be under attack from the West and it requires the promotion of Russian interests, protecting the rights of the Russian population or following the current Russian political direction. Russian PMCs are of the belief that they are part of the "struggle for Russia's greatness". It is not by chance that several Russian contractors previously affiliated with radical organisations and occasionally faced imprisonment. Following their release, a PMC recruited them and facilitated their entry into the profession. Russian PMCs are highly motivated by ideological factors, which is especially true in this case. In Russia, the term "military" is understood differently from its Western interpretation- Transatlantic and Chinese private military companies have attempted to distance themselves from the term, whereas Russian companies openly embrace it, even incorporating it into their company name. The contrast is shaped in part by government attitudes towards the industry. Therefore, PMCs must carefully consider their actions, particularly in their marketing, to avoid contracts that would cause the public to label them as mercenaries once again. The level of detail necessary for the Russian side to address this aspect is negligible.

Even though PMCs operate abroad, the process of their creation and the domestic culture are the biggest factors that influence the creation of a given company and the environment or market in which it operates. As with any operations of a PMC, the advantage is that they operate in a grey zone, i.e., with a high degree of official disassociation from the activities of contractors, in the

case of Russia it is an advantage to have an alternative that is perceived differently in the public perception than the military. Also, given the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or the post-Cold War situation, the Russian public may be sensitive to military involvement in conflicts where there would be a high number of lives lost. PMCs, even in these quarters, offers a way in which plans can be carried out without the excess public interest that has allowed for the over-involvement of contractors in the Middle East or even in the United States.

Furthermore, the identified Russian PMCs can be distinctly classified based on their activities. Conversely, this categorisation would prove challenging for PMCs operating in the US and China. The operations of Russia's MAR and ENOT Corp entail strong ideological motives, where they function as state agents. Conversely, Wagner and Turan also support state interests, but with a primarily commercial motivation. The RSB Group, or the network of PMC Antiterror that includes the remaining mentioned PMCs, are primarily commercial entities. They may act as agents of the state in some instances, but their aim is to function as a regular company outside of these contracts.

Contractor usage during 2010 has had a significant impact on international relations and has changed the conduct of modern conflicts. Private contractors have demonstrated their effectiveness in resolving crisis situations across varying regions, specific situations, and conflicts. In contrast to conventional armed forces, they usher in an era where weapons and power are more aligned with the private sector. It should be noted that the intervention of private military companies can significantly influence trust and relationships among states in the international arena.

During the course of 2023, certain aspects of our research have been confirmed. While this serves as a cautionary signal for the future, there remains an abundance of knowledge yet to be unearthed. Wagner's actions and their consequences have the potential to not only impact the functional capabilities of a dominant power, but also the trajectory of our research. The steady prevalence of PMCs assures their continued existence for the foreseeable future. The western PMCs have set an example by legitimately utilizing contractors as an effective tool during their operations, what has in turn established a precedent for their Russian counterparts, which can potentially be applied to other regions of the world with their respective regional specifics. Therefore, it poses a much greater threat than the contractors based in the west. As new actors in the environment of international relations, we must take into account their regional specifics and characteristics, rooted deep down in the strategic and doctrinal

thinking of the Great Powers.

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