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Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies

— the implications for European and Norwegian Security

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Summary

Russian private military and security companies (PMSCs) have recently caused headlines in international media. This is mainly because of the Russian PMSC Wagner's participation in the war in Syria on the side of President Assad. However, the Russian PMSC industry is larger and more varied than it appears at first glance.

In this report we start by analysing the historical Russian experience with the use of private force. The Russian Cossacks are of prime importance here. Today these groups are back on the private force market after being curbed during Soviet times. Apart from Cossack groups, also other types of private force providers thrive in Russia, including both private militias, such as Ramzan Kadyrov's Terek, and the Russian PMSCs. It would be wrong to describe the Russian PMSC industry as large, but the few companies that do exist are very active. In addition to participating in combat in Donbas and Syria, they have also acted as military advisers to the governments of Sudan and the Central African Republic.

There is great variety among the Russian PMSCs. Some, first of all Wagner, are probably more mercenaries than PMSCs, while for example the RSB-group is relatively similar to Western PMSCs. Other companies are more akin to militias. In general, the Russian PMSCs seem more ready for direct combat, more ideologically motivated (some of them) and less inclined to providing logistics and other support services than most Western PMSCs.

Since President Putin already in 2012 spoke favourably about the development of PMSCs, it may seem surprising that they are still not legalized. There have been several attempts over the last few years to get such legislation through the Duma, but they have all failed. We argue that these failures can be ascribed to a combination of ideological resistance from parts of the military leadership as well as bureaucratic struggles between government agencies over the issue of control. Both the FSB, the GRU and the foreign ministry would probably want to have at least partial control over these actors if the PMSCs were to be legalised. However, as long as the divisions of power are still debated, the legislation is hard to pass. In addition, PMSCs may be considered more useful as long as they are not explicitly legal. This way, it is easier for Russian authorities to deny responsibility for Russian PMSC actions internationally.

In the final part of the report we discuss potential consequences of the development of a Russian PMSC industry for Norwegian and European security. Here, we make a distinction between bilateral and international consequences. By bilateral consequences we mean instances where Russian PMSCs act on behalf of the Russian government in political and military conflicts with specific European countries. By international consequences we mean the presence of Russian PMSCs in conflict zones outside Europe, but where one or more European countries are involved militarily.

Sammendrag

Russiske private militære selskaper har nylig fått betydelig oppmerksomhet i internasjonale medier. Dette skyldes først og fremst det private militære selskapet Wagners deltagelse i striden på president Assads side i Syria, men den russiske private militærindustrien er større og mer variert enn dette.

I denne rapporten gjør vi først rede for Russlands historiske erfaring med å delegere voldsmakt til organiserte private aktører. De russiske kosakkene står sentralt i denne redegjørelsen da disse i dag er tilbake på det private «voldsmarkedet» etter å ha vært holdt utenfor i sovjettiden. Nå har kosakkene imidlertid fått følge av flere andre typer private voldsaktører. Disse inkluderer blant andre Ramzan Kadyrovs private milits Terek og ikke minst de russiske private militære selskapene.

Det vil være feil å hevde at disse selskapene til sammen utgjør noen stor industri i Russland, men de få selskapene som finnes er til dels svært aktive. I tillegg til beskyttelsesoppdrag i Irak og Somalia har de også deltatt i regulære kamphandlinger i Donbas og Syria, og de har opptrådt som militære rådgivere for regjeringene i Sudan og den Sentralafrikanske Republikk.

Det er stor bredde innenfor denne industrien i Russland. Noen, først og fremst Wagner, er mer for leiesoldater å regne, mens for eksempel RSB-Group ligner på tilsvarende vestlige selskaper. Generelt skiller de russiske selskapene seg fra de vestlige ved å være mer villige til å delta i direkte strid, ved å være mer preget av ideologiske motiver (noen av dem) og ved å være mindre engasjert i logistikk og støttetjenester.

Siden president Putin allerede i 2012 uttalte seg positivt om framveksten av en russisk privat militærindustri, kan det virke noe overraskende at slike selskaper fremdeles ikke er legalisert i Russland. Det har de siste årene vært flere forsøk på å få legaliserende lovgivning gjennom i Dumaen, men disse har foreløpig ikke lyktes. Vi argumenterer i denne studien for at årsakene til dette antakelig er å finne i ideologisk motstand mot privatisering av voldsmakt i deler av det russiske militærapparatet, og i det faktum at viktige politiske aktører i Russland slik som FSB, GRU og Utenriksdepartementet kjemper seg i mellom om kontroll over denne virksomheten. Så lenge fordelingen av myndighet innenfor dette området er gjenstand for maktkamp er det vanskelig å få vedtatt lovgivning. I tillegg kan det tenkes at selskapene anses som desto mer nyttige så lenge de ikke er formelt lovlige da det gjør det enklere for russiske myndigheter å fraskrive seg ansvar for selskaperens handlinger internasjonalt.

I den siste delen av studien diskuterer vi hvilke konsekvenser framveksten av russiske private militære selskaper kan få for norsk og europeisk sikkerhet. Vi skiller i denne analysen mellom bilaterale og internasjonale konsekvenser. Med bilaterale konsekvenser mener vi tilfeller der russiske myndigheter kan tenkes å bruke slike selskaper for med makt å påvirke europeiske enkeltland i viktige politiske spørsmål. Med internasjonale konsekvenser mener vi tilfeller utenfor Europa der russiske private selskaper deltar i stridigheter hvor også europeiske styrker kan være involvert.

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Preface

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1 Introduction

How does the Russian use of private military and security companies affect Russian use of force and what are the implications for European and Norwegian security? Over the past couple of decades, private military and security companies (PMSCs) have become instrumental to modern warfare. Western PMSCs have so far dominated this trend and hence, the bulk of the academic and media attention has been directed at this part of the industry. However, in recent years, PMSCs have developed in many parts of the world, including in Russia. The example set by the US in particular, and its extensive use of PMSCs in the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, is likely to have been a source of inspiration for many other countries interested in expanding their war fighting repertoire and defence industries.

Recent reports of the Russian mercenary company Wagner's operations in Syria have sparked significant media attention to the phenomenon of Russian PMSCs. So far, however, there is still little systematic study of the Russian PMSC industry and its capabilities. Speculations abound in terms of if and how these companies can be tied to Russian authorities. There is, furthermore, little academic research on how PMSCs relate to Russian foreign policy or if and how the Kremlin has used PMSCs in recent military operations. This report will direct its attention to these questions.

The report will start by discussing how best to understand Russian authorities' relations with non-state actors of force in general. This first part of the paper describes important aspects of the history of Russian use of private providers of force and serves to illustrate that Russian use of private force is not a new phenomenon. This in turn suggests that path-dependency may be part of the explanation for the current use of such force. After that, we perform an empirical mapping of the contemporary Russian PMSC industry. This mapping is followed by a brief discussion of how the Russian PMSC industry differs from the Western PMSC industry and what this means for the debate on the use of PMSCs, as well as for further study of PMSCs.

Taking the mapping as a point of departure, the paper then assesses relations between different segments of the industry and the Russian authorities, including different parts of the Russian security apparatus. In the final section we discuss what potential consequences the development of the Russian PMSC industry may have for European and Norwegian security. Here, we discuss both how Russian PMSCs may play a role in bilateral conflicts between Russia and European countries, as well as the possible wider implications of the future presence of such companies in international conflicts outside Europe.

1.1 The international private military and security industry

A burgeoning literature on Western PMSCs has shown how this industry has become indispensable, not only to expeditionary military operations but also to the day-to-day maintenance, training and support of the world's most advanced military organizations. In the US for example, PMSCs fill gaps in the military organization and carry out routine military

support and logistics, they support allies in contingency operations and carry out “train and equip” programs in partner countries outside the developed world.

The Western PMSC industry is a heterogeneous and flexible industry and PMSCs are versatile instruments to Western governments. Some companies have also been used to carry out reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, force protection and detainment and interrogations. One PMSC was even used by the CIA in the targeted killing program aimed at killing central Al-Qaeda individuals (Mazetti 2009).¹ PMSCs are perhaps best known for supplying protective services in Afghanistan and Iraq, an activity that sometimes has led them to cross the line between defensive protective activities and combat activities.² This goes to show that the US in particular has used PMSCs as force multipliers, and that within the Western segment, there are few established lines for their activities, apart from pure combat activity.³ PMSCs are not only flexible tools that can be called upon to perform ad hoc tasks in war, but they increasingly form part of long-term defence planning in many countries.

1.2 Making sense of the diversity of the industry

PMSCs do not make up a clear-cut category of social actors. PMSCs are often difficult to define both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, the lack of common labels and definitions contributes to blur discussions on commercial security and military companies. Not only do several denotations of these companies coexist (often with strong normative connotations), but the more commonly used labels are also used to denote a variety of empirical phenomena, ranging from small companies supplying guards to large logistical conglomerates. The confusion related to understanding what exactly the PMSC industry is and what it is not, is not eased by the fact that the companies making up the industry tend to serve a wide variety of demands, both within the military and civilian segments. While some companies specialize in some, or a few of these services, others will be able to provide a wide selection, and a few will form one-stop shops for military support services. In addition to the PMSC label being blurry in itself, PMSC may also be hard to distinguish from other types of companies that partially overlap in service offers. Logistics firms, weapons manufacturers, companies specializing in information technology, demining, surveillance, CCTV and other more mundane security services, may all provide some similar services commonly provided by PMSCs (Østensen 2013, 23).

In order to ease the “definitional morass” (Isenberg 2009, 14), which plagues much of the writing on PMSCs, several authors of academic texts, explicitly distinguish between private security companies (PSCs) and private military companies (PMCs). These distinctions are often made on the basis of whether the services provided are designed to have a strategic military impact or whether they simply provide protective services to personnel or property (Shearer

¹ The company in question was Blackwater USA, renamed Xe in 2009, and restructured and renamed Academi in 2011.

² See e.g. Prince 2004.

³ It should be noted that many countries employ PMSCs only for selected tasks while some use them on a more institutionalised scale.

1998). While this distinction may be analytically useful, many companies will operate on both sides of the divide, which gives the distinction limited practical value.

Although many PMSCs cater to militaries, Western companies generally avoid the military term in order to distance themselves from mercenary associations. The Western industry went through a rebranding and a legitimizing process from the mid-2000s. The driving force for this process was a realization that if companies were to attract valuable contracts with governments, they could not afford to have their image tainted by association with the mercenary companies that operated in Africa during the 1990s. Many media reports tended to equate PMSCs to Executive Outcomes and Sandline International and their infamous endeavors in Africa, or to mercenaries in general. In order to continue growing, the industry thus had to overhaul its appearance and one way it did so, was to remove the military aspect from labels and names, no matter what services the companies provided or who their main clients were.

Starting around 2003–2004, the industry was also attracting a lot of unwanted attention related to company behavior in Iraq in particular. Critics then began demanding that the industry should be controlled and regulated. Many companies thus saw a need to display a willingness and ability to operate according to certain standards that would not alienate governmental clients. That often meant to distance their companies from the “cowboy behavior” displayed by many companies operating in Iraq after 2003. At the same time, there was an increased willingness to use these companies, not only by the US government, but also by aid organizations, UN agencies and other clients, which would be sensitive to “militant” profiles or trigger-happy conduct. These customers would require companies to have a lower profile better tailored to their own activities and images. Both customers and the companies themselves thus preferred the label private security companies or other generic labels such as “risk management companies”, “risk consultancies”, or better yet, no label or category whatsoever.

In contrast with the Western industry, some of the Russian companies do not shy away from the military label and denote themselves “private military companies” or “military consulting companies” (e.g. RSB Group). This tendency may reflect a greater general acceptance for all things military in the Russian public, compared to many countries in Europe and in the US (Golts and Putnam, 2004). However, the Russian PMSC industry may also come to adjust its image to whatever position the Russian government takes in the future and to the level of acceptance it faces in the Russian public.⁴

In this report, we have used the collapsed term PMSC to denote both the Western and the Russian side of the industry. This is done, for one, due to the complexities related to categorizing companies as either PSCs or PMSCs, as described above. Secondly, making the distinction between the “security” and “military” domains is arguably not necessarily overly useful in modern conflict scenarios. In recent violent and non-violent conflicts involving Russia, attacks have crossed the dividing line between what is to be considered security and military

⁴ This may depend in particular on whether Russians continue to die in the service of PMSCs like Wagner, without receiving public acknowledgement from Russian authorities.

domains. Western responses to so-called “hybrid threats” are also designed to span this divide. In essence then, military and security services are understood broadly as services *intended to manage violence* – on land or sea and the industry accordingly offers its clients opportunities to improve or change their management of violence on a commercial contractual basis.

The wide array of companies and services that make up the private security and military market have made it difficult to make good classifications that cover the heterogeneity of the industry. None of the taxonomies provided so far have been acknowledged as cutting-edge in providing explanatory and definitional parsimony (Østensen 2013).⁵ Common to several of them is their focus on placing individual companies into categories. In order to make sense of the Russian industry and at the same time be able to compare it to the Western industry, we argue that a perhaps more useful starting point is to categorise services, rather than the companies themselves. Another reason for such an approach is that companies tend to adapt their service offers in accordance with contemporary demand, legal frameworks and the political permissiveness of their operations and services, making company categorizations subject to continuous reviews.

1.3 Comparing Western and Russian PMSCs

As a starting point, we briefly outline the services most common to Western PMSCs. Subsequently, we compare these to the services that Russian PMSCs (appear to) offer. Comparing the Russian companies to the Western industry may also be useful to better analyse what implications the Russian PMSC industry have for European and Norwegian security.

The services that the Western PMSC industry typically provides can roughly be grouped into three areas: protective security services, military support, and state building services. Table 1 provides examples of the services that these categories entail. Now, many PMSCs cater to a range of needs and provide services that pertain to two or all three niches. Large conglomerates like Dyncorp and Engility e.g. will specialize in military support and state building, but will also provide a full range of protective services as part of the package.⁶ Other companies will focus on a particular domain and will provide a range of different services related to that domain. For instance, Solace Global provides a rather wide range of security services to commercial clients within the maritime domain.⁷ Smaller companies may provide only a handful of services pertaining to one of the niches. Some companies are highly specialized and provide only one or two different services.

⁵ Classifications and taxonomies have been made by e.g. Vines 2000, Mandel 2002, Singer 2003, Spearin 2006 and Isenberg 2009. The best known is Peter W. Singer’s “Tip of the Spear” typology. Singer classifies PMSCs according to the range of services and level of force a company is able to offer (see Singer 2003).

⁶ See <http://www.dyn-intl.com/>

⁷ See <https://www.solaceglobal.com/sectors/maritime/>

Table 1.1 Western private security and military services

Niche	Customers	During war/peace	Examples	Designed to
Protective services	Commercial companies, NGOs, IOs, state agencies, individuals, etc.	Both	Personal security details, consulting, training, risk assessments, unarmed or armed guards (e.g. onboard ships, static or mobile), convoy protection, evacuation, kidnap & ransom services, intelligence, etc	Protect the client
Military support	State militaries, allied militaries, allied militias (?)	Both	Logistics support, heavy lift, transport, capacity building, weapons systems training and maintenance, expeditionary construction, mine clearance, interpretation, intelligence, etc.	Increase military capability or capacity
State building	State agencies (both donor state and recipient state), NGOs, development agencies	Both	Training, mentoring, security sector reform, demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs, institution building, infrastructure, humanitarian mine and UXO clearance, humanitarian aid, etc.	Contribute to peace building, development, post war reconstruction, COIN operations, etc.

Table 1.1 displays the services most often provided by Western PMSCs that aspire to work on the legal side of the spectrum. In addition, there are also fly-by-night companies, which provide security to private customers and perhaps also authoritarian regimes and/or militias around the globe. While some of these will cater to criminal organizations and other illicit customers, others are simply not legally registered or are outlawed by (home) national legislations and function as mailbox companies in locations where supplying armed protection is legal.⁸ At other times, companies that operate in the shadows may avoid public attention for other reasons (such as customer discretion etc.).

Western companies will generally shy away from services that will associate them with mercenaries. This applies to the segment of the Western industry that competes for contracts for (Western) state clients and which operates on the open market. These companies are generally

⁸ Norway is one such country that bans companies from the supply of armed services on land (at sea is a different matter). That means that a smaller number of Norwegian citizens supply these services from e.g. a London office (mailbox).

sensitive to bad publicity and many also find that operating in complex war zones is simply too risky. Both because it is dangerous and because going too far in terms of violence could easily put them in Blackwater's shoes, a company which lost all its contracts in Iraq after the so-called Nisour square shootings in 2007 (see e.g. Tavernise 2007). Seventeen people were killed in the shooting and the company suffered enormous reputational damage to the point where the company was rebranded and reorganized several times.

Much like its Western counterpart, the Russian PMSC industry is also heterogeneous (see Chapter 3). That said, two main features distinguish Russian PMSCs from the main segment of Western PMSCs. The first is the tendency to deliver combat services. Western companies will, as mentioned above, generally be very hesitant to deliver services that will associate them with mercenaries. In this respect, Russian companies have more in common with some infamous African companies of the past, the most well known of which are Executive Outcomes and British registered Sandline International. Executive Outcomes in particular, while defunct now, gained local popular support because they took part in fighting for governments against the attacks of brutal militias.⁹ Offspring of these companies still exist in Africa. One example is STTEP (run by Eeben Barlow, one of the figures behind Executive Outcomes). STTEP was e.g. used by the Nigerian government to fight Boko Haram in 2015 (Freeman 2015).

The second disparate feature of the Russian PMSC industry compared to the Western one, concerns the military support niche. In the West, the supply of logistics and support services is the largest of the three segments. The Russian companies that are discussed in chapter 3, generally do not offer these types of services. However, some of the companies that operated after the fall the Soviet Union supplied some support services, especially tailored to air operations.

In terms of the state building category, Russian PMSCs do provide training, probably as part of capacity building to allies, or as part of weapons deals. However, training for state building purposes do not appear to be a featured part of their service offer. One reason is probably that these activities are not central to Russian military forces, which are geared towards kinetic activities.

In Russia, as in any other national context, the PMSC industry will be shaped not only by supply and demand, but also by the cultural, historical, political and legal environment they exist within. The industry will be affected by the national institutional environment, national military culture, popular acceptance, historical propensity for using private actors to exercise force, relations to government structures and elites, and many other factors.¹⁰ In short, companies will be "socialized" by their home environment, even when acting internationally (Flohr et al. 2010, 241). Unsurprisingly, the socialization shapes not only the services that Russian companies offer, but also the overall Russian "market for force" (Dunigan and Petersohn 2015).

⁹ See e.g. Rubin 1999.

¹⁰ It should be noted that PMSCs are not simply passive recipients of their context, they have also taken an active role in shaping both regulatory environments and public acceptance of their services (see e.g. Østensen 2011, Østensen 2013).

Dunigan and Petersohn (2015) have identified three different types of markets for force, which they term neoliberal, hybrid and racketeer markets. The basic features of a neoliberal market are that clients and providers enter into legal contracts for the voluntary exchange of services or goods. The bulk of Western companies operate within such a market. In typical hybrid markets, the state controls the market and the providers then only function according to the approval of the state. In racketeer markets the role of the state and the legal system is marginalized and the logic of this “market” is force, meaning customers cannot choose providers but are subjected to the rule of the criminal organization or warlords that claim to provide security (Dunigan and Petersohn 2015: 163-165). Olivia Allison has previously characterized the Russian private market for force as “neoliberal” because of the predominance of private business entities (Allison, 2015). We argue that the new evidence presented in this study indicates that today this market is better characterized as hybrid. This is because of the increasing involvement of the Russian state both as an organizer of the industry and as a customer.

That the Russian market is characterized as hybrid, should not be taken to mean that companies are oblivious to legal conditions. The legal framework can effectively be used as an instrument to abolish the industry should it fall out of favour with the Kremlin. Developments in Russian foreign policy is another factor, which helps shape demand as well as the industry’s character. However, while PMSCs in the current shape is a relatively new phenomenon in Russia, history has shown a propensity for the Kremlin to use non-state armed actors, suggesting that PMSCs are likely to continue to exist in some shape or form.

The following section lays out some of the historical legacy in terms of Russian use of private actors for the use of force. Some weight is placed on the legacy of Russian use of Cossacks. The rationale for the rather thorough description of the Cossacks as a Russian instrument for force is both that it offers a particularly telling illustration of the complex relationship between the Russian state and nonstate armed actors, and that Cossacks have yet again surfaced as a tool to Russian authorities. The Russian relationship to the Cossacks also illustrates some of the control dilemmas that the state appears to grapple with concerning PMSCs.

2 The historical relationship between the Russian state and non-state armed actors

“Putin’s legacy in civilian-military relations is much more the result of Russian history than of external attempts to make the Russian leadership change its power structures”

Thomas Gomart (2008, 12)

Russia has historically been a state where the Weberian principle on the state monopoly on violence has, at least rhetorically, been treasured. However, Russia also has a militaristic

political culture (Golts and Putnam, 2004) and the democratic Western model of civilian control of the military is not necessarily recognized as an ideal in Russia (Gomart 2008, 11–12). Examples of governmental use of private lethal force is as such not hard to come by throughout Russian history.

2.1 Exceptions to the state monopoly of force

Russia has a record of using nonstate armed force in regional conflicts. There are for example reports of ragtag Chechen mercenaries taking part in the war in Georgia in 2007-8. The so-called *Vostok Battalion* is reported to have been one particularly brutal such force. What the exact relationship is between Russian commanders and the mercenaries is not always clear, but Russia has often claimed that these bands are “volunteers”, although some sources would claim that one can safely assume that they were there with Russian forces’ blessing (see e.g. Peters 2008).

Domestically, the main exception to the state monopoly is probably the plethora of private security companies that were established in Russia in the 1990s (Galeotti, 2013). These companies were and are mostly concerned with the protection of property and individuals inside Russia. The rise of the industry was very much a product of market reforms put in place by the Yeltsin administration combined with efforts to downsize the state security sector. The rapid speed of privatization, combined with weakening security institutions thus provided ripe conditions for both crime and private security arrangements. The prevalence of criminal groups demanding businesses to pay protection money also made hiring a private security company a way out of engaging with the mafia or other criminals (Volkov 2002, 144–45). Accordingly, the law on private protection was adopted in 1992, which effectively legalized private security companies (Volkov 2002, 43, 149). At the same time, public police displayed both low capacity and low quality, with ensuing lack of public trust in the police (see e.g. Taylor 2011, 207). Many private security companies were started by former state security personnel who eyed an opportunity for earning more money (Volkov 2001, 149). State institutions also took part in the market and exploited the demand for protection by selling their services to the highest bidder (Lock 1998, 1417). According to Volkov, the public reaction to private security was initially mixed (2002, 149), but by 1998, the ratio of private security officers to police had already risen to three to one, the same as in the US at the time (Lock 1998). Russia thus has a large domestic market for private security.

A somewhat different type of private security outfit in existence is the private armed units frequently established by regional leaders. These lightly armed units are typically rationalized as necessary for the personal protection of regional leaders but seem to provide force for other purposes as well. The most famous of these is the *Terek* unit of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, but similar units exist also in other Russian regions. Kadyrov in 2013 explicitly renounced the protection services provided by the Moscow controlled FSB and said he would create his own (Gorevoi, 2017b). These exceptions to the government monopoly on the use of violent force may be said – at least in part – to have prepared the ground for the development of Russian private military and security companies (PMSCs).

In addition to the domestic privatization of the legitimate use of violence, there have also been Russian private initiatives in the export of force. The most important was probably that Russian ex-military took part in armed conflicts abroad on an individual or partly organized basis throughout the post-Soviet period (Allison, 2015).¹¹ Retired Russian personnel often appeared to be part of arms deals with partners who lacked the expertise to operate the platforms that they had bought. Some observers claim that during the Ethiopia – Eritrea war (1998-2000) the Ethiopian air force was for all practical purposes led by the retired Russian air force colonel Yanakov (Cooper and Kyzer, 2008). As part of the sales agreement for SU-27s to Ethiopia, the fighter aircraft producer *Sukhoi* allegedly provided retired fighter pilots, mechanics, and ground personnel, which amounted to a small air force in and of itself (Global Security, Singer 2003). In 2008, media investigation into the death of a Russian MIG-29 pilot in Darfur led some to conclude that not only were retired Russian pilots flying Sudanese fighter jets, but so was also active duty Russian personnel (InformNapalm 2017a). In another example, in the years 2002-2003 the Russian MOD assisted Ethiopia in developing its own special forces under a commercial contract (Valentinov, 2010).

2.2 Cossacks as agents of Russian state security

Cossacks have a long and uneasy relationship with the Russian state. This relationship has oscillated between serving as military muscle of the state and constituting a challenge to its authority. Accordingly, the way that the Russian state has treated Cossacks has varied between providing them with privileges to banning their identity and oppressing them as a group. After a long period of ostracism during the Cold War, Cossacks appear to again be regarded as useful security actors to the Russian state. Although Cossacks no longer represent a “warrior class” in Russian society, they have, at least to some extent, retained their status as ‘free reign men under arms’ that can be used to the benefit of the Russian state. While they are not organized as PMSCs per se, much like PMSCs, they present both dangers and opportunities to Russian authorities. They represent an opportunity for unconventional force projection while at the same time they may be a threat to the state monopoly of violence. This section traces the historical willingness to use Cossacks as auxiliary forces for the Russian state.

The term “Cossack” can be traced back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and originally denoted socially constructed groups of men living as nomadic traders, mercenaries and pirates of the steppes on the frontiers beyond the borders of the kingdoms of Poland-Lithuania and Russia (Toje 2006, 1065). Thus, we are talking about a social rather than ethnic identity. Cossack peasants avoided serfdom in exchange for engaging in the defence of the Russian southern and eastern borders. While by no means a monolithic unity, Cossacks culture is traditionally associated with military achievements, war fighting skills and bravery. Cossacks have been renowned to be innovative and skilled at seeking ways to throw the enemy off-balance and catch him unaware. They have also earned a reputation as heroic and persistent

¹¹ “Organized” mostly meant that they either were hired by foreign companies or leased by the Russian MOD (Dzhemal, 2009).

warriors, which meant they were not only skilled in unconventional warfare, but also highly valued mercenaries (O'Rourke 2012, 1).

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Cossack groups presented a threat to newly evolving states through their attacks on border settlements, the sheltering of wanted criminals, their mercenary activities and later, as potential competitors in state formation processes. At the same time, Cossack groups also represented potential military resources for the gradually developing and expanding Moscow state (Toje 2006, 1065). As more territory was conquered, the state had a need to defend the new areas and transform them into Russian territories. The state thus negotiated a contract with the Cossacks which gave them special rights to natural resources and a degree of administrative autonomy in the areas where they settled in exchange for settling and defending these territories on behalf of the state (Toje 2006, 1065).

In this period, the Cossacks established themselves as orthodox buffers towards the Islamic south and as defenders of the Tsarist Empire. Yet, the allegiance between the Tsar and the Cossacks appeared highly pragmatic and inconsistent. The Cossacks obeyed the Tsar whenever his orders suited their own convenience and the Tsar denounced and embraced the Cossacks as he saw fit. The Tsar thus at times referred to the Cossacks as his faithful subjects; and at times, such as when complaints were made to him about Cossack raids on Turkish territory, declared that they were indeed not his subjects and that their actions were not his responsibility (Wallace 2015, 236). Nevertheless, the Tsar regularly provided the Cossacks with supplies and ammunition from Moscow (Wallace 2015, 236). In this way, the tsar used Cossacks when needed and kept them at arm's length when needed. This arrangement allowed the authorities to maintain a certain "deniability" what concerned the Cossacks, and for the Cossacks to also maintain a loose commitment to the Tsar.

The Cossacks also turned against the empire, leading two major revolutions in the 18th century. After the Tsar crushed the uprisings, the Cossacks were transformed into a special military caste within the imperial forces. The Cossack brigades were considered some of Russia's most elite and were constantly used in military campaigns to expand the empire into the Caucasus, Siberia and Central Asia. They were also used as paramilitary forces to drive out (or kill) Muslims and Jews within the empire. While they fought under the empire's command, however, they continued to frequently act on their own, and remained hard to control.

After the Russian revolution Cossacks fell out of favour with most sides. Testimony to the loose bonds to the Tsar, Cossacks fought on more than one side. Some fought in independent Cossack armies, some fought for the Whites, some fought for the Reds, and many fought for all three (O'Rourke 2012, 4). As a result, in January 1919 the Bolsheviks launched a "de-Cossackization" program, which led more than 1,5 million to be killed, thousands to flee, and many of the remaining groups to be divided among different regions (Van Herpen 2014, 144). At the outbreak of World War II, the Cossack brigades were again resurrected to fight the Nazis (van Herpen 2014, 144). Seventeen Cossack corps were formed to serve in the Red Army. Cossacks had, however, suffered purges carried out by Stalin and thousands chose to fight alongside the Germans (O'Rourke 2012, 4).

For the remainder of the Soviet period, Moscow cracked down on Cossack identity but failed to delete it. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it became clear that many Russians had not forgotten the Cossack heritage passed on from their ancestors. Cossack identity experienced a resurgence and Cossack political organizations formed across the country (Toje 2006, 1069). In 1992, Yeltsin issued Decree 632 on the rehabilitation of the Cossacks, which gradually paved the way for a restoration of the relationship between the Cossacks and the Russian state. In 1994, Yeltsin also issued a decree, which established a Council for Cossack Affairs, and guaranteed them the status as an “archipelago state” within Russia. This archipelago state, made up of 12 Federal Cossack Regions united by a Council, was responsible to the President, not the government, a feature, which has led to comparisons to the historical relationship with the tsar (Galeotti 1995, 56). As part of this “rehabilitation process”, Cossacks were also gradually given policing and military tasks again (van Herpen 2014, 144). By 1995 for instance, Cossacks had been hired as local vigilantes in many Russian cities, patrolling the streets with clubs, sabres and their traditional whips. The regional administration in Krasnodar had even hired untrained armed Cossacks to patrol the countryside on horseback and in armoured vehicles, equipped with the power to perform search and arrests (Galeotti 1995, 56). Yeltsin’s reforms also re-established Cossack regiments and Cossacks were reinstated as border guards. Cossacks were granted the right to establish security companies, and by 1997, several of the Cossack private security companies were working for the Moscow city government (Galeotti, 2012).

2.2.1 Cossacks and the Russian state today

The real boost to the Cossack movement seemed to come when Vladimir Putin assumed power. Putin promoted Cossack bravery, Orthodox faith, conservative values and loyalty to the Russian state as an integral part of Russian national identity and the Cossacks in return expressed staunch support for Putin. A 2005 legal bill named “On the State Service of the Russian Cossacks” created the legal basis for Cossacks willing to serve the Russian state to do so officially and legally (Baranec 2014, 9). It granted more than 600,000 Cossacks ample rights to carry out various functions usually controlled by the state. This includes the right to defend border regions, guard national forests, organize military training for young cadets, fight terrorism, protect local government buildings and administrative sites and provide the vague service of protecting public order (Darczewska 2017). The welcoming of Cossacks into Russian services sped up after the 2011–2012 demonstrations against alleged vote fraud (Baranec 2014, 10). A new Cossack regiment was established in the army and Cossack military schools were founded (van Herpen 2014, 145).

Cossacks have a history of carrying out security related tasks that the authorities preferred not to do. In 2005 in the southern Krasnodar, Cossacks were used to displace the ethnic minority, the Meshketian Turks. Cossack forces carried out beatings and ambushes and attacks on businesses and homes (van Herpen 2014, 147). Cossacks also became an effective force in terms of forcing out muslim migrants and patrolling the streets in the Krasnodar province. The governor of the province, Aleksandr Tkachev, explained that while the police was restricted by democracy and human rights, the Cossacks were handy as they could act more freely. Or in other words, “what you can’t do, the Cossacks can” (Lipman 2012). Accordingly, recent use of the Cossacks

displays many similarities to the way they were used historically, especially during the 19th and early 20th century.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, there have been several instances of Cossacks acting as mercenaries in conflict zones, e.g. in the Georgian breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in Chechnya and Transdnistria, as well as in the former Yugoslavia (Van Herpen 2014, 147). During the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, there were reports that thousands of Cossack paramilitaries fought on the Russian side (Parfitt 2008, Human Rights Watch 2008). In fact, Cossack leaders had bragged ahead of the breakout of the war that up to 10,000 to 15,000 experienced Cossacks fighters could be sent to join the fight (Van Herpen 2014, 147). This activity has according to Galeotti, not been motivated by monetary gains alone, but also by historical interests and claims to many volatile and disputed regions within the former Soviet Union (1995, 56). This goes to show that Cossack fighters can still be mobilized to fight for ideological reasons in Russia's vicinity.

Cossacks do not only serve the Russian state informally, they can also do so formally by signing up on the state's Cossack register. There are accordingly both unregistered and registered Cossack associations, the registered ones enjoy a particularly close relationship to the Kremlin and perform services in exchange for economic benefits provided to the associations (see e.g. Darczewska 2017). However, unregistered associations also serve the Kremlin. According to Jolanta Darczewska, unregistered Cossack associations are in fact "more useful when fulfilling the role of 'Russian fifth columns', as they can camouflage their ties with the Russian state more effectively" (2017, 22).

In 2012, eleven registered Cossack associations were (at least on paper) collapsed into one All-Russian Military Cossack Association, commonly referred to as the Cossack troops. The troops probably number around 300,000 individuals. This also includes the Independent Baltic Cossack District in Kaliningrad (Darczewska 2017, 25, 27). From 2012, the Cossack army leader (ataman) was stationed in Moscow and reports directly to the commander-in-chief, Vladimir Putin. The force has acted as a military unit as well as police force, vice squads, cyber volunteers, and volunteer teams for security at mass events (Darczewska 2017, 19). In fact, policing tasks have been directed specifically towards keeping social order and curbing political opposition. They have in particular been visible when cracking down on events that were either seen as in opposition to Putin or to the Orthodox Church, such as political demonstrations, art exhibitions or events promoting the rights of gay people. Cossacks carried out policing tasks during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, the anti-Putin demonstrations in Moscow after the 2018 presidential election, and the 2018 soccer World Cup.

Under Putin, the restoration of the Cossacks' status and role appears to be part of an attempt to revive the greatness of the Russian past when Cossacks defended the national and cultural borders of the Russian Federation. Cossacks are not just folklore, however, but actually serve as community police, suppressors of social discontent, border guards, Presidential guard force and finally, as fighting forces. The last capacity has been demonstrated during the annexation of Crimea and in the war in Eastern Ukraine.

In 1995, Galeotti estimated that there were about a million Cossacks in Ukraine with an ambiguous relationship to both Russia and Ukraine. He also foresaw that while Ukraine had made attempts to pacify them, they represented “a potential problem for the Ukrainians” as some, mostly Luhansk Cossacks, had encouraged Russian Cossacks to lay claim to portions of Ukraine, notably those with large Russian populations (Galeotti 1995, 58). To shore up any such loyalty, Ukrainian authorities also raised Cossack units to guard its borders (Galeotti 1995, 58). They had limited success in this as several media reports have revealed that both Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks played a significant role in the Russian occupation of Crimea as well as in the ensuing war in Eastern Ukraine. Ukrainian Cossack paramilitary groups manned checkpoints on highways, guarded the headquarters of the separatist government, patrolled the streets and helped build and defend fortifications on the de facto Crimean border with Ukraine. Through it all, they have had ample help from Russia’s professional and state-sponsored Cossack forces, who have come by the thousands to defend what they see as historically Russian lands (Schuster 2014b).

After the annexation was over, there were reports that many Cossacks had taken part in the war in the Eastern Ukrainian provinces. One example includes the so-called “Cossack National Guard”, an association of unregistered Cossack groups formed in 2014 to support the Russian war against Ukraine in Donbas (Darczewska 2017, 21).

Out of Ukraine's roughly 30 Cossack leaders, almost all have come out in support of the separatist cause (Reed 2014). While Cossacks of both Ukrainian and Russian origin provided support to separatists, there were also reports that Cossacks have fought on the Ukrainian side of the conflict. However, according to some reports, Cossacks fought more effectively on the side of the separatists (see Reed 2014), which may be explained by their close coordination or even integration with Russian forces. In the words of Galeotti, most often these volunteers were in fact not individuals attaching themselves to different militias, but rather “formed elements that appear directly or indirectly under Russian control” (Galeotti 2016, 60).

One Cossack group active on the side of the separatists is the so-called “Wolves Hundred”. The group claims to have existed since the 1990s (before Cossack regiments were included in the Russian armed forces). News sources claim they formed part of the original core of the militant fighters who took over several towns in April 2014 (Schuster 2014a). Fighting inside Ukraine, they would typically get their reinforcements from other Cossack militias across the Russian border. While the Wolves Hundred is an unregistered Cossack group and denies ties to the Russian state (see Schuster 2014a), their actions have not been restrained by Moscow. The legal amendment “against participating in armed formations on the territory of a foreign state” introduced as a means to stop Russians from going to Syria in service of rebels, could easily have been used to stop paramilitary groups like the Wolves Hundred (Baranec 2014, 12). Galeotti, goes further and claims that, Cossacks (and other irregular auxiliaries)¹² have in fact largely been organized or coordinated by the GRU (the foreign military intelligence agency of

¹² There are claims that the Russian regime supports a wide variety of irregulars that support the Russian separatists in the war in Eastern Ukraine. Among these are reportedly biker gangs (such as the Night Wolfes), right-wing radicals, individual mercenaries, bands of mercenaries of various kinds, Football hooligans, etc.

the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), operating out of their headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, close to the border (2016, 59).

Tomáš Baranec, sums up the ways that the Russian state has recently used Cossacks as:

“One, a symbol and guardians of the traditionalist policies advocated by Putin during his third term, second, as a suppressive force to tame the North Caucasus; and third as an expansionist tool toward the ‘near abroad’” (2014, 12).

A fourth function could arguably be added, namely that of a regime protectionist force.

Cossacks and regional strongmen militias such as Kadyrov’s Terek represent one way of deploying coercive power through deniable and irregular means. These forces are generally not organized as PMSCs, but by performing as pre-organized units that can be called upon while maintaining deniability, arguably function much like a PMSC. In fact, the Russian MoD also makes the comparison between Cossacks and PMSCs. In an article on the current debate about legalization of Russian PMSCs, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) daily *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red Star) points out that Cossack ataman Yermak’s efforts to conquer Siberia for the Tsar in the sixteenth century essentially was a PSMC operation (Palchikov, 2013). Perhaps more important to this study, the Kremlin’s use of Cossacks is testimony of its propensity to employ non-state actors to carry out tasks often considered the sole domain of state security forces. Nevertheless, there is a need to distinguish between these more militia type providers of private force and the emerging Russian PMSC industry. The latter tends to be better organized, managed, trained and oriented towards profits, although, as we will see, there are also Russian PMSCs that have some traits in common with the Cossacks.

3 The Russian Private Military and Security Company Industry

As discussed above, Russia has been an exporter of former armed forces personnel for a couple of decades already. As a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, surplus military personnel and equipment became available on the legal and illegal markets around the world. Soviet aircraft and aviation personnel became especially valued, but some companies selling armed services also came into existence in this period. The section below first briefly describes the early PMSC industry, which usually hails from the early post-soviet period. It then moves on to a mapping of PMSCs in existence today, all of which appear to be relatively new.

3.1 The early Russian PMSC industry

In the years after the fall of the Soviet Union, surplus military and state security personnel frequently established domestic security companies as described above, but some also went abroad to work for the international PMSC industry. Former Russian soldiers served as body guards and as diverse types of protective work while Russian pilots and technicians were attractive to companies operating aircraft (Allison 2015). The South African mercenary PMSC, Executive Outcomes for instance employed Russian Mi-17 and Mi-24 attack helicopters and Russian and Ukrainian pilots and technicians to operate them (Reno 1997, 180). In this way, Russians got acquainted with the international PMSC industry.

In the domain of military support companies, Russian companies specializing in aviation sprung up after the fall of the Soviet Union. Due to the widespread appropriation of state property, a considerable number of Russian companies operating military transport planes and helicopters opened up, often in tax havens (Lock 1998). Some of these companies provided worldwide logistical support in support of legal operations, while others catered mainly to clients involved in illegal transports, including the logistics for on-going conflicts in Africa (Lock 1998, 1417-18). One of the better-known companies is Ruslan International. Ruslan operated a fleet of Antonov transport planes and catered to defence and commercial customers worldwide but closed down as of 31 December 2016.¹³

The downsizing of the Soviet military not only demobilized individual troops, but also entire cadres and military units. According to one observer, some of the demobilized elite military formations maintained sufficient cohesion to reconstitute themselves as, in effect, readymade PMSCs (Axelrod 2013, 193). The company “Alpha Group” was created out of Group A (Alpha Group), one of two FSB special forces units. Alpha Group was later acquired by the then U.S. company ArmorGroup sometime between 1999 and 2003. Another Russian PMSC, which has disappeared or mutated, is RusCorp Group. In 2010 RusCorp described itself as an international security holding company headquartered in Moscow, but with offices in Nigeria, Iraq, the United States, the UK and “other selected European countries”. The company further claimed to have wide experience from emergency and high-risk environments and to deliver services to handle “all aspects of security”.¹⁴ As such, RusCorp appears to have been an international armed private protection company, much like many US and UK PMSCs.

After 9/11 the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan presented security challenges for military and civilian actors in those environments, in turn presenting huge business opportunities for PMSCs. Russian companies also rushed to the scene in order to cater to Russian companies in particular. In 2003 the so called “non-government educational centre” *Antiterror* was established with the assistance of the Russian Union of Paratroopers. *Antiterror* signed contracts for the protection of the oil and gas infrastructure of the companies *Tatneft*, *Energoinzheniering* and the Russian Engineering Company in the mid-2000s (Valetskii and Konovalov 2013, 96). In 2010, the

¹³ See <http://www.ruslanint.com/>

¹⁴ Excerpts from RusCorp’s defunct homepage (<http://www.ruscorp.net>) acquired from http://www.privatemilitary.org/security_contractors.html (March 20, 2018).

Russian oil company Lukoil established its own security company – Lukom-A – to protect investments in Iraq. According to Arkadii Babchenko the Lukoil subsidiary was by law just a regular private security company, but in reality, it was a PMSC. The same author also claims that the next trigger for the PMSC business in Russia was Somali piracy. Russian ship-owners needed protection for their vessels in the Gulf of Aden. Thus, in terms of timing, the development of Russian PMSCs seems to follow international trends.

3.2 Mapping of contemporary Russian PMSCs

According to the Russian experts Ivan Konovalov and Oleg Valetskii, there are about 20 000 “private protection services” in Russia, about 4000 private security firms, and between 10 and 20 PMSCs (Konovalov and Valetskii, 2013, 100). Private protection services (*Chastnoe Okhrannoe Predpriatie – ChOP*) protect property and individuals in Russia on a commercial basis, and they are regulated by law No. 2487 from 1992 on “The activity of private detective and protection organizations in Russia”. Konovalov and Valetskii do not detail how “private security firms” are different from “private protection services”, but it seems likely that the former basically are bigger and more nationally represented versions of the latter and that they are regulated by the same law. PMSCs, on the other hand, are not officially legal in Russia. Therefore, the PMSCs described in this study that have registration in Russia are, despite the very different profile of the services they provide, officially registered as “private security firms”. They now, however, more commonly refer to themselves publicly as PMSCs. Below follows a short mapping and description of the six currently most prominent PMSCs. As will be clear from this presentation, the Russian PMSCs vary considerably both in terms of what they do, how they are connected to Russian authorities, and how they compare to Western PMSCs.

The Antiterror family of companies

The company *Antiterror-Orel* was officially registered in the city of Orel in 2003 as a “non-government education and training centre” (Neelov, 2013, 27). The training centre was set up by former Special Forces operatives living in this city. *Antiterror-Orel* next signed contracts with different Russian civilian companies, for the protection of their commercial operations in Iraq. Tiger Top Rent Security was one of the *Antiterror-Orel* detachments that worked in Iraq. This detachment seems to have been the point of departure for several later Russian PMSCs. The exact details of the further process of splitting into new subsidiaries and new companies, however, are still somewhat unclear. The Russian observer Orkhan Dzhemal talks about these companies collectively as the “Orel mercenaries” (Dzhemal, 2018). Different sources have slightly different versions of what happened, but it seems that Tiger Top Rent Security at least served as a base for the establishment of the companies Moran Security Group, Ferax and *Redut-Antiterror*. Of these, the currently most prominent is the Moran Security Group (<http://moran-group.org/>).

Moran was established by a mix of former FSB and Russian Navy personnel (Morgenstern, 2015a, 166). On its website, the company mainly claims to provide protection services in the maritime domain, including “armed escort of ships”. The company was officially registered in

2011 but was active before that (Neelov, 2013, 30). According to the company website, their first international mission was in 1999, when they recovered a ship belonging to a United Arab Emirates owner. This ship had been hijacked by Sudanese nationals. Most of the other missions they choose to present took place in Iraq. Additionally, they also mention missions in some African countries – Central African Republic, Kenya and Nigeria. Moran Security controls a number of its own naval vessels, but these are registered in the Cook Islands and not in Russia (Morgenstern, 166). In their information to prospective applicants for work they state that preference is given to "former officers or non-commissioned officers that have served in special forces units (GRU), the airborne forces, naval infantry, and who have served in at least two operations abroad. Furthermore, knowledge of English is a plus». It was operatives from Moran Security that in 2013 set up the Slavonic Corpus PMSC that served as the precursor for the Wagner PMSC which is described separately below.

Another subsidiary of Tiger Top Rent Security is *Redut-Antiterror*. *Redut-Antiterror* also mostly consists of Russian ex-military, in this case, especially from the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the Russian airborne troops. The company was formed in 2008 and is alleged to have especially close relations with the Russian MOD (Shishkov, 2009; Gorevoi, 2017a). On the Tiger Top Rent Security offshoot Ferax, it has not been possible to find relevant information in open sources.

RSB-Group

Independent from the *Antiterror*-family, the RSB-Group (<http://rsb-group.org/>) was officially registered in Moscow in 2011. A Russian source claims that the company was set up by a mix of former GRU and FSB officers (Vysokii, 2017). The head of the company is Oleg Krinitsyn. This company has among other things been engaged in the protection of naval vessel in African waters (outside Somalia and in the Gulf of Guinea), mine clearance in Libya, and possibly also in the protection of land convoys and VIPs in several Arab countries. Krinitsyn, however, in an interview with the BBC in 2017, denied rumours of RSB-Group participation in the civil war in Sudan (Russian service of the BBC, 2017). The RSB-Group has an office in Senegal in addition to Moscow, and they have representatives in Sri-Lanka, Turkey, Germany and Cyprus (Boiarskii, 2014). The Ukrainian web-site *Infonapalm* claims that the RSB-Group also has been aiding the Russian backed rebels in Donbas, and at least one Russian specialist thinks this company took part in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Morgenshtern, 2015b). Two Russian observers describe the RSB-Group as possibly "the most serious" Russian PMSC (Staver and Skomorokhov, 2016). By this they meant that this company is the one most similar to major Western PMSCs. It is interesting to note that the RSB-Group in 2016 opened its own cyber defence detachment. According to Krinitsyn, only non-Russian PMSCs had done this before the RSB-group (Khodarenok and Zatari, 2017). He also added that they so far had received one request for assistance in meddling in the elections of a foreign state. They had refused the request because it was illegal, but Krinitsyn would not say which state the request had come from. He only said that it was not Russia (Khodarenok and Zatari, 2017).

PMSC Mar

The PMSC MAR (<http://chvk-mar.ru/>) seems to be a somewhat smaller Russian PMSC with a more local post-Soviet agenda than Moran and the RSB-Group. The company home page has a flash saying that MAR does not engage in “mercenary activity or participate in armed struggles on the side of foreign governments or illegal non-state groups”. The website further lists a large number of services provided by the company. These are mostly to do with the armed protection of facilities and transport, but also include the ambiguously worded “maintenance of public order in extreme circumstances”. Ukrainian sources claim that Mar is one of the Russian PMSCs that the Russian state has used against Ukrainian forces in the war in Donbas. On this topic, the founder of the company, Aleksei Marushchenko, in an interview with the Russian military news agency *Voennoe.ru*, claims that “we do not take part in combat action in Donbas”. However, somewhat self-contradictory, he follows up by saying that “if necessary, and if we are asked by the regular army of the Donetsk People Republic, we are always ready to assist in the suppression of enemy positions” (Bogatishchev, 2015). He goes on to say that Mar can field about 70 operatives. Among other assignments, Marushchenko also says that Mar has been engaged in the evacuation of wounded personnel from Libya (Bogatishchev, 2015). The Mar commander refers to his unit a “military-patriotic organization”, and in the absence of a Russian law on PMSCs, refers to Putin’s positive comments about PMSCs from 2012 as the event that made it possible for him and his people to establish Mar.

ENOT Corp

Much like MAR, ENOT (<https://enotcorp.org/>) seems mostly concentrated on the post-Soviet agenda, although the investigative company *Bellingcat* claims ENOT also has been involved in fighting in Syria (Roche, 2016). This company was created by veterans from different Russian special operations forces (SOF) connected to the veteran SOF organization *Reserv* (reserve). On its home page, ENOT presents itself as an entity that “has taken part in both well known and unknown events in order to save human lives, increase the security of our countrymen and taken an interest in their ideological upbringing”. There is no explicit mention of regular combat activity, but a video posted on the same web-site seems to show the unit taking part in clearing operations in the city of Antratsit in Donbas (Informnapalm, 2017b). According to one source, the head of ENOT, Roman Telenkevich, is head of The Union of Donbas Volunteers in Russia (Goble, 2017). The same source also claims that ENOT is “notorious for its links to Russian neo-Nazi groups”. For example, ENOT is known to have organized camps for paramilitary and ideological (pro-Russian) training for youth from Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

Wagner

As mentioned above, Wagner traces its roots back to Moran Security Group, which again is part of the *Antiterror* family of companies. Wagner is at present the internationally most famous of the Russian PMSCs. This is first and foremost because of its role in supporting Assad’s forces on the ground in Syria, and to a lesser extent also because of its role in backing the Russia-

supported rebellion in Donbas. In fact, Wagner, and the close to Wagner business structures of Putin ally Yegeniï Prigozhin, are famous enough to have been put on a US sanctions list.

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 (Murtazin, 2017). This was two years before Russia as a state entered the Syrian conflict. Because such an engagement was more than questionable under Russian law (the prohibition against mercenary activity), Moran established a subsidiary in Hong Kong called Slavonic Corpus to do this job (Dergachev and Zgirovskaia, 2016). Slavonic Corpus sent about 250 fighters to take back the infrastructure, but largely failed in their effort (Ermakova and Batyrkhanov, 2014). Later, when the fighters returned to Russia, two of the leaders of Slavonic Corpus were arrested and convicted for breaking Russian mercenary laws. Moran Security at the time denied all connections to Slavonic Corpus.

Despite this failure, however, the expedition seems to have served as the point of departure for Wagner. Exactly how this transformation took place is still unclear, but Wagner most likely was a reality as a PMSC already in 2014. In particular, the summer of 2015 seems to have been the time when things really started rolling. This is the time when Wagner's training base was set up at Molkino in Southern Russia, next door to the already long existing base of the 10th GRU special forces brigade (Korotkov, 2017b). Wagner is led by Dmitriï Utkin, who originally came to Moran Security from the 2nd GRU special forces brigade in Pskov. Utkin took part in the failed Slavonic Corpus operation in Syria but was not arrested after returning to Russia. He is said to be a lover of the music of Richard Wagner, and to have used Wagner as his call name in Syria. In early 2017 a photo taken in the Kremlin shows Utkin in the company of President Putin. This photo was heavily discussed in Russian media. Many suggested that the photo demonstrated the closeness of the president to this particular PMSC. Putin spokesman Dmitriï Peskov later confirmed that the picture was authentic but did not elaborate on the relations between the president and Wagner (Tomin, 2017). This company appears to have fought at the request of the Russian government both in Donbas, Syria, and later also in Libya and Sudan.

The St. Petersburg Internet newspaper *Fontanka* in 2016 and 2017 ran a series of investigate reports on Wagner. They found among other things that in contrast to for example the RSB-group, Wagner is not registered as an official company. According to the reports of *Fontanka* and others, Wagner has been actively used in Syria at least since autumn 2014 and in the annexation of Crimea and Russia-initiated rebellion in Donbas as well (Korotkov, 2015). In Donbas, especially in the so-called Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR), the suspicion is that Wagner in particular has been used by Russian authorities to eliminate anti-Kiev war-lords that Moscow for one reason or another wanted out of the way (Ivashkina and Skibitskaia, 2016).

In Syria, Wagner has been involved in the training of Syrian elite forces, (Iliash and Andreeva, 2017) and they also appear to have taken part directly in combat on a significant scale. According to *Fontanka*, the first main Syrian operation that Wagner took part in was the liberation of Palmyra from the Islamic State in February and March 2016. Here, they lost 32 fighters (Korotkov, 2017c). They also seem to have taken part in the second liberation of Palmyra in the spring 2017. In these battles they were, most probably by the Russian MOD,

provided with heavy weaponry such as T-72 main battle tanks, *Grad* multiple rocket launchers and 122 mm howitzers (Korotkov, 2017c). Wagner may have deployed as many as 2500 fighters in this last battle, and the PMSC was at the time organized into four companies of reconnaissance in force, one tank company, one combined artillery group, intelligence and logistics units and a battalion staff (Korotkov, 2017c; Rozhdestvenskii and Rusaeva, 2016). Thus, in Syria, Wagner was organized more or less like a battalion battlegroup (Stepanov, 2016). Given Wagner's priority on reconnaissance in force in this operation, their main function seems to have been to prepare the ground for larger Syrian regular army formations to follow.

There is, furthermore, a possibility that Wagner recently may have been taking part in the civil war in Sudan on the side of Sudanese president Omar Bashir. This information comes from statements to the BBC in December 2017 by a veteran of the wars in Donbas and Syria, as well as from investigative reporting by the Russian web resource called *The Bell*. According to *The Bell* more than 100 Wagner operatives started training of Sudanese government forces in spring 2018. In return for this service, Evgenii Prigozhin was given mining rights for gold in the country. Russian geologists are currently searching for gold in Sudan (Iakoreva, 2018). The statements about Russian PMSCs in Sudan were also confirmed by the head of RSB-Group, Krinitsyn, who underscored that nobody from his company had gone there (Russian service of the BBC, 2017).

Both because of the types of operations were Wagner has participated, and because of the seemingly close links to the GRU, several observers have questioned whether it is at all fair to call Wagner a PMSC. At least, in the Western sense of the word. The Ukrainian source *Infonapalm* describes Wagner as a “unit of voluntary former GRU special forces operatives” (Infonapalm, 2017), and the Russian military observer Arkadii Babchenko thinks it is “a private infantry battalion” (Babchenko, 2016). While the existence of Wagner has never been officially confirmed by Russian authorities, both the location of the company's training site, next to the base for the 10th GRU special forces brigade, and statements by anonymous sources in the Russian MOD and FSB strongly suggest that Wagner is at least partly a creation of the GRU (Infonapalm, 2017). Furthermore, GRU active involvement in the development of Wagner would be fully in line with the changes to the GRU mission spectrum promoted by the late GRU commander General Igor Sergun. Sergun was Director of the GRU from 2011 until his death in 2016. At the time when Sergun took over as director the GRU was not very popular in the Kremlin. Among other things, they were blamed for many of the problems that the Russian military encountered during the 2008 Georgia war. Sergun saw an opportunity to re-establish GRU prestige by taking a lead in what came to be known in Russian as “unconventional warfare”, especially in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The use of PMSC fits very nicely into this relatively new GRU mission (Bukkvoll, 2015; Ramm, 2017).

Russian investigative journalist Lilia Iapparova puts the total number of Wagner operatives that have taken part in operations in Syria at 6000 (Iapparova, 2018). She also estimates that about 1500 would have been active at any particular time. This latter figure, however, is likely to have changed over time. *Fontanka* estimates that close to 2500 Wagner operatives took part in the battle for Palmyra. For endurance over time, the company would have to keep a certain

percentage of operatives in Russia in order to rotate their forces. Thus, a total of 6000 does not seem unreasonable.

In August 2018 the Russian independent TV-channel Dozhd announced that according to their investigative reporting a new Russian PMSC called Patriot had become active in Syria. This PMSC is to have taken over many of the jobs Wagner used to do, and it is claimed to be even more closely connected with the regular Russian military than Wagner (Stepanov, 2012). So far, however, it has not been possible to corroborate the information on Patriot from other sources.

Turan

In October 2017 the Russian newspaper *Moskovskii Komsomolets* ran an interview with an anonymous source who claimed that he had fought in Syria for a private Russian PMSC called Turan. According to this source, Turan is together with Wagner the most important Russian PMSCs today. He further described Turan as a “Muslim battalion” (Sazhneva, 2017). Additionally, the pro-Kremlin newspaper *Vzgliad* has claimed that Turan exists and is made up of Muslim fighters from Central Asia and the North Caucasus (Krutikov, 2017). An interview with a former Turan fighter in the web resource *Baltnews* in November 2017 further confirmed this composition of Turan fighters (Khidzhab, 2017). There is, however, much uncertainty about Turan, and some even doubt that the unit exists. For example, Denis Korotkov, a journalist who investigated Wagner for *Fontanka*, seriously doubts their existence (Ber, 2017). He said that the sources he interviewed for his Wagner investigation had never heard of any Turan.

Some of the companies described above appear similar to Western PMSCs and other do not. We suggest that there are two main characteristics of the Russian context that contribute a lot to explaining some of the specifics of the Russian case.

First, Russia is a country with weak rule of law. This means that private enterprise takes place within a regime of individual deals between each private economic entity and the public authorities. Normally, this means that private firms are allowed to operate and make profit provided that some of that profit finds its way into the public employees’ pockets, and that the individual firm does the government’s bidding when called upon to do so. This is very different from countries with a strong rule of law, where private enterprise to a significant extent is protected from the executive by the judiciary. This means in our case, that PMSCs normally cannot say no if the executive asks them to do something. They will still differ, however, in the extent to which they are agents of the state or state proxies.

Second, Russia today sees itself as a country under siege by the West. This ideological parameter permeates both elites and society in general and is continually reinforced by the executive’s control over the most important media outlets. In this situation, ideology easily becomes a motive for PMSC formation, sometimes of equal importance to the profit motive. Fighting for the greatness of Russia, or for the promotion of Russian foreign policy interests, may thus stimulate the establishment of PMSCs to the same extent as financial gain. In fact, both motives may very well be present at the same time, as seems to be the case for PMSC-MAR and ENOT Corporation described above.

Based on these two reasons, we propose a typology of Russian PMSCs that take both the degree to which they are agents of the state and whether they are mostly ideologically or commercially motivated into account. We then get the following table:

	Mostly agent of the state	Occasionally agent of the state
Mostly ideologically motivated	PMSC-MAR, ENOT	
Mostly commercially motivated	Wagner, Turan	RSB-Group, Antiterror

4 The Russian state and PMSCs

Despite their undeniable existence, PMSCs are not yet regulated by Russian law. The Russian state at present seems relatively ambivalent about the phenomenon of PMSCs. In fact, when a new proposal for the legalization of PMSC again was raised in Russian media at the beginning of 2018, Putin’s spokesman Dmitrii Peskov simply stated that the Kremlin “has no position on this question” (Aptekar, 2018).

These companies are furthermore also largely absent from Russian military theory, at least in terms of PMSCs being an instrument in the Russian military toolbox (Eklund and Elfving, 2018). In the latest 2014 version of the official Russian military doctrine PMSCs are only mentioned in the context of foreign threats (Neelov, 2017). Likewise, in a major new Russian work on future war written by the military intellectuals Igor Popov and Musa Khamsatov, PMSCs are mostly described as a Western phenomenon. They are not prescribed any particular role in future Russian security politics (Popov and Khamzatov, 2017, 256–259). It should, however, be mentioned that a “scientific discussion” on the topic was held in October 2017 at the joint initiative of the Russian General staff and the Defence Committee of the Duma. The only piece of information that has been made public from that event is that the discussions tended to be “relatively heated”.¹⁵

There have been a number of initiatives in the Duma to legalize PMSCs and regulate their activities. In 2009 the representative Andrei Lugovoi proposed an amendment to the law on private security companies that would allow them to operate abroad. In 2012 another

¹⁵ <https://soldat.pro/2017/10/10/v-rossijskom-voennom-universitete-sostoyalas-diskussiya-o-perspektivax-chvk-v-rossii/#more-3304>.

representative, Andrei Mitrofanov, suggested a law called “On the state regulation of the establishment and operation of private military companies”. None of these were adopted by the Duma, but President Putin at the time of the Mitrofanov initiative expressed some general support for the idea of Russian PMSCs. Putin in this connection answered to a question about a potential Russian legalization of PMSCs that “I understand your question and think that this (the establishment of PMSCs) undoubtedly is an instrument for the realization of national interests where the state itself does not have to be involved”.¹⁶

A third Duma deputy, Gennadiy Nosovko, proposed similar legislative initiatives to the Duma both in 2010 and 2014. In the 2014 project Nosovko defined the military tasks that Russian PMSCs should be allowed to exercise as “de-mining and armed defence of civilian maritime vessels”, and additionally the more controversial “alternative regulation of armed conflicts beyond Russia’s borders” (Boiarski, 2014). Due to a mix of political and bureaucratic opposition, claims of procedural mistakes and the absence of any pressure from the Kremlin in favour of the proposals, none of these initiatives were adopted into law. According to the journalists Vladimir Dergachev and Ekaterina Zgirovskaya, military sources had told them after Nosovko’s initiative was defeated in the Duma that the absence of such a law would not prevent the government from the use of existing PMSCs in specific operations (Dergachev and Zgirovskaya, 2016). In 2016, however, a law on “short term military contract service” was in fact adopted. While not explicitly referring to the phenomenon of PMSCs, this law was nevertheless seen as a compromise that at least partly legalized PMSCs (Neelov, 2017).

In addition to politically and bureaucratically motivated scepticism towards PMSCs, there is also the legalistic problem of article 13 in part 5 of the Russian constitution. This article says that “in Russia, the establishment and activity of public organizations with the purpose of destroying state security, as well as armed formations, are prohibited” (Krymskii, 2018). This article again came to the forefront in Russian media in January 2018, when a fourth attempt at legalization seemed to be on the way. According to deputy head of the Duma Sub-Committee for Statbuilding and Legislation, Mikhail Emelianov, a new proposal will soon be delivered to the Duma. This time the proposal also seems to have more political backing than before. Both Foreign Minister Lavrov and former commander of the Airborne forces and current head of the Duma Defence Committee, Shamanov, have voiced their support (Krymskii, 2018).

4.1 Russian motives for the development of PSMCs

The Russian debate on PMSCs suggests at least five main drivers for their development: profits, military emulation, the companies’ potential as a non-attributional means of coercion, avoiding Afghanistan type popular loss-aversion, and, in the case of Donbas, to limit the return to Russia of battle-hardened and ideologically disappointed fighters.

In terms of the first motive, the above mentioned deputy head of the Duma Sub-Committee for Statebuilding and Legislation, Mikhail Emelianov, argues that the private military industry is an

¹⁶ *RIA-Novosti*, 11 April 2012.

internationally rapidly growing market so far dominated by Western countries (the US and the UK in particular). He argues that there is a huge unused potential for Russia here. As Emel'ianov put it "Our history is such that we always had to fight wars. Why not exploit this experience [for profit]?" (Kovalenko and Baltacheva, 2018). One thing that in particular troubles Russian decision makers in this regard is that even Russian companies working abroad will purchase the services of Western or other PMSCs as long as the Russian PMSC industry is underdeveloped. Russian military observer Ivan Konovalov proposes that many developing nations' governments may welcome the emergence of PMSCs with geopolitical affiliations different from the West (Eremenko, 2014).

Secondly, military emulation is a well known international phenomenon. It would be fair to say that the radical reforms of the Russian armed forces, initiated by Minister of Defence Anatolii Serdiukov in 2008, to a significant extent was an emulation of reforms that had taken place in many Western countries after the end of the Cold War. This in particular concerns the change from a large conscript army to a smaller more professional force, and the preference for the organization of the land forces into brigades rather than divisions. Thus, it is not unnatural to see also the development of Russian PMSCs as a more or less conscious attempt to imitate by Russia what may seem to be a clever innovation by the West. For example, an article in the Russian MOD daily *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red Star) from 2013 argues that PMSCs is a "phenomenon of our times" that the West has understood but where Russia lags behind (Palchikov, 2013). It is, however, a question whether the Russian political-economic model is likely to produce a PMSC market similar to those created in many Western countries. There is currently a very strong tendency towards monopolies in many sectors of the Russian economy, and that could become the case also in the PMSC industry. The head of the RSB-Group, Oleg Krinitsin, in 2014 expressed scepticism about the possibility of a genuine neoliberal Russian PMSC market. His suspicion was that Russia is more likely to end up with some "clumsy monopoly structure" (Boiarskii, 2014). In support of Krinitsin's scepticism, one idea that has been discussed is to give the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF) a decisive role in the establishment and organization of the Russian PMSC industry (Elfving, forthcoming). DOSAAF was created in 1927 as a government organization with voluntary membership to prepare reserves for the armed forces. After being of limited importance in the immediate post-Soviet period, the organization has had a revival in the last 5 to 10 years. It is now mostly concerned with the physical, ideological and paramilitary training of Russian youth, but could also conceivably expand into other activities, such as PMSCs.

Thirdly, the possibility to use a certain level of force in pursuit of national interests without this force being attributed to you is also clearly tempting. Russian voices in the PMSC debate are certain that Western countries do this (Neelov, 2017), and President Putin himself, as demonstrated above, has talked about "an instrument for the realization of national interests where the state itself does not have to be involved". The above-mentioned Duma deputy Gennadii Nosovko, who proposed a law for legalization of PMSCs, has even publicly indicated that Russian PMSCs could be a perfect tool for authoritarian leaders that face popular uprisings. According to him "there would not have been this present situation in Ukraine if there in Russia had been relevant PMSCs for hire at the time of the crisis for the Yanukovich government". At

a time where they [i.e the Yanukovych government] could not be certain of the loyalty of their army, they could have signed a contract with a Russian PMSC” (Boiarskii, 2014). Thus, he indicates that Russian PMSCs could be very useful in the future for Russia aligned authoritarian leaders facing popular unrest.

Fourthly, PMSCs give Russian authorities a possibility to use military force in operations where the general Russian population would be sensitive to casualties. Ever since the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), there has been considerable scepticism in the Russian population against risking Russian lives in operations not directly connected to the defence of Russia. A Levada Centre opinion poll from October 2015 (the beginning of Russian operations in Syria) suggested that despite more than 50 percent support for the Russian policy towards Syria, only 19 percent were willing to support the country with “boots on the ground”.¹⁷ But, according to one Russian observer, “the Russian public has proved completely indifferent to reports of the losses suffered by the mercenary companies, rightly believing that these people are highly paid, and knew what they were getting into” (Pukhov, 2017).

Finally, from the beginning of the conflict in Donbas there has been a debate in Russian media about potential political and social problems that might accompany the return of the Russian fighters who went to Donbas for ideological reasons. These may well present a future challenge to Russian authorities. They have military experience, they would probably be less risk averse than other forces critical of the Kremlin, and many of them are disappointed in the Kremlin for encouraging them to go and fight for “the Russian world” (*russkii mir*) only to stop short of the final creation of this “world”. One of the initiators of the Russian interference in Donbas, Igor Girkin, has already become a vocal critic of the Kremlin. Thus, it is not unlikely that Russian authorities would prefer these fighters to join Russian PMSCs. If they did that they would go abroad to fight rather than return to Russia and create instability. It must be pointed out that the presence of this motive is mostly speculation. There is no direct proof in open sources to confirm that Russian authorities are thinking in this way, but there is little doubt that Wagner in particular has recruited heavily among Russian fighters in Donbas (Korotkov, 2017d).

4.2 The bureaucratic politics of Russian PMSCs

Some of the domestic resistance to legalizing PMSCs is probably ideological – i.e conviction of the necessity of retaining the state monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. However, equally or possibly even more important, different agencies may resist legalization as long as they are uncertain whether they or rival agencies will be in control of the new capacity. Such control is desirable because of the potential political clout attached, and because of the management of the financial resources going to the PMSCs. It may be the case that as long as the control issue remains undecided, most of the domestic players in Russia prefer the current ambiguous existence of these companies instead of legalisation.

¹⁷ <https://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/06/russian-participation-in-the-syrian-military-conflict/>.

Several Russian sources point to a conflict of interest between the FSB and the GRU on this issue. The fact of competition and rivalry between these two agencies is historically well known, and a dispute between them on the issue of PMSCs does not seem unlikely. One Russian source claims that the GRU “has spent 15 years on spreading the, in principle false, myth that private military companies play a major role in contemporary wars”, and points to what he sees as planted publications on this topic in Russian military journals such as *Zarubezhnoe Voennoe Obozrenie* (Foreign Military Review) (Tokarev, 2017). On the other hand, alternative sources maintain that the scepticism towards PMSCs is strong also in the military and not only the FSB. Vladimir Neelov, for example, claims that both the MOD and the FSB are obstacles to the adoption of a law on PMSCs (Neelov, 2017). On a roundtable on PMSCs at the Russian Diplomatic academy in May 2016, the MOD delegation stated that they thought that a specific Russian law on PMSCs was premature, and that Russia instead should continue to participate in the development of international guidelines in this sphere (Labetskaia, 2016, 191). Similarly, at a conference on PMSCs organized by the Academy of the General Staff in March 2016, the Deputy Head of the Duma Sub-Committee on Industry, Vladimir Gutenev, argued forcefully for a PMSC law, only to be countered by former Head of the General Staff, General Iurii Baluevskii. The latter in particular pointed to the recent experience of allowing private military force in Ukraine. He specifically referred to the Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Kolomoiskii, who initiated and financed several of the volunteer battalions that took up the fight against the Russia-supported rebellion in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Baluevskii, in an effort to discredit PMSCs as a phenomenon, claimed that “Kolomoiski for a long time dictated what the president was able to do or not, and nobody was capable of doing anything about it” (Falichev, 2016).

It is, however, perfectly possible for the GRU to be a lobbyist for PMSCs at the same time as other parts of the military are against. Both the armed forces and the FSB are huge structures where different branches may have both ideas and interests that are in conflict. The military observer Vyacheslav Polivinko is certain that there are different views on PMSCs within the armed forces. In addition to the concerns voiced by Baluevskii above, Polivinko sees at least two further reasons why the military should be against PMSCs. First, in one way or another, PMSCs are likely to consume resources that otherwise could have gone to the regular military. Second, legalization would probably mean that the casualties sustained by the PMSCs in operations would be added to overall Russian casualty figures. In the case of Syria, the MOD has so far been able to brag about a very low casualty rates. This is because much of the Russian fighting on the ground has been conducted by non-official PMSCs (Wagner). Thus, if PMSCs are allowed to continue to exist in Russia, it is for MOD image purposes best for the armed forces if they remain non-legalized and less visible (Polovinko, 2017). A possible third reason for MOD resistance is that a legalization of PMSCs may give increased unwanted competition for the ministry’s own efforts to earn on the side. Such money has in the past provided non-budget revenues for the MOD that has been a particularly easy source of corruption (Dzhemal, 2009).

It would probably be wrong, as some have done, to suggest that the FSB is totally against PMSCs (Tokarev, 2017; Aptekar, 2018). If that was the case, PMSCs would most likely not

have been allowed to exist even in the shadowy way that they do today. The FSB currently enjoys enough political pull in the Kremlin that they would have been able to stop this phenomenon completely. The Russian military observer Arkadii Babchenko is adamant that the FSB currently is in full control of the PMSCs (Popkov, 2016). Thus, it seems more likely that the FSB has chosen a strategy of allowing for the limited development of PMSCs under strict FSB control rather than trying to block such companies from emerging. Control does here not necessarily mean day to day monitoring and interference. It is more likely that the FSB, and in the final instance the Kremlin, have made it clear that the PMSCs will have to do whatever the political leadership tells them, and that should they fail to do this they can almost instantly be dissolved. This latter point may also explain the apparent paradox of PMSC existence without legalization. If they, in the absence of legalization, continue to exist at the FSB's mercy, they are likely to be easier to control. According to one of the authors of the new, yet to be discussed in the Duma, law of PMSCs, the new version gives the MOD complete control over these companies, including licensing of their activities abroad (Muratzin, 2018). That part of the proposal is probably not going to go down well with the FSB. In this instance, a semi-legal existence would probably be the preferable option for the FSB.

4.3 PMSCs in Russian foreign policy

There is now substantial empirical evidence to suggest that Russia over the last five years on several occasions has employed private military companies (PMSCs) in pursuit of national interests beyond its borders. However, whereas the existence of Russian PMSCs as such goes back to the mid-2000s, their role as a tool of foreign policy seems more recent. In fact, Wagner's participation in the annexation of Crimea may have been the first major example. Since then, their employment by the Kremlin on the rebel side in Donbas, and on the side of Assad in Syria, are the most prominent examples. Furthermore, as already stated, there are also indications that they have been active in Libya and on the side of president Bashar, in Sudan (about 150 operatives), in Burundi (about 200 operatives), and in support of the government in the Central African Republic (about 170 operatives) (Iapparova, 2018).

Two aspects of the Russian use of PMSCs as tools of foreign policy are particularly striking: the diversity of operations they have been engaged in, and the blurring of national and private interest in their employment. The full extent of Russian PMSC participation in the annexation of Crimea is not yet known. However, Russian sources suggest that at least Wagner took part in the preparations for the disputed Crimean referendum on leaving Ukraine (Dergachev and Zgirovskaia, 2016). In Donbas, the same company was nicknamed "the cleaners". This was because of their role in getting rid of local rebel commanders not to the Kremlin's liking, and for their participation in disciplining anti-Kiev rebel groups that operated too freely. In particular, Korotkov claims that Wagner was used to discipline the loosely organized Cossack groups that fought Ukrainian forces in the Luhansk area (Korotkov, 2015; Guliaiev, 2016; Butusov, 2016). The Ukrainian group *Informnapalm* claims that as much as seven different Russian PMSCs operated in Donbas, but it has been difficult to find independent evidence to corroborate that claim (Informnapalm, 2017b).

The above-mentioned operations are all what could arguably be called special operations. However, a separatist source also claimed to the Ukrainian Internet newspaper *Strana* (the country) that Wagner together with other Russian PMSCs took part in the battle of Debaltsevo in February 2015 (Ivashkina and Skibitskaia, 2016). This is further evidence that Russian PMSCs can also be used in more conventional military campaigns. This point sits well with how Wagner for example, as previously mentioned, has been used in a reconnaissance in force role in Syria. As the former Wagner fighter Oleg told the Estonian TV-channel ETV in July 2017 “Wagner is no ordinary private military company. It is a miniature army. We had it all, mortars, howitzers, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers” (Zakharov, 2017).

The second striking aspect is how the use of PMSCs as opposed to regular military force opens up for a blurring of national and private interests. In June 2017 the Russian Internet newspaper *Fontanka* claimed to have seen documents demonstrating that the Syrian government and the Russian civilian company *Euro Polis* in December 2016 signed a deal where *Euro Polis* promised to liberate oil and gas fields from the Islamic State. As compensation, *Euro Polis* was to receive 25 percent of the future income from these fields. The job was to be done by Wagner. The company *Euro Polis* is owned by the well-known Russian business man and suspected Wagner banker, Yevgenii Prigozhin (Murtazin, 2017; Korotkov, 2017a). The full details of the relationship between Prigozhin and Wagner are not known, but one anonymous observer told the Russian newspaper *Novaia Gazeta* that Wagner in terms of finances is largely run by Prigozhin (Polovinko, 2017). Furthermore, Prigozhin is assumed to be close to President Putin. He among other things runs a number of catering businesses that serve Russian state institutions. Prigozhin is therefore popularly called “Putin’s chef”. Russian regular forces in Syria could not have taken on such a contract, but the PMSC Wagner could. In a somewhat similar situation, in February 2018, an unidentified number of Wagner soldiers died in an attempt to force the US backed Syrian Democratic Forces away from oil wells they controlled. The 600 strong Wagner force in this incident operated in support of the Assad backed militia “ISIS Hunters”. However, anonymous Russian military sources have characterised the operation as mostly a local fight over oil resources (Solopov et al., 2018). One Russian commentator called this incident the first direct clash between Russian and US forces since the Vietnam war (Aptekar and Zhelezneva, 2018). Russian military sources also confirmed that this operation was initiated without the approval of the Russian command in Syria (Solopov et al., 2018).

The principal question, however, is whether Wagner was fighting for national or private Russian interests in these cases? They could be fighting for both, if they coincided, but what would happen if the national and private interest later diverged? This blurring of national and private interest may not be limited only to Syria. The former mentioned separatist source of the Ukrainian newspaper *Strana* claims that in Donbas Wagner was “integrated into the GRU, but also open for private customers on the side” (Ivashkina and Skibitskaia, 2016).

So far in this study we have analysed the development of Russian PMSCs. This means that the discussions have centred on the past and the present. The next section takes us into the future.

Here, we contemplate what possible consequences the development of Russian PMSCs may have for European and Norwegian security.

5 The Russian case – Implications for European and Norwegian Security

The potential security implications for European and Norwegian security of the development of Russian PMSCs can usefully be divided into bilateral and international consequences. By bilateral consequences we mean instances where Russian PMSCs act on behalf of the Russian government in political and military conflicts with specific European countries. By international consequences we mean the presence of Russian PMSCs in conflict zones outside Europe, but where one or more European countries are involved militarily. In the latter case they may operate on behalf of the Russian government or they may operate independently. The potential consequences described below came out of a brain storming session involving the authors of this report as well as military experts, operational analysts and Norwegian civil servants.

5.1 Bilateral consequences

When Russian PMSCs operate on behalf of the Russian government, they can do this either by command or on a commercial basis. As discussed earlier in this report, the distinction between public and private enterprise is more blurred in Russia than in most Western countries. There is little rule of law to protect private enterprise from having to carry out the wishes of the political leadership, even if they should not want to do this. Thus, it is easier for the Russian government than for many other governments to order private companies to do the government's bidding. Therefore, whether the PMSC in question is a mercenary group operating closely with government structures, such as Wagner, or a registered private security firm such as the RSB-group, may not be very important if the state decides that it needs its help.

Despite the fact that Wagner in Syria, according to some sources, on occasion fought on the level of a battalion battle group, we do not think that this is likely to be repeated in a conflict with European countries. This would be particularly unlikely in conflicts with NATO countries such as Norway. In Syria, Wagner fought the relatively lightly armed IS. In a European context, they would be fighting regular and much more heavily armed forces. In such high-intensity scenarios, Russia would probably prefer to use regular forces. Still, one cannot rule out that PMSCs in some instances would be used as force multipliers in situations where Russia finds its troops stretched. Nevertheless, we argue that PMSCs in the context of bilateral consequences would be most valuable to Russia as an instrument in peacetime or in the period immediately leading up to military conflict.

We have identified five possible consequences for European and Norwegian security that we describe in somewhat more detail below. These are: (1) limited use of kinetic force where non-attribution is important, (2) subversion on behalf of the Russian state without kinetic force, (3) limited use of kinetic force or acts of subversion in coordination with regular forces in the initial stages of conflict, (4) smoke screens for Russian forces, and (5) acts of hostility by a Russian PMSC towards another state under PMSC presumption that this aggression will please Russian authorities.

First, in many ways, the most obvious potential implication of Russian PMSCs for European security is that Russian authorities could use them in situations where they wanted a very limited use of force for a restricted aim. Such aims could be of any kind, but an example might be the forced release of a Russian trawler arrested by the Norwegian Coast Guard. The advantage of using a PMSC in such a situation would be that if the operation failed, or if some of the Russian operators were arrested, Russia could deny responsibility. Russian authorities may certainly order such services from other Russian nonstate actors, for example from criminal syndicates. However, given that some PMSCs (such as RSB), recruit mostly ex-service personnel who most likely would be better trained and organized, a PMSC might be preferable. It is of course very likely that the government of the country where such an incident took place would understand, or at least strongly suspect, that the use of force could be attributed to Russian authorities. Still, in terms of both legal responsibility and the international narrative, there would be a major difference between the use of PMSCs and regular forces.

Second, PMSCs do not necessarily have to use kinetic force in order to help Russian authorities achieve strategic goals. They could, for example, be used to instigate civil unrest, they could be used to execute cyber-attacks, or they could be used to inflict significant economic losses. As explained above, at least one of the Russian PMSCs seems to run military type training camps for right wing activists from foreign countries. If Russia wanted to put a foreign government under pressure, training right wing radicals in violent methods and then sending them back to their home country to harass immigrants, could be one way of doing that. In terms of cyber warfare, we have already seen that the RSB-group has established its own cyber capacity. So far, several of the cyber operations emanating from Russia have been traced back to the FSB or GRU. In order to avoid direct attribution to Russian government structures in the future, Russian authorities could start outsourcing more of the cyber operations to competent PMSCs. PMSCs that supply cyber services may also carry out acts of business intelligence, sabotage, hacking, etc. on behalf of private clients searching for competitive advantages. Such activities could potentially be directed at vital infrastructure, arms or technology manufacturers, research institutes or other actors and activities that are a matter of national security to foreign countries. Additionally, one may also imagine a situation where Russia wanted to do economic harm to a European country. This could for example be as revenge, because Russia thought that she had been the victim of economic sabotage first. Here, Russia could for example strike port infrastructures, oil and gas facilities or underwater sea cables. Using PMSCs for such missions could create a situation of formal deniability, but where the target country still got the message. Right wing radical violence, cyber operations and economic sabotage are just three examples of

what kind of non-kinetic activities the Russian PMSCs carry out on behalf of the Russian government. There are probably a lot more.

Third, if we move from a time of peace to a time of crisis, PMSCs could be well suited to “prepare” the target country for the possible later insertion of regular Russian forces. PMSC activities here could for example include acts of sabotage, liquidation of key personnel, reconnaissance, intelligence collection and target identification. Many of these tasks would normally be the domain of special forces, but the use of PMSCs would decrease the possibility of attribution. In some instances, they could be used openly in countries where deploying soldiers would be considered unacceptable or even an act of war. In addition, it is worth keeping in mind here, as stated earlier in this study, that Russian PMSC personnel often have a background in the special forces. Uncertainty and confusion on the point of attribution could slow down the target country’s decision making. The use of PMSCs could in such instances create doubt about the identity of the perpetrator, and in terms of NATO guarantees, it would likely complicate appeals to article 5. Other NATO countries would most likely want to verify that the observable acts of violence could be traced back to the Russian government before taking action. NATO countries would probably not risk retaliating against Russia and thus risk war if there was a chance that Russia was not to blame for the hostile acts. One should note here that Russian military thinking for a long time has entertained the idea that there is no longer a clear demarcation between peace and war. The line is blurred, and efforts to achieve strategic aims may move back and forth between states of civilian and military aggression. In fact, the 2014 establishment of the National Defence Management Center in Moscow is a concrete expression of this conviction. The purpose of the centre is to achieve maximum coordination of civilian and military means of coercion. PMSCs may not necessarily be given a separate seat at the table at this centre, but they could certainly be included in the command and control arrangements facilitated here.

PMSC activity in this scenario could take place both immediately prior to the Russian use of regular force and in the initial stages of active regular force deployment. However, in the latter case the non-attribution benefit would no longer be valid, and the PMSCs would most likely be too lightly armed and not sufficiently integrated into the regular Russian chain of command to be very useful militarily. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the more overt and intense the Russian use of force becomes, the less relevant the PMSCs would be.

Fourth, PMSCs could be employed as smokescreens for regular Russian soldiers or special force personnel in places or contexts where deploying Russian soldiers would not sit well nationally or internationally. By this we mean that regular Russian troops could disguise as PMSCs. Russian speaking personnel could thus be carrying out activities in locations under the cover of commercial agencies. This type of cover-ups would be plausible in cases where Russian state support for a regime or a militia was not official, or where Russia for other reasons wanted to keep a low profile or a light footprint. As mentioned above, there has been speculation among observers that the Russians training Sudanese forces may in fact be GRU personnel, not PMSC personnel. Whether true or not, it is not unthinkable that the same personnel may operate as part of both organizations in some operations. Worst case, considering the close ties between e.g.

GRU and Wagner, one should not rule out that shoulder patches may change according to assignment.

Finally, PMSC activities against a foreign state may in principle also be initiated by the PMSC itself. There is reason to believe that not all activity in support of Russian political goals, for example in cyber space, is directly ordered by Russian authorities. Some of it is probably initiated bottom-up. Such bottom-up initiatives could be motivated by idealistic patriotism, or societal actors could initiate actions in order to improve their own credibility before approaching Russian authorities with appeals or requests. One cannot exclude that also Russian PMSCs might do something similar, at least the more ideologically motivated among them. On the other hand, companies that strive for a position among international PMSCs are not likely to engage in such activities. Also, any actor that may contemplate actions on behalf of Russia, but without consent of Russian authorities, would probably be relatively careful in what activities they engaged in. They would know that they easily could end up putting the Russian government in an awkward position, and that this could back-fire with very negative consequences for themselves at home.

5.2 International consequences

In the wake of the PMSC boom during the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, several instances of PMSC misbehaviour were reported in Western media. This triggered debate in both political and academic circles of what PMSC proliferation had to say for the security of civilians in war zones. Such worries are also warranted in the case of Russian PMSCs in today's violent conflicts. Furthermore, there may also be consequences for the conduct of campaigns of European military forces in international operations in theatres where Russian PMSCs are present. We identify two potential consequences in terms of the security of civilians in war zones and three possible consequences for European forces in international operations.

In terms of the security of civilians in war zones, we in particular focus on the possibility that Russian PMSCs may have a lower threshold for endangering civilian lives than most conventional Western PMSCs, and also that they may be more willing to serve customers with questionable human rights records than their Western counterparts. In terms of European military forces in international conflict zones, we in particular focus on the possibility that Russian PMSCs may be hired to augment the capacity of actors that are hostile to the European forces; that they may be fighting on behalf of the Russian government in conflicts outside Europe where European militaries are also involved; and finally that actors that are European allies in such conflicts may still hire Russian PMSCs to boost their military capacities even further.

The first potential consequence in the international domain is that Russian PMSCs may contribute to increased risks for civilians in conflict zones. This hypothesis is based on an assumption that Russian military culture may be relatively more tolerant of collateral damage in terms of civilian life than is the case in the military cultures of many other countries. Observers will in particular point to the two Chechen wars, and in particular the bombings of Grozny, as

evidence of this. Tom de Waal has argued in relation to the first Chechen war of 1994–1995 that “rarely has there been a conflict in which the means were used so vastly disproportionate to the scale of the problem nominally being tackled” (Tom de Waal, 2005, 182). Similar evidence of limited sensitivity to collateral damage can be observed in the Russian war effort in Syria since 2015. Eline Knarrum Bostad argues, based on reports from the UN and independent human rights groups, that “Russian aerial bombardment in the final months of 2015 illustrated Russia’s willingness to inflict civilian suffering in support of the Syrian regime”, in particular by the use of cluster munitions (Knarrum Bostad, 2018, 52). Thus, the fighters of Russian PMSCs are likely to come from a military culture that has a comparatively high acceptance for the loss of civilian life, and they are even less likely than the PMSCs of other countries to face sanctions from their own governments for causing such losses.¹⁸

The second conceivable consequence has to do with some of the would-be customers of these companies. Initially, the non-Russian customers of Russian PMSCs were not necessarily very different from the customers of most Western PMSCs. In both cases they were often oil and gas companies operating in zones of conflict, or they were shipping contractors operating in waters where piracy was a problem. However, after Donbas and Syria there may be an increasing tendency for Russian PMSCs to sign contracts with regimes in developing countries that have questionable human rights records. For example, the growing indications that Russian PMSCs are working for the governments of Sudan and the Central African Republic point in such a direction (Iakoreva, 2018). Both these countries were, according to Freedom House, among the 11 worst in the world in terms of political rights and civil liberties in 2017. As demonstrated earlier in this study, for some Russian lawmakers, the provision of violent force for the suppression of domestic rebellion in other countries has even been launched as a motive for the legalization of PMSCs in Russia. Thus, there is a danger that Russian PMSCs may become an additional source of repressive capacity for at least some of the world’s most oppressive regimes. Historical experience shows that oppressive regimes sometimes evolve into problems of an international scale that later leads to Western and European military involvement.

The third plausible consequence is that European militaries engaged in international conflict zones may end up fighting against Russian PMSCs because they have been hired by actors, state or non-state, that the European forces fight against. In the case of the USA, this already happened in February 2018 when US warplanes bombed forces on the ground in Syria that included Russian Wagner fighters. How many Wagner fighters that were left dead is still a matter of controversy, but the episode created international headlines and provoked fear that Russia would see this as an act of violence against the Russian state. Fortunately, that did not happen in this case. According to US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis, the Russian forces in Syria used the established deconfliction line to convey to US commanders that Wagner in this case was acting outside of their control (Pawlyk, 2018). That, however, does not always have to be

¹⁸ It should be noted that also Western PMSCs are rarely held to account for misbehaviour, unwarranted use of violence or other acts in several conflict theatres. The Conviction of four Blackwater operators in 2010 was the first widely-publicised trial where PMSC personnel were convicted of murder committed in Iraq. Until 2009, contractors working for the US government agencies or the Coalition Provisional Authority were subject to Order no. 17, which exempted PMSCs from Iraqi laws and regulations (Order 17 is available from https://www.usace.army.mil/Portals/2/docs/COALITION_PROVISIONAL.pdf).

the case in the future. Thus, the danger here is both that European countries' adversaries in such conflicts may be militarily augmented by Russian PMSCs, and also that Russian authorities may come to see attacks on their PMSCs as more problematic than they did in the February 2018 Syria example. Russian reactions to similar incidents in the future probably depends on the ties that the PMSC in question has to Russian authorities. They will also depend on the type of military engagement that the PMSC is part of, and on whether future Russian authorities may identify even more with their domestic PMSCs than they do today.

Fourthly, it may also be that the Russian PMSCs are fighting directly on behalf of the Kremlin in international conflicts. While that did not seem to be the case in the Wagner February 2018 episode, it was most probably true in the two fights for Palmyra in March 2016 and March 2017. Since these were both battles against the Islamic State, US or other Western forces had no reason to try to prevent the Syrian and Russian offensives. However, it is not difficult to imagine a future situation where the antagonist of Kremlin backed Russian PMSCs is a local ally of European forces. In such situations, European countries would have to take into account that supporting its ally may result in an escalation into conflict with Russia. In fact, the antagonist of the European ally may invite Russian PMSCs specifically for this purpose. The expectation that the Kremlin will see attacks on Russian PMSCs as an affront to itself may embolden the antagonist to be more offensive than he otherwise would have been. Thus, to what extent Russian PMSCs act on behalf of the Russian government in future international conflicts is likely to be crucial in terms of what effect their development has on European security.

Finally, we can also not disregard the possibility that a local actor allied to a European country in the future hires Russian PMSCs to boost its military capacity beyond what the European partners may contribute with. Whether this would happen or not is of course to a large extent dependent on the ally's need for European support. If this need is high, European countries may be able to discourage the employment of Russian PMSCs, but if the need is lower, that will be more difficult.¹⁹ Thus, there is at least a theoretical possibility that European forces sometime in the future may find themselves fighting alongside Russian PMSCs. This would probably not create many problems with regard to relations with the Kremlin, but if the Russian PMSCs show disregard for human rights or civilian casualties, such fighting may become a significant source of embarrassment. It may for example make the fighting unacceptable to the public opinion in the European countries engaged in that particular conflict.

Some of the possible consequences for Norwegian and European security pointed out in this study may seem remote today. After all, the Russian PMSC industry is still relatively limited, and Russia as an international actor is not militarily engaged in many countries around the world. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the nervousness created by the US bombing of Wagner in Syria in February 2018, things may change quickly. Consequently, there is every reason to think through some of the imaginable consequences discussed here before they actually occur.

¹⁹ For instance, as mentioned above, Nigeria has hired STTEP, a PMSC that engages in combat, to help combat Boko Haram. Nigeria at the same time has recurrently received various forms of military training from Western countries, also to confront the Boko Haram (for a recent example, see U.S. Department of Defense 2018).

6 Conclusions

Despite Russian rhetoric on the need for a state monopoly on the use of force, and despite significant resistance in Russia to the legalization of PMSCs, we have seen in this report that the country has both a historical and current record of outsourcing violence to private entrepreneurs. Historically, particularly the Cossacks were given a large degree of liberty in the use of violence and usually in a relationship with the state that assured deniability if needed. Today, Cossack groups yet again serve the Russian state by violent means, sometimes under direct official authority, at other times not. In addition, there are also domestic strong men, militias, PMSCs and in some cases, what appears to be hybrids of these phenomena.

In trying to map the Russian PMSC industry we have found that it is still relatively small, and also that there is significant diversity among the different firms. Furthermore, compared to the most Western PMSCs, Russian companies appear more rugged and more likely to take part in direct combat. In fact, there are (unconfirmed) reports that all of the companies identified in this study has participated in violent struggle in Ukraine, Crimea, Syria or elsewhere during the past few years. The Western industry is also heavily involved with military support and logistics, a type of services Russian PMSCs do not appear to be very engaged with. Finally, some Russian PMSCs are ideologically motivated, something which is very much at odds with Western PMSCs which, apart from declaring that they support their home countries' troops, insist on being "non-political" actors.

We argue that some of the idiosyncrasies of Russian PMSCs stems from the weakly institutionalized rule of law in Russia and the strongly entrenched siege mentality of the current Russian elites and society. These traits also go a long way towards explaining that the Russian market for force itself can be categorized as hybrid in nature,²⁰ meaning that the market is dominated by the state both in terms of control but also as the main customer. In order to distinguish between the different types of Russian PMSCs then, we moved away from our preferred way of making sense of the Western industry (by looking at service niches) and suggested to also group the Russian PMSCs according to motivation (mainly commercial or mainly ideological) and relationship to the state (mainly a state agent or only occasionally a state agent). This means that the Russian PMSC market is essentially diverse, with actors that appear to cater mainly to the state, while others cater mainly to private clients, such as shipping companies, but occasionally have to step up and provide services to the state.

We discuss in some detail the Russian state policy on PMSCs. The still lacking Russian legalization of PMSCs is somewhat puzzling since President Putin already in 2012 spoke out positively about the development of such companies. We find the answers to this puzzle in the strong ideological resentment to PMSCs in some quarters of the Russian elite, and even more in state agency infighting over the control over the phenomenon. Nevertheless, despite the absence of formal legality, Russian PMSCs are a reality. There are also few indications that they will

²⁰ This is in contrast with the conclusions of Olivia Allison's 2015 study, which concluded that the Russian market was essentially a liberal one (Allison 2015).

disappear. If anything, they have lately only become more active and more important, especially as a result of the Donbas and Syrian wars. Thus, there is every reason to believe that this phenomenon will continue and possibly grow in the years to come. In that context it becomes important to examine what possible consequences the Russian PMSCs may have for other countries. We have discussed potential consequences for European and Norwegian security in this report, and we have made a distinction between bilateral and international consequences.

Our discussion leads us to identify five potential bilateral and five potential international consequences that it would be important for European countries to consider. The five bilateral consequences are: (1) limited use of kinetic force where non-attribution is important, (2) subversion on behalf of the Russian state without kinetic force, (3) limited use of kinetic force or acts of subversion in coordination with regular forces in the initial stages of conflict, (4) covers for Russian state forces and (5) acts of hostility by a Russian PMSC towards another state under PMSC presumption that this aggression will please Russian authorities. The five international consequences are: (1) that Russian PMSCs may have a particularly low threshold for endangering civilian lives; (2) that they may be more than average willing to serve customers with questionable human rights records; (3) that Russian PMSCs may be hired to augment the capacity of actors that European militaries fight against; (4) that they may be fighting on behalf of the Russian government in conflicts outside Europe where European militaries are also involved; and finally (5) that actors that are the allies of European countries in non-European conflicts may still hire Russian PMSCs to boost their military capacities even further.

Western countries, including Norway, should anticipate that Russian PMSCs will continue to be a feature in violent conflicts where Russia is a party. However, Western countries should also anticipate that PMSCs could be used for a wide array of actions within the hostile spectrum, both in war and in peace and in the grey zones in between war and peace. Understanding the Russian conception of this “tool” and understanding what advantages these companies may have to Russian use of force is therefore an important part of understanding Russian strategic thinking.

The modern use of commercial military and security companies in war zones is still seen as a particularly Western, or even a US phenomenon. As with most other military innovations however, it eventually came to be emulated also in other regions of the world. It will, however, almost never be the case that military innovations are just copied. When entering new political, economic and cultural realities, these innovations will inevitably take local forms. This study has investigated that process in the Russian case and has tried to provide insights into the characteristics of the Russian PMSC industry and its potentials. The study has revealed that Russia is home to a small, but potent PMSC industry which can be mobilized to inflict harm on Russia’s enemies if called upon.

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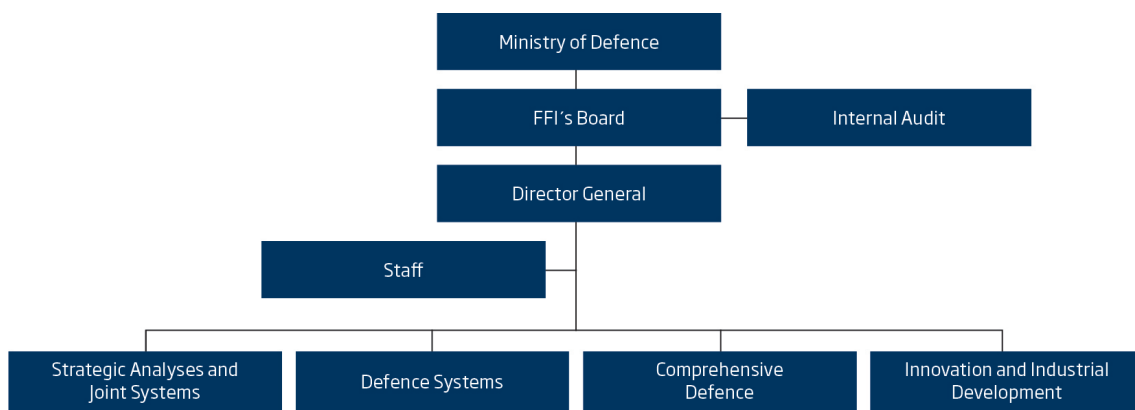
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