



# RUSSIAN AFFILIATED PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

**Zdzislaw Sliwa, PhD**  
*Baltic Defence College*  
*Dean*

**Keywords:** private military companies, Syrian civil war, Russian Federation

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary conflicts often involve private military companies (PMCs) in addition to national or local armed forces. These groups are used by nations to forward national political or economic interests without direct contribution. The PMCs that have been present during the Syrian Civil War include those that have connections with Russia, represented by the Slavonic Corps and PMC 'Wagner'. The purpose of the paper is to analyse Russian PMCs operations in Syria in the context of national legislation and as tools exploited by the state. It allows distinguishing if those PMCs are used in Syria for the benefit of Russian political and economy reasons, even though they are not acknowledged according to Russian law. The paper utilises qualitative research as a case study method, comparative studies, and desk research from existing resources and available online sources. It is supported by an analysis of available official documents from official websites. The limited use of quantitative data allows for the validation of the collected information.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a historical basis for political leaders, oligarchs and governments to hire private militia, armies and mercenaries, and are by no means a recent phenomenon (Kinsey, 2006; Alexandra & Baker, 2006; Varin, 2006; Singh, 2017). A recent example is the case of the Blackwater operations in Iraq that caught the attention of governments, international organisations, and ordinary citizens regarding the role and use of Private Military Companies (PMCs) in regional conflicts. These and other cases of their kind have been further investigated, recognising that such a practice is common for a few nations, often providing a reason to criticise them for their direct involvement in local affairs for reasons of national security or economy. Among them, Russia has used PMCs covertly in the past on the territories of Ukraine, Libya, the Central African Republic, Venezuela, Sudan, Mozambique, and Syria, looking to forward political and economic benefits (Rabin, 2019; Kuczyński, 2018). It is especially interesting as there are no national legal regulations in respect to PMCs (Rus.: Частные военные компании). Nevertheless, such companies have been used due to their flexibility for quick deployment.

Next, there is a formal lack of connection with the government and no necessity to deploy armed forces, which provides plausible deniability for a nation in its actions, which could be externally perceived as either brutal or against international law. A well-known example is the ‘Wagner’ company, founded by Dmitry Utkin in 2014, which has only operated abroad and is connected with the Russian security services through personal relations, most likely supported with training and equipment. It is not the only company but is among the most apparent, others, which are less known, include: Anti-Terror Eagle, Redut-Anti-Terror, Cossacks, ENOT Corp., MAR, Ferax, and Sarmat. Information regarding these groups is limited because their operations are not essential and the publicity regarding ‘Wagner’ acts as a ‘smokescreen’ to cover other PMCs (Рыжов, 2020). It presents a challenge to have the full data of the PMC involvement in Syria and elsewhere, especially due to the unreliability of many sources and there are different data regarding some organisations and their operations, supported by purposely prepared fake news, obfuscate a clearer picture. An example is the Russian PMC ‘Turan’ or ‘Muslim

battalion,” as reports found that it was a piece of fabricated information repeated by many sources to obscure the overall situation (Kimberly, 2019, p. 189) of using ‘information laundry’ methods.

The purpose of the paper is to analyse Russian PMCs operations in Syria in the context of national legislation and as a tool exploited by the nation. The research question is: are PMCs used in Syria to the benefit of Russia’s politics and economy, despite not being legally recognised? In respect to this research, there is a factor related to the terminology and division of legally recognised entities and those which are acknowledged as illegal. From this perspective, private military and security companies are legally recognised in many countries, and their focus is on a specific type of mission, like “logistical support, mine clearance, protection and training, not shooting dictators or their enemies” (Eremenko, 2014). The range of tasks and capabilities is evolving, as PMCs were granted access to heavy weapon systems during recent regional conflicts, enabling them to fight effectively at a tactical level. They could be supported by armed forces capabilities, e.g., air force, tactical lifts, artillery support from contracting nations, or governments employing them for specific missions. It contrasts with mercenaries defined in the International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. Those are “specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict”, not belonging to “the armed forces of a party to the conflict” and they are “specially recruited locally or abroad to participate in a concerted act of violence” (United Nations, 1989, p. Article 1). The mercenaries’ recruitment, deployment, financing, and training are seen as an offence “for the purposes of the Convention” (United Nations, 1989, p. Article 2) and are illegal or prohibited in most countries.

The use of mercenaries is by no means a recent development, as they have been supporting predominantly authoritarian regimes and insurgencies as well-trained foreign professionals contracted to defeat opposition or change legal governments through force. This has resulted in such a label merging with PMCs in various contexts, e.g., supporting Syria’s government system. There is still a role for all of them, for instance Frank Hoffman sees future conflicts as fought by “states, state-sponsored groups, or self-funded actors” (Hoffman, 2009) using modern armed forces combat systems, with a particular role in this concept for PMCs. Aleksandr Ageev sees their utilisation to achieve “geopolitical (including regime

change) and geo-economic ('power economy'— силовая экономика) objectives in the interest of state or state-related structures/actors but, crucially, without the state's direct participation" (Sukhankin, 2019), and Kimberly Marten recognises the Wagner Group as a "lethal expeditionary conflict entrepreneur" and a "military provider firm", which are often performing PSCs functions (Kimberly, 2019, p. 183).

The paper utilises qualitative research and case study methods for comparative studies of the PMC origins and operations in Syria. The desk research of academic sources developed by academics, think tanks, and available online sources is supported by the analysis of available official documents from the official websites. It involves the utilisation of quantitative data based on existing data and sources, allowing for the validation of collected information. The paper is comprised of three basic parts. The first covers the PMCs situation in Russia in respect to its legal status, discussion about their status, and the possible role of their utilisation abroad. The second covers PMCs operations in Syria with the focus on the Slavonic Corps Ltd. and 'Wagner Group' operations in respective periods of their presence there. Finally, conclusions related to the logic of PMCs presence and their future are elaborated.

## 1. THE PMCS STATUS AND ROLE IN RUSSIA

In contrast with the United States and other nations, military companies are not legal according to the existing law in Russia. It is related to the Russian Constitution, which states “The creation and activities of public associations whose aims and actions are aimed at a forced change of the fundamental principles of the constitutional system and at violating the integrity of the Russian Federation, at undermining its security, at setting up armed units, and at instigating social, racial, national and religious strife shall be prohibited.” (The Russian Federation, 1993, p. Article 13 para 5). The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine posited the existence of international PMCs as a major external military risk, whilst also recognising them as a characteristic of contemporary military conflict (The Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2014, pp. Chapter II para 12k, 15h). Therefore, it could be assessed that there is a suspicion among the leadership that such companies could be used against the country’s internal stabilisation or government. According to Dara Massicot, the new military doctrine will include the growing role of PMCs as it has been recognised by General Gerasimov. He stated, “The number of actors participating in armed combat is increasing. Along with armed forces of sovereign states, various rebel groups, private military companies, and self-proclaimed “quasi-states” are combatants on the battlefield.” (Massicot, 2019).

However, they are directly involved in combat operations abroad, possessing trained and organised units, skills and equipment being the “heroes of our time” as stated by Sergey Minaev, the editor-in-chief of ‘Esquire’ (IA Regnum, 2020). In the future, PMCs could be legalised as claimed by Alexei Mitrofanov from ‘A Just Russia’ party. He stated “I believe that such companies are a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state.” (Sputnik News, 2012). To such a suggestion, President Putin replied, “Yes, I think we could consider this option” (Sputnik News, 2012). The issue could be in preserving control over such the companies and their legal status related to their areas of responsibilities. The lack of legal status provides an excuse as stated by President Putin; “If this Wagner group violates something, then the Prosecutor General’s Office should give a legal assessment. Now, about their presence somewhere abroad. If, I repeat, they do not violate Russian law, they have the right to work, to sell their business interests anywhere in

the world.” (РЫЖОВ, 2020) Therefore, the Russian government continuously distances itself from PMCs, as expressed by Peskov, who stated “And what is PMC ‘Wagner’? In Russia, legally, de jure, there is no such thing as PMC. What is a PMC?” (Delfi, 2020). Formally, he was right concerning Russian law, as those do not exist in the country, although there were attempts to make them legal already in 2012 and 2014, but the last project from 2018 has not been yet approved (Ovcharov, 2018). There are some arguments for their suitability for Russia to use PMCs based on the principle “they are not there” (Рус. Их там нет) (Муртазин, 2020, p. 5), explaining that they are not national entities and are purely private organisations. At the same time, there is a growing need to preserve national corporations’ interests domestically and abroad. For instance, in 2013, ‘Gazprom’ and ‘Transneft’ received legal permission to organise internal security bodies or ‘private armies’ (Полит.ру, 2013) to protect installations and pipelines using small arms and special equipment. It was broadly seen as being a “good way to offer retired servicemen new employment opportunities when Russia’s Defence and Interior Ministries are planning to reduce their workforces” (Sputnik News, 2012A). There are also suspicions that the law is impacted by the domestic power struggle between the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the FSB, as both organisations would like to control PMCs fully (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018, p. 32). The leaders of those organisations are very influential members of the President’s inner circle, and looking into future, they want to keep control of the security domain.

The control of legally recognised law enforcement entities is critical, and the Russian National Guard (NG) has a role in this regard. The main tasks of the NG include (Государственная система правовой информации, 2016, p. para 6) the contribution in cooperation with internal security forces for the protection of public order and security and state of emergency regime, and to combat organised crime, fight terrorism and ensure a legal regime of counter-terrorist operations, as well as the supervision of private security companies. In general, the tasks listed above are related to internal security, but they are likewise linked with external threats, which could be eliminated before ever entering Russia. It is related to Private Security Companies (PSCs; Rus.: Частная охранная организация), legal in Russia from 1992, which could be a source of manpower for PMCs. Next, some of the existing PSCs could potentially shield PMCs, allowing them to exist undercover, as the former are legal according to existing

laws. As National Guard competencies include distribution of licences for operations and firearms, those are effective means to control PSCs by giving or cancelling such certificates. In Russia, PSCs are responsible for the armed security of infrastructure, people, civilian companies, various businesses and transport, proving to be a powerful force in the country, with many tasks being discernibly similar to those executed by PMCs abroad. According to the Interior Ministry in 2015, “there are currently over 60,000 such companies in the country with about 700,000 employees” (Kryazhev, 2015); the number could be even bigger counting unregistered employees and is growing every year. The PSCs are organised and controlled by local authorities, and those are controlling access to weapons giving them a constant overview of status, staffing, and operations. In the case of an emergency, those are available assets to face a crisis within the legal framework. In theory, PMCs could receive recruits with military training to be deployed in operations in a relatively short time staffing those positions, and without requiring special training. It is also linked with the assumption that many retired soldiers and officers, along with former personnel of law enforcement organisations, are employed by PSCs.

The combination of PSCs and PMCs’ capabilities and human resources should be considered when discussing possible human resources reserves that can be mobilised and deployed in a relatively short time. The well-trained PMCs manpower, tested in combat operations abroad, is invaluable for the National Guard, as those leaving previous employer duties could immediately join as guardsmen. Therefore, the control of PSCs is of great importance as it influences them during peacetime, due to their extensive knowledge about their human resources, capabilities, and tasks, enabling the division of local security-related tasks and releasing the NG for more critical duties. The coordination is continuously achieved at a local level between NG and PSC leadership, which supports the coordination and mutual support during crisis response operations and war. It supports another critical aspect of sharing information between NG and PSC, which is especially important at the local level giving updated orientation about any opposing endeavours.



## 2. PMCS OPERATIONS IN SYRIA

Formally, Russia decided to support the Syrian government based on request for assistance, and it was also accepted on the same day by the Russian government and the Federation Council. It was followed by the deployment of units of armed forces, reaching a peak presence of up to 10,000 troops. However, the presence of PMCs, run by former Russian military and comprised of Russian citizens, started much earlier. PMCs involvement in Syria had already begun in 2013 with the deployment of the Slavic Corps formed by the Moran Security Group and registered in Hong Kong in 2012. The Russian motivation behind using the company was to solidify infrastructure through a favourable contract with the Syrian Ministry of Oil and Mineral Resources without official military involvement. Additionally, an important factor was to preserve President Assad in power as he had supported Russian interests, and without Russian support his government could collapse. The threat of another colour revolution in Syria was a factor taken into consideration by Russia as similar 'revolutions' happened in the vicinity of Russian borders, which were ultimately not in Moscow's favour. Another factor was the presence of radical organisations in Syria, including those from the Caucasus and former Soviet republics, which act as a real threat toward the Russian Federation's domestic stability. The numbers differ, as the former could reach some 2000 and the latter even some 7000 (Asymmetric Warfare Group & TRADOC G2, April 2020, p. 62). Therefore, fighting radicals on another nation's territory and annihilating radicals physically is recognised as worth the investment, especially by denying their return to the country. National interest is supported by the assumption that radical fighters could be back in, for example, Chechnya, causing security problems and posing a future threat. Finally, Syria has geostrategic importance as it is facilitating the preservation of military bases with direct access to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. It has been explicitly linked to a naval facility in Tartus and airbases Khmeimim in Latakia and Shayrat in Homs among others (see Figure 1). As such, this option is essential, as Turkey controls the Bosphorus Strait and alone or as a NATO member, it could close it, denying the Russian Fleet an important access point between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and vice versa. The relations between Moscow and Ankara have sporadically evolved due to historical conditions, and in the future could go in a variety of directions, preserving an array of options for the former.



**Figure 1.** Russian military bases in Syria.

Source: Developed by the Author based on (Algora, 2018). The map - Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin [https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia16/syria\\_sm\\_2016.gif](https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia16/syria_sm_2016.gif)

Algora, 2018. Russia builds four new air bases in Syria, deploys another 6,000 troops. [Online] Available at: [https://www.algora.com/Algora\\_blog/2018/02/02/russia-builds-four-new-air-bases-in-syria-deploys-another-6000-troops](https://www.algora.com/Algora_blog/2018/02/02/russia-builds-four-new-air-bases-in-syria-deploys-another-6000-troops) [Accessed 5 January 2021].

The Slavonic Corps Ltd was responsible for recruitment, under the supervision of Vyacheslav Kalasznikow, president of Moran Security Group, which is headquartered in Moscow (Moran Security Group, 2021). An important figure is Dmitry Utkin, the commander of the ‘Wagner’ group, who commanded a separate special unit of a GRU Spetsnaz brigade, which

afforded him solid military experience, personal connections, and knowledge of weapon accessibility and funding systems. The forces in Syria were led by his deputy Gusev (АВТОР, 2020). The servicemen were transferred to the country by air and by sea using Sevastopol and Novorossiysk with the so-called ‘Syrian Express’ using the Black Sea and Bosphorus Straits (News.ru, 2018; Маржецкий, 2019). During their employment, the main tasks included security of oil and gas facilities, convoy security or personnel protection, which allowed the deployment of Syrian armed forces to fight the rebels and radical organisations. However, it also conducted typical military combat operations at the tactical level. The Slavonic Corps was composed of two companies: ‘Cossacks’ and ‘Slavic’ equipped with older equipment including small arms, mortars, T-62s tanks, BMPs and also with adopted civilian vehicles. The training was multifaceted, mainly structured around two-months of basic military training and supported by some previous conscription service. The Corps was withdrawn in 2014 after suffering casualties during combat in the Sukhnah village and the disappointment of Syrian authorities. Working in parallel with another company, the Zeitplus Consultancy Services Ltd, registered in Cyprus, operated there to provide humanitarian aid to the government but not to conduct combat operations. Active warfare was considered only in the case of taking Syrian citizenship, as combat would be against Article 359 of the Russian criminal code (Kimberly, 2019, pp. 183, 191). Such an approach excludes Russia from the accusation that its citizens are fighting as mercenaries or that there is a presence of Russian PMCs there.

The Slavonic Corps experiences proved to be useful and fully utilised later by PMC ‘Wagner’. It was recognised that among reasons of failure were insufficient equipment and armament and a lack of proper coordination with Syrian armed forces and tasks, which were outside of the PMC’s capabilities to accomplish. It has been a part of the broader concept and ‘pilot’ deployment, and the estimation was that:

*“Russia is trying to combine traditional military and special means with the relevant activities of the PMCs, mercenaries, local collaborators and other paramilitary groups such as the Cossacks. All these units are integrated into the common intelligence and information space and operate under the direct control of the top military leadership of the Russian Federation, according to a single plan. Modern Russian military theory defines this approach as ‘integrated groups of troops (forces)’”.* (Короткий, 2020)

It is believed that some experienced and combat-tested ‘Wagner’ members were withdrawn from Ukraine in 2015, but the company was already doing Syrian reconnaissance in 2014 as a precondition for deployment. Initially, the estimated numbers reached 1350 persons in support of President Assad, before the number rose to some 3000 people as a constant contingent (Короткий, 2020). The number of ‘Wagner’ operators was consistently close to 2000 during a rotation, and the estimated number during the overall presence was some 6000 personnel during the entire period in Syria. These PMC numbers are not precise and probably exaggerated, as not every person will meet military requirements, and the law could limit PMCs’ employment. The quantity varied based on the situation, rotation of troops and necessity to deploy them in other geographical regions. The specific characteristics of this PMC have supported it. The ‘Wagner’ structure is similar to regular military units, and those are supported by combat arms, including armour, artillery, snipers, air defence, and others. There were five permanently deployed detachments (est. 300 persons each), an armoured group, an artillery squad, a separate reconnaissance unit, and the required combat service support units. The sustainment was provided to maintain combat capability, and it could be assessed that it was supported by Russian contingent and from the country itself. The point being that this PMC mainly used the same equipment as armed forces and thus supplying them from military stocks. Nevertheless, some weapon systems were not the latest generation equipment or most modern combat platforms. There was also change in supplies after initial support in 2016, as the situation declined in January 2017. Sergey Sukhankin divided ‘Wagner’ deployment into three phases (Sukhankin, 2019, pp. 12-13):

- Ground Reconnaissance (September 2015–early 2016) with limited combat actions;
- A ‘Baptism by Fire; (April/May–December 2016), including the liberation of Palmyra that caused the first casualties, followed by independent operations and an increase in manpower;
- Deep Involvement (January 2017–February 2018) with the transformation from typical military operations (recapture of Palmyra) to more paramilitary-style, such as recapturing oil and gas fields and security provision.

In March 2016 during the battle at Palmyra, the PMC was fighting together with Syrian Armed Forces and Russian troops from their own special forces and supported further by the Russian air force. Both Russian and Syrian media noted the usage of multiple rocket launchers, Mi-24 helicopters, and the successful utilisation thereof. Interestingly, in recognition of the victory, select 'Wagner' commanders received Orders of Courage during an official ceremony in Kremlin, presenting that the Russian government recognised the PMCs, although they were not legally approved (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 11).

The support of the Russian armed force detachment in Syria and supplies of equipment and sustainment changed for the worse at the beginning of 2017, impacting the effectiveness of 'Wagner' during the second battle of Palmyra and battles in the Deir el-Zour province. Disagreements between PMC leadership and Russian MoD and shift of sponsoring it to the Syrian government and private companies were the causes behind the deterioration of the support. In parallel, it caused a shift in command and control arrangements following the new subordination, altogether negatively impacting combat effectiveness and ultimately increased the number of casualties. However, limited coordination persisted, as PMCs were located in the same bases as Russian troops, as a result many of Syria's operations were conducted or supported by private military companies (PMC) in support of Syrian forces. Based on different levels of training, various roles were carried out, starting from leading attacks, fire coordination, forward air control, or military advisers being sent to Syrian units.

In some cases, it caused disappointment, as successful operations were mentioned as the outcome of local armed forces assaults despite the fact that PMCs were often the initial casualties of the first wave of advance. The PMC was directly involved in no less than four major engagements: the liberation of Palmyra from ISIS in March 2016, the second liberation of Palmyra in spring 2017 again from ISIS, the fall 2017 offensive to capture Deir el-Zour province, and finally in the battle of Khasham in Deir el-Zour province in February 2018 (Asymmetric Warfare Group & TRADOC G2, April 2020, p. 65). The last battle was connected with the establishment of 'de-escalation zones' based on a US and Russian agreement. As it left oil deposits out of the Assad government's control, the decision was to retake them to ensure funds to continue the war and reconstruction. For this reason, PMCs were a handy tool, as they did

not undermine any agreement between the two originators of the zones. Therefore, coordination with Russian leadership in Syria was restricted, causing limited support during combat; moreover, there was also a political component. According to the US Secretary of Defense, “the Russian high command in Syria assured us it was not their people,” (Kimberly, 2019, pp. 183,194) and it was related to Russia denying any violation of ‘de-escalation zones’, using communication channels that allowed them to avoid direct fighting between the two armed forces. It also appears to be valid in regard to Syrian units supported by ‘Wagner’ during the fight against the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurds near Deir el-Zour in eastern Syria. The defending troops were supported by US Special Forces, air force, and artillery (Roblin, 2018) that caused the PMC to suffer casualties; it is estimated that some 100 mercenaries were killed and 200 wounded (Roblin, 2018; Żochowski, et al., 2018). It is important to note that neither the Russian air defence nor the air force responded to protect them, compared to direct support to anti-Assad forces by US F-15s, UAVs, and AH-64 helicopters. It left the attacking Syrian and PMC troops exposed in desert terrain with no capabilities to face it. It allowed the Russian government to mention within official statements the deaths of only five Russian citizens (unconnected to the armed forces) and no involvement of Russian troops. President Press Secretary Peskov denied it, and spokesperson of Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zakharova deemed it fake news; both claimed that there were no Russian citizens in Syria and no Russian soldiers were killed (Interfakc, 2018; TASS News Agency, 2018). What is interesting is the wounded service members were evacuated to Russia using military planes. There was an information blockade, as the operations in Syria were presented as a success, and the failure was not in line with propaganda. It was a particularly tenuous and undesired topic, as Russia was in the midst of presidential elections in March 2018, and this propaganda campaign represented a significant element in favour of President Putin. Moreover, if the death of Russian citizens at the hands of US armed forces would be officially confirmed, it would present a risk for the deterioration of bilateral relations. Thereafter, there would be expectations to enact revenge against the United States, with a decisive political reaction at the very minimum.

The case above confirms PMCs ‘value’ as those losses are not counted within official government reports, taking pressure off the government and avoiding accusation toward the state. It is in line with the official

narrative regarding PMCs, as “Russia is using large numbers of contractors in Syria because that allows Moscow to put more boots on the ground without risking regular soldiers whose deaths have to be accounted for” (Tsvetkova, 2018). The point is that such topics are sensitive both for the internal and international audience as a source of criticism toward the government. Next, there was a limited exchange of information and intelligence between PMCs and Russian armed forces in Syria, although it probably occurred. The assumption is that the Russian contingent commander was aware of employing PMC members, but could not actively support them as it would be against official political statements. Of further interest is the fact that Russian entities did not order the advance on the Deirez-Zor oil facilities; according to Kommersant correspondent, those were fighting for those who paid; in this case, “so-called Syrian businessmen, who needed to gain a foothold and get an oil refinery.” (Алексеев, 2018). The battle exposed limitations in ‘Wagner’ operations, with more passive support for Syrian armed forces, but had not fully ceased its presence there.

Alongside this, the PMC Vegatsy Strategic Services LTD continued the presence in Syria from the beginning of 2019 to provide military and security-related training along with protection of critical infrastructure but not direct combat operations. There were updates that the Russian Energy Minister Aleksandr Novak facilitated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in December 2016 between his Syrian counterpart and a Russian PSC firm ‘Evro Polis’ to “liberate oil and gas fields, plants, and other infrastructure captured by enemies of the regime, and then guard them.” (Kimberly, 2019, pp. 184, 194) The profit for Russia would be a quarter of the fields’ output as compensation for military expenditures during a five-year term. Along with such tasks, ‘Evro Polis’ provided trainers to a Syrian special unit, ‘ISIS Hunters,’ to “free, secure, and defend the oil fields around Palmyra, then held by the Islamic State” (Коротков, 2017). It was an area in which ‘Wagner’ was fighting battles. Another PMC ‘Schit’ protected the oil field in the vicinity of Palmyra, which has been owned by the Moscow-based ‘Stroitransgaz’. It is comprised of airborne unit veterans, deploying some 25-30 people in each of five locations for 3 months rotations with an estimated payment of 120,000 roubles monthly (Asymmetric Warfare Group & TRADOC G2, April 2020, pp. 66-67). The payment policy is flexible among PMCs based on tasks and subordination to national authorities or private companies. It is

estimated that it could reach some 200,000 roubles in military operations and up to 300,000 roubles during military campaigns involving major engagements (Бушуев & Барановская, 2020). The compensations for families were predicted: for those killed in combat (5 million roubles) and in other non-combat missions (3 million roubles) (Sukhankin, 2019, p. 7). The situation worsened when the Syrian government paid for services, causing disappointment and resulting in a lower quality of recruits. The financing of the PMCs is not clear, but as they represent national interests in Syria, there must be a channel to pay for the service in a combat zone and those wounded or hospitalised and consider compensations for families of those killed in action. The presence will be continued, and the PMCs' role and deployment will differ with respect to the evolving situation in Syria and other regions. Lately, President Putin confirmed their presence in Syria during a conference in June 2019, but a lack of connection with the Russian government and armed forces was mentioned (INTERFAX.RU, 2019). It was clarified that those fighting terrorism on another nation's territory are only doing so in support of domestic economic interests there, however.



### 3. PMCS IN RUSSIA – DISCUSSION

The PMCs mercenaries “have been fighting major battles in Ukraine and Syria, including Palmyra’s battles” (Miller, 2016; ФОНТАНКА.ру, 2016) enhancing and developing their combat experience. According to military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, “the deployment of military contractors is consistent with the Russian take on ‘hybrid-war’” (Sparks, 2016; Gusarov, 2016). Thus, it could be surmised that Russia is putting the theory of ‘new generation warfare’ in Syria into practice, using military and non-military assets to acquire more experience on how to deal with any threat coming from inside and outside of the country. Such threats could be related to terrorist organisations inside Russia and the threat of internal ‘colour revolutions’, not to mention conflicts in the Middle East. The link between PMCs and armed forces will be preserved, as according to Mark Galeotti, Moran “is run by FSB veterans, and FSB officers were involved in recruiting for the corps” (Galeotti, 2016). He also claims “the Donbas has been a testing ground for new state-controlled but notionally private initiatives, ranging from the Vostok Battalion, deployed in 2014, to a variety of other groups drawn from Cossacks, veterans, and adventurers, largely mustered by the Federal Security Service (FSB) - or more usually, military intelligence, the GRU” (Galeotti, 2016).

As suggested, there are links with national security organisations like MoD, FSB, GRU and Special Forces, as all the aforementioned provide training, contracts, money, and weapons. It does in a broader sense relate to national security. PMCs could serve as an element that underpins armed forces in the case of war against the Russian Federation, as a form of combat or reserve forces. Their peacetime activities provide constant training and ability to fight arm-in-arm with military structures or could be used to support military operations and regular units for specific tasks. The key advantages are PMC’s readiness to be operational on short notice, experienced and well-connected leadership and service members, familiarisation with weapon systems, and constant military establishment links. Compared to conscript armies, the PMCs members are well trained and motivated more by money than by ideology, causing them to adhere to a customer’s expectations. However according to Alexander Golts, there is an internal obstacle in Russia as “military service in Russia is widely seen as a civic duty rather than a well-paying job, which discourages for-profit military work” (Eremenko, 2014); with the open market

and general economic situation leaving space for changing attitudes. An encouraging factor is the anonymity of lower ranks, as usually data are limited only to leaders. Moreover, power is in numbers, as according to the Moscow Times, “Russia is ripe for entering the PMSC market, given the surplus of retired military professionals from its 760,000-strong army, not counting the other 300,000 young men who complete obligatory national service every year” and “we probably have more people who know how to handle a Kalashnikov than the US does” (Galeotti, 2016). In respect to overwatching PMCs in the future, there is the option to “give control over them to the Defence Ministry, which would use them as an immediate response to various threats” (Kryazhev, 2015). The competition for ‘ownership’ will continue and the failure in Deir el-Zour could be exploited by FSB and other players to weaken the position of MoD in years to come.

The case of PMCs is an example of using, or rather not implementing, specific legal regulations to achieve specific national tactical or strategic objectives. As of not passing domestic legislation, it is allowing flexibility in denying any national involvement in a conflict or case or connection with a PMC, which is simultaneously directly or indirectly serving national aims. It is also causing the risk “that the rule of law and the integrity of the legal system, both domestic and international, could be thereby subordinated to operational imperatives”; it could be seen as use of “law as a weapon of war.” (Craig, 2019). The issue is that there is differing perception of law in democratic nations vs other nations, and it is leading to the instrumental utilisation of law for specific purposes. Professor Craig paraphrased Clausewitz, stating that “law is but a continuation of politics by other means” (Craig, 2019) causing a “weaponisation” of law. Zarko Perovic made a comparative study of PMC-related law in selected nations (e.g. Ukraine, Libya, Syria, Mozambique and Azerbaijan). It was leading to conclusions, in respect to Wagner PMC, that although its “activities are nominally regulated by both international law and the domestic laws of the countries where the group is present, these laws put relatively few constraints on Wagner’s operations” (Perovic, 2021). It is allowing them to be used when required to fulfil national aims without promoting formal accusation of a country that is deploying them for their own purposes. Deployments of PMCs are particularly possible within nations with weak governments and insubstantial legal systems that allow a rather pliable use of the law. The interesting question is whether PMCs will be legalised

as such in Russia. The lack of official status along with the fact that their expanding presence in selected nations and conflict areas continues to be profitable for Russia. However, it would not be an option for a democratic rule of law-based country. The reality that PMCs such as Wagner can exist and operate without clearly defined legal status could be argued to be an advantage of such undemocratic regimes.

## CONCLUSIONS

The PMCs should not be seen as ‘companies’ if only as they possess real capabilities as proven by their involvement in Syria and their ability to engage a variety of opposing forces. In this sense, they can be compared with the armed forces of small nations. There are, according to the United Nations, some 3,000 active PMCs in the world, present in more than 60 countries. In the past, they were able to influence or support governments and dictators. In 2018, the market for PMCs was estimated to be between USD 250 – 300 billion, with all signs pointing toward increases in the future (Тодоровски, 2020). The most successfully employed are US companies, but Russian ones are growing in power and importance, and the experiences coming from regional wars, including Syria, will make them stronger and more desirable for covert deployment by the government and other nations’ regimes. An essential factor in Russia is the close control or relations between PMCs, law enforcement structures, security, and special forces. The lack of legal background is utilised flexibly, as in some cases, as in Syria, PMCs are operating in close cooperation with armed forces. However, when it is not desired, or could be seen as a risk for Russia, the nation is distancing themselves from them, as was the case in the Deir ez-Zor battle.

The Slavonic Corps Limited deployment was the first test in the utilisation of such PMCs in combat and auxiliary tasks; the experiences were later introduced in ‘Wagner’ preparations and operations. Russia remembers its painful experiences from Afghanistan, but using non-governmental assets allows it to avoid domestic and international rumours as well as to ensure Assad rule. What is significant is that the connection between PMC and armed forces with the full range of modern armament, e.g., an air force, proved to be important. It was visible during battles in the Deir ez-Zor province when PMC troops faced technologically superior US Special Forces supported by airstrikes. It was an example of the PMCs limitations as they were more effective fighting rebels and terrorist as these groups represented weaker opponents. The other tasks as intelligence, protection of infrastructure or training of local armed forces were performed effectively, and it is linked with the background of members. Many are retired military or former law enforcement personnel, allowing them to share real experiences.

Presumably the role of PMCs will not diminish, especially in the regions and countries which are not democratic, allowing their leadership to use them in place of regular armed forces to preserve a regime rule. It was recognised that such international-based companies could be very effective tools in implementing political will or preserving economic interests with limited risk to their own government. The battle of Khasham illustrated another factor whereby the United States and Russia supported different sides of a conflict in Syria. Denying direct involvement of Russian citizens and forces by PMC involvement proved that Moscow was trying to avoid any distinct collision or incident, which could escalate relations with the United States. Next, the Syrian deployment of PMCs was an important factor that, although not officially recognised, avoided any domestic rumours and denied any accusations on the international level. The case indicated that Russian authorities will tolerate the casualties of Russian citizens, which differs greatly from the perspectives of many other nations, which could consider broader consequences for such actions. The relations between military and oligarchs and governments were a factor, but also within differing stages, when cooperation was very closely coordinated or diminished as a result of diverging interests. The Syrian case presents a doctrinal study regarding mixing traditional armed forces with mercenaries, local troops, and paramilitary organisations worthy of attention and continuity. Such is the ad-hoc organisation or 'integrated groups of troops (forces)' that was used in Ukraine and Syria and could be used against any other nation.

The concept is also a part of military exercises. Russia, led by growing global ambitions and the desire to use other tools than official instruments of power, will use PMCs covertly, which suits their purposes particularly well. It is a tactic driven by globalisation, economic interests, and a need to deploy 'troops on the ground'. PMCs' involvement enables Russia to deny their immediate presence on a territory whilst sanctioning, enforcing or ensuring their national interests.

## REMARK

The views presented by the author are his own opinions and do not represent the official position of the Baltic Defence College.

**Contact:**

**Zdzisław Śliwa, PhD**

Baltic Defence College

E-mail: [Zdzislaw.sliwa@baltdefcol.org](mailto:Zdzislaw.sliwa@baltdefcol.org)

## REFERENCES AND SOURCES

- Alexandra, A. & Baker, D.-P. C. M., 2006. *Private Military and Security Companies. Ethics, Policies and Civil-Military Relations*. London: Routledge.
- Asymmetric Warfare Group & TRADOC G2, April 2020. *Russian Private Military Companies. Their use and how to consider them in operations, competition, and conflict*, Laurel: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory.
- Delfi, 2020. "А что такое ЧВК „Вагнер“?" Дмитрий Песков ответил на вопросы российских СМИ о ситуации с задержанными. [Online] Available at: <https://rus.delfi.ee/daily/russia/a-что-такое-чвк-vagner-dmitrij-peskov-otvetil-na-voprosy-rossijskih-smi-o-situacii-s-zaderzhannymi?id=90602313> [Accessed 20 January 2021].
- Eremenko, A., 2014. Blackwater.ru: The Future of Russian Private Military Companies. *Moscow Times*, 12 November.
- Gusarov, V., 2016. *Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror*. [Online] Available at: <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/> [Accessed 20 November 2020].
- Hoffman, F., 2009. Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict. *Strategic Forum No 240*, April, p. 5.
- Интерфакс, 2018. Песков не исключил присутствия в Сирии граждан не из Вооруженных сил РФ. [Online] Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/599909> [Accessed 21 January 2021].
- INTERFAX.RU, 2019. Путин подтвердил присутствие частных охранных компаний в Сирии. [Online] Available at: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/666012> [Accessed 8 January 2021].
- Kimberly, M., 2019. Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(3), p. 189.
- Kinsey, C., 2006. *Corporate Soldiers and International Security: The Rise of Private Military Companies*. London: Routledge.
- Kryazhev, A., 2015. *Government rejects bill to introduce private military contractors in Russia – report*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.rt.com/russia/316276-government-rejects-bill-to-introduce/> [Accessed 12 November 2020].
- Kuczyński, G., 2018. *Putin's Invisible Army*. [Online] Available at: <https://warsawinstitute.org/putins-invisible-army/> [Accessed 10 November 2020].
- Massicot, D., 2019. *Anticipating a New Russian Military Doctrine in 2020: What it Might Contain and why it Matters*. [Online] Available at: <https://>

- warontherocks.com/2019/09/anticipating-a-new-russian-military-doctrine-in-2020-what-it-might-contain-and-why-it-matters/ [Accessed 12 March 2021].
- Miller, J., 2016. *Putin's Attack Helicopters and Mercenaries Are Winning the War for Assad*. [Online] Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/putins-attack-helicopters-and-mercenaries-are-winning-the-war-for-assad/> [Accessed 14 November 2020].
- Moran Security Group, 2021. *Moran Security Group*. [Online] Available at: <http://moran-group.org/en/about/index> [Accessed 25 December 2020].
- News.ru, 2018. *Как изменился «Сирийский экспресс» за три года*. [Online] Available at: <https://news.rambler.ru/army/40978500-kak-izmenilsya-siriyskiy-ekspress-za-tri-goda/> [Accessed 6 December 2020].
- Østensen, Å. G. & Bukkvoll, T., 2018. *Russian Use of Private Military and Security Companies – the implications for European and Norwegian Security*. Bergen: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) .
- Ovcharov, A. V., 2018. Частные Военные Компании В России. *Вестник Восточно-Сибирского Института МВД России*, 86(3), pp. 84-93.
- Rabin, A., 2019. *Diplomacy and Dividends: Who Really Controls the Wagner Group?*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/10/diplomacy-and-dividends-who-really-controls-the-wagner-group/>; [Accessed 10 November 2020].
- Roblin, S., 2018. *Did Russia and America Almost Go to War in Syria?*. [Online] Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/did-russia-america-almost-go-war-syria-26279> [Accessed 16 November 2020].
- Singh, A., 2017. *Soldiers of Fortune: the Rise of Private Military Companies and their Consequences on America's Wars*. [Online] Available at: <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2017/10/25/soldiers-of-fortune-the-rise-of-private-military-companies-and-their-consequences-on-americas-wars/> [Accessed 15 December 2020].
- Sparks, J., 2016. *Revealed: Russia's 'Secret Syria Mercenaries'*. [Online] Available at: <http://news.sky.com/story/revealed-russias-secret-syria-mercenaries-10529248> [Accessed 14 November 2020].
- Sputnik News, 2012A. *Russia May Consider Establishing Private Military Companies*. [Online] Available at: <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120413/172789099.html> [Accessed 25 November 2020].
- Sputnik News, 2012. *Russia May Consider Establishing Private Military Companies*. [Online] Available at: <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120413/172789099.html> [Accessed 12 November 2020].



- Sukhankin, S., 2019. Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond. *The Jamestown Foundation*, 18 December, p. 2.
- TASS News Agency, 2018. *Захарова: в Сирии могли погибнуть пять российских граждан, это не военнослужащие*. [Online] Available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/4962156> [Accessed 21 January 2021].
- The Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 2014. *The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation*. [Online] Available at: <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029> [Accessed 10 March 2021].
- The Russian Federation, 1993. *The Constitution of the Russian Federation Adopted at National Voting on December 12, 1993*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-01.htm> [Accessed 12 January 2021].
- Тодоровски Дарко, 2020, *Частные военные компании на современном этапе*, <https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/dtodorovsky/chastnye-voennye-kompanii-na-sovremennom-etape/> [Accessed: 8 December 2020].
- Tsvetkova, M., 2018. *Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ> [Accessed 16 November 2020].
- United Nations, 1989. *International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Mercenaries.aspx> [Accessed 12 December 2020].
- Varin, C., 2006. *Hybrid Armies and National Security. Private Soldiers and the State in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.
- Żochowski, P., Strachota, K. & Menkiszak, M., 2018. *Russian losses near Deir ez-Zor – a problem for the Kremlin*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-02-21/russian-losses-near-deir-ez-zor-a-problem-kremlin> [Accessed 16 November 2020].
- АВТОР, У., 2020. *ЧВК «Славянский Корпус»: История провала ФСБ РФ и западных спецслужб*. [Online] Available at: <https://myrotvorets.news/chvk-slavianskyi-korpus-ystoryia-prov/> [Accessed 6 December 2020].
- Алексеев, А., 2018. *Эксперт: перспективы легализации частных военных компаний в России туманны*. [Online] Available at: <https://rus.err.ee/684439/jekspert-perspektivy-legalizacii-chastnyh-voennyh-kompanij-v-rossii-tumannyy> [Accessed 8 December 2020].
- Бушуев, М. & Барановская, М., 2020. *ЧВК Вагнера: все, что о ней известно*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/чвк-вагнера-все-что-ней-известно/a-42596738> [Accessed 8 January 2021].

- Государственная система правовой информации, 2016. Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 05.04.2016 № 157 “Вопросы Федеральной службы войск национальной гвардии Российской Федерации”. [Online] Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201604050058> [Accessed 26 November 2020].
- ИА Regnum, 2020. *Бойцов ЧВК ‘Вагнер’ назвали ‘героями нашего времени’*, [Online] Available at: <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2975777.html> [Accessed 12 November 2020].
- Короткий, В., 2020. «Вагнер» и компания. *Наемники тоталитарного режима*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-world/3048586-vagner-i-kompania-naemniki-totalitarnogo-rezima.html> [Accessed 6 December 2020].
- Коротков, Д., 2017. *Немного бизнеса в сирийской войне*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2017/06/26/084/> [Accessed 8 January 2021].
- Маржецкий, С., 2019. “Сирийский экспресс” под угрозой: США попытаются лишить Сирию снабжения. [Online] Available at: <https://topcor.ru/10112-sirijskij-jekspress-po-ugrozaj-ssha-popytajutsja-lishit-siriju-snabzhenija.html> [Accessed 6 December 2020].
- Муртазин, И., 2020. ЧВК в России — как секс в СССР. *Novaja Gazeta No 84*, 7 August, p. 5.
- Полит.ру, 2013. «Газпрому» и «Транснефти» разрешили создать «частные армии». [Online] Available at: <https://polit.ru/news/2013/06/14/gazprom/> [Accessed 14 November 2020].
- Рыжов, В. А., 2020. *Частные военные компании: солидный бизнес уважаемых джентльменов*. [Online] Available at: <https://topwar.ru/172525-chastnye-voennye-kompanii-solidnyj-biznes-uvazhaemyh-dzhentlmenov.html> [Accessed 10 November 2020].
- Фонтанка.ру, 2016. *Они сражались за Пальмиру*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/> [Accessed 14 November 2020].