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Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs)

Over the last decade, Russian private military companies (PMCs) have appeared globally in various conflicts. Observers believe the Russian government is increasingly using PMCs to project power cheaply and deniably. Russian PMCs often operate alongside local militias, volunteers, criminal groups, and other non-state actors. In many cases, such PMCs appear closely connected to and controlled by the Russian government; in other cases, the extent of government control is uncertain. Members of Congress may be interested in examining the scope of Russian PMC operations to understand the full range of Russian tactics and operations when evaluating Russia's efforts to advance its foreign policy.

History and Legal Status

During the 1990s, Russia experienced an increase in internal demand for security services, which resulted in the growth of a large domestic private protection industry. The fall of the USSR left many former soldiers, members of elite special forces, and intelligence professionals jobless; many of these former soldiers formed associations with veterans of their old units and created new private security companies. Gradually, these firms and associations began to look internationally for business but were met with stiff competition from Western private security companies. Additionally, a 1996 law forbade Russian citizens from participating in armed conflict abroad for financial gain. PMCs ostensibly remain illegal under Russian law, despite several attempts to pass legislation that would give them legal status. Observers suggest this may be due to opposition from the official security services and sections of the military, which seek to ensure Russian security agencies retain control over these private actors and manage competition from them.

Growth and Evolution

By 2010, several internationally focused, operational Russian private security companies, primarily run by former military and security service officers, appeared to have close connections with the Ministry of Defense. Initially, these companies offered traditional training and protection services for private firms, including anti-piracy services. Often these groups worked for, or had connections to, Russian state-run oil and gas companies. Gradually, new companies were formed that emphasized combat services, which included not only training and coordinating local forces but also participating in direct combat. This combat-oriented focus constitutes a main difference between Russian PMCs and Western security contractors, which tend to focus on logistics and support.

The type, extent, and competency of Russian PMCs appear to vary widely both across and within conflicts. Information on these groups and their activities is often imprecise. Some

personnel are highly experienced and trained ex-members of Russia's elite forces or intelligence services. Others appear to be less qualified or trained and reportedly are paid significantly less. Analysts have reported instances of qualified, experienced Russian PMC personnel being used for specific operations and then gradually replaced by less competent personnel.

Multiple Russian PMCs are registered both domestically and internationally, including in Cyprus and Hong Kong. Often companies are dissolved and reconstituted under new management and names, often to obscure their true ownership. The most well-known PMC is the Wagner Group (and entities related to it), allegedly financed and operated by wealthy state-connected businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin (through his holding company, Concord Management and Consulting). The U.S. government has imposed sanctions on Prigozhin, the Wagner Group, and/or related individuals and entities for actions tied to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, U.S. election interference, and support to the former government of Sudan.

Media reporting suggests the Wagner Group and its related entities maintain close connections to Russia's military intelligence agency (GU). Reporting also has identified Wagner training camps close to the bases of Russian *spetsnaz* (special forces) brigades. Other firms appear to have close connections to Russia's Ministry of Defense and other state security services. In some cases, tensions between PMC outfits and their security service or military patrons reportedly have resulted in infighting and arrests.

A defining feature of Russian PMCs is the blending of private and Russian state interests. For example, the U.S. Treasury Department identifies the Wagner Group as "a designated Russian Ministry of Defence proxy force" despite it allegedly being operated by a private citizen.

The Russian government initially used PMCs extensively during its invasion of Ukraine and its intervention in Syria. As the role of PMCs increased, the political and economic power of their owners also increased. Over time, and as the Russian government's needs changed, Russian PMCs apparently began to pursue more commercially beneficial opportunities less directly connected to Russian foreign policy objectives. Some analysts argue that, in some cases, PMC owner/operators are pursuing financial opportunities in exchange for carrying out Russian state directives.

Russian PMC Doctrine and Strategy

The rise of Russian PMCs coincided with developments in Russian military doctrine and strategy concerning the use and role of non-state actors in conflict. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, "Russia relies on a highly

sophisticated apparatus consisting of state and non-state agents and proxies, decades of experience carrying out influence operations around the globe, and the strategic direction of Russian president Vladimir Putin.” The Russian military believes the importance of information and political influence has increased in modern conflicts, making nontraditional forms of coercion particularly important. The Russian state may use PMCs prior to conflict to prepare the battlefield, and it may deploy PMCs during conflict to increase Russia’s low-cost power-projection capabilities. PMCs also generally increase speed and flexibility in conducting operations. Overall, PMCs offer four potential benefits to the Russian state:

Deniability. PMCs may allow the Russian government to deny and deflect accusations of direct involvement in conflicts. Although the level of deniability is often tenuous, the Russian government appears to use PMCs to confuse and complicate attribution rather than to fully hide its responsibility. This strategy often reduces the political costs of interventions and undermines international responses.

Casualty Avoidance. By using PMCs, the Russian government can avoid official casualties, which may increase domestic opposition and attention to foreign operations. PMC losses are not subject to the same scrutiny as Russian military losses, and Russian officials may consider PMC personnel more expendable than regular troops.

Rapid Deployment and Withdrawal. PMCs provide the Russian government with an easily scalable fighting force. They also provide increased flexibility, with the ability to inject, or withdraw, fighting forces on short notice.

Low Cost. Using PMCs is cheaper than using conventional Russian forces. PMCs require less logistical support, and the combination of public and private motives means PMCs often can sustain their presence through private financial ventures (e.g., asset protection of valuable natural resource deposits) when not directly in service of the Russian state.

PMCs also come with potential disadvantages. As noted, some analysts have identified a wide range in quality among PMC operations and outfits. PMCs also offer less capability and capacity than Russian forces to decisively defeat committed opponents. Armed primarily with small arms, PMCs generally are limited to acting as force multipliers and are exposed without the support of conventional forces.

Opaque ownership and varying levels of direct government control complicate attribution and assessment of Russian intent. Nevertheless, the growth of Russian PMCs and extensive operational experience mean their use may increase in the future.

Selected Russian PMC Deployments

Country	Deployment Actions
Ukraine	Combat, training, assassinations
Syria	Combat, training, asset protection

Country	Deployment Actions
Libya	Combat, training, asset protection
Central African Republic	Training, asset protection, supplying weaponry
Sudan	Training, asset protection, supplying weaponry
Mozambique	Combat, training

Source: Compiled by CRS based on public U.S. government documents, media reports, and U.N. sanctions monitoring reports.

Ukraine: PMCs played a key role in Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine, both in direct combat and in the training and oversight of various rebel forces. Most PMC personnel appear to have been highly qualified and well trained. The GU appears to have controlled their deployment, and there are allegations PMCs assassinated rebel leaders who Russia found problematic. Analysts cite Ukraine as the first appearance of the Wagner Group.

Syria: PMCs have seen extensive service in Syria, ranging from oil field protection to direct combat, including engagements with U.S. forces. Analysts and media reports have noted a range of goals and quality in personnel. Some operations appear to be commercial—such as protecting oil fields—and often are conducted by less skilled personnel. Other actions, such as combat and training of local allied forces, appear to be conducted by highly skilled personnel and closely coordinated with the Russian military.

Libya: Russian PMCs, specifically the Wagner Group, have played a relatively large role in supporting Libyan National Army leader Khalifa Haftar since 2018. Support has included direct combat, training and advising, and overseeing the deployment of air defense systems and aircraft.

Central African Republic (CAR): Since 2018, when Russia transferred a shipment of weapons to the government of CAR—having obtained a U.N. Security Council exemption from an arms embargo imposed on the country—Russian PMCs reportedly have provided security services, military training, and personal protection for top CAR officials (including the president). Russian firms connected to PMCs also have concluded mining contracts with the state and established a presence at rebel-held diamond mines that are subject to international sanctions.

Sudan: Since 2018, the Wagner Group and related entities have been documented in Sudan training local security personnel (including troops from CAR) and protecting gold sector investments.

Mozambique: In 2019, Wagner Group personnel reportedly deployed to Mozambique’s far north to train and support government forces against a local Islamist insurgency with ties to the Islamic State. The PMC appeared to suffer serious losses, however, and reportedly is no longer involved in such activity.

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