



FROM MERCENARIES TO *PRIVATE DEFENCE*. THE CASE OF RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES

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The modern hybrid warfare came with an important added value involving old instruments in new clothes. It is the case of the Private Military Companies, used in a way that allows credible denial and the hiring of mercenaries with impunity. It is the case of the Russian PMCs, a form of the private defence that goes the closest to mercenaries. Lawfare, another very present form of the hybrid approaches nowadays, has provided the means to hire and change a highly condemn practice as well as the breach of the rules of war and the human rights into a very effective tool with a very high impact when facing regular armies as well as guerillas, irregulars or legitimate protesters.

The study makes an overlook into the international legal framework for the use of mercenaries and moves to the uses and abuses of the new PMCs – Private Military Companies. From the legal framework observed in the case of American legislation and private defence approaches in the US, the translation of the PMCs as an instrument in Russia has put the framework under the umbrella of a real lawfare, with ambiguity in the status and illegality according to the internal Russian legislation. Not talking about difficulties of those PMCs and their way of operating to fit into the international legislation regarding mercenaries and the illegal interventions of hybrid nature.

Russian mercenaries case study is in the heart of the present paper. It covers the legal (in)existent internal base, the hybrid use of legally inexistent private defence companies in Russia's offensive special operations, as well as the use of the lack of legal base for constraining mercenaries by condemning some for a credible denial. And last but not least, the habitudes in using Russia's PMCs as a power projection instrument, methods to covertly finance those interventions and the political use of such an instrument in showing characteristics of a Great Power.

Keywords: mercenaries; private defence; hybrid warfare; lawfare; guerrillas; revolution; insurrection; protest.

The Mercenary. An imperfect legal basis

The mercenary has a long historical evolution and has been used since ancient times. The idea of recruiting people specialized in the art of weapons to defend a prince or a nobleman and to participate in wars is a constant throughout history. The emergence of nation states, equal sovereignty and mutual responsibilities of states that come with the recognition of sovereign equality also implies establishing responsibilities for mercenary nationals, an approach that, we believe, could extend today to the paradigm of foreign fighters – in theaters of terrorist operations around the world, with all the consequences resulting for the states on this dimension¹.

However, it must be accepted that the legislation in this area is imperfect. First of all because we are talking, for the most part, about *Conventions*

open to state ratification or *UN General Assembly Resolutions* which are not binding. Secondly, because all 5 permanent members of the Security Council are not signatories to these conventions – even though some are voters of UN General Assembly Resolutions. Last but not least, because the definition found in these documents for mercenaries is a cumulative one which includes a set of conditions that make it inapplicable or difficult to apply in practical terms.

The origins of anti-mercenary laws are found in the 19th-century neutrality laws codified in *The Hague Convention on the observance of the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers during War*². Article 4 mentions that neutral states cannot allow combatant corps or recruitment agencies to work on the territory of neutral states and act as belligerents. However, Article 6 absolves the neutral state of responsibilities for persons crossing the border and offering their services to the belligerents³. And Article 17 mentions as a clause of the loss of neutrality in war that the provisions apply to mercenaries⁴. The illegal act under the Convention is not mercenary work *per se* but rather the violation

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of the sovereignty or territorial integrity of a third state. The connection is made between mercenaries and aggression against a state, respectively the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of the concerned state⁵.

Therefore the provisions of international law as it is quantified today, with or without the states as parties to the conventions, suppose that, when an internal conflict or a war takes place between two states, a third party should observe the sovereignty of the states and, therefore, remain neutral in relation to the war in question, this also assuming the non-involvement of the third party in any way as a source of mercenaries / fighters / troops in any way, shape or form.

On this basis, Russia's actions in Ukraine, even without admitting to the presence of Russian troops, and only of Russian military personnel who "lost their way and ended up" in Ukraine or were on leave – as Serghey Lavrov explained at the OSCE meeting in which Ukraine had presented the evidence – as well as other Russian nationals, generate responsibilities for the state under the Conventions regarding mercenaries.

*Additional Protocol I (1977) to the Geneva Conventions of 1949*⁶ is the only document in force today *erga omnes*, applicable to all, concerning mercenaries. It states that a mercenary cannot be considered a combatant or a prisoner of war – thus the Geneva Conventions does not apply to him in this case; and then a formula for defining the mercenary is presented that cumulatively demands several conditions, such as – the person who is recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict; actually participates in the fighting; he is motivated by money, receiving much more than the regular military forces of the concerned state; he is not a citizen of a party to the conflict; he is not part of the armed forces of any party in the conflict; he was not sent by the state to which he belongs as a military officer in official capacity to a third party in a conflict⁷.

The convention has some practical value, among which the most important is deterring mercenary services, by depriving of rights, even those equal to the military of the regular forces and entailing the responsibility of states of origin. However, the definition of a mercenary is so restrictive in this convention that it is impractical and unusable in particular cases, no matter how obvious it is, for

instance, that Russian soldiers of the regular army captured in Ukraine meet these conditions, for example, for whom the Russian state denies any responsibility.

On the other hand, there are numerous efforts undertaken to remedy these vulnerabilities of the legislation such as *The Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries* of December 4, 1989, with 36 State Parties and 9 signatories, adopted by the UN GA Resolution 44/34⁸. We can also add here *The Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa*, adopted by the Organization of African Unity in Libreville, July 3, 1977⁹, which is specific and reasserts the provisions of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Convention.

There, in the new convention, the definition of mercenary is derived from Article 47 of Protocol I but goes much further, it applies to any armed conflict (Article 1, paragraph 1) and to any situation (Article 1, paragraph 2). All instances are considered violations of international law with equal responsibility for the mercenary himself and for the state of origin, generating responsibilities for states which must take actions in relation to mercenaries – punishment according to the criminal code, prosecution, pro-active prevention. Article 4 also condemns the complicity to the mercenary activity. Articles 9 and 12 stipulate the extradition of those involved in accordance with the Convention in order to face the criminal charges in the concerned state, not only the internal provisions on mercenaries.

The topic is extremely complex, and there are also more direct approaches and proposals for mandatory Conventions, even studies that separate the legitimate activity of Private Military Companies from that of mercenaries. Michael Scheimer has such a study that is meant to protect PMCs from a legal standpoint, and also to clarify the legal status and entail the responsibility of states where the companies are registered and whose citizens are involved in these illegal actions¹⁰.

Scheimer points out that all PMCs fall under Article 47, which defines mercenary work, but can also easily avoid it because of the cumulative conditions of the definition. The support and the advisory role are not mentioned in the Convention, as the definition implies the direct role in effective battles – a fact that automatically includes the PMCs,



but requires conditions difficult to prove for direct involvement; financial involvement is not easy to prove for the employees of PMCs, they might be profit oriented but they do not encompass the type of financial conditions required by definition, which refers to the employees, who are not directly linked to the conditions that lead to the sanctions stipulated by the Convention¹¹. Furthermore, Scheimer proves that there is language and wording of the contracts that can easily avoid the condition of non-belonging to the armed forces of the parties involved in a conflict¹².

However, the conclusion of all the studies, under the terms of the new conventions, is that a PMC is legitimate if the option of private defense is accepted in the state in which he is registered and if there are the appropriate control formulas of the state institutions that control the Regular Army and the intelligence services (it can be done by means of contracts signed with the state which will be the direct beneficiary) and if they are open and represent the concerned state in a transparent manner. It is the only legal option for the use of PMCs on the territory of a third state.

Lawfare. Its use in the case of mercenaries and private defence

We introduced in the concept of *lawfare* meaning the speculation and the abuse of the existing loopholes in the International Law and the lack of legislation, in order to use military instruments to achieve the military and strategic objectives using these means¹³. This include premeditation and strategic planning to achieve these goals, it is not a random action or one that just speculates on the opportunities determined by the vulnerabilities of the targeted country, vulnerabilities present at one point¹⁴.

Of course, examples are all around us: the creation of the new form of war, with the use of soldiers without distinctive signs and unclaimed, the intervention of the so-called "green men" as a military force and as a tool for avoiding responsibility, both for aggression and regarding the rights of these soldiers and their families¹⁵; speculation and use of loopholes in international law in order to take advantage of their capabilities and dominant position to obtain national advantages in cyber warfare and aggressive actions in the energy sector, as they are not yet defined by international

law as aggression; the creation of artificial islands at sea in order to claim offshore rights, such as the creation of new strategic fortifications, including by using natural grounds and based on the natural development aspect of these artificial islands; last but not least, the case of a group of adventurers / terrorists who wish to set up, by purchase or by force, and to own their own state, established on the territory of weak states, in territories where that state has little authority and its army is weak and poorly prepared.

The legal war – *lawfare* – used in the case of mercenaries and PMCs implies speculating on the vacuum of legislation or bypassing the responsibilities generated by the existing legislation in this matter. We have seen above what the shortcomings of the legislation are and, when there exists and is clarified the lack of the appetite of states to adhere to the principles and provisions of the conventions in this field.

Private military companies are a relatively recent instrument of state power projection. The existence of foreign legions, mercenaries and their use by states, mainly in the colonies, is a fact recorded during the Cold War. However, states still have legislation that mentions the monopoly over use of legitimate military force and condemns the use of mercenaries. Still, the tools of private military companies, in the direct sense, belongs to the 21st century, when the expansion of the hybrid war and the need for credible denial of actions, as well as the introduction of some forms of business and self-financing of these instruments resulted in military forces being used in parallel with such companies. The most widely known and most extensive use is that of the Russian Federation, although mercenaries and PMCs are still banned in Russia.

The most common used definition of PMCs is taken from "Montreux Document on Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies during Armed Conflict"¹⁶ and stipulates that MPSC (military and private security companies) are "private business entities providing military or security services". In recent years, Russia has become increasingly interested in PMCs after they started being used by some states such as the US, UK, South Africa or Israel.



The fundamental difference between Western and Russian PMCs is relevant. The former have contracts with the states they come from and have strict norms in recruiting the professional soldiers, training them and carrying out dangerous missions, accompanying regular national military troops, to whom the general tasks in conflict go to and have heavy and specific capabilities. Private companies are used in special missions, their degree of use being relatively restricted otherwise – rescue after kidnappings, assistance and security of private individuals in hostile territories – hence, above all, responsibilities regarding security and protection.

In the case of the Russian Federation, the private military companies belong to some oligarchs with close ties to Putin, the recruitment and training of the employees is conducted in GRU camps – the Russian military services – and their use in special operations exceeds the guard duty and the protection of individuals or objectives. They are, in fact, regular military troops with special status, undercover, with whom Moscow denies any link, allowing credible denial and offensive operations, taking over, defending vital resources from unstable areas that they exploit for the personal or business interests of their owner and the Russian state. The links with the Russian state and the secret services, especially the military ones, is obvious and necessary for their functioning especially outside the Russian territory.

Sending contractors to the battlefield entails lower political and financial costs and helps reduce diplomatic and social costs for the continuation of the war. In addition, states do not have to publicly explain their casualties. The risks assumed by private soldiers are higher and the state does not have the same responsibilities towards them and their families once they die or are injured¹⁷.

Additionally, the operations that these private companies can carry out could go beyond the classic laws of war, as a result of them not being regular troops, and those hired or captured by these companies cannot invoke the laws of war because those involved do not have the status of regular troops, nor a responsible state. In fact, PMCs are a perfect tool for *lawfare* – legal warfare, operating on the edge of the law or in territories where the law has no applicability¹⁸.

Private Military Companies.

The case of Russia. Practices and abuses in the use of *private defence*

Between 1998 and 2013 Russia attempted several times to set up private military companies based on the Western model. However, the final product was a hybrid, combining the characteristics of private security and military companies. The most significant PMCs of that period were Antiterror-Orel, Antiterror, the RSB Group and the Moran Security Group (which is linked to the Wagner Group)¹⁹. In the Putin era, the Kremlin emphasized the use of foreign policy, challenging the West, in order to strengthen the regime and to restore the old Russian "spheres of influence" that existed during the Soviet period.

The most important Russian PMCs set up in the last decade are Moran Security (2011), RSB Group (2011), E.N.O.T. (2011) and Wagner (2013)²⁰.

In the last decade, Russian private military companies have expanded both their range of services they provide and the areas where they operate. Initially, most of the Russian PMCs focused on protection services for individuals, companies and critical infrastructures or on military consultancy and training for foreign military forces²¹. After the Arab Spring and the beginning of the civil wars that followed after 2011 in Libya and Syria, the Kremlin reassessed the role of irregular forces and non-state actors in hybrid conflicts, which led to the formation of the Russian Special Operations Forces (SOF) – subordinate to the Russian General Staff – and the private military company Slavonic Corps Limited.

The first use of irregular forces in the context of a hybrid conflict by Russia was during the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. The Russian PMCs played an increasingly important role in the conflict zones and occupy an equal position with the regular military troops on the battlefield, being some kind of government structures. Russian CMPs take over in "gray areas" in order to create "artificial stability zones," mainly with the purpose of exploiting the natural resources of an area, and partially take over political control.

Russian private military companies have also expanded their activities in the area of cyber security and military-patriotic education / propaganda, and recently in the information war²². Russian businessman Yevgeni Prigisin, Wagner's



owner and close ally of Putin, also funds the "trolls factory" in St. Petersburg. Most members of the PMCs are veterans of Russia's enforcement and security structures, but not limited to them, as the groups attracted pro-Russian fighters from other ex-Soviet states and from Serbia.

The status of private military companies has a role in increasing the ambiguities and the control over them by the Russian state bodies. While in the West private security and military companies have a clear legal status and are very profitable, in the United States, private security companies were legalized in 1992, are officially registered and have already participated in the protection of Iraq's oil and gas installations since the 2000s.

In contrast, Russian PMCs do not exist *de jure*. Moreover, belonging to a private military organization or the creation of a private military company is a mercenary activity that is illegal, according to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. This is reinforced by Article 13 of the Constitution which underlines the monopoly of the Russian Armed Forces at the level of official state institutions. This is why Russian private military companies are registered abroad: RSB-Group was registered in Russia in order to operate inside Russia on security and legal protection activities, and was registered in the British Virgin Islands for international operations, while the Moran group was registered in Hong Kong²³.

To avoid the legal dilemma, although it had been proposed to legalize these companies several times in the State Duma, in September 2018, President Putin signed a decree that classified as secret all information about those who "cooperate with the external intelligence services of the Russian Federation and they are not employed (by them)." Thus, journalists writing about issues related to Russian PMCs can be prosecuted for investigations and public disclosures regarding this area²⁴.

However, according to experts in the field, Vladimir Putin and Russia want to keep PMCs illegal, ambiguity being a mechanism by which they can be controlled, either by Putin or the FSB as an institution, beyond the coordination they have with the GRU. As long as they operate illegally, they can be threatened, managers and employees face severe prison sentences in Russia²⁵, and this mechanism helps maintain their loyalty to the Kremlin. Thus, executing the orders received from the Kremlin is

a kind of state "protection tax" to allow them to carry out such activities that generate individual and private income, beyond the services provided to the Russian state²⁶. Moreover, the Kremlin can continue the credible denial of the Russian state's involvement in activities abroad, given that the respective actors do not formally exist in Russia.

Condemning mercenaries: an instrument for the credible constraining and denial of recruiting fighters in private defence

There are four types of Russian private military companies: consulting companies, support companies (auxiliary functions), private security companies and those providing tactical support during military operations (including direct participation). The functions performed depend on the theater in which they operate, but they are, broadly speaking, military and paramilitary, geopolitical, geostrategic and hybrid. Russian private military companies operate in the form in which they have been directly identified and their existence was acknowledged, partially or indirectly, in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Central African Republic and Venezuela.

In the early phase of the use of PMCs, immediately after the annexation of Crimea and the military aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the first thing that was exposed internationally was the set-up by the Russian Federation of some military corps financed by various private companies, mercenary corps to fight in various abroad territories. The first one to draw attention was Moran Security Group, led by Viaceslav Kalashnikov, a former FSB officer, and probably still on the payroll of the Russian service, recruited mercenaries, especially former army or special services officers or former police, for the "Slavic corps," Slavianski Korpus, whose initial and official objective was to protect Syria's oil installations²⁷.

Upon arrival in Syria, the Slavianski Korpus unit, with 250 mercenary employees, quickly transformed into an entity that directly supported Bashar al-Assad's troops. Yet, the formula proved to be a total failure and the unit was quickly withdrawn from Syria; it was shameful how it worked even in comparison to Syrian troops of the Al-Assad government or Shiite pro-Iranian militias, Libyan Hezbollah, not to mention the Pasadarans and the Iranian official militias acting



on the ground. Russian mercenary troops were old, lacking flexibility and mobility, poorly armed for Syria's theater of operations and completely unfit for the local conditions of the fight with the well-armed and equipped Syrian insurgency, with the Al Nuusra Front, belonging to Al Qaeda and with the fighters of the Islamic State. Russian troops returned to the country, according to the above-mentioned source, where some of its members were sentenced to prison for receiving resources from a foreign state as mercenaries²⁸.

Moscow denied any involvement in the activities of the Slavic corps. However, Le Figaro points out that it is almost impossible for a group of several hundred armed men to carry out missions for the benefit of the Russian state without the approval of the Russian security forces. Its failure to adapt to the desert conditions and the context of guerrilla warfare with the Syrian insurgency does not mean that the Russian troops are equally ineffective in more familiar areas, as is the case of Eastern Ukraine.

It is true, however, that here the type of "volunteers" is different from the mercenaries in Syria and only a few are former military personnel. In this case they are prisoners, released and trained near Rostov on Don, in training camps, and subsequently inserted via the unenforced border in Eastern Ukraine and, first of all, professional and active military personnel who are registered as on vacation or on leave and sent to coordinate and fight against the Ukrainian army and special forces in Donbas.

The bad aspect, as far as they are concerned, is the fact that in the event of death or injury, they do not benefit from any of the rights or advantages of someone who defends their country, are buried in mass graves or brought home as part of the long chain of coffins hidden in purported humanitarian convoys that bring ammunition and supplies and leave with the dead and injured towards anonymous cemeteries or small hospitals in marginal settlements of Great Russia, in order to hide their existence.

Officially, Russia cannot have mercenaries. Still, the old "Afghans" – its fighters in the war in Afghanistan, together with the traditional Kazakh corps – another feature of Russia's paramilitary troops – were the major source of recruiting "volunteers" fighting in Donetsk and Lugansk, alongside the Russian Army regulars who are

registered as on leave or offer their resignation before being sent to the region to face the Ukrainian troops. Recently, mercenaries became a current troop resource in Russia²⁹.

Since they are outlawed in Russia, the fighters of Wagner private military company, registered in Argentina, were training in the theaters of operations where they were fighting. This approach allowed Russia to deny the existence of its foreign military operations. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent mercenaries to fight in Syria and decorated them for bravado in formal ceremonies and, on top of that, paid certain sums of money to the children and family of those who died in the conflict. The data appeared in investigations published by Russian publications, cited by the Western press³⁰.

Wagner has officially about 1000 mercenaries who train in the Russian village of Molmino, where the training camp of the 10th brigade of the special military intelligence forces GRU is also located. The Russian Defence Minister announced the death of six soldiers in Syria. But besides the 6 Spetznaz fighters, the Wagner sources cited by the Russian publication *Fontanka* claim that there were several dozen dead in their unit this year alone. As the unit does not formally exist, the victims were not publicly announced. Nevertheless, decorations and other posthumous symbols and honors for those killed were sent to their families, with the signature of President Putin, distributed by a general of the military *intelligence* troops.

The Russian publication released photographs of these medals and orders with Putin's signature. It did the same with the documents provided to the families of the deceased. Others were victims in 2014-2015, in Eastern Ukraine, for the same reason of being able to formally deny the involvement of Russian troops in Donbas. An example is Maksim Kolganov, who appeared in photos in Lugansk, Ukraine, and Latakia, Syria, and was killed on February 3, 2016 in Syria and received the posthumous medal "for bravery" from the Kremlin³¹.

In fact, previously, several Wagner soldiers fought and died in Debaltseve, a strategic Ukrainian settlement in Donbas, following the first Minsk agreement. That battle also involved several hundred Russian military regulars and the strongest bombardment of modern times, in January and February 2015.



In order to benefit from money, salaries (not the daily allowances given while on the theater of operations) and payments given to family members, paid by the Russian state, both the Russian "foreign fighters" and their families must sign confidentiality agreements. The law of silence is applied strictly in exchange for a volunteer service in Donbas and the maintenance of the family post-mortem³².

As for recruitment, many false organizations post advertisements in Russian media, obviously with the support of the Russian state. With the planning and contribution of the Russian state and the authorities which, in a country where mercenary work is punished by law, have many public recruitment offices and announcements in the official press.

In this regard, the numbers of Russian volunteers in Donbas range from a conservative 12.000-15.000 to a maximum of 30.000-50.000 (compared to up to 1.000 foreign fighters from outside Russia in total in the Donbas battles), registering 2.500 dead among volunteers only. The number of wounded is not known, but at an average rate of 4-4,5-5,5 times the number of dead, it means an estimated between 10,000 to 113,750 wounded in the first two years of conflict only, when difficult battles were fought, before the war entered the *low intensity conflict* phase.

Private military companies: an instrument of power projection and assertion as great power

Russia is reasserting itself and rebuilding itself as a global power. On a different basis and by other means than during the Cold War. And the first instrument it uses in the endeavor are private soldiers, the illegal military companies of the GRU, Russian intelligence services, registered in other states, who recruit – on a large scale – soldiers trained for special operations as mercenaries, mainly from Russia. Putin's Russia, with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff, Valeri Gherasimov at the forefront of influence and decision making, has set up the most lucrative export and projection of strategic relevance industry in recent years³³.

Firstly, the patriotic concerns and military schools were developed, where young people are ideologically trained on velicorussian and nationalistic bases. They constitute the special military training resource which is subsequently

recruited in private military companies for 3.600 USD per month (Wagner) and also have better options, such as the Patriot Group, for example, that offer more money. And, while initially the Slavon Corps, Wagner's precursor, was used in 2013 in Syria resulting in major loses, later Wagner became relevant in Ukraine, and then returned to Syria where it was paid to capture refining and oil resources in return for 25% of the income they produced³⁴, aside from training Syrian troops and direct fighting in the reconquering of the territories lost by al-Assad.

Lately, it spread to Sudan, Libya, Yemen and the Central African Republic. The same old habits have been employed: protection of leaders, training of armies, guarding diamond and rare metals mines or oil resources. The practice of Soviet instructors has been reactivated on a large scale, generating direct profits for the Russian state and relevant strategic influence.

Not to mention that those who have ventured to write about these developments have been eliminated. Three Russian journalists paid by Hodorkovsky were eliminated in the Central African Republic, because they filmed not only the support offered to official forces, but also actions in the rebel territory. The journalist Maxim Borodin from Yekaterinburg unexpectedly "jumped" from a window³⁵, dying, and another journalist, Denis Korotkov, born in St. Petersburg, had to go into hiding after receiving threats following exposing the Wagner attack on US and Kurdish-Arab troops, which led to the death of several hundred Russians in Syria, near Dar Ezzor³⁶.

Russia took advantage of the withdrawal of Americans troops from Africa and of its low desire to maintain a permanent presence there, and the poor image of the former colonists, especially the French, and took over. In Libya, it offered its support to General Khalifa Haftar who opposes the UN and US-recognized government³⁷.

In Egypt, an old Soviet military base was restored, in the desert, near Libya³⁸. In fact, it was all about the rivalry with the US, a war with the West all over the world. And the results can be seen even today.

Its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea is not only a step taken towards Syria and the Middle East. In Yemen, at the request of the pro-Iranian Al Houthi movement, and as part of a complex



action in partnership with Iran, Russia took over the capabilities of the former Soviet naval base on Socotra island, which it had from 1962 until the collapse of the USSR³⁹.

The strategic result is the projection of force towards the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean and, on the other hand, the parity of power in the Red Sea, an extension of the presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the control over the naval base already announced by the President of Sudan Al Bashir⁴⁰.

On October 15th, 2018 there were 2500 Wagner soldiers in Syria, 170 in Sudan, 500 at the Central African Republic – Sudan border, according to data publicly acknowledged by Russia or by host countries. Yet these mercenaries can also be used in Russia, while offering the same credible denial to the authorities.

Moreover, the relationship between these troops and the Russian authorities, especially the GRU, is complicated. Although they use classical military cover, they receive Russian orders and decorations, and they are treated in Russian hospitals, they can be abandoned at any time and can be described as mere adventurers. It happened with two such soldiers captured and killed by Daesh - the Islamic State, and in the case of the attack where several hundred were killed near Dar Ezzor (the target was in fact the nearby refinery).

Yet, the complex relationship also raises questions about the dependence of the oligarch who pays them, Evgheni Prigojin, about Putin, respectively the level of loyalty and the possibility that, at some point, they will turn against the interests of the Russian state abroad, or even at home. Furthermore, the assassination of some pro-Russian separatist leaders in Donetsk and Luhansk raises questions about the autonomy of these groups and the execution of local leaders who do not obey the orders coming from Moscow, or involvement in control rivalries, or the sharing of the benefits resulting from lucrative economic resources and capabilities⁴¹.

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