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GOING AGAINST MACHIAVELLI: RUSSIA'S INCREASING RELIANCE ON MERCENARIES



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Abstract

Niccolò Machiavelli warned in the 16th Century against utilising the services of mercenaries; overextension and poor performances in Ukraine have now forced Russia to rely heavily on these soldiers of fortune. This Info Flash examines the recent history and attempts to regulate mercenaries on national and international levels, the history of Russian mercenaries, and the implications of the use of mercenaries in Ukraine. There is a focus on the Wagner Group, which has grown in importance due to the group's recent size increase and its leadership's growing influence in the Kremlin. Targeting these groups through their finances and contracts is a good way for the West to counter their activities in Africa and the Middle East.

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War has brought attention to the actions of the Wagner Group, fighting on behalf of Moscow. Paramilitary organisations like the Wagner Group are certainly not new. Mercenaries have been involved in warfare since antiquity. Following the end of the Cold War there has been a lucrative growth of commercial military actors (CMA), seen in the resurgent use of mercenary forces. CMA is a term utilised by Penel and Petersohn (2022) to include private military and security companies and mercenaries. Due to differing definitions and understandings of which actors can be considered mercenaries, military companies, security companies, or even private armies, the term CMA, as used here, is more all-encompassing and does not make the distinction of whether a paramilitary organisation is registered under a given state.

Russian CMAs have recently transitioned from covert special operations forces to overt frontline fighters, supplementing and, at times, replacing official Russian troops. Another interesting development is how the leadership of the Wagner Group, the most prominent of these CMAs, is now seemingly in a power struggle with the military leadership. And while there is much that the West can do to affect Russian CMAs' activities, much attention also needs to be focused on the real challenge that is effectively regulating CMAs.

History of Mercenary Use and Regulation

Mercenaries have been employed for matters of warfare for millennia. Mercenaries had a significant role in ancient Carthage, Greece, and Rome, among other ancient civilisations, and their use continued throughout the Middle Ages (Dodenhoff, 1969). In Italy, heads of military companies were known as *condottieri*, but their services became a source of controversy due to perceptions of greed, which led to Niccolò Machiavelli's condemnation (Dodenhoff, 1969). In his political treatise, *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1532/2003) writes:

Mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous; and if one holds his state based on these arms, he will stand neither firm nor safe; for they are disunited, ambitious, and without discipline, unfaithful, valiant before friends, cowardly before enemies; they have neither the fear of God nor fidelity to men, and destruction is deferred only so long as the attack is; for in peace one is robbed by them, and in war by the enemy ... They are ready enough to be your soldiers whilst you do not make war, but if war comes they take themselves off or run from the foe; which I should have little trouble to prove, for the ruin of Italy has been caused by nothing else than by resting all her hopes for many years on mercenaries, and although they formerly made some display and appeared valiant amongst themselves, yet when the foreigners came they showed what they were. (pp. 67–68)

Machiavelli (1532/2003) further suggests that an incapable *condottiero* is a hindrance while a capable one cannot be trusted. Indeed, the latter was exemplified by Francesco Sforza's betrayal of his Milanese employers in their conflict against the Venetians, where he proceeded to conquer Milan and establish himself as Duke (Dodenhoff, 1969). Despite Machiavelli's warnings, mercenaries continued to be a common supplement for armies, such as the German mercenaries that fought alongside the British in the American War of Independence (Dodenhoff, 1969).

The end of the Cold War brought about a resurgence of CMAs, now more frequently referred to as private military and security companies. One of the first major cases was that of Executive Outcomes, a CMA which provided military assistance to the governments of Angola and Sierra Leone against domestic insurrections (Kaya, 2013). Most prominently, the United States signed multibillion-dollar contracts with CMAs for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; CMA use was so extensive that the United States Congressional Budget Office (2008) reports that "The ratio of U.S.-funded contractor employees to members of the U.S. military in the Iraq theater is therefore approximately 1 to 1" (p. 8). It should be noted that not all CMAs are involved in combat, though they nevertheless serve a military purpose. Still, following a series of incidents in Iraq, CMAs became increasingly controversial. Arguably the most infamous case is that of Blackwater, when four of its employees were found guilty of killing and wounding multiple Iraqi civilians in the 2007 Nisour Square Massacre, though they were later pardoned by President Donald Trump (Reuters Staff, 2020; Woolf, 2015). Still, regardless of the controversies, the CMA industry is thriving.

Effectively regulating CMAs is a challenge. Traditionally, by not formally being part of a military structure, they are not bound by military codes of justice; in the United States, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2007 modified public law to expand the jurisdiction of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (McNaylor, 2010). However, this has not been without its own controversy due to concerns of unconstitutionality and military jurisdiction over civilians (McNaylor, 2010; Singer, 2007).

South Africa, meanwhile, has implemented laws that “endeavour to prohibit mercenary activities and regulate all forms of military assistance carried out in areas of armed conflict by persons with ties to South Africa” (Buzatu, 2015, p. 16). Other forms of regulation have also been implemented, such as the United Kingdom’s public-private collaboration or Swiss law requiring CMAs in Switzerland to join the International Code of Conduct Association, which sets good practices based on the Montreux Document (Buzatu, 2015; Van Amstel & Rodenhäuser, 2016).

International regulation has been relatively weak. The United Nations has adopted drafts from the UN Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries, such as the General Assembly resolution 74/138 on the Use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, which does little more than emphasise concerns and call upon states to accede to the 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries. This convention prohibits the use and financing of mercenaries but has only been signed and ratified by a total of 37 states (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], n.d.). Similarly, the Montreux Document contains “legal obligations and good practices” but is explicitly “not legally binding” (ICRC, 2020, para. 1). These efforts contain many excellent points but face the same issues generally encountered in matters of international regulation, including lack of legal binding, states outright not participating, and being generally state-centric (Buzatu, 2015).

Even outside state-centred agreements, there are no significant private or public-private international regulations. One initiative, the UN Global Compact (UNGC), is a non-binding effort to push businesses around the world to adopt better policies (Buzatu, 2015). But the UNGC lacks accountability and oversight mechanisms; Buzatu (2015) explains that “a company’s status as a participant gives no assurance that it actually operates in compliance with the principles, providing it with a positive public relations vehicle that is not necessarily merited (also known as ‘bluewashing’)” (p. 22). In fact, they might “use the UNGC as an entry point to influence UN policies, as well as an excuse to discourage states from pursuing binding international regulation” (Buzatu, 2015, p. 22). Again, the lack of real enforcement capabilities makes efficient regulation a challenge.

All that said, one study does seem to suggest that some of these efforts do have an effect on reducing civilian victimisation. Penel and Petersohn (2022) find that, in the case of CMAs operating from countries that are Montreux members, “the likelihood of compliance with international norms is higher” (p. 15). However, another implication is that CMAs “headquartered in countries with weakly institutionalized human rights” are more likely to “engage in atrocities” (Penel & Petersohn, 2022, p. 16). Penel and Petersohn (2022) conclude that effective regulation of CMAs in such contexts is unlikely to be viable and that extending the scope of the International Criminal Court might be a better deterrent. Still, without the home state having the will or incentive to prosecute, it is unlikely that justice will be served against CMAs that commit criminal acts.

Russian Commercial Military Actors

Despite widespread use in Ukraine alongside the Russian Army, CMAs are illegal in Russia (Mackinnon, 2021; Putin’s Proxies, 2022; Stronski, 2020; Vorobyov, 2022). But like in many other countries, the development of CMAs in Russia began in the 1990s (Blank et al., 2020). After the fall of the USSR,

there was an important “transition of elite security cadres from government service to private security overlapped with several phases of privatization and reorganization of state enterprises of strategic importance for Russia’s export base”, leading corporations like Gazprom to have security divisions with tens of thousands of employees (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 26). The successors became the CMAs that grew in the late 2000s (Rondeaux, 2019). Many of these CMAs “are reconstituted units formed from security services such as the FSB, GRU, and VDV. They have imported wholesale the organizational structures and operational culture of those institutions” (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 8). And now, their use has become widespread and global; Russian CMAs have been active throughout Africa, the Middle East, Venezuela, and, of course, Eastern Europe (Blank et al., 2020; Putin’s Proxies, 2022).

There are several prominent and known CMAs that fight for Russian interests, many of which have been identified in Ukraine. The group known as Yenot recently lost one of its co-founders and alleged neo-Nazis, Igor Mangushev, who was killed in Luhansk, although there is still speculation as to who was responsible (Kirby, 2023). One of the better trained and equipped CMAs is Patriot, which is allegedly frequently in competition with the Wagner Group (Warsaw Institute Foundation, 2018). The latter has been the focus of significant media attention recently.

Rondeaux (2019) identifies the origins of the Wagner Group, also known as Private Military Company Wagner, beginning in the 1990s with a group known as Anti-Terror Orel. This group was “a confederation of small cadres of military intelligence veterans and retired and reserve spetsnaz special operators”, and served directly alongside official Russian forces (Rondeaux, 2019, p. 33). Anti-Terror Orel was affiliated with nationalists and neo-Nazis (Rondeaux, 2019). CMAs affiliated with Anti-Terror Orel, such as Antiterror-Redut and TigrTop Rent, were at least present in Iraq and Afghanistan, though it appears some of their members also later resurfaced in Syria and Ukraine under the Wagner Group and another CMA known as Slavonic Corps—these groups also often serviced Russian energy enterprises (Rondeaux, 2019). One consolidation of Anti-Terror Orel seems to be RusCorp, a company which was seemingly also registered under similar names in Cyprus and the United Kingdom, while other similarly named companies appear in Brazil and the United States (Rondeaux, 2019). Also connected to Anti-Terror Orel, RusCorp, and others is Moran Security Group (Rondeaux, 2019).

Moran was an early CMA headed by a former KGB officer that was later registered in Belize in 2011 and as a corporate entity in Russia (Rondeaux, 2019). This CMA seems to have been present in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Nigeria, the latter being where 15 members were arrested on arms smuggling charges, though they were ultimately released (Rondeaux, 2019). Later in Syria, Slavonic Corps, a contingent of Moran, was involved in an incident where the Islamic State claimed to have killed at least 100 Russian contractors, including one from Moran, leading to the interrogation and subsequent punishment of Slavonic Corps contractors by the Russian authorities (Rondeaux, 2019). The eventual replacement of Slavonic Corps in Syria was the Wagner Group (Rondeaux, 2019).

The first reports of activity date back to the annexation of Crimea. The Warsaw Institute Foundation (2017) reports that Wagner members took part in the annexation and later fought in the Donbas. Indeed, the Wagner Group’s participation in these two areas also demonstrates the group’s involvement in the Russian “hybrid surrogate” warfare strategy, which Foley and Kaunert (2022) describe as the “[creation of] insecurities through fighting hybrid and proxy wars” (p. 183). Their legal ambiguity is a feature which allows CMAs like the Wagner Group “to operate outside the rules of war

and can undertake any type of operation without regard of international norms” (Foley & Kaunert, 2022, p. 186).

Other Wagner operations include (but are not limited to) successful operations in the Central African Republic, mixed success in Madagascar, and poor results in Mozambique; civilians are frequent victims (Putin’s Proxies, 2022). Following the French withdrawal from Mali, Russia has been able to establish a presence through the insertion of the Wagner Group in the region (Latorre, 2022). The Wagner Group and other CMAs are a hard power tool for Moscow but also serve to procure financial gain, exemplified by the Russian smuggling of Sudanese gold or the resource boom for Rostec subsidiaries in Syria (Putin’s Proxies, 2022; Rondeaux, 2019). By utilising CMAs like the Wagner Group, Russia can establish an armed presence around the globe while the “legal loophole gives the Russian government a mechanism to exercise plausible deniability for any Russian mercenary activity and hide accurate casualty numbers in conflict zones, giving the false impression of greater success in potentially unpopular interventions abroad” (Nakamura, 2022, Origins section, para. 1). But this plausible deniability is severely weakened following open CMA activity in Ukraine.

Implications

It is possible that the way Moscow utilises CMAs will change now that their involvement in Ukraine directly alongside, if not often in replacement of, official Russian troops is overt and public. Rondeaux (2019) notes that these groups are “opaque” and “are often hidden in plain sight” (p. 9). But the new reality is that CMAs like the Wagner Group are no longer hidden at all; the Wagner Group recently opened a new, modern office building in Saint Petersburg with the organisation’s name explicitly on the building (Novaya Gazeta, 2022).

The Wagner Group now behaves more as an independent corps of the Russian Army. Its numbers have inflated with convicts to the point of 50,000 members (The BBC, 2022). Ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin and founder of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has gone as far as demanding ammunition from the Russian military for Wagner operations in eastern Ukraine (Al Jazeera Media Network [AJMN], 2023; Shevchenko, 2023). This exemplifies how there is no plausible deniability left regarding the relationship between the Russian state and the Wagner Group.

This leaves questions regarding the future of Russian hybrid warfare. While the cyber warfare and political interference aspects do not need to change, what is the future of CMAs like the Wagner Group? Will they simply rebrand to continue deploying in the Global South after Ukraine? Does their explicit relationship with the Russian state even matter? The history of the network of the Russian CMAs might suggest that many of their non-convict members would likely move to a different or new organisation and continue to operate as in the past.

Machiavelli’s Warning

Moscow seems increasingly reliant on CMAs, particularly the Wagner Group, to advance in Ukraine, progressively requiring their services for frontline combat rather than special operations (EURACTIV.com with Reuters, 2022; Nakamura, 2022). The growing replacement of the army is not

without consequences. Indeed, Machiavelli (1532/2003) warned:

The mercenary captains are either capable men or they are not; if they are, you cannot trust them, because they always aspire to their own greatness, either by oppressing you, who are their master, or others contrary to your intentions; but if the captain is not skilful, you are ruined in the usual way. (p. 69)

Indeed, following demands for more ammunition and supplies, Prigozhin seems to have come into conflict with Defence Minister Gen Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gen Valery Gerasimov, going as far as accusing them of treason (AJMN, 2023; Shevchenko, 2023).

The United States believes that there are increasing tensions and even a power struggle between Prigozhin and the Russian Ministry of Defence (Bertrand & Lillis, 2023; Wolf, 2023). According to Liptak (2022), former Rear Admiral John Kirby of the United States National Security Council claimed that “In certain instances, Russian military officials are actually subordinate to Wagner’s command” (para. 4). The Russian military’s poor performance in Ukraine has left no shortage of criticism for Prigozhin to take advantage of; his influence within the Kremlin seems to be growing, exemplified by the recent appointment of Prigozhin-backed Gen Sergei Surovikin (Nakamura, 2022). While the Wagner Group’s long-term military efficiency in Ukraine remains to be seen, so far it seems that, as Machiavelli would put it, Prigozhin is oppressing and fostering resentment with the military establishment.

How the EU and NATO Can Act

While CMAs have been an effective tool for states, they have critical vulnerabilities. A fundamental aspect of CMAs is that they are profit-driven, meaning that they are particularly vulnerable to financial targeting (Putin’s Proxies, 2022). While Prigozhin and others in the Wagner Group have been sanctioned, investigating and sanctioning their network and front companies is a key step forward (Putin’s Proxies, 2022). Another strategy is to target their ability to attain contracts, especially in Africa. This can be accomplished by an information campaign on the crimes these groups commit and the violence they spread, pursuing legal punishments for these CMAs locally and internationally, and offering African states and organisations alternative options that Europe and the United States can provide (Marten, 2020; Putin’s Proxies, 2022). It is therefore important for Western CMAs to be properly regulated so as to improve their reputations and public trust. Finally, Marten (2020) recommends that “forces in the field should maintain situational awareness about the Wagner Group’s activities, and be on guard for their own safety and well-being” (p. 6).

Conclusion

The use of mercenaries or CMAs is certainly not new in warfare, but the profession has had a serious resurgence in the past few decades. They are relatively commonplace and exist in a relatively vague legal area. Effective regulation of CMAs is a challenge, especially when it comes to those originating from countries with weak democratic institutions and respect for human rights. In the Russian Federation, CMAs are widespread despite their illegality and typically act in the state's interests. While typically an aspect of Russian hybrid warfare, Russian CMAs operating in Ukraine, especially the Wagner Group, have had a much more direct military role, which leaves in question what their future, post-war role will be now that there is little plausible deniability left to cling to. And it seems that military leaders like Gen Shoigu are experiencing firsthand Machiavelli's warning regarding mercenaries, as Prigozhin and his Wagner Group have an ever-increasing influence in Moscow and on the battlefield. As for the West, there is much that can be done to counter the Russian CMAs in the Global South, particularly through financial targeting and closing down their opportunities. Regardless of the activities of the Russian CMAs, more needs to be done on national and international levels to attempt to regulate these organisations.

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