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**THE DOWNFALL OF WAGNER AND THE
RISE OF REDUT: THE GROWING
CHALLENGE OF RUSSIAN PMCS FOR
EUROPEAN SECURITY**

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Introduction

Following the aftermath of the June 2023 mutiny, the future role of the PMCs (private military companies) has been a question within and outside Russia. In the wake of Yevgeny Prigozhin's death and the near incorporation of the Wagner Group into the National Guard of Russia (Rosgvardiya), Russia's network of PMCs is transforming. Emerging in the shadows is Redut, a PMC reportedly operated under the direct influence of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU). Unlike the semi-autonomous structure of profit-based Wagner, Redut appears to function as a tool for Russian intelligence, following a centralised agenda that extends beyond profit-driven motives into the realm of statecraft and covert operations. This shift in the landscape of Russian PMCs has far-reaching implications for European security and stability, particularly in regions where the European Union (EU) maintains a strategic presence and responsibility, such as the Eastern Europe, the Middle East-North Africa, the Sahel and the Caucasus regions.

The re-emergence of a state-backed PMC, especially one that operates with impunity under the guise of a private entity, introduces fresh challenges for European land forces and security policymakers. These groups occupy a 'grey zone' of warfare, one in which they are not bound by the laws or conventions that govern regular armies yet serve as strategic levers for Russian interests abroad. Redut's activities in regions bordering the EU, where tensions are high and international attention limited, create a landscape in which Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, including disinformation, cyber operations, and destabilising local governments, have room to expand unchecked.

This article explores the implications of Redut's rise on European security and strategic interests, examining how the EU's missions in these vulnerable regions may be directly or indirectly impacted. By analysing the operational and legal challenges that Russian PMCs pose and outlining potential countermeasures, this discussion aims to shed light on a pressing issue that demands a proactive, coordinated EU response.

1. Background on Redut's Emergence and Influence

Redut emerged from the need for additional private combat support, often attributed to Russia's intelligence agency, the GRU. It reportedly began by providing security for high-value facilities in Russia, including assets owned by Gennady Timchenko, a former KGB (Committee for State Security) officer and close ally of President Vladimir Putin (Oliphant, 2023). Initially small-scale and security-focused, Redut expanded in recent years into Ukraine, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, where it's used to supplement Russian forces under GRU supervision. Redut, unlike Wagner, has been tied directly to the GRU's 16th Spetsnaz

Brigade and utilises sophisticated recruitment and assignment structures that connect contract soldiers with military units through private channels (RFE/RL, 2023). This allows Redut to engage in combat without formal acknowledgement from the Russian state, maintaining plausible deniability for the Kremlin's operations (Schemes and Systema, 2023a). Redut emerged around 2008, initially functioning as a lower-profile alternative to defend Russia's foreign military assets and protect the state facilities by providing covert support aligned with state interests in strategic regions. Although the historical presence of Redut under different names has been active since the fall of the Soviet Union (Mardasov, 2023), according to Norwegian intelligence, Redut's independent activities are reported after 2008, notably at the height of the Russo-Georgian War (Riefer, 2021). Initially, it began as part of a broader Russian strategy to employ private military entities for plausible deniability in foreign operations, primarily overseen by the GRU. Until 2022, Redut operated from Russian oil facilities in Syria to train pro-Russian forces in the breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions (Sukhankin, 2019).

Redut expanded in recent years into Ukraine, especially after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, where it's used to supplement Russian forces under GRU supervision and gather reconnaissance/recruitment in areas where Russia has strongholds (Schemes and Systema, 2023b). The GRU's influence ensures that Redut's operations align with Kremlin policies, often under the direction of high-ranking former Russian military leaders. One prominent figure believed to be involved is General Vladimir Alekseyev, who has reportedly held leadership roles in multiple PMC operations, shaping Redut's strategic directions in Ukraine and other conflict zones for Konstantin Mirzayants, who is known to be the current head of operations for Redut (Bryjka, 2023). Following Wagner Group's 2023 mutiny, Redut absorbed defectors, becoming a Kremlin-preferred, loyal alternative in conflicts like Ukraine and the Sahel. Figures like GRU's Vladimir Alexeyev have driven Redut's expansion, filling Wagner's void in Mali and Burkina Faso and advancing Russian interests under private contracts with African governments (Martyniuk, 2024).

2. Operational Threat of Redut to the EU Missions

With the downfall of Wagner, Redut has seen a remarkable increase in its personnel and network capacity. Many 'ex-Wagnerites,' alongside the recruits from CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and pro-Russian insurgents, have signed with Redut, thus significantly increasing the presence of Redut where mercenaries have left their prior spot (Bekmurzaev, 2023; UK Parliament, 2022). Russian sources claim that under General Vladimir Alexeyev's directorate, the GRU was able to utilise Redut as a loyalty-proof PMC against the rivalry with Wagner (The Insider, 2023). This is further proved by the decision to operate Redut contractors at the Kubinka air base close to Moscow, where the Ministry of Defence (MoD)

can have complete control of the Redut contractors. Since their relocation, Redut has reportedly expanded its personnel size to 7,000 in 2023 and 25,000 by 2024 (Ivanova et al., 2023; Sukhankin, 2024).

The following section looks at Redut's operational capacities and an assessment of its objectives where EU member states have active missions or security concerns. This part also covers countries like Moldova and Georgia since the ongoing political climate presents a challenge for the greater 'Europeanisation' process by the possibility of Russian hybrid warfare tactics and political unrest using mercenaries.

Ukraine

In Ukraine, Redut's activities mirror the Russian state's larger objectives, particularly in the occupied oblasts of Ukraine, where they operate as a paramilitary extension of the Russian military. Since 2022, Redut has been active in logistical support, reconnaissance, and direct engagements, taking on roles previously managed by Wagner Group. The firm's direct alignment with GRU operations raises concerns for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and EU land forces, given the hybrid warfare tactics that Redut employs that blend conventional warfare with cyber and psychological operations aimed at destabilising Ukraine's defence capabilities (Schemes and Systema, 2023a).

However, Redut's direct objective or combat stance remains unclear. While not much is known about their active combat performance, it is assumed (by the Ukrainian Secret Service) that Redut was contracted to enter Kyiv and assassinate Ukrainian President Zelensky in the early stages of the invasion (Pacella, 2023). The Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU) has acquired the intel from unclassified FSB members who were in disfavour of Redut's operations, hence liquidating around ninety per cent of Redut's active force in the outskirts of Kyiv (The Insider, 2023).

While Redut's activity might seem to have been cut short by heavy casualties, the dissolution of Wagner into the Russian MoD revived the presence of Redut once again. According to Chkaidze (2023), Redut has the capacity and intent to capture Wagner's remaining contractors and power in regions such as Ukraine and Syria. Since Redut is a government-controlled entity, unlike many other PMCs, this further strengthens the point that the Kremlin can circumvent legal implications by allowing Redut to take over private contractors. However, some experts claim that Redut simply functions as a replacement for Wagner, in a sense punishing Prigozhin and his men for conflicting with the state interests (Lechner and Eledinov, 2023). Given the past combat experience of Redut contractors, this can be ideally seen as rebranding the Wagner members to maintain their position where Russia is short of

replacing experienced soldiers (Rondeaux, 2023).

The presence of Redut and, in general, other linked PMCs are presenting a significant challenge for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The current task of the EU mission to Ukraine (EUMAM UA) is to provide basic and advanced training for the Ukrainian troops against the Russian aggressor (Bundeswehr, n.d.). However, it remains an obstacle to what extent this training includes active combat involving PMCs. Neither NATO nor the EU has a specialised, comprehensive strategy explicitly targeting PMCs like Redut, though PMCs are increasingly recognised as a security challenge. NATO's approach remains more aligned with conventional military support and intelligence sharing among allies rather than actively addressing the nuances of PMC involvement (Piątkiewicz, 2021). However, both parties do acknowledge the complexities of the Russian PMC business, especially regarding command, accountability, and state sovereignty, which may affect alliance cohesion and undermine unified defence postures across member states (Harangozo, 2024).

The Sahel and Central Africa

Redut has established a strong presence in Africa after Wagner's withdrawal. Redut, alongside new players like Convoy, is filling the vacuum left in regions such as the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali. The continuing presence of Russian contractors in the Sahel and Central Africa is vital for the Kremlin's economic interests. Hence, Redut sees this frontier as their primary objective to hold and recruit (Luxmoore and Faucon, 2023). However, this process of complete mission change is not as stabilised as Wagner's past presence, considering MoD has total control of these newly recruited contractors (Lechner and Eledinov, 2024). While Redut might manage to grow in numbers since its nationalisation under MoD, the constant need for units in Ukraine might delay their transportation in the short term. Nevertheless, Redut is highly active in African nations, according to Giustozzi and Lewis (2024). Earlier in July 2024, the presence of the Bears Brigade, a battalion under Redut, was reported with the government personnel in Burkina Faso, albeit they are now recalled to the Kursk region. (Geopioneer Staff, 2024).

Unlike the military presence, economic ties and a complex web of personal ties from Wagner's presence still limit the operational capacity of Redut in Africa (Giustozzi and Lewis, 2024). Wagner was able to establish deep ties in various shadow companies to sustain their activities and logistics. With their absence, Russia's main interest is to take over what Wagner left and replace the ex-mercenaries with their contractors. This is also evident in the number of ex-contractors who were offered to sign under Redut due to their network and geostrategic experience (Siegle, 2023). In the example of the Central African Republic and Mali, the Russo-African ties were established on the loose political influence and rapid

deployment of contractors to execute their plan (Masuhr, 2023). While Russia and MoD might struggle to maintain such a level of flexible operativeness, Redut's direct link with GRU means that Russia can engage in hybrid warfare or sabotage missions where the EU have political and strategic goals, particularly concerning France's foreign influence (Irish et al., 2023).

Apart from Redut, Russia has restructured its African operations under a new entity known as the 'Africa Corps' (Pohorilov, 2024). The first reports of Africa Corps' existence started with a Telegram channel in December 2023, claiming to be actively recruiting to assist with various 'tasks' (Giustozzi and Lewis, 2024). This organisation, now directly supported by the Russian MoD, is designed to maintain Russia's strategic presence in key African nations where Wagner was operating. Differently from the profit-based loose communication of PMCs, Africa Corps seem to have a tone and narrative that points out the West as an enemy of both Russia and African states through the use of 'neo-colonial' discourse (Ivanov, 2023). While it is difficult to clarify their legitimate ties with the Russian MoD, some intel about their geolocation and equipment confirms their existence in Burkina Faso, where Bears Brigade was previously reported earlier (Nordsint, 2024). This was further verified with Konstantin Mirzayants and the Kremlin to take over what Wagner had left in Africa (Wall Street Journal, 2023). It is estimated that the Africa Corps intends to recruit up to 20,000 fighters (albeit not verified) to reinforce influence in countries like Mali, the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, and Niger, unsurprisingly where ex Wagner contractors who now are signed under Redut operate (Bartosiewicz and Żochowski, 2024).

In these regions, EU missions focused on security and humanitarian support face an alternative power structure promoted by Russian PMCs, which influence local governments through security services and economic partnerships (Siegle, 2023). As mentioned above, Redut's control over mining operations in CAR has enabled it to establish financial footholds, undermining the influence of EU missions while advancing Russian interests. The group's influence comes closely with GRU directives, providing a means of geopolitical leverage that can counteract EU security and stabilisation efforts. Currently, the EU has one civilian mission in Mali (EUCAP SAHEL MALI) and one military mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA) (EUEA, 2023). Redut's presence in this region presents a direct challenge to the operational capacities of these missions, ranging from local unrest to profiting off the money laundering operations.

The Middle East & North Africa

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Redut has sought to establish influence in regions where Russian interests align with or counterbalance Western objectives. Although

more discreet, their presence in Syria, for example, has allowed them to function under the radar, supporting the Assad regime while keeping a low profile compared to the larger Wagner forces. In Syria, the MoD was able to quickly outcast Wagner from military-civilian roles (Barabanov and Lotareva, 2024). Russia's close relationship with the Assad regime allowed for a safer exit of contractors and securing the oil fields (Giustozzi and Lewis, 2024). Russia's national interests in Syria go far beyond the existence of contractors alone, albeit their footprint is still visible. The Kremlin wants to merge their ongoing business operations (particularly oil refineries) under one unit with the help of the Syrian government, which affected Prigozhin and, thus, Wagner's business directly (Bouzo, 2023).

Regarding the role of Redut, Syria is relatively easy ground. Since their past deployment and experience with asset protection, Redut found it easy to replace Wagner with the help of the Russian MoD (Mardasov, 2023). Their presence in Syria can be an example of where Redut acts exactly as an extension of the Russia's hidden military tool rather than contractors on foreign soil (Uribe, 2024). However, regardless of the attempts of the Russian MoD to quickly deploy Redut in Syria, the sheer interest in contractors and profitability of the contractor business fell sharply after 2020. On the one hand, the Assad regime has reached a point of stability that does not require additional forces to combat on behalf (Cremin, 2024). On the other hand, Redut lacks the same level of 'rogue business' skills that Wagner had under Prigozhin (Giustozzi, 2024).

As for the military aspect, Redut keeps the same objectives in Syria: to gather intelligence, train the locals and protect the Russian assets (Titus Jansen, 2024). Since Redut is designed to be more of an operational frontier for the GRU, it is unclear how Redut can compete with Wagner's ability to generate profit apart from securitising Russian assets (Giustozzi, 2024; Watling et al., 2024). This has been further brought up with the recent escalation of the conflict in Syria. On November 27, Syrian rebels reportedly attacked the Russian positions, killing one special forces member (Malyasov, 2024). As Russia continues its war in different fronts, Redut's efficiency could be contested in Syria.

Redut's presence in the MENA region directly challenges the EU's border security and, to an extent, NATO's southern flank. EU forces deployed in NATO missions face potential confrontations with such entities, especially given that Redut's operations may threaten or come into conflict with European objectives in counterterrorism and stabilisation efforts (Davidson, 2024). Since Russia already has naval access in Syria from Tartous, additional access from Libya would bring the Russian navy and NATO's southern fleet closer than ever. Additionally, the destabilising effect of Redut's activities could alter the migration crisis in Europe (Costa, 2023). Their violence and psychological abuse are also a key driver for further enhancing ethnic grievances and diminishing the effectiveness of European missions

(Nasr, 2022). Although the EU does not have an active mission in Syria, the European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM Libya) was established in 2013 to implement the Integrated Border Management (IBM) strategy in the long term (EUEA, 2023). Redut's operational capacities and objectives are a direct threat to the EU's mission to secure a peaceful transition of state legitimacy post-conflict in Libya.

Georgia and Moldova

Emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, like Georgia and Moldova, are also potentially at risk. Both nations have seen a resurgence of Russian influence, especially after the recent (2024) Georgian parliamentary elections, where pro-Russian sentiments gained traction through Russian interference and even use of violence by fraud men (Gasparyan et al., 2024). Considering the number of Russian citizens who have settled in Georgia since the beginning of the full-scale invasion (around 62,300), the difficulty of conducting security checks on everyone creates security challenges for the Georgian state's integrity (Transparency International Georgia, 2024). Additionally, Russia has been a direct threat to Georgia's territorial sovereignty since 2008 as it recognises Abkhazia and South Ossetia as breakaway regions and trains local militiamen. Regarding this, PMCs can objectively do the proxy work by training, gathering intelligence and even being involved in disinformation campaigns (Julukhidze, 2024).

Several PMCs and individuals have been discreetly active in the Caucasus, leveraging propaganda, security partnerships, and, at times, covert operations to create divisions within these societies. While Redut is not actively operating in Georgia, it is reported that GRU has registered business under certain contractors to gather intelligence in Georgia (FormulaNews, 2021). Main PMC activities include gathering intelligence through human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT) and covert operations with the help of proxy groups such as local militias (Julukhidze, 2024). Recent reports of electoral violence indicate that GRU might install contractors to exacerbate this violence to prevent locals from voting (Parulava, 2024).

The situation is similar in Moldova. The 2024 Moldovan presidential elections showed severe security concerns and direct threats from Russia-backed groups to disrupt the election process (Sauer, 2024). These concerns include a wide range of tactics, from bribing to inciting civil unrest. Moreover, Moldovan authorities announced that Russian PMCs trained several recruits to cause further violence in the nation (McGrath, 2024). Another key issue is the actual presence of Russian troops in the Transnistria region. Transnistria has benefited from Russian support, including financial backing, political influence and military presence since the 1990s. Apart from Russia's military presence, local collaborators and intelligence

units are recruiting pro-Russian Moldovans to disrupt the Moldovan government and even fight in Ukraine (Wesolowsky, 2024). A group of Moldovans are currently being controlled by the Russian Federation under the command of Alexander Kalinin, a Moldovan politician who had his citizenship stripped. Called the Dniester detachment, Kalinin has threatened to grow a paramilitary unit of 20,000 men to overthrow the Moldovan government and join the Russian forces in Ukraine (Wesolowsky, 2023). Their allegiance to Russia shows that the GRU is most likely to gather intelligence and disrupt Moldova by controlling Moldovan contractors. There is no direct evidence of Redut PMC operating openly within Moldova. However, Kalinin expressed his motives to create a bigger mercenary group called 'Nistru-Dimitrie Cantemir Detachment' to the Russian media, which is expected to be controlled by Russia (Wesolowsky, 2023). Apart from the developments in Transnistria, pro-Russian sentiment is also growing in Gagauzia, where Russia is conducting covert operations to weaken the Moldovan government (Całus, 2024). Governor of Gagauzia, Evghenia Guțul, has already expressed that Gagauzia would not hesitate to ask for Russian help in case Moldova 'hurts' their interests (Oleksy, 2024).

As these countries consider EU integration, Redut and other collaborators' potential presence and actions may further disrupt democratic processes and fuel anti-EU sentiment, challenging the EU's stability and influence on its Eastern neighbours (Harward, 2024). Addressing the Redut threat will likely require coordinated EU action, not only in reinforcing security and intelligence cooperation but also in tackling the root economic and social challenges that make these nations susceptible to foreign PMCs. Two civilian EU CSDP (Common Security and Defence Policy) missions have emerged in Georgia and Moldova following Russia's invasion, respectively EUMM Georgia and EUPM Moldova. (Cenusa, 2023) While both missions have the objectives of promoting further EU values and national resilience, the increased presence of PMCs creates different challenges for the EU.

In Georgia, Russia seems to plan long-term geopolitical manoeuvres by establishing a naval base in Abkhazia, further deepening its military stronghold inside Georgian borders and the Black Sea (Seskuria, 2023). Such military instalment could lead to the deployment of contractors and occupy governmental institutions, just as FSB is moving deep inside the Ossetian border (Yarmolenko and Rayevskiy, 2024). Additionally, the EU cooperates in monitoring the South Ossetia and Abkhazia border, where contractors can potentially engage in sabotaging or rogue attacks where the EU personnel can be targeted, as Russia is keen to push the EU out of Georgia (International Crisis Group, 2024). In Moldova, the EU mission marks the first of its kind to include cybersecurity and hybrid warfare methods (EUEA, 2023). The EUPM Moldova mission aims to build resilience in the country, which is directly affected by the existence of Russia-backed groups. Redut can play a direct role in further destabilising the country, given the recent situation regarding the elections. Redut's

ties with GRU suggest that not only their armed presence poses a threat but also their potential to infiltrate society. Unlike Wagner or any separatist group, Redut can feed hybrid warfare into Russia's foreign goals in Moldova.

3. EU PMC Strategy and Framework

The EU lacks a fully cohesive strategy specifically targeting Russian PMCs, but it addresses such entities through a combination of sanctions, regulatory frameworks, and regional cooperation mechanisms. The EU considers the operational scope of Russian PMCs differently than other private militaries, focusing on the lack of humanitarian aspects and criminal activities (Council of the European Union, 2023). Although the EU mainly targets Wagner in the reports as a blend between special forces and military organisations, the undermining of EU missions abroad is reported within the general scope of Russian contractors (Council of the European Union, 2023, p. 4).

Currently, Redut is sanctioned by the EU, under the name Redut-Security, as the organisation responsible for the operation of the Redut PMC (The Moscow Times, 2023). However, the EU lacks a common, comprehensive 'Russia' strategy (Dumoulin, 2023). As Russia moves more into a hybrid warfare stance, contractors are also becoming a strategic tool to extend Russia's sphere of influence outside of EU/NATO borders, hence reducing the operational capabilities of Western powers (Klein, 2019). Another issue in this regard is the lack of a single response mechanism. Unlike NATO, the EU lacks a unified approach to defence strategy fuelled by the national interests and defensive capabilities of the member states (Ciolan, 2024). While member states help combat contractors in Ukraine by providing training and equipment (Ostanina, 2023), it is visible that Russia's use of contractors is becoming far more far-reaching. Among the member states, only France and Poland have field experience and strategic measures to deter Russian contractors, while Finland has only reported the transport of radical volunteer groups who are known to be a part of the Redut and GRU along the border (Euronews, 2023; Lawler, 2022; Nilsen and Krivtsova, 2024).

This is partly influenced by the notion that Russia is conducting a 'shadow war' against Europe rather than the conventional methods. Even Redut itself stands as a pseudo-mercenary group that does not exist either as a standalone group or a military entity (Kaunert, 2022), hence a deniable asset that the EU cannot specifically target. Even with a greater security framework, NATO lacks a structured Russia strategy that points out the hybrid threat of these contractors (Williams, 2024). Therefore, the EU's strategy is momentarily bound to sanctioning and supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine (Council of Europe, 2023; Taran, 2024).

Conclusion

The resurgence of Redut after Wagner poses an evolving challenge for European land forces and broader security frameworks. While groups like Wagner brought the privatisation of military power to international prominence, Redut's integration with Russian state structures, particularly the GRU, marks a shift toward more direct Kremlin control. This creates a dual threat: operational flexibility and plausible deniability for the Russian government in regions critical to EU and NATO interests, including Ukraine, Africa and Eastern Europe.

This paper has investigated the brief emergence of Redut and their operational threat to the EU mission across the near border. While Russia is increasing its hybrid warfare methods, the role of contractors is becoming much more aware. Europe's strategic response remains fragmented. While mechanisms like sanctioning and continued assistance signal progress toward unified defence capabilities, the EU lacks a comprehensive framework to address the growing role of PMCs in destabilising regions where it operates. Member states, too, vary in their approaches, with no cohesive strategy to counter PMCs' hybrid tactics or their impact on fragile political environments.

Addressing these threats requires more than military solutions. Coordinated intelligence-sharing, legal frameworks targeting PMC activities, and enhanced support for vulnerable neighbours like Moldova and Georgia must underpin future policies. Redut's rise highlights the urgency of adapting European defence and foreign policy to a world where state and private actors blur, exploiting gaps in traditional security paradigms.

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