

APRIL 2025



INFOFLASH

**MERCENARIES MADE IN EUROPE?
EXPLORING THE NEED FOR A EUROPEAN
REGULATORY FRAMEWORK OF PRIVATE
MILITARY COMPANIES**

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Introduction

On 27 January 2025, the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel group declared that it had seized full control of the eastern Congolese city of Goma, causing a major humanitarian crisis, with reports of rapes, civilian executions, and thousands of refugees fleeing the region (Reuters, 2025; Usher, 2025). Amidst the city's capture, rebel forces apprehended 300 Romanian employees of a European Private Military Company (PMC) operating in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), nearly executing them (Waita & Holland, 2025; Popoviciu et al., 2025). The embroilment of hundreds of European nationals with military experience in a humanitarian crisis raises questions about the role of European PMCs in countries such as the DRC and what consequences their operations may entail for global and European security.

This paper argues that the lack of regulatory oversight of PMCs, both abroad and domestically, poses severe risks to European foreign policy and security interests, highlighting the necessity of oversight mechanisms to ensure the political and legal integrity of PMCs' ventures. In doing so, it first traces the evolution of European PMCs, focusing on their involvement in the African continent. Then, it discusses the advantages and common criticisms of PMC use, before analysing two case studies on European private security businesses operating in the DRC. These cases illustrate how European PMCs have actively aided the interests of Europe's strategic rivals in conflict areas. The analysis also exposes the involvement of European PMCs in illicit activities within Europe, including financial fraud, weapons smuggling, and the support of dangerous organisations, reinforcing the urgent need for increased oversight mechanisms over European military contractors. Considering the opportunities and challenges of expanding regulatory control, the paper concludes by offering policy recommendations for a common European PMC oversight system.

1. The 21st Century Rise of European PMCs

This section traces the historic rise of European PMCs, focusing on their growing role in African security operations. By examining the benefits and risks of their usage, it highlights issues of PMC accountability and misconduct, as well as past efforts to tackle these concerns, before concluding with the practical challenges of enforcing international regulatory frameworks.

Following the end of the Cold War era, European military disarmament efforts not only decreased the continent's capacity to conduct foreign interventions independently but also left significant numbers of professionally trained European military personnel without a profession (Engborg, 2025). The downsizing of Western militaries created a gap in demand,

which facilitated the rise of Private Military Companies. In response, European governments and multinational organisations such as the UN and EU increasingly started to outsource their peacekeeping and security operations (Wauters, 2018; Murphy, 2010). In recent decades, African governments have also expanded their reliance on foreign PMCs to complement their own militaries (Enos, 2023), with a growing number of these companies originating from Europe (Amoah, 2023). Besides the decrease in direct foreign security involvement in Africa, factors driving the need for European contractors include the shortage of domestically available manpower and the demand for highly trained instructors and operators (Engborg, 2025; Enos, 2023). For instance, the DRC's government explicitly expressed its intention to hire former members of the French Foreign Legion for training and security missions (La rédaction de Mondafrique, 2025).

The track record of PMCs in African conflicts demonstrates that their involvement can yield positive outcomes for their host nations (Enos, 2023). However, recurring scandals involving grave operational misconduct not only illustrate the humanitarian risks of unsupervised PMC operations but also expose their potential to prolong and escalate violence (Wauters, 2018; Enos, 2023). Thus, the most frequent criticism of PMC employment concerns accountability (Murphy, 2010). Unlike conventional militaries, PMCs operate without the same government structures and supervisory mechanisms, leading to a lack of regulatory oversight. While these companies operate independently, their state employers, along with both their country of origin and their employing government, face public and political repercussions for potential misconduct (Engborg, 2025). This oversight deficiency also increases the risk of PMCs acting against the employing country's best interest, as private contractors have previously been found to foster not only third-party corporations' and governments' objectives, but also their personal ones during their missions (Amoah, 2023).

Previous efforts to improve control of private military and security providers on the international level include the 2008 Montreux Charter (Cockayne, 2008) and the 2010 International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (Jerbi et al., 2013). Advocates of the status quo argue that PMCs are therefore liable not only under the law of their country of origin and operation, but also under these international treaties and corporate law, effectively creating a set of regulations for PMCs more extensive than that of conventional militaries (Murphy 2010). However, enforcing these regulations remains challenging due to conflicting interests and cooperation limitations, while self-governance has repeatedly proven to be unreliable (Wauters, 2018, pp. 77-78). Meanwhile, efforts to establish more wide-ranging international agreements are inhibited due to contentions over legal definitions for mercenaries and PMCs (Murphy, 2010).

The following case studies of DRC-based European PMCs illustrate the risks posed by

weaknesses in national and international oversight mechanisms. They illustrate how European PMCs currently operate without restrictions, contributing to political instabilities both at home and abroad. Moreover, they highlight how PMCs have profited from regional conflicts by facilitating the influence of foreign powers with competing interests to their nations of origin, even engaging in operations hostile to their home countries. These findings underscore the need for more stringently binding regulations on PMC operations.

2. Case Study: European Private Military Companies

Olivier Bazin & Agemira

Agemira RDC, officially based in Sofia, Bulgaria, is a PMC owned and managed by former French Gendarme Olivier Bazin (La rédaction de Mondafrique, 2025). To secure his contract as a military consultant to the Congolese general staff located in Goma, Bazin professed a close connection to the French government—a claim that has since been refuted by President Macron (La rédaction de Mondafrique, 2025). About 40 French contractors employed by Agemira were active in the maintenance of aircraft belonging to the Congolese Air Force, as well as logistics and intelligence operations around Goma (Popoviciu, 2025). A major task of Agemira has been the delivery and maintenance of predominantly Chinese-made Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for, and into the DRC (La rédaction de Mondafrique, 2025), especially in collaboration with the Chinese state-owned drone manufacturer NORINCO. Acting as a mediator, Bazin has facilitated China's expanding military and industrial influence in the DRC, profiting from the equipment shortages Tshisekedi's government faced in its fight against insurgents (Paszkwiaak, 2024). Through their operations, Bazin and Agemira thus directly supported one of Europe's main strategic co-competitors in the region. China has previously acted against the European Union's preferred 'effective multilateralism' policy, which the EU has aimed to strengthen as a means of dealing with political instabilities in the area (Tull, 2008).

Bazin's involvement in Africa and the DRC far supersedes his ventures with Agemira. Serving as a mediator for Gunvor, the world's fourth-largest oil company and an enterprise with close ties to the Russian government (Wiśniewska, 2018), he reportedly aided in securing a Russian export deal with the DRC's national oil company for the extraction of crude oil (Tilouine, 2017). The case gained public attention in 2012 when Gunvor's headquarters in Geneva were raided on suspicion of money laundering in connection with the deal (Guéniat et al., 2017). The close ties between Agemira's commander, Big Oil, and the Russian government highlight the extensive influence European PMCs had, and may continue to have, in facilitating the growth of third actors that compete with European strategic interests, extending far beyond the regional dimensions of the DRC. Moreover, Bazin's abuse of

fabricated political ties with European nations and the support of companies accused of financial misconduct within Europe further demonstrates the futility of self-governance as a meaningful tool to assure the ethical operation of European PMCs.

Horațiu Potra, Asociația RALF & Congo Protection

The second notable PMC currently active in the Democratic Republic of Congo is led by Romanian national and former French Foreign Legionnaire Horațiu Potra (Onofrei, 2024). Potra's involvement in the DRC takes place in the form of two interconnected entities: the firm Congo Protection and the Romanian-based Asociația RALF. The latter employs approximately 900 to 1,000 contractors, mainly from Romania, but also from Russia, and Georgia, embedded in the DRC forces in training and advisory roles (Felseghi, 2025; Popoviciu et al., 2025). The Romanian forces were predominantly drawn from existing European recruitment pools, including the French Foreign Legion, as well as Romania's armed forces and police units (Onofrei, 2024). The contracts were then signed with third-party companies, such as the UK-registered GPH La Role Ltd, controlled by Potra's brother, before being transferred to the DRC-based company Amani Sarl. This effectively blurred legal and contractual accountability for the operators (Popoviciu et al., 2025).

International observers have criticised Potra's military contractors for potentially contributing to prolonging and intensifying the conflict. As a result, tension arose between Romanian forces and the UN-commissioned South African peacekeeping troops in the area (Felseghi, 2025). When M23 forces surrounded Goma in early 2025, more than 280 Romanian contractors fled to the United Nations base in the city centre (Popoviciu et al., 2025). According to a UN official, the contractors were "imminently going to be killed" and only narrowly escaped a disaster, before international political intervention brokered an extraction deal, which allowed the surrounded operators to be disarmed and driven to the Rwandan border in UN vehicles, from where they were returned to Europe (Popoviciu et al., 2025, para. 8).

In February 2025, authorities raided Potra's premises in Romania as part of an investigation into far-right presidential candidate Călin Georgescu, for whom Potra had also worked as a provider (Marinescu & Brandiburu, 2025). Inquiries against Potra and his brother included suspicions of supporting a fascist organisation, money laundering, and tax evasion, all linked to British accounts used to employ contractors operating in the DRC (Robert, 2025a; Robert, 2025b). At Potra's residence in Mediaș, investigators discovered not only significant sums of money (Neagu, 2025), but also an arsenal of weapons and ammunition (Robert, 2025b). Following the searches, Romania's Supreme Court issued arrest warrants in absentia for Horațiu Potra on the charges of attempted acts against the constitutional order, violations of

arms and ammunition regulations, and breaches of laws concerning explosive materials (Pîntea, 2025).

Potra's private ventures in the DRC pose problems for European security interests that extend far beyond his enterprises' poaching of personnel from European military and law enforcement institutions. The events in Goma highlight the risks that European PMCs operating for third parties in conflict areas may entail for European foreign and security relations, as they nearly resulted in a diplomatic crisis had hundreds of Romanian citizens been killed. Most strikingly, the possible involvement of European PMCs in financially and militarily supporting criminal and extremist organisations exposes alarming failures in regulating military contractors' activities within Europe. This lack of formalised PMC oversight poses a severe threat to both national and transnational security.

Having outlined the multitude of threats to external and internal European security policy enabled by insufficient control of PMCs and their business operations the following section discusses effective measures for establishing a comprehensive regulatory system. The key concern is to ensure accountability and avoid legal loopholes before assessing the arguments in favour and against the likelihood of the implementation of such a system in the near future.

3. A United European Oversight System?

Although calls to improve control and regulation of European PMCs have increased over the past three decades, regulatory frameworks still vary drastically across Europe. Liberal trade and immigration laws within the EU make it easy for PMCs to circumvent legal barriers, obscure traces of employment contracts and conceal the movement of goods and personnel (Born et al., 2007; Wauters, 2018; White & MacLeod, 2008). Romanian PMC Agemira's use of a separate UK-based company to move funds and employ contractors for their missions in the DRC demonstrates this loophole (Robert, 2025a). Introducing stricter legal frameworks in individual countries is therefore insufficient; effective regulation must instead be applied universally on a supranational level.

A united European regulatory effort offers a viable solution to the current policy inconsistencies and consequential oversight gaps in European legislature (Tripeni, 2023; Krahnmann & Abzhaparova, 2010; Wauters, 2018). An analysis by the European Union Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) supports this conclusion (Krahnmann & Friesendorf, 2011). SEDE's policy recommendations include creating a common register of military and security services operating from within the EU, as along with standardised guidelines for the employment, management, and legal supervision of these contractors

(Krahmann & Friesendorf, 2011).

To ensure these regulations are applied comprehensively, a common European oversight agreement must cover both PMC conduct on the European internal market and their services exported to third nations (Sossai, 2013). This could be achieved by introducing mandatory national legislation for EU Member States to regulate the international export of private military services, including the requirement of military service export licenses and transparency reports for private military missions outside of Europe (Krahmann & Friesendorf, 2011). A foundation for such service export regulations is the already existing Common Position 2008/944 under the European Common Foreign and Security Policy framework, entailing conditions for licensing processes, which policymakers could expand by differentiating between operational types and considering the political and human rights situation in the target country (Sossai, 2013).

European PMC Oversight: Impossible or Unwanted?

Despite arguments in favour of a unified European regulation system needed for states to better control PMCs, governments themselves have also expressed resistance to advancing legislative control. For instance, the UK government has shown little willingness to intensify the supervision of of PMC conduct, especially in theatres abroad (Wauters, 2018). Similarly, in a 2021 policy statement towards the United Nations Human Rights Working Group on the use of mercenaries, the European Union declared that “[t]he EU continues to be opposed to a legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of private military and security companies” (European Union, 2021, p. 2), illustrating the wide-ranging scepticism among various bodies towards the expansion of oversight mechanisms.

Governments and supranational organisations may oppose PMC regulation for economic, political, and strategic reasons. Firstly, implementing oversight regulations presents several practical challenges for governments. Acquiring knowledge and compiling sufficient incriminating evidence to successfully prosecute PMCs for breaches of regulations committed abroad can be difficult. Additionally, bans on exporting security services to foreign countries could also significantly hinder the broader private defence sector—not just PMC operations—since service provisions, such as transport and training, are common aspects of defence export contracts (Wauters, 2018). As such, policymakers would need to appropriately account for the collateral damage of regulatory efforts regarding PMCs on other business branches if they were to implement such a system.

Secondly, the absence of formalised oversight mechanisms for PMCs offers various strategic advantages to many European states. Previous trends in European public opinion, favouring

reduced military spending and limited involvement in military operations abroad, have made the employment of private contractors to conduct military operations instead of official military contingents a more politically attractive alternative (Council of the EU Research Team, 2023). Avoiding the need for formal parliamentary consent—otherwise necessary for military interventions—means that European governments may deploy private contractors more rapidly, cost-efficiently, and with less public and political scrutiny over missions than their national militaries (Krahmann & Friesendorf, 2011). This way, European nations and the EU itself have employed private enterprises to provide security for military complexes and operational bases in conflict areas abroad (Krahmann & Friesendorf, 2011). Thus, policy adjustments requiring increased transparency around European PMCs' operations could risk inhibiting governments' own uses of PMCs, especially if regulation were to tackle previously exposed security.

While it can be rightly argued that the integrity of the European private defence sector is becoming increasingly crucial for European security in the wake of current changes in the political landscape, the economic and political challenges accompanying the expansion of PMC regulation put into question whether European governments and transnational organisations will implement a comprehensive transnational regulatory oversight system in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the potential dangers posed by the unregulated conduct of European PMCs to European internal and external security interests. The case studies analysed in this research clearly demonstrated ties between European-based military contractors and antagonistic political and economic actors, such as Russia and China. Furthermore, the studies reveal how the involvement of EU citizens employed by European companies in service of third parties presents an uncontrolled danger to European foreign and security relations. The actions of private contractors can have serious repercussions for their countries of origin, which are themselves unable to influence or regulate their conduct.

Beyond financial fraud and weapons smuggling, the possibility of PMCs' involvement in election interference and the support of extremist organisations within European countries further puts European security in jeopardy. These findings stress the severe lack of regulatory oversight to control the conduct of European PMCs both abroad and within their home countries must be reconsidered. This paper provided policy recommendations for a unified European regulatory framework for increased PMC oversight, including export licensing, employment conditions, and the establishment of a European register of private security providers. The implementation of such regulations in the near future remains,

however, questionable, due to conflicting political and economic interests.

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