

# Mercenary armies in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Both Russia and Ukraine deploy or have deployed PMSCs in the Russo-Ukrainian War. It is estimated that no more than about 35,000 operators of PMSCs ever participated in combat, a small number compared to the total number of combatants. However, this is only a quantitative indication, qualitatively it is different. It can be noted that on both sides PMSCs sometimes formed the main effort in the operations, such as at Kyiv (February 2022), Mariupol (May 2022) and Bakhmut (August 2022 to May 2023). In order to understand the position of PMSCs in the Russo-Ukrainian War, it is necessary to study historic examples of the use of such companies during military operations. In modern times, what exactly are the advantages for the states that hire them?

*Members of the Ukrainian 224th battalion of 112th brigade around 10 kilometres from Bakhmut: after fierce fighting in which PMSC Wagner took on a leading role the city fell into Russian hand in May 2023*



A multitude of articles have been published since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in which the authors expressed their surprise and concern about the Russian way of warfare. At the end of February 2014 the world was witnessing the annexation of Crimea with the insertion of so-called little green men, soldiers in military uniform but without markings or insignias. For nearly two months Moscow had denied any involvement, until 17 April when President Vladimir Putin confirmed Russian presence in Ukraine. Besides Russian Spetsnaz from the Gru,<sup>1</sup> the Russian military secret service, and soldiers from 810 Marine Infantry Battalion, the Wagner Group and Redut also contributed to this operation.<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2022 these Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) played their part during the invasion of Ukraine, with Wagner as the main contributor.

In the spring of 2023 Wagner even took on a leading role as they were the only unit capable of achieving tactical gains at the Ukraine-Russian front. Clearing building after building, fighters of the Wagner group fought their way through the Ukrainian town of Bakhmut. All attention was focused on this titanic battle: Wagner versus Ukraine's most experienced military. Bakhmut became a symbol of tenacity for both Russian and Ukrainian authorities. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky wanted to hold on to the town of Bakhmut at all costs.<sup>3</sup> However, after nearly a year of fierce fighting, in May 2023 the city fell into the hands of the Russian invaders.<sup>4</sup>

With all the attention focused on the battle of Bakhmut, it became clear that the use of mercenaries and mercenary armies, now referred to as PMSCs, had established itself as a significant factor on the battlefield of today and tomorrow. As is further highlighted in this article, it later emerged that not only Russia but also Ukraine deploys or has deployed PMSCs in this Russo-Ukrainian War.

The purpose of this article is to shed more light on various PMSCs affiliated with Russia and Ukraine that played a role during the first two

years of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The first section of the article discusses what PMSCs are and will explain the history of mercenaries and PSMCs, even modern-day ones. It will be followed by a section on the characteristics and Western standards regarding PMSCs. The next two sections focus on Russian and Ukrainian PMSCs fighting in armed conflicts. The article concludes with some final remarks on PMSCs.

Before delving deeper into PMSCs, here are two comments. First, the terms 'Private Military Companies' (PMCs), 'Private Military and Security Companies' (PMSCs) and 'Private Security Companies' (PMSs) are used interchangeably. Yet there are differences: PMCs operate independently and are dedicated to combat operations, either through participating in, advising or supporting them. PMSCs do the same but also perform protective and more security-related tasks. They often started out as PSCs, but over time they have expanded their tasks and can be hired because of their knowledge and experience of combat operations. PSCs are independent companies that focus on protecting businesses and individuals that are prone to robberies and attacks. The current market for hiring auxiliary forces itself also contributes to the confusion over the terms PMCs, PMSCs and PSCs. With the negative attention for PMCs arising after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, many PMCs increasingly prefer

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- 1 GRu stands for Glavnoje upravlenije General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhonykh sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation). This is Russia's military intelligence service.
- 2 Han Bouwmeester, *Krym Nash. An Analysis of Modern Russian Deception Warfare* (PhD-dissertation, Utrecht University, 2020) 322-325.
- 3 Jamie Dettmer and Veronika Melkozerova, 'Zelenskyy digs in against calls to quit Bakhmut', *Politico*, 17 March 2023. See: <https://www.politico.eu/article/zelenskyy-digs-in-against-calls-to-quit-bakhmut-us-western-allies-eu-russia-frontlines-valeriy-zaluzhnyy-kyiv-soledar-kupol/>.
- 4 Kateryna Stepanenko, 'The Kremlin's pyrrhic victory in Bakhmut. A retrospective on the battle for Bakhmut. Institute for the Study of War, 24 May 2023. See: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut>.

PHOTO: US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE



Supplied by the Russian Armed Forces, the Wagner Group is active on the ground in Libya: Russia has not ratified the Montreux Document that contains regulations for states that use PMSCs

to portray themselves as PMSCs or PSCs, which are considered more moderate than PMCs.<sup>5</sup> Second, the term PMSC may also invite association with e.g. the French Foreign Legion, but this is unjustified. The French Foreign Legion is not an independent company but is part of the regular French army.

### Understanding PMSCs

‘Guns for hire’, ‘sell swords’, ‘soldiers of fortune’, ‘mercenaries’, or ‘contractors’; history has coined many different terms for what is considered to be one of the oldest professions in the world: that of waging war. According to *Oxford Languages* the term mercenary means ‘a professional soldier hired to serve in a foreign army’. The term stems from the Latin *mercenarius* meaning ‘hireling’. Although it is hard to find an unambiguous and uniform definition, the explanation given by the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 is often followed. According

5 Pieterjan Willaert, *De opmars van private military companies. Aard, implicaties en de lessen uit Irak* (Master thesis, Ghent University, 2013) 6.

to article 47, sub 2, a mercenary is any person who:

1. Is specially recruited locally or abroad to fight in an armed conflict;
2. Does, in fact, take direct part in hostilities;
3. Is motivated to take part in hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially more than promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that party;
4. Is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict;
5. Is not a member of the armed forces of a party involved in the conflict;
6. Has not been sent by a state, which is not a party to the conflict, on official duty as a member of its armed forces.<sup>6</sup>

The Geneva Conventions defined mercenaries and mercenarism as early as 1949, but it took until 1989 before the United Nations adopted Resolution 44/33, the 'International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries', thus banning the use of mercenaries. This resolution was intended as a response to colonial powers that made use of mercenaries to fight opposing forces and treated these mercenaries as combatants. Following the final entry into force of Resolution 44/33 in 2001, only 37 countries have ratified the Convention. Interestingly, most European countries, including the Netherlands, abstained from signing or ratifying this document.<sup>7</sup> The United States, France, the United Kingdom, China and the Russian Federation, which actively use PMSCs, have not ratified the convention and do not intend to do so.

The growing global scale of 'non-state armed groups' demanded some sort of regulation. To distinguish the private military and security industry from mercenary activities and to improve governance in the industry, a Swiss initiative was launched in the run-up to the Montreux Document in 2008. This document provides clarity on legal issues surrounding the

use of PMSCs in conflict situations. It contains 27 international obligations, including respect for international law, human rights, state responsibility and liability for activities of PMSCs and 73 so-called 'good practices' on control of the outsourcing of services of PMSCs. The document highlights the responsibilities of three principal types of states:

1. 'Contracting states', being nations that hire PMSCs;
2. 'Territorial states', being nations on whose territory PMSCs operate, and;
3. 'Home states', being nations in which PMSCs are headquartered or registered.<sup>8</sup>

The classification into three different types of states contributes to a clearer view on who is doing what, where and with what responsibility. The document is currently endorsed by more than 59 nations worldwide, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia and almost all EU-member states, including the Netherlands.<sup>9</sup> The official website of the Montreux Document Forum shows a marked decrease of violence against civilians during and after hostilities, from which it concludes that the introduction of the Montreux Document has a positive impact on the reduction of violence against civilians.<sup>10</sup>

6 Doctors without Borders, 'The Practical Guide to Humanitarian Law'. See: <https://guide-humanitarian-law.org/content/article/3/mercenaries/>.

7 United Nations, 'International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries'. See: <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/icruftm/icruftm.html#:~:text=By%20resolution%2044%2F34%20of,was%20annexed%20to%20the%20resolution.>

8 Montreux Document Forum, 'The Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies', section 2. See: <https://www.montreuxdocument.org/about/montreux-document.html>.

9 Swiss Confederation / Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 'Participating states of the Montreux Document, 27 September 2023. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/international-law/international-humanitarian-law/private-military-security-companies/participating-states.html>.

10 'Independent research confirms the positive impact of the Montreux Document on the reduction of PMSCs Violence against Civilians', Montreux Document Forum, 27 April 2022. See: <https://www.montreuxdocument.org/news/impactoncivilians.html>.

## Mercenaries and PMSCs throughout history

In ancient times, during the three Punic Wars, which lasted from 264 to 146 BC, the Carthaginians fought for supremacy in the western Mediterranean, using multi-ethnic armies whose ranks were filled with mercenaries.<sup>11</sup> It was an adaptation to armies that started out of necessity. Results on the battlefield were mixed as there was also a high risk of mutiny. Hannibal Barca, a general and statesman, perfected his father's adaptation creating a fighting force that was considered 'the epitome of what a mercenary army could achieve'.<sup>12</sup> To prevent too much autonomy of the mercenary captains this Barcid system<sup>13</sup> ensured that the mercenaries were closely supervised by Carthaginian officers, who were always employed by and loyal to their Commanding Officer. Therefore, these armies were constantly sent on campaign and received their pay from their general.<sup>14</sup>

Later, during the Middle Ages, mercenaries were employed throughout Europe to wage wars between emperors and kings. The ruling noblemen supplemented their armies of knights with mercenaries. In the 14th century Europe saw the so-called Routiers, being soldiers without regular employment or financial means, scavenging the lands, their origins dating back to the 12th century. The radical shift in political power and the collapse of the status quo led to

the end to public war and thus to an end to hostilities and the need for large armies. The disbandment of these armies of enormous size led to a series of 'large and heavily-armed migrations throughout France'.<sup>15</sup> The Routiers ravaged the French countryside in search of food and work and would continue to do so until the end of the 14th century. Eventually, these warriors, who initially 'foraged' and 'ransomed' the countryside under the auspices of the crown, began to do so on their own authority. These Routier units could range in size from hundreds to even thousands of men.<sup>16</sup>

Remarkably, ever since the sixteenth century, Europe has been an open haven of refuge for former mercenary units. The Swiss Guard in Vatican City represents the last vestige of an ancient and long-standing tradition of Swiss military service. Forced by poverty and seeking their fortune abroad, many young Swiss chose to enlist as mercenaries in the service of the European great powers.<sup>17</sup> Knowing their fighting reputation as well as their loyalty, Pope Julius II appointed these men as his personal bodyguard. On 22 January 1506 the first contingent of 150 Swiss mercenaries entered the Eternal City. In 1648, the Westphalian Peace introduced the Papal state as a political entity with the monopoly on violence. However, this did not end the presence of private militias on countless battlefields since then. Even today, mercenaries, or as they are nowadays called, PMSCs, still frequently make their appearance in today's conflicts.

## The development of 'modern' mercenaries

After the French Revolution, the market for private armies deployed saw a decline as its utility was considered low in the eyes of politicians and military commanders. However, centuries later, after WWII a return to the use of mercenaries occurred during the Cold War, when political views and operational experiences were shared between individual mercenaries and London's political elites. Both parties had served in the Second World War, which had fostered

11 Kevin Emery, 'Carthaginian mercenaries. Soldiers of fortune, allied conscripts, and multi-in antiquity', *Student Scholarship*, 1 May 2016. See: <https://digitalcommons.wofford.edu/studentpubs/11>, 25 September 2023; Sean McFate, 'Mercenaries and war. Understanding private armies today' (Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 2019). See: <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2031922/mercenaries-and-war-understanding-private-armies-today/>.

12 Emery, 'Carthaginian mercenaries'.

13 Derived from Hannibal Barca, a Barcid system denotes a system that combined men and units from different countries, languages, religions and fighting styles to form an army.

14 Emery, 'Carthaginian mercenaries'.

15 William Mulloy, 'A question of control: violence and late medieval society during the Hundred Years War' (Canyon West Texas A&M University, 2021). See: <https://wtamu-ir.tdl.org/items/a6bcbe1b-4791-4b64-ad21-36d586b48f5e>.

16 Ibidem.

17 SWI, 'The Mercenaries Who Converted the Vatican', *Swissinfo.ch*, 21 January 2006. See: <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/the-mercenaries-who-converted-the-vatican/4960306>, 24 September 2023. And: MacDonald, 'Dogs of war redux?'

mutual understanding and therefore good relationships. According to Christopher Kinsey, 'The best-established companies that conducted covert operations were those employing former Special Air Service (SAS) personnel.'<sup>18</sup>

The coup d'état in Yemen in September 1962 forced the United Kingdom to take action to protect British interests in the region. Under international political pressure, however, the UK was reluctant to deploy regular British troops and therefore called in the assistance of former SAS founder David Stirling. Although the operation in Yemen did not yield the desired result, it prompted Stirling to start marketing national interests. The result was eventually WatchGuard, which can be seen as the first

post-war commercial company of its kind in Britain. It sold services of a military nature, making it the first new-style PMC to be established. This was the first effort of a non-state actor (a civil company) to make use of its personnel's range of military skills in a foreign country. By deploying former British service personnel, Watchguard made it possible to 'safeguard British interests in places where the government was not able to act for whatever reason.'<sup>19</sup>

18 Christopher Kinsey, *Corporate Soldiers and International Security. The Rise of Private Military Companies* (New York, Routledge Contemporary Security Studies, 2006) 44.

19 *Ibidem*, 46-47.

*SAS founder David Stirling (right) and members of the elite unit on patrol in Northern Africa during the Second World War: in the 1960s Stirling's WatchGuard became the first modern commercial company in Britain that sold services of a military nature*



## The changing character of war has led to a totally different playing field where the role of PMSCs as the mercenaries of the new era is emerging

From the 1970s onwards, geopolitical security underwent drastic changes that sparked the emergence of a renewed security industry. Globalisation with its security risks for multinational companies operating worldwide and the rise of international terrorism stimulated the growth and transformation of what were once clandestine covert military companies. 'Mercenaries still operated, but these new companies kept away from these terrorist operations and focused instead on providing security solutions for the commercial sector.'<sup>20</sup> Companies like Executive Outcomes and Sandline International in the 1990s and Blackwater and Triple Canopy in the first decade of 2000 are products of their time. The changing character of war has consequently led to a totally different playing field with more diverse actors than before. In this realm, the role of PMSCs as the mercenaries of the new era is emerging. As security expert Sean McFane has put it: 'Mercenaries will return, not with AK-47s, but with fighter planes, and special operations teams will be auctioned off to the highest bidder.'<sup>21</sup>

## Characterising PMSCs

As the PMSC industry came to maturity, the call to differentiate between the various types of PMSCs became louder. PMSC-researcher Peter W. Singer structured PMSCs into three different types, based on their distance to the battlefield:

1. **Military Provider Firms:** These firms send in soldiers who participate in the actual fighting (combat-protection) or provide the client with commanders who direct the local troops, e.g., South African-based Executive Outcomes, US-based Academi, formerly known as Blackwater, Canadian-based GardaWorld Corporation (including former British-based Aegis Defence Services) and the Wagner Group.
2. **Military Consultant Firms:** These firms provide services to their clients in the field of military advice and training inherent to the execution of military operations, e.g., US-based MPRI (Military Professional Resources Incorporated), or the Netherlands-based Triangular Group Academy.
3. **Military Support Firms:** This last type of PMSC provides its clients with services in the field of logistics, transportation, and operational capabilities, e.g., US-based Kellogg, Brown and Root, US-based Supreme Group and Spanish-based Golden Owl, specializing in providing international open-source intelligence and investigation.<sup>22</sup>

Four reasons can be identified for states to use PMSCs in armed conflict: flexibility, plausible deniability, professionalism, and cost considerations.<sup>23</sup>

First, PMSCs and PMCs are flexible and can quickly be moved to a potential global hot spot. These organisations lack long political and bureaucratic decision-making processes to mobilise and prepare the necessary troops for deployment. Many PMSCs indicate that they can be ready at short notice. Exiting a conflict area or repatriation is also easy and can take place directly after a task has been completed.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Sean McFate, *The new rules of war. Victory in the age of durable disorder*, first edition (New York, William Morrow/HarperCollins Publishers, 2019) 9.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Singer, *Corporate Warriors. The rise of the privatized military industry*, updated edition, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs, 2008) 91.

<sup>23</sup> Parth Raman and Maria Diandra Opre, 'Private Military Companies: empowerment of state of privates?' *The Daily Guardian*, 23 August 2023. See: <https://thedailyguardian.com/private-military-companies-empowerment-of-state-or-privates/>.

<sup>24</sup> Raman and Opre, 'Private Military Companies'.

Second, it is not always clear who is responsible for the deployment of the PMSCs. By denying involvement top government officials avoid responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, state authorities sometimes deliberately try to cover their involvement in a conflict with the veil of ambiguity. While governments are held accountable for the deaths and injuries of their soldiers, PMSCs do not have to publicly report their casualty numbers.<sup>26</sup> In other words, PMSCs allow states to shirk responsibilities and to deny any involvement in frontline actions.

Third, PMSC-operators are well-trained professionals. They are often recruited from the 'elite forces of the best-trained armies in the world'.<sup>27</sup> A 2014 study found that PMSC-operators possess many military and special forces skills, can perform a variety of missions and can quickly adapt to the changing demands of a mission.<sup>28</sup>

Fourth, deploying PMSCs can be a low-cost solution. How many nations are willing to pay for PMSC services cannot be ascertained from public sources, but the activities of a PMSC are based on a business model. In addition, it is often claimed that PMSCs are more cost-effective than standing armies. Governments that hire PMSCs do not have to take care of remittances for the purpose of pensions, health care, housing benefits, etc.<sup>29</sup>

## Russian PMSCs

The next two sections portray PMSCs operating on the Russian and Ukrainian side. In some cases, these PMSCs abide to the aforementioned characteristics of PMSCs, but in others any resemblance to these characteristics is hard to find. It is difficult to indicate what the share of PMSCs on either side in the Russo-Ukrainian War has been so far. Although the warring parties are very reluctant to specify the exact number of combatants participating in this war, it can be assumed that on both sides it is several hundred thousands, the majority on the Russian side. It is estimated that no more than about 35,000 operators of PMSCs ever participated in combat, a small number compared to the total

number of combatants. However, this is only a quantitative indication, qualitatively it is different. It can be noted that on both sides PMSCs sometimes formed the main effort in the operations, such as at Kyiv (February 2022), Mariupol (May 2022) and Bakhmut (August 2022 to May 2023). In fact, it is even believed that Wagner's forces were a decisive factor in the Battle for Bakhmut.

### The Wagner Group

The origin of the Wagner Group, known in Russia as ChVK Vagner,<sup>30</sup> is not clear. In September 2022, Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed to be the founder and owner of the Wagner Group.<sup>31</sup> This may have been grandstanding on the part of Prigozhin, as it has been concluded by some that Dmitry Utkin, a former lieutenant colonel of the GRU, was the founder of the Wagner Group and created it in 2013 from remnants of the former Hong-Kong based PMSC Slavonic Corps. According to journalistic research group Bellingcat, Utkin was not the initiator of the Wagner Group but worked at the Wagner Group from its inception and had a strong influence on its image. It is believed that the Wagner Group owes its nom-de-guerre Wagner to Utkin's 'obsessive fascination' for the Third Reich. Richard Wagner was Adolf Hitler's favourite composer.<sup>32</sup> *The Bell*, a website run by

25 Wojciech Pałka, *The awakening of Private Military Companies*, special report (Warsaw, Warsaw Institute, 20 August 2020) 9.

26 Mik Dijkman, *Soldiers of fortune. The Wagner Group as tool for Russian grand strategy* (Breda, Netherlands Defence Academy, Military Strategic Studies master thesis, 2023) 34.

27 Nikola Zadzorova, 'Privat Military Companies: an efficient way of meeting the demand for security', electronic paper, *E-International Relations*, 20 September 2015. See: <https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/20/private-military-companies-an-efficient-way-of-meeting-the-demand-for-security/>.

28 Jutta Joachim and Andrea Schneiker, 'All for One and One in All: Private Military Security Companies as Soldiers, Business Managers and Humanitarians', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27 (2014) 2, 254-259.

29 Marina Caparini and Moncef Kartas, *Private Military Companies*, DCAF Background (Geneva, Geneva Centre for Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2006) 2.

30 ChVK stands for Chastnyye Voyennyye Kompanii, which means Private Military Company.

31 Pjotr Sauer, 'Putin ally Prigozhin admits founding Wagner mercenary group', *The Guardian*, 26 September 2022. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/26/putin-ally-yevgeny-prigozhin-admits-founding-wagner-mercenary-group>.

32 'Putin chef's kisses of death. Russia's shadow army's state-run structure exposed', *Bellingcat*, 14 August 2020. See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>.

independent Russian investigative journalists, claims that the creation of the Wagner Group derives from an initiative of some senior Russian officers after attending a presentation by Eeben Barlow, founder of the South-African-based PMSC Executive Outcomes. Prigozhin was chosen as Wagner's leader because of his already close contacts with the Russian Defence Ministry as the Kremlin's main caterer at social events and dinner parties.<sup>33</sup> In short, there is still much uncertainty about the origin of the Wagner Group.

Wagner Group's main training camp was located at the Molmino base in Russia's Krasnodar region, which is also home to the 10 Spetsnaz Brigade, belonging to the GRu.<sup>34</sup> This suggests an intimate relationship between the Wagner Group and the GRu, although it has never been openly confirmed by Russian authorities. The assumed connection with the GRu might imply a degree of professionalism mentioned before as a PMSC characteristic. The fact that the Russian authorities never openly confirmed the relationship could refer to the characteristic of plausible deniability. After its founding, the

Wagner Group soon became active during the annexation of Crimea and later during the armed conflict in the Donbas region and Syria. Their area of operations includes the African continent with active commitments in Libya, Mali, Central African Republic, Niger, and Sudan, but also in countries like Venezuela and Sri Lanka.<sup>35</sup> This is often done at the invitation of the present rulers. Wagner's mission often involves protecting high-ranking individuals, maintaining order, supporting groups involved in internal conflicts, but in Africa they also provide the protection of gold and diamond mining enterprises.<sup>36</sup>

From the summer of 2022, the bitter battle for Bakhmut between Wagner and Ukrainian forces raged for nearly a year, although experts disputed the city's strategic value. Prigozhin declared several times that Bakhmut was completely in Wagner's hands, although Ukrainian defenders managed to regain small parts of the city each time.<sup>37</sup> In late May 2023, President Zelensky admitted that Bakhmut lived only in the 'hearts of the Ukrainians', hinting at the fall of Bakhmut.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Prigozhin made it clear he disagreed with the way the war was being conducted, criticising the then Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov. Prigozhin, owner of Concord, a large business empire including the Wagner Group, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), also known as the Russian Trolls, and several media companies, skilfully used his media channels to openly express his dissatisfaction with the way the war was developing.<sup>39</sup> He also openly complained about the lack of sufficient logistical support from Russian forces while, at the time, the Wagner Group, despite suffering huge losses, was the only successful unit fighting for Bakhmut.<sup>40</sup>

On Friday, June 23, 2023, emotions ran so high that Prigozhin decided to lead his Wagner group to Moscow. The mutiny took regular Russian troops completely by surprise. Without much opposition the Wagner group moved from the Donbas region to Rostov-on-Don in Russia and then headed towards Moscow.<sup>41</sup> In the vicinity

33 Ibidem.

34 Sarah Fainberg, *Russian spetsnaz, contractors and volunteers in the Syrian conflict*, Russi. Nei.Visions, No. 105, (Paris, Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2017) 18.

35 Patrick Wouters, *Putin's private army. How the Wagner Group supports Russian strategy*, CSDS policy brief 19/2022 (Brussels, Brussels School of Governance, 2022) 3-4; *Deutsche Welle*, 'Where in the World Is the Wagner Group Active?' *Frontline*, 26 June 2023. See: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/russia-private-military-company-wagner-group-global-connections/article67010754.ece>.

36 Colin P. Clarke et al., 'Is Wagner pivoting back to Africa? Ukraine isn't the only place where America must counter Russia's mercenaries', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 May 2023. See: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/ukraine-wagner-pivoting-back-africa>.

37 Thomas d'Istria, 'Wagner and Putin claim the capture of Bakhmut, a city reduced to rubble', *Le Monde*, 24 May 2023. See: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/21/bakhmut-wagner-and-putin-claim-the-capture-of-a-city-reduced-to-rubble\\_6027450\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/21/bakhmut-wagner-and-putin-claim-the-capture-of-a-city-reduced-to-rubble_6027450_4.html).

38 Matt Viser, Tyler Pager and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, 'Zelensky says destroyed Bakhmut now lives 'only in our hearts'', *The Washington Post*, 21 May 2023. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/05/21/zelensky-bakhmut-biden-g7-aid/>.

39 Tim Lister, Jim Sciutto and Mary Ilyushina, 'Exclusive: Putin's chef, the man behind the troll factory', *CNN Politics*, 17 October 2017. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/17/politics/russian-oligarch-putin-chef-troll-factory/index.html>.

40 Friedel Taube, 'Who's who in the Prigozhin-Kremlin conflict?' *Deutsche Welle*, 25 June 2023. See: <https://www.dw.com/en/whos-who-in-the-prigozhin-kremlin-conflict/a-66021700>.

41 Jason Blazakis et al., *Wagner Group. Evolution of a private army, special report* (New York, The Soufan Centre, 2023) 5.ssss



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (left) during a military briefing: in February 2022 Redut was to play a significant role in the attack on Kyiv and the planned assassination of the Zelensky government

PHOTO OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE

of the city of Voronezh, about 500 kilometres south of Moscow, the Wagner group was attacked by Russian helicopters. Five helicopters and a fixed-wing airplane were shot down by Wagner forces, killing 13 Russian crew.<sup>42</sup> The following day, in the evening of June 24, Prigozhin announced the end of the action. Putin was furious and called the coup ‘a stab in the back of our nation and our people’.<sup>43</sup> Nearly two months later, on Wednesday, August 23, 2023, a business plane crashed en route from Moscow to St. Petersburg. According to Russian aviation authorities, ten prominent members of the Wagner Group were among the victims, including Yevgeni Prigozhin, Dmitry Utkin and Valery Chekalov.<sup>44</sup> The Kremlin denied any involvement in the crash, leaving a veil of obscurity on the real circumstances of the crash. Since the death of Wagner’s top leadership, information on the Wagner group has been rather vague. According to several sources Wagner is likely to be divided in separate units as part of the National Guard, Rosgvardiya, PMC Redut and the so-called Africa Corps.<sup>45</sup> It seems

the Kremlin is doing everything possible to prevent future uprisings of these PMSCs.

#### Redut

Redut, a much lesser-known PMSC than the Wagner Group, was founded in 2008. It initially belonged to the family of anti-terrorist PMSCs.

- 42 Max Rust, ‘Where is Wagner: Map of Rostov and Voronezh in Relation to Moscow’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2023. See: <https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-wagner-prigozhin-putin/card/map-of-rostov-and-voronezh-in-relation-to-moscow-gauy4DQzzDVlwoYLDenD>.
- 43 Pjotr Sauer and Andrew Roth, ‘Putin accuses Wagner chief of treason and vows to ‘neutralize’ uprising’, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2023. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/24/vladimir-putin-accuses-wagner-chief-treason-vows-neutralise-uprising>.
- 44 Nicola Smith, ‘Jet crash victim who died alongside Prigozhin’, *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2023. See: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/08/24/prigozhin-wagner-plane-crash-victims/>.
- 45 Pjotr Sauer, ‘How Russia is recruiting Wagner fighters to continue war in Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, 9 November 2023. In the summer of 2022, a hugely bitter battle raged for nearly a year between Wagner and Ukrainian forces over Bakhmut, although experts disputed the city’s strategic value; Nicodemus Minde, ‘Russia’s Africa Corp – more than old wine in a new bottle’, *Institute for Security Studies*, 7 March 2024. See: <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/russias-africa-corps-more-than-old-wine-in-a-new-bottle>.

It was the intention of the Russian General Staff that Redut would become an apprehensive competitor to the Wagner Group

The company Antiterror-Orel was officially registered in 2003, in the city of Orel, as a 'non-governmental education and training centre'. The company's training centre was set up by former Special Forces agents, who lived in the city. Antiterror-Orel served as the basis for the creation of Redut-Antiterror, later developing into Redut. The initial Redut organisation was largely composed of Russian ex-military personnel, drawn from the 45th Special Forces Regiment of the Russian Airborne Forces. Reportedly, Redut has particularly close ties to the Russian Ministry of Defence.<sup>46</sup> Assumably, many contractors belonging to Antiterror-Redut worked in Afghanistan from 2004-2006 and 'served later in Ukraine and Syria under the banner of the Slavonic Corps and the Wagner Group'.<sup>47</sup>



PHOTO ANP/AFP, GENYA SAVILOV

According to insiders, Redut is entirely under the control of the GRU. The PMSC asserts complete loyalty to Russia's state institutions as it depends on it for ammunition, equipment, and logistics. Nevertheless, the group still enjoys a certain degree of autonomy, but not comparable with the latitude claimed by the Wagner Group.<sup>48</sup> Russian oligarch Gennady Timchenko, a former KGB officer and close acquaintance of Putin, is the one who benefits most from Redut. On the recommendation of a few senior GRU officers, Redut was tasked to secure Timchenko's energy company Stroytransgaz, which belongs to his privately owned investment conglomerate Volga Group.<sup>49</sup>

46 Åse Gilje Østensen Tor Bukkvoll, 'Russian use of Privayte Military and Security Companies – the implications for European and Norwegian security', FFII-report 18/01300 (Kjeller, Forsvarets Forskningsinstitutt (FFI)- Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2018) 24-25.

47 Candace Rondeaux, *Decoding the Wagner Group. Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare* (Washington, D.C., New America, 2019) 34.

48 Nicholas Chkhaidze, 'PMC Redut. The Wagner Group's potential replacement', situation reports, *Geopolitical Monitor*, 30 August 2023. See: <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/pmc-redut-the-wagner-groups-potential-replacement/>.

49 Matthew Luxmoore and Benoit Faucon, 'Russian Private Military Companies move to take over Wagner fighters', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 September 2023. See: <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/russian-private-military-companies-move-to-take-over-wagner-fighters-a568f938>.



*Belarusian soldiers from the Kastuś Kalinoŭski regiment, made up of Belarusian opposition volunteers formed to defend Ukraine, prepare a 120mm mortar to fire at a front line position near Bakhmut in the Donetsk region, April 2023*

Until 2022, Redut was mainly concerned with anti-terrorism and security tasks, although they also operated in Syria with two detachments of approximately 60 contractors. It was the intention of the Russian General Staff that Redut would become an apprehensive competitor to the Wagner Group, as the Wagner Group was becoming less controllable. On 24 February 2022, during the start of the war, Redut was to play a significant role in the attack on Kyiv and the planned assassination of the Zelensky government. The deputy head of the GRu, Lieutenant-General Vladimir Alexeyev, had made plans for this part of the Russian attack on Ukraine, and made Anatoly Karaziy, a former

intelligence officer of the Wagner Group, head of this Redut unit. Redut recruited many former Wagner members in the period prior to the Russo-Ukrainian war, which infuriated Wagner chief Prigozhin. Redut suffered heavy losses of up to 90 percent of their strength during the advance to Kyiv in the first weeks of the war. Due to the weakening of Redut, Prigozhin's Wagner Group became the leading PMSC during this war.<sup>50</sup>

50 Roland Oliphant, 'Inside ambitious mercenary outfit Redut, the Wagner rival linked to the Russian spy service', *The Telegraph*, 24 August 2023. See: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/08/24/redut-russia-yevgeny-prigozhin-plane-crash-rival/>.

In early 2023, Russia's Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin authorized Gazprom Neft, a subsidiary of Russian energy giant Gazprom, to establish its own PMSC. The new PMSC was founded in the city of Omsk, under the name Gazprom Neft Security. It was led by former high-ranking members of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSS) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>51</sup> The three main units that came under Gazprom Neft Security were Fakel (Torch), Potok (Stream) and Plamya (Flame) and were placed under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defence.<sup>52</sup> In April 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defence forced members of Potok to sign contracts for Redut to fight under their leadership in the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>53</sup> Gazprom never admitted its involvement in the formation of PMSCs; instead, in the past, the company sought to project a traditional Western corporate image to trading partners in Europe.<sup>54</sup>

Also, in April 2023, the British secret service announced that the Russian authorities were in the process of creating a new PMSC that, alongside Redut, could counterbalance the Wagner Group.<sup>55</sup> Although no names were mentioned by the British service, it quickly appeared to be PMSC Convoy, with its own *Telegram* channel. The driving force behind PMSC Convoy is Sergey Aksyonov, head of Crimea's Kremlin-backed government. Born in Moldova, Aksyonov was a businessman who may have had links with organised crime. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin appointed him head of the Crimean government. In the summer of 2023, PMSC Convoy made frantic attempts to recruit fighters through its *Telegram* channel. According to estimates, PMSC Convoy includes several hundred contractors, operating mainly in Crimea and in the Kherson region. The story that Convoy fighters had to sign two contracts, one for Convoy and one for the Russian Ministry of Defence, indicates that Russian authorities are keen to keep a much tighter grip on Russian PMSCs.<sup>56</sup>

PMSC Patriot, established by the Russian authorities, made its first appearance in Syria in 2018. Patriot had initially focused on VIP protection, but soon this task shifted to combat missions in Syria and the Central African Republic.<sup>57</sup> Patriot, also participating in the Russo-Ukrainian war, has strong ties with former Russian Defence Minister Shoigu.<sup>58</sup> According to *Ukrainska Pravda* Patriot contractors were reportedly spotted fighting around Vuhledar in the Donbas region in late 2022.<sup>59</sup> Even with PMSC Patriot, it can be seen that the Russian authorities, especially former Minister Shoigu, wanted tighter control over the deployment of PMSCs.

From the Russian point of view, these so-called PMSCs do not conform to the usual conceptions of PMSCs as they exist at the whim of the Kremlin. All PMSCs associated with Russia maintain close relationships, often covert, with the Kremlin and are supported with ammunition, transport, training facilities, and equipment to varying degrees by the Russian government.

- 51 Sergey Sukhankin, 'The 'Privatization of Force' presses on in Russia, Part one', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 27 February 2023. See: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-privatization-of-force-presses-on-in-russia-part-one/>.
- 52 Karolina Hird et al., 'Competition among Russian private military companies (PMCs) is likely increasing in Bakhmut', Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment (Washington, D.C., Institute for the Study of War, 26 April 2023). See: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-26-2023>.
- 53 'It's not just Wagner, at least three Gazprom-linked private military companies now have fighters in Ukraine', *Meduza*, 16 May 2023. See: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2023/05/16/it-s-not-just-wagner>.
- 54 Polina Ivanova, Christopher Miller and Max Seddon, 'Stream' and 'Torch'. The Gazprom-backed militias fighting in Ukraine', *Financial Times*, 1 June 2023. See: <https://www.ft.com/content/4dd0aa0a-4b37-4082-8db0-0b969c539677>.
- 55 British Defence Intelligence, 'Intelligence Update', *Twitter (X)*, 4 April 2023. #StandWithUs#.
- 56 Grégoire Sauvage, 'New Russian militia Convoy rises as Wagner Group gets too big to control', *France24*, 4 August 2023. See: <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230408-new-russian-militia-convoy-rises-as-wagner-group-gets-too-big-to-control>.
- 57 Sergey Sukhankin, 'Russia's New PMC Patriot. The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa?' *The Jamestown Foundation*, 1 August 2018. See: <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-new-pmc-patriot-the-kremlins-bid-for-a-greater-role-in-africa/>.
- 58 Ryan Bauer and Erik Mueller, 'Ukraine is breeding ground for Russian PMCs, RAND Corporation', 14 June 2023. See: <https://www.rand.org/blog/2023/06/ukraine-is-a-breeding-ground-for-russian-pmcs.html>; Edward Lucas, 'Big Bang Theory', *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 15 January 2023. See: <https://cepa.org/article/wagner-victory-new-russian-civil-war-is-now-under-way/>.
- 59 Tetiana Lozovenko, 'Shoigu deploys his Private Military Company, which compete with Wagner Group, to war against Ukraine', *Ukrainska Pravda*, 28 December 2022. See: <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/12/28/7382706/>.

## Ukrainian PMSCs

On the Ukrainian side, several PMSCs can be distinguished in name and, as on the Russian side, not all of these PMSCs associated with Ukraine meet the standards mentioned.

The Azov Battalion started as a militia, called Black Corps, and was founded by far-right politician Andriy Biletsky, leader of the ultra-nationalist organization Patriot of Ukraine.<sup>60</sup> Black Corps was initially funded by a non-state actor, Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy and can be classified as a PMSC.<sup>61</sup> In 2013, Black Corps was used to repress the demonstrations around Maidan Square in Kyiv against President Viktor Yanukovich, seeking to strengthen the relations with Russia. Around 70 Black Corps fighters, together with other far-right groups, patrolled the streets of Kharkiv during the troubled weeks of March 2014. A month later Black Corps began focusing on the nascent conflict in the Donbas region. On May 5th, 2014, it was transformed into the Azov Battalion in the Ukrainian town of Berdiansk and became a special police unit of the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, later switching to the National Guard of Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> In May 2022, the Azov Battalion gained a somewhat notorious reputation for tenaciously holding out against Russian attackers in the Azovstal metal factory complex during the Battle of Mariupol.<sup>63</sup>

Despite this heroic defence, the battalion is controversial due to its presumed right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi ideology, which made it vulnerable to the Russian propaganda machine.<sup>64</sup> From the start of its foundation, the Azov Battalion's symbol showed a strong resemblance with the Nazi's Wolfsangel, although the battalion's leadership claimed at the time that the symbol was in fact intended as the letters 'N' and 'I' crossed, standing for 'national idea'.<sup>65</sup> Since February 2023 the unit has formally been enlisted in the Ukrainian armed forces as the Azov Assault Brigade and is no longer a PMSC.<sup>66</sup>

Between March and May 2023, unknown groups suddenly launched attacks from eastern Ukraine

## The Azov Battalion is controversial due to its presumed neo-Nazi ideology, which made it vulnerable to the Russian propaganda machine

on the regions of Bryansk and Belgorod in the western part of the Russian Federation. In fact there were two different groups. The first group was the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC), composed of Russian immigrants who opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. RVC was created in August 2022, and because it has no ties with the Ukrainian armed forces, it likely is

- 60 Tara John and Tim Lister, 'A far-right battalion has a key role in Ukraine's resistance. Its neo-Nazi history has been exploited by Putin', *CNN*, 30 March 2022. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/29/europe/ukraine-azov-movement-far-right-intl-cmd/index.html>; Call sign Jerome, 'Active Units of Azov', *MilitaryLand*, 31 August 2023. <https://militaryland.net/news/active-units-of-azov/>.
- 61 Dave Bender, 'Ukraine: Battalion backed by Jewish billionaire sent to fight pro-Russian militias', *The Algemeiner*, 24 June 2014. See: <https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/06/24/ukraine-jewish-billionaires-batallion-sent-to-fight-pro-russian-militias/>.
- 62 John and Lister, 'A far-right battalion has a key role in Ukraine's resistance'; Jerome, 'Active Units of Azov'.
- 63 Michael Schwartz, 'Last stand at Azovstal: inside the siege that shaped the Ukraine war', *The New York Times*, 24 July 2022. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/24/world/europe/ukraine-war-mariupol-azovstal.html>.
- 64 Sudarsan Raghavan et al, 'Right-wing Azov Battalion emerges as a controversial defender of Ukraine', *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2022. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/06/ukraine-military-right-wing-militias/>.
- 65 Shaun Walker, 'Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may its greatest threat', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2014. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis>.
- 66 Rémy Ourdan, 'Azov Brigade is once again at heart of fighting in Donbas', *Le Monde*, 13 May 2024. See: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/13/azov-brigade-is-once-again-at-heart-of-fighting-in-donbas\\_6671268\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/13/azov-brigade-is-once-again-at-heart-of-fighting-in-donbas_6671268_4.html).

externally funded.<sup>67</sup> The group was founded and is still led by the famous Moscow-born neo-Nazi Denis ‘Nikitin’ Kasputin.<sup>68</sup> The RVC is known as far-right with ties to the Azov Assault Brigade. The second group was Freedom of Russia Legion (FRL), which also opposed the invasion of Ukraine and Putin’s policies. The group consists of defectors from the Russian Armed Forces and from units fighting alongside Russia. FRL was formed in March 2022 and is part of Ukraine’s International League, the foreign military unit of the Territorial Defence Forces of Ukraine. Therefore, FRL cannot be considered a PMSC. In Russia, on the other hand, the FRL is classified as a terrorist organization.<sup>69</sup>

Ukraine was also supported by two foreign PMSCs, the first of which was the Kalinoŭski Regiment from Belarus. The regiment, established in 2014, has its name from the Belarusian and Polish hero Kastyŭ Kalinoŭski, who led an uprising against the Russian Empire in 1863.<sup>70</sup> On March 9th, 2022, the regiment participated in the Battle of Kyiv, where its deputy commander was killed. The regiment was integrated in Ukraine’s International League on 25 March 2022, so effectively no longer a PMSC. The second foreign PMSC was the American-based Mozart Group, formed in March 2022 by two former US Marine Corps colonels, Andrew Milburn and Andrew Baine, consisting of some 50 contractors from various Western nations. These contractors had mostly served in the Special Forces of their home nations. The

name was deliberately chosen as a contrast to the Russian Wagner Group. The Mozart Group gave advice and training to Ukrainian forces. In addition, they helped evacuate Ukrainian civilians from Bakhmut in the autumn of 2022.<sup>71</sup> Contrary to all the other PMSCs who operate as military provider firms, this PMSC matches the criteria of being a military consultant or support firm. Funding came from wealthy Ukrainian immigrants in the United States and a Texas billionaire, but in November 2022, the Mozart Group quickly ran out of money. According to *The New York Times*, despite their highly appreciated evacuation operation in Donetsk, backers became less enthusiastic when they understood that the Mozart Group had recruited many contractors suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and drinking problems. Moreover, Milburn and Baine had disagreements with each other, and the Mozart Group ceased to exist in early 2023.<sup>72</sup>

## Final remarks

The main purpose of this article is to provide an insight into the different PMSCs operating on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian war. It may seem to many as if only the Wagner Group was active as a PMSC during this war, but nothing could be further from the truth. PMSCs were active on either side, Russian as well as Ukrainian. The Wagner Group became notoriously known for their incessant and determined fighting at Bakhmut and their ruthless manner of engaging the enemy. This created a very negative reputation for all PMSCs, but the Wagner Group was certainly not the only one acting this way. All the PMSCs involved in the Russian-Ukrainian war that were examined for this article, except for the Mozart Group, did not meet the characteristics of PMSCs and did not follow the rules and regulations as laid down in the Montreux Document.

There are, of course, other PMSCs in the world. The Netherlands Armed Forces also use PMSCs, insofar as they meet their requirements. For example, the Human Environment and Transport Inspectorate of the Dutch Ministry of

67 Robyn Dixon, Francesca Ebel and Mary Ilyushina, ‘Kremlin accuses Ukraine of violent attack in western Russia’, *The New York Times*, 2 March 2023. See: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/02/bryansk-russia-attack-ukraine-saboteurs/>.

68 James Kilner, ‘The Russian neo-Nazi hooligan who led an anti-Putin militia across the border’, *The Telegraph*, 4 March 2023. See: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/03/04/russian-neo-nazi-hooligan-who-led-anti-putin-militia-across/>.

69 Michael Schwartz, ‘They are Russians fighting against their homeland. Here’s why’, *The New York Times*, 12 Februari 2024. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/12/world/europe/russian-legion-ukraine-war.html>.

70 Anne Applebaum, ‘To bring change to Belarus, a band of fighters is taking up arms in Ukraine’, *The Atlantic*, October 2022, 38-43.

71 Alex Choy, ‘Unarmed and unafraid: the Mozart Group in Ukraine’, *The SAIS Europe Journal of Global Studies*, April 2023. See: <https://www.saisjournal.eu/article/93-Alex-Choy-Unarmed-and-Unafraid.cfm>.

72 Jeffrey Gettleman, ‘Hard drinking and murky finances. How an American veterans group imploded in Ukraine’, *The New York Times*, 1 February 2023. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/01/world/europe/american-veterans-ukraine-mozart.html>.



'Teddy Boy', 41, an American citizen from Los Angeles and currently a Russian contract military serviceman, talks to media visiting an improvised memorial for the Wagner PMC in central Moscow on June 21, 2024

PHOTO ANP/AFP, ANDREY BORODULIN

Infrastructure and Water Management issues licences to so-called Private Maritime Security Companies, a specialised type of PMSC that meets the Ministry's standards to provide armed protection to merchant ships transiting such hazardous maritime routes such as the Gulf of Aden.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the Netherlands Armed Forces have a partnership with the Netherlands-based PMSC Triangular Group. This PMSC has grown rapidly since 2017 and is now providing not only parts of the general military training for the Netherlands Armed Forces but also shooting practice and the more specialised training for combat life saver and crowd and riot control. The Triangular Group meets the requirements set for them by the Netherlands Armed Forces.<sup>74</sup>

One of the main questions that remains, however, is: what can be learned from the insights gained from this research into Russian and Ukrainian PMSCs? Well, the existence and

deployment of PMSCs is not a new phenomenon, and they will continue to be deployed on the future battlefield. It offers government leaders the opportunity to deny any direct involvement in a conflict by hiring a well-trained armed force. It should be noted that PMSCs may differ considerably from each other, from PMSCs directly participating in any combat zone to those with a merely supporting and advisory role. Moreover, abiding by the Montreux Document attaches a seal of approval to a PMSC, which additionally guarantees that the PMSC in question will respect human rights and international humanitarian law during operations. ■

73 Ministry of Infrastructure and Watermanagement, Private maritime security company (PMSC) licence. See: <https://english.ilent.nl/topics/security/private-maritime-security-company-pmsc-permit>.

74 Erik de Waard and Aron van der Beek, 'De adaptieve krijgsmacht. Praktijkervaringen van de flexibele schil, *Militaire Spectator* 193 (2024) (1) 1, 25.