



## Armies of War Without Uniforms: Mercenaries and Private Military Companies in Russia's Interventions in Syria and Ukraine

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### ABSTRACT

In the struggle for influence and power between states, states tend to use mercenaries and PMCs due to reasons such as the economic cost of the regular Armies, the negative reactions to be received from many actors in an official intervention in the target state, the sanctions of international law and the indignation caused by a possible loss of official soldiers, especially in the society. The history of mercenaries dates back to ancient times. However, they were used extensively in conflicts in many regions after the Cold War. The changing perception of security is the main reason for the resurgence of mercenary activities. Factors at the center of the changing perception of security are the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a privatized military industry. Considering the interventions where mercenaries were deployed, Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and then in 2022 and in Syria in 2015 come into prominence. The overarching purpose of this research is to explain how these actors affect the character of the war by explaining the reasons for their use, duties, and effects on the battlefield. The study concludes that Russia used mercenaries in Ukraine for secrecy and reasonable deniability and aimed to prevent the reaction of world public opinion. On the other hand, Russia used mercenaries in Syria to prevent the reaction of the Russian public by hiding casualties and reflecting the operation as a successful operation without any casualties.

**Keywords:** Mercenaries, Private Military Companies, Ukraine, Syria.  
**JEL Codes:** F50, F51, F59

## Savaşın Üniformasız Orduları: Rusya'nın Suriye ve Ukrayna Müdahalelerinde Paralı Askerler ve Özel Askeri Şirketler

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### Öz

Devletlerarası etki ve güç mücadelesi meselesinde devletlerin paralı asker ve özel askeri şirketleri kullanma eğilimlerine etki eden birçok faktör bulunmaktadır. Bu faktörler, düzenli ordunun ekonomik maliyeti, hedef devlete resmi bir müdahalede birçok aktörden alınacak olumsuz reaksiyonlar, uluslararası hukukun yaptırımları ve olası askeri zayıfların özellikle toplumda yarattığı infial şeklinde sıralanabilir. Paralı askerlerin tarihsel açıdan çok eski bir geçmişi bulunmasına karşın, Soğuk Savaş sonrası birçok bölgede yoğun bir şekilde aktif çatışmalarda kullanılmışlardır. Değişen güvenlik algısı, paralı askerlik faaliyetlerinin yeniden canlanmasının ana nedenidir. Değişen güvenlik algısının merkezindeki faktörler ise Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesi ve özelleştirilmiş bir güvenlik sektörünün ortaya çıkması şeklinde ifade edilebilir. Söz konusu kullanım örnekleri değerlendirildiğinde Rusya'nın 2014 ve 2022 Ukrayna ve Arap Baharı süreci sonrası Suriye müdahaleleri ön plana çıkmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel amacı Rusya'nın Suriye ve Ukrayna müdahalelerinde paralı askerlerin kavramsal açıdan sınıflandırmasını yapabilmek ve bu aktörlerin muharebe sahasında neden kullanıldıklarını, görev ve etkilerini ifade ederek savaşın karakterine nasıl etki edebildiklerini ortaya koyabilmektir. Çalışma, Rusya'nın paralı askerleri Ukrayna'da gizlilik ve makul inkâr için kullandığı ve uluslararası kamuoyunun tepkisini önlemeyi amaçladığı sonucuna varmaktadır. Öte yandan çalışma Rusya'nın Suriye'de paralı askerleri, kayıpları gizleyerek Rus halkının tepkisini önlemek ve operasyonu herhangi bir zayıflık vermeden başarılı bir operasyon olarak yansıtmak için kullandığını iddia etmektedir.

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**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Paralı Askerler, Özel Askeri Şirketler, Ukrayna, Suriye.  
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## Introduction

The USSR, one of the two superpowers competing with each other in the bipolar international system that emerged after the Second World War, was a global superpower during the Cold War period. Following the disintegration of the USSR, especially in the first few years, Russia faced a deep economic crisis and political instability. In the changing international system order after the Cold War, Russia determined its goals in both foreign and domestic politics. The newly established Russia was dealing with economic difficulties and major problems including ethnic-demographic problems, internal security, and terrorism. In addition, Russia was struggling to consolidate the foundations of the new state it established after the war it lost.

While Russia set its goals in foreign policy to become a superpower again and to defend itself against threats emanating from the West, its domestic policy goals were to prevent the federation from disintegration and to design the new state according to its new power capacity. When Russia started to gather its economic and political power, it turned to the former Soviet realm and sphere of influence and tried to maintain its influence in these countries. Russia pursued a foreign policy that included diplomatic efforts to prevent NATO's eastward expansion. Russia implemented the Near Abroad Policy with the aim of becoming a global power again and reviving its imperial past. In addition, with the Eurasianism strategy it developed, Russia tried to deter the former Soviet Republics, including Ukraine, which tended to cooperate with the European Union and NATO. Military operations conducted by Russia in Chechen War and the intervention to South Ossetia in Georgia can be given as examples of Russia's efforts to rebuild its own sphere of influence and to prevent Western influence in these countries.

In line with Russia's goal of becoming a superpower again, the Kremlin has adopted various foreign policy strategies to expand Russia's sphere of influence. To do so, the Kremlin has sought to display her influence felt by intervening in regional and global issues. Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War alongside the Assad regime and the Russian Army's intervention on behalf of Assad in 2015 are important indicators of the Kremlin's foreign policy strategy for influence.

During the struggle for influence in the World political scene, a state should consider the economic cost of the regular Army, the negative reactions it will receive from many actors in an official intervention to the target state, the limitations of international law, and the defiance in society caused by a possible loss of official soldiers. For those reasons, states tend to use mercenaries and PMCs during their struggle for influence. The Russian Federation's war in Ukraine in 2014 has rekindled the debate over mercenaries and the privatization of the war, among many other issues. In this context, this study seeks to answer the question about how mercenaries and PMCs are used within the framework of Russia's military strategy and why and how the Wagner Group was used in Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 and in Syria in 2015.

To analyze Russia's use of PMCs, first, the conceptual explanation of mercenaries will be made and their distinctive features will be mentioned. This will be followed by a historical analysis of the transformation of classical mercenaries into PMCs. Then, by revealing the differences between PMCs from mercenaries, their rapid development on a global scale will be examined, and the underlying reasons for this development and the reasons for their use by states will be investigated. Finally, by revealing the place of mercenaries and PMCs in Russia's military strategy, the study will discuss why and how Russia used these actors in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 and Syria in 2015.

## Use of Mercenaries in War

The word mercenary originates from the Latin word *merces*, meaning wage or salary (McFate, 2019: 10). McFate (2019: 7) defines a mercenary as "an armed civilian paid to do military operations in a foreign conflict zone". In common usage, the mercenary functions as a category of an irregular fighter. (For a detailed definition of mercenary see Article 47 of Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (1977).)

The mercenary is treated as a foreign individual who is symbolically motivated by and fighting for private gain (Beyani and Lilly, 2001: 15). Mercenaries are driven by profit motives rather than any political motivation (Erkmen, 2019: 5). For these reasons, the mercenary has a bond of both official and material interest with the state he/she represents. The mercenary code of conduct is based on the allocation of military capabilities, acting individually and independently, without the motivation of national consciousness and without developing moral affiliation or loyalty to any army for their own material interests (Kurtarcan, 2017: 397; Percy, 2007: 70-72). There is a negative perception of mercenaries as it is believed that mercenaries benefit financially from the war without considering the hardship and deprivation that the war inflicts upon individuals and communities (Beyani and Lilly, 2001: 15). They are also perceived as responsible for violence against civilians, as well as for the establishment of crime and informal economies.

When the traditional mercenary definitions in the literature are examined, it is observed that some critical questions are ignored. According to Percy (2007:49), questions including "What makes a mercenary different from a soldier? What does placing a warrior in the 'mercenary' category instead of the 'soldier' category mean?" should be answered.

McFate (2019:7) claims that there are certain characteristics that distinguish mercenaries from soldiers and politically motivated armed non-state actors, such as terrorist organizations. The first of these relates to motivation, and accordingly, mercenaries are motivated more by profit than politics. It should be noted that while profit maximization is a mercenary's top priority, not all mercenaries disregard political interests. Second, mercenaries seek employment abroad rather than

providing security services at home, and they are foreign-oriented. Third, mercenaries use force militarily by viciously defeating or deterring the enemy which causes a direct effect on their operations. Last, characterized as deadly, mercenaries treat warfare as a market and focus on making money from war.

Singer (2008: 43), on the other hand, expresses the main features that distinguish mercenaries from other fighters and military organizations. According to him, those characteristics can be categorized as foreign, independence, motivation, recruitment, organization, and services. Mercenaries are not citizens or residents of the state they are fighting for. Moreover, they are independent agents and bound by contractual linkages of private contractors. They serve merely for material reward and are not political or religious oriented. For avoiding legal prosecution, the recruitment of mercenaries takes place surreptitiously. Mercenary units are made up of individual groups of temporary or special-purpose soldiers. Finally, previously unorganized mercenaries offer combat services for single customers only.

Despite these conceptual separation efforts, there is still no consensus on exactly who is a “mercenary”. Singer (2008: 24) states that words such as “freelancers” and “companies” first emerged to describe mercenary groups that circulated in the Middle Ages. Because mercenaries had no homes or careers to return to after each war they were hired to, they formed “companies” and these companies referred to organizations designed to facilitate the employment of mercenaries as a group or at least to provide support and protection to one another (Singer, 2008: 24).

PMCs often employ mercenaries, but they differ as they are often legally registered companies hired by governments ostensibly to ensure public safety (Beyani and Lilly, 2001: 5). Personnel are employed within a defined structure, with defined terms and conditions, and work with a degree of accountability to a particular organization and company. In turn, the company is liable to its customer, usually under a legally binding contract (Shearer, 1998: 21). PMCs differ in that they are recruited by governments ostensibly to ensure public safety, while non-state armed groups that seek to disrupt the constitutional order of states often hire mercenaries (Beyani and Lilly, 2001: 15-16).

Similar to the distinction Singer makes between mercenaries and other fighters and military organizations, Singer (2008: 47-48) distinguishes PMCs from mercenaries by focusing on organization, motives, open market, services, recruitment, and linkages. Accordingly, PMCs adopt a prior institutional structure in terms of organization. It is assumed that PMCs pursue business profits rather than individual profits. The United Mercenary Convention banned mercenary activities, whereas PMCs are legal and public entities. PMCs offer a wide range of services and serve diverse clients. PMCs recruit people with specialized skills and maintain ties to corporate holdings and financial markets.

So why do states tend to use mercenaries? According to McFate (2019: 10), renting is cheaper than owning force. Investing in and maintaining a permanent army is very

costly. Therefore states may prefer to hire regular armies instead of investing in them (McFate, 2019: 10-11). The general perception is that the main reason states use mercenaries is that mercenaries are cost-effective in terms of securing interests in the short term. Moreover, they are effective in terms of secrecy and reasonable deniability, especially in covert operations, since the organic link between the state and mercenaries is hard to detect.

In different times, individuals or groups seeking to maintain or seize control over lands and peoples have found it appropriate or necessary to recruit soldiers beyond those with a personal, tribal, or other significant obligation to them (Taulbee, 1998: 145). Contrary to popular belief, the use of mercenaries dates back to ancient times. Their use since ancient times has continued to the present day with the emergence of new types of mercenaries in the international arena (Percy, 2007: 1). Before the late 19th century, the use of mercenaries was the dominant mechanism and conscription was rare. The mercenary institution served at the request of the church and the king, which was considered the center of power, during the Middle Ages and at the request of the emperors in the later periods. For thousands of years, military contractors had provided their clients, kings, with not only soldiers but also weapons, supplies, food, and transportation on demand. During the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), Albrecht von Wallenstein supplied fully equipped armies with all types of logistical support to his client, the Austro-Hungarian Emperor (Uyar, 2022). However, after the Industrial Revolution, as military technology progressed, states began to establish and use regular armies to protect national interests (Baum and McGahan, 2009: 6).

As states sought a monopoly on the use of force in their territories in the 17th century, they took action to eradicate the violence of non-state actors, including mercenaries. After the Peace of Westphalia, which marked the beginning of the rise of modern nation-states, mercenaries were less common until the end of the Cold War, as more emphasis was placed on controlled state armies (Gilsinan, 2015). In the historical process, the construction of nation-states and the establishment of regular armies caused the state to dominate over the means of violence and to have a monopoly on the use of force (Bayrak, 2019).

National and regular armies emerged with the “*levee en masse*” accepted by the 23 August 1793 Convention, which enabled Napoleon to establish his Armies (Yalçinkaya, 2006: 252). In this context, permanent state armies of citizens began to replace the hired armies of foreigners. The ultimate turning point of this change was the Napoleonic Wars, which began at the end of the 18th century (Singer, 2008: 29-30). Based on Napoleon’s citizen-military approach, conscription aims to bring together moral, intellectual, and technological elements (Tugwell, 1989:6). As a result, mercenaries who found themselves powerful in past wars played a lesser role on the world stage from the 1800s to the mid-1900s. The increasing nationalism movements in the 1800s and the more active role of national armies in the World Wars can be mentioned as reasons for this situation (Öz and Çalışkanlar, 2020: 313-314). After World War II, when the wars of

independence began in the colonies, the colonial states, especially France, heavily benefited from mercenaries in Africa and Southeast Asia. Thousands of ex-Nazi soldiers dressed in French uniforms fought in Vietnam and Algeria. With the independence of the last colonies, this need also came to an end.

It can be argued that today, the resurgence of mercenaries, the emergence of PMCs, and the “re” privatization of war are the result of the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The reason for the USA to turn to this strategy is to try to find a solution to the increasing casualties in the unconventional war and the inadequacy of the army personnel (Uyar, 2022). DynCorp which was founded by American veterans who served in World War II and provided technological and logistical support to the US Army in activities such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the occupation of Grenada, is also one of the first private military contractors established in the modern day.

In the decolonization process, the activities of PMCs intensified even more. The activities of Watchguard International, which was founded in 1967 by a former British Special Air Service personnel played an active role in the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, Executive Outcomes, which intervened in the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002) and the activities of Sandline International, which played the role of the UN’s service provider can be given as examples of this situation. Most private military and security companies are based in the USA and UK. G4S, a British multinational private security company; Aegis Defence Services, a British private military and security company; Sandline International, a British private military company; Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR), a unit of Halliburton and a U.S. based company that also provides military support services; DynCorp, an American private military contractor; and Academi (formerly called Blackwater), an American private military company can be mentioned as examples of PMCs (Karaman, 2020).

Although their activities are difficult to track, the use of mercenaries increased after the Cold War. In the post-Cold War period, mercenaries were actively involved in conflicts in Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Georgia, Kashmir, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Chechnya among others (Beyani and Lilly, 2001: 11).

The changing perception of security is the main reason for the resurgence of mercenary activities. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of a privatized military industry can be mentioned as factors at the center of the changing perception of security. The impact on the supply and demand of military services created a “security gap” and the private military industry aimed to fill this gap. Two other factors can be mentioned as necessary factors for the emergence of the industry. The first factor is the changing character of war which has created new demands and new market opportunities while the second factor is the privatization revolution. The combination of these important dynamics led to the emergence and rapid growth of the privatized military industry (Singer, 2008: 49).

In recent years, there have been massive mercenary activities in Yemen, Nigeria, Iraq, Syria, and most recently

Ukraine. Among these interventions, Russia’s interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 and Syria after the Arab Spring attracted attention. In the next section, the place of mercenaries and PMCs in the Post-Cold War and Russia’s changing National Security Strategy will be discussed, and Russia’s wars in Ukraine and Syria will be analyzed in the context of mercenary use.

### Changing Security Narrative of Russia in the post-Cold War

PMC activity has increased worldwide since the end of the Cold War. According to Brooks (2020:132-133) particularly three reasons explain this increase. First, during the global bipolar struggle, many states and dictators supported by the superpowers failed as the bipolar system ended and they also lost support. The conflicts in the new world order created a demand for private security. Second, the demobilization of armies with the end of the Cold War and the end of the Apartheid Regime in 1994 increased the number of people with military capabilities in civilian life. As a result, many unemployed military personnel who want to capitalize on their experience have emerged. Finally, with the effect of economic globalization, multinational companies have turned to underdeveloped countries to extract their natural resources and have started to use PMCs to reduce the risks that may arise for them in countries in armed conflict. The main reason for the increase in the use of mercenaries and PMCs lies in the changing security narrative of states after the Cold War. In this context, when Russia is examined in particular, the hybrid war approach, which has become conceptually popular in the recent period, comes to the fore.

“Hybrid War Strategy” emerges as a concept that Russia has implemented in Georgia, Crimea, Syria and Ukraine in the last 20 years. According to Ruslan Pukhov (2015), the concept of hybrid warfare, which is an innovative form of military intervention created by Russia specifically for the crises in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, has been widely used in the West after the actions of Moscow. Hybrid warfare has started to be discussed in studies that analyze Russia’s strategy and war after Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014. Hybrid warfare at the Wales Summit held by NATO in 2014 after Russia’s intervention in Ukraine was described as “a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures are employed in a highly integrated design” (Wales Summit Declaration, 2014). In 2017, addressing the Japan National Press Club, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasized that the NATO witnessed how hybrid warfare was used especially to force Ukraine, and that hybrid warfare increased in intensity, scale, and scope. He also emphasized that NATO takes hybrid warfare very seriously. In his speech, Stoltenberg defined hybrid warfare as “a combination of covert and overt operations, a combination of everything from disinformation, propaganda, to soldiers without insignia or without uniforms, and also actually sometimes cyber or the use of conventional military force” (Stoltenberg, 2017).

**Çizelge 1.** Rusya'nın Yeni Nesil Savaşı**Table 1.** Russia's New Generation Warfare

From	To
Direct destruction	Direct influence
Direct annihilation of the opponent	The opponent's inner decay
A war with weapons and technology	A culture war
A war with conventional forces	Specifically prepared forces and commercial irregular groupings
The traditional (3D) battleground	Information/psychological warfare and war of perceptions
Direct clash	Contactless war
A superficial and compartmented war	A total war, including the enemy's internal side and base
War in the physical environment	A war in the human consciousness and in cyberspace.
Symmetric warfare	Asymmetric warfare by a combination of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns
War in a defined period of time	A state of permanent war as the natural condition in national life

Source: Berzins (2014: 5).

To analyze how Russia perceives hybrid warfare, it is important to understand the Gerasimov doctrine since the Gerasimov doctrine is the application of the hybrid warfare approach to Russian military thought. General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, developed ideas about future armed conflicts in his article titled "The Value of Science in Foresight" in 2013. Gerasimov's new generation warfare idea is known as the Gerasimov Doctrine. The Doctrine has led to the modernization of the military and changes in Russian warfare thought in the post-Cold War era (Gerasimov, 2016).

In his article, Gerasimov (2013) advises the Russian army to prepare for future armed conflicts by presenting certain predictions. He states that the conditions in the field of war and strategy have changed, and there is a tendency to blur the lines between war and peace situations in the 21st century. In addition, he emphasizes that wars are no longer declared and that when wars begin, they proceed on an unfamiliar template. Gerasimov claimed that the rules of warfare have changed. He explains this change by stating that the importance of using non-military methods to achieve political and strategic goals has increased, and this method has in many cases surpassed the use of military force in terms of effectiveness. Gerasimov notes that there has been a shift in the focus of applied conflict methods toward the widespread use of political, economic, computational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures. According to Gerasimov, changing war and the rule of warfare require that war strategies, military equipment used, troops, and other vehicles adapt to this change. He envisions the use of covert force, such as paramilitary and civil insurgent units. Therefore, he emphasizes the need for a strategy based on asymmetric, indirect methods (2-3). According to Gerasimov, in hybrid warfare, besides Special Forces, armed irregular forces and PMCs also stands out. Today, Russia is one of the states that have used hybrid warfare methods quite actively in their neighboring countries.

The methods in the component of the doctrine, which Russia calls the New Generation Warfare Doctrine, were applied in the 2014 Ukraine War, then in Syria in 2015, and finally in Ukraine in 2022. Berzins (2014) summarizes the

main guidelines for developing Russian military capabilities by 2020 adapted from Peter Mattsson's lecture in February 2014 in Riga as follows:

After the Cold War, Russia applied hybrid methods in line with the new generation warfare doctrine in its cross-border activities and used PMCs, one of the actors of the hybrid war. Russia used PMCs and mercenaries in many places, including 2008 Georgia, 2014 Crimea, and Libya while the most intensively used cross-border activities are 2014 Ukraine, 2015 Syria, and 2022 Ukraine interventions.

Russia used mercenaries in these interventions for several advantages derived from the use of PMCs. First, unlike regular armies, PMCs are much more flexible and have a wider range of action. Moreover, PMCs are not subject to any political constraints. Most importantly, the use of PMCs provides Russia with a degree of reasonable deniability and secrecy. The next section will focus on the use of mercenaries and PMCs, their duties, and their effects on the battlefield in the context of Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 and Syria in 2015.

### Mercenaries in Russia's Ukraine and Syria Interventions

The role of PMCs in Russia's international operations has increased in recent years. Especially the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict environment in eastern Ukraine, and the military intervention in Syria in 2015 brought the issue of PMCs back on the agenda.

Between 2008 and 2012, Russia made various legal arrangements regarding mercenaries and PMCs. Private security guards are legally permitted to provide security at the overseas facilities of strategically important Russian companies. In fact, the legal infrastructure has been established to provide these companies with the authorization to use weapons and security training, as well as professional military training. These companies are allowed to own military equipment under the control of the state (Şahin and Aydın, 2021: 169).

In recent years, many PMCs have been established in Russia. One of them is known as "RSB-Group" which is a private company that calls itself a military consulting

company. The “RSB-Group” operates in coordination with the legitimate governments of other countries in regions where the political situation is unstable. “Anti-Terror”, on the other hand, is a group of companies consisting of a mine clearance team and former special forces officers. The company specializes in training soldiers for special missions in areas with a high risk of war. “MAR” is also an important example of PMCs established in Russia. The company is a PMC that provides a full range of ‘security services’ in areas with high terrorist activity or an unstable political situation. “Moran Security Group” is a company focused on the protection of marine and land cargoes and has a naval training center in St. Petersburg. “Center R” (also known as “Tiger Top-rent security” and “Redut-Antiterror”) is a company whose specialists participated in the conflicts in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The company provides training on sniper (and anti-sniper) specialists, shooters, combat engineers, radio engineers, and rapid response fighters in the urban environment (Gusarov, 2015).

The Wagner Group has recently come into prominence in the war and conflict areas where Russia is involved. The Group emerged in 2014, just after the Slavonic Corps ceased to exist as a private military company. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Dimitri Utkin is recognized as the founder of the Wagner Group. The Group, which actively assumed the role of Russia’s proxy in Ukraine in 2014, has also been active in the region between 2014 and 2016. It has often been claimed that the company was established by the Kremlin to be used as a strategic tool to serve Russian interests (Sukhankin, 2019; Bellingcat, 2020)

Through PMCs, Russia has increased its military intervention capacity in foreign countries without direct state intervention and by circumventing international law. Mercenary use is also considered important in terms of helping to restrain the reactions that may occur in the Russian public after possible losses (Gülşen, 2017: 7). At this point, the Wagner Group has become known to the public when Wagner mercenaries were deployed in Ukraine in 2014 in order to support Russian forces operating in the country (Görücü and Bünyad, 2020). After the annexation of Crimea, Wagner mercenaries took part in armed conflicts with the Russian army in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Wagner is estimated to have around 2,500 mercenaries in Ukraine in 2014 (Akhiyadov, 2022: 4).

Since its inception in 2014, Wagner’s use by Russia and its influence on the battlefield have steadily increased. Russian private military and security companies (PMSCs) have recently been on the international media agenda. The main reason for this is the Russian Wagner’s participation in the war in Syria alongside President Assad. It is argued that Wagner has continued to operate in various regions of both the Middle East and Africa since Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014. Considered a reliable and valuable intervention tool by Russia, Wagner is also thought to play an active role in Russia’s control of natural resources in countries such as Sudan and Syria (Vandoorne, Bell, Ataman, and Bertini, 2022). In March 2021, several UN Working Groups and Special Rapporteurs concluded that

Wagner had committed human rights violations such as systematic violence, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, looting, enforced disappearances, and torture during interrogations, particularly in the Middle East (Mehra LL.M and Thorley, 2022). The Kremlin has always officially denied any connection to Wagner while Wagner’s activities around the world were celebrated in Russia’s state-run media outlets (Ilyushina, 2022).

This raises an important question: Why did Russia follow the strategy of using mercenaries in the 2014 Ukraine War, then in Syria in 2015, and finally in the 2022 Ukraine War? Studying the subject of mercenaries is inherently difficult since most of their activities are confidential and it is difficult to obtain quantitative data on their duties and responsibilities. Although media sources occasionally make claims about the total number of mercenaries, especially with reference to intelligence reports, exact figures are not available.

The claim that Wagner became the leading force in the operations carried out using the paramilitary structure in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has often been expressed (Killioğlu, 2022: 644-645). Wagner played an important role in the capture of Luhansk Airport in Russia’s annexation attempt. It was also stated that the company was effective in keeping communication channels open with its Russian supporters in the region. Wagner was also the most important support force for the Russian forces during the Battle of Debaltseve. Wagner took part in Luhansk without Russian forces while it took part in the battle of Debaltseve with Russian forces. In addition, there are strong allegations that the company is used as a problem solver by taking part in interventions that Russia does not want to undertake officially. It can be claimed that Wagner and the Russian army were equally powerful and important for Russia’s armed forces in the invasion of Crimea (Port, 2021: 53-56).

After the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, Russia realized the importance and potential power of mercenaries. Since 2015, it has started to deploy Wagner mercenaries in Syria to fight alongside the Assad regime in close cooperation with the Russian military (Akhiyadov, 2022: 5). The Kremlin wanted to avoid an official ground battle in the Syrian intervention and chose to follow the strategy of using Wagner mercenaries as a tool of intervention in Syria. Thus, Wagner could both assist the Syrian forces on the ground and be used as a casualty tool without the knowledge of the public (Reynolds, 2019: 2). It is possible to make some inferences about the activities of Russian mercenaries, especially the Wagner Group, by examining their activities in Syria. Accordingly, the Russian mercenaries were successful in the wars against the opposition forces with relatively little training and scattered structure. On the other hand, it is observed that they were not effective at all in the fight against the regular forces, which are especially technologically superior. 2018 Deir ez-Zor and 2019 Tripoli conflicts can be given as examples of these situations (Akhiyadov, 2022: 5).

In addition to protecting strategic facilities, gas, and oil fields, it was also reflected in the press that Wagner actively participated in combat missions and fought as shock troops

in Syria. With the experience gained in Ukraine and the training in Russia, Wagner mercenaries have reached the capacity to use various weapons, including tanks. It is claimed that Wagner mercenaries also took part in the training of the regime-affiliated militias in Syria, the use of strategic and heavy weapons, and the fighter aircraft pilot training, especially the MiGs. These capabilities paved the way for paramilitary groups to be used as combat elements and enabled them to participate in many battles in Syria. The operations carried out against ISIS elements in Palmyra in the eastern countryside of Homs province in 2016 and to the west of Deir ez-Zor as of 2017 can be given as examples of the operations in which Wagner worked in coordination with the regular army units of Russia (Görücü and Bünyad, 2020: 14).

In February 2022, both Russian regular troops and mercenaries, especially Wagner mercenaries, were used in Russia's attempt to invade Ukraine. It is important to note that Wagner mercenaries were deployed in Ukraine in 2022 to provide support to the Russian army because the Russian army failed to capture Kiev, and the Russian Army's first attempt to overthrow the Ukrainian government was unsuccessful (Ilyushina, 2022). After Russia realized that quick victory was not possible, it began to use mercenaries intensively (Uyar, 2022). As can be clearly seen in the 2022 Ukraine intervention, Wagner mercenaries have been fighting alongside and complementing the Russian military (The Soufan Center, 2022: 13).

Defence Minister of the Russian Federation Sergei Shoigu said that 16,000 fighters from the Middle East volunteered to fight alongside the Russian army in Ukraine (Razek and Barabanov, 2022). These fighters include foreign fighters from Chechnya and mercenaries from Syria and Libya who joined the Wagner Group (Mehra LL.M and Thorley, 2022). Furthermore, Ukrainian sources state that at least 5,000 Wagner mercenaries are operating in Ukraine with the Russian army (Vandoorne, Bell, Ataman and Bertini, 2022). It has been claimed that Russia relied heavily on Wagner, especially in the regions of Donbass and Donetsk (Bowen, 2022: 15-16; Higgins and Bigg, 2022). It can be argued that Russia deployed Wagner mercenaries in these regions to break Ukraine's strategy of attrition. The aim of this strategy was to prolong the war as much as possible and thus to wear down the Russian army and political will by suppressing it. Russia deployed Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine to reduce the casualties of the Russian army and thus the public reaction. However, as the duration of Russia's invasion of Ukraine prolonged, Russian casualties and thus Russian public opposition to the intervention increased.

At this point, it is also important to draw attention to the mercenaries to be transferred from Syria to Ukraine. According to the intelligence sources, many people from the militias supporting the Assad regime called "Shabiha" volunteered to fight as mercenaries in the centers under the responsibility of the Russian Special Forces in Syria. It is also stated that among the applicants, those who are experienced in the use of snipers and heavy weapons such as rocket launchers, cannons, and mortars will be given

priority (Karacaoğlu, Misto and Musa, 2022; Weinthal and Evansky, 2022).

The Ukrainian government also claimed that Russia had opened 14 new recruitment centers across Syria, stating that the applicant mercenaries had already signed contracts and would be paid \$300-600 for deployment (Waters, 2022). However, Waters (2022) states that these 14 recruitment centers have existed for many years and are used to recruit Syrians for deployment in Russian-backed troops in Syria and Libya.

To conclude, mercenaries fighting alongside the Russian Army were successful in Russia's previous interventions while they have not been successful so far in Russia's ongoing intervention in Ukraine.

## Conclusion

With the end of the Cold War in 1990, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was defeated militarily and ideologically, and the USSR became the Russian Federation with the regime change. One of the most important dimensions of Russian Foreign Policy in the post-Soviet period is the bilateral relations with the former Soviet Republics. Aiming to regain its influence in the former Soviet political space, Russia pioneered the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States at the end of 1991 and declared the Near Abroad Doctrine in 1993. With this doctrine, Russia defined the geography formed by these states surrounding it from the south as the primary sphere of influence of its foreign policy and claimed that it was primarily responsible for all kinds of developments in these regions. The term Near Abroad is an exclusively Russian concept and has been used in a purely political rather than geographical sense. Common goals and threats in Russian National Security Strategies from now on can be stated as: to raise Russia as a superpower from the ashes of the former Soviet Union; to defeat the influence of the West; to prevent NATO's expansion towards the East; and to strengthen Russia's national security.

Russia tried to prevent Ukraine's efforts to develop an autonomous foreign policy with various political and economic moves. However, the "Orange Revolution", which started with the idea that the 2004 presidential elections were not fair, caused the Ukrainian people to position themselves closer to the West and the EU. This rapprochement overshadowed Russia's attempts to become a global power again with its Near Abroad Policy.

The struggle for Western geopolitical supremacy, especially the USA, was not limited to Ukraine, but this struggle also shifted to the Syrian Civil War with the Arab Spring. Syria is the only country that provides Russia with direct access to the Eastern Mediterranean and it can be argued that the ongoing struggle in Syria is a competition for geopolitical superiority between Russia and the USA in the Middle East and especially in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia intervened militarily in Syria to support its closest ally in the Arab world and ensure the survival of the regime. To achieve these goals, Russia changed its security strategy and implemented the hybrid

war model. Russia actively implemented the hybrid war strategy after the Cold War and used PMCs, which are one of the important actors of the hybrid war, in many places including in Georgia, Crimea, Libya, Ukraine, and Syria.

In the struggle for influence between states, a state evaluates the economic cost of the regular army, the negative reactions it will receive from many actors in an official intervention to the target state, the sanctions of international law, and the indignation that an attack will cause in the society due to the possible loss of official soldiers. Given these factors, states tend to use mercenaries and PMCs in the struggle for influence. States prefer to use mercenaries and PMCs for several reasons. First, it is difficult to reveal the organic ties of mercenaries and PMCs with a state or official armies. Second, there is a general perception that because of the lack of ties of mercenaries with the relevant society in terms of motivation sources, the societies do not react negatively in case of their loss. Third reason is the perception that the cost of mercenaries is lower than that of regular armies.

Based on the reasons for the use of mercenaries, it can be argued that Russia used mercenaries in Ukraine for secrecy and reasonable deniability and aimed to prevent the reaction of the world's public opinion. On the other hand, Russia used mercenaries in Syria to prevent the reaction of the Russian public by hiding casualties and reflecting the operation as a successful operation without any casualties.

#### Extended Abstract

Following the disintegration of the USSR, Russia faced a deep economic crisis and political instability. In the changing international system dynamics after the Cold War, Russia has determined its goals in both foreign and domestic politics. While Russia set its goals in foreign policy as being a superpower again and defending itself against threats from the West, its domestic policy goals were to prevent the federation from disintegration and to design the new state according to its current power capacity. When Russia started to gather its economic and political power again, it turned to the former Soviet geography and tried to maintain its influence in these countries. In line with Russia's goal of becoming a superpower again, the Kremlin has adopted foreign policy strategies to expand Russia's zone of influence, as well. To do so, the Kremlin has sought to make its influence felt by intervening in regional and global issues. Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War alongside the Assad regime and the Russian army's intervention on behalf of Assad in 2015 are important indicators of the Kremlin's foreign policy strategy for influence.

Russia's use of mercenaries comes into prominence in its struggle for regional and global influence. As Gerasimov Doctrine puts forward, the use of mercenaries in wars is an important component of the Russian hybrid warfare strategy. In the contemporary international system where threat and security perceptions have changed, it is of great importance to understand Russia's changing security

narrative and components of its security strategies. Since the end of the Cold War, PMC activity has increased worldwide. Several reasons may explain this increase. In the struggle for influence between states, a state evaluates the economic cost of the regular army, and renting is cheaper than owning a force. Investing in and maintaining a permanent army is very costly, therefore, states may prefer to hire regular armies instead of investing in them. Moreover, the negative reactions a country will receive from many actors in an official intervention to the target state plays an important role in such a decision. By using mercenaries, states may avoid the sanctions of international law and the indignation in society caused by a possible loss of official soldiers. In general, the main reason states use mercenaries is that mercenaries are cost-effective in terms of securing interests in the short term, and they are an effective tool in terms of secrecy and reasonable deniability, especially in covert operations since the organic link between the state and mercenaries is difficult to detect.

This study seeks to answer the question of how mercenaries and PMCs are used within the framework of Russia's military strategy and, why and how the Wagner Group was used in Russia's interventions in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, and in Syria in 2015. To answer these questions, the study examines the concept of mercenary in a historical context and through Russia's military strategy by distinguishing mercenaries from PMCs. This study employs an exploratory comparative case study research design by studying three cases in-depth and making a detailed examination of each case.

Through PMCs, Russia has increased its military intervention capacity in foreign countries without direct military intervention and by circumventing international law. The Wagner Group has become known to the public when Wagner mercenaries were deployed in Ukraine in 2014 in order to support Russian forces operating in Ukraine, and after the annexation of Crimea, Wagner mercenaries took part in armed conflicts with the Russian army in the eastern regions of Ukraine. In 2014, Wagner played an important role in the capture of Luhansk Airport in Russia's annexation attempt. It was also stated that the company was effective in keeping communication channels open with its Russian supporters in the region. Wagner was also the most important support force for the Russian forces during the Battle of Debaltseve. Wagner, which took part in Luhansk without Russian forces, took part in the battle of Debaltseve with Russian forces. In addition, there are strong allegations that the company is used as a problem solver by taking part in interventions that Russia does not want to undertake officially. The Kremlin has always officially denied any connection to Wagner.

Since its inception in 2014, Wagner's use by Russia and its influence on the battlefield have steadily increased. In 2015, Wagner mercenaries were deployed in Syria to fight alongside the Syrian Army. The Kremlin wanted to avoid an official ground battle in the Syrian intervention and chose to follow the strategy of using Wagner mercenaries as a tool of intervention in Syria. In 2022, both Russian regular troops



and mercenaries, especially Wagner mercenaries, were used in Russia's attempt to invade Ukraine. Wagner mercenaries were deployed in Ukraine in 2022 to provide support to the Russian army because the Russian army failed to capture Kiev, and the Russian Army's first attempt to overthrow the Ukrainian government was unsuccessful. Wagner mercenaries have been fighting alongside and complementing the Russian military. It has been claimed that Russia relied heavily on Wagner, especially in the regions of Donbass and Donetsk. Russia deployed Wagner mercenaries in these regions to break Ukraine's strategy of attrition. As the duration of Russia's invasion of Ukraine prolonged, Russian casualties and thus Russian public opposition to the intervention increased. Russia deployed Wagner mercenaries in Ukraine to reduce the casualties of the Russian army and thus the public reaction.

Given the findings, this study concludes that Russia used mercenaries in Ukraine for secrecy and reasonable deniability and aimed to prevent the reaction of the world's public opinion. On the other hand, Russia used mercenaries in Syria to prevent the reaction of the Russian public by hiding casualties and reflecting the operation as a successful operation without any casualties.

One of the most significant limitations of this study was the difficulties to obtain information about the activities of mercenaries. Due to the secretive nature of their activities, mercenaries are difficult to track, and this makes it difficult to analyze their actions. As mentioned in the conclusion, Wagner mercenaries have not been successful so far in Russia's ongoing intervention in Ukraine. Both the measures taken by the Ukrainian army and the strategy implemented in contrast to 2014 played role in Wagner's failure. In further research, the reasons for Wagner's failure in the 2022 Ukraine intervention can be studied extensively.

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