

# Russian Para-Statal Military Organisations and their Challenge to European Security Interests: Authoritarian Conflict Management Abroad and Subversion at Home

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## Abstract

This chapter identifies and analyses security challenges posed by Russian para-statal military organisations (PSMOs) to European security interests. It focuses on three challenges: 1) the challenge of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM) abroad; 2) the challenge of enacting ACM and related PSMO limitations; and 3) the challenge of subversion at home. The chapter emphasises international power shifts, increasing authoritarian great power activism, and the seeming limitations of the ‘liberal stance’ towards conflict management that point toward a different approach undertaken through Russian PSMOs. Assessed together, the potency of Russian PSMOs rests in offering an alternative to European engagement, the heightening of violence overseas and its repercussions, and the fear of changed PSMO effort on the European continent.

## Russian-PSMO Activity

Russian para-statal military organisations (PSMOs) have tested European security policies in recent years.<sup>1</sup> They have supported Russian pushes into Ukrainian territory since 2014. They provided unofficial Russian ground forces in Syria, thus complicating European and other Western endeavours. They have been instrumental in limiting, if not jettisoning, the French, wider European, and United Nations presence in several African countries. Such are the vexations that the European Union has initiated sanctions

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*The views expressed in the chapter are those of the author. They do not reflect those of the Canadian Department of National Defence or the Government of Canada.*

<sup>1</sup> Russian para-statal military organisations have ties both to the state and to Russia’s prominent oligarchy. The breadth and degree of agency they possess varies temporally, by location, and by mission.

against the PSMO Wagner Group, elements of Russian military intelligence connected to Russian PSMOs, and perpetrators of linked propaganda and disinformation efforts (Council of the European Union, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2024). In a similar way, the United Kingdom has levelled sanctions against Wagner Group, Africa Corps, and Bear Brigade, and has designated Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation to boot (United Kingdom Home Office, 2023; United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, 2024). These developments remain relevant because Russia, even in the wake of Wagner Group's June 2023 mutiny, has continued its reliance upon PSMOs.

At first blush, it might appear that the impact of Russian PSMOs on European security interests has lessened during the preceding 12 months at the time of writing. Africa Corps has encountered recruiting challenges. With perhaps as many as 70–80 percent of Africa Corps members previously working for Wagner Group (depending on the operation at hand), Russian PSMOs are arguably only reshuffling employees rather than growing (Reuters, 2025). Bear Brigade personnel returned to Russia from Burkina Faso in August 2024 in order to counter the Ukrainian incursion into the Kursk region (Roger and Eydoux, 2024).

Given the level of European concern and these developments, a stock-taking of the security headaches posed by Russian PSMOs is in order. To capture the complications Russian PSMOs *still* present, this chapter concentrates on three challenges: 1) the challenge of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM) abroad; 2) the challenge of enacting ACM and related PSMO limitations; and 3) the challenge of subversion at home. Taken together, the continued threat of Russian PSMOs rests in offering an alternative to European engagement, the heightening of violence and its repercussions, and the fear of changed PSMO effort on the European continent.

## **Authoritarian Conflict Management**

Given international power shifts, increasing authoritarian great power activism, and the seeming limitations of the 'liberal stance' towards conflict management, analysis now recognises the nature, practice, and aspired outcomes of a different approach – ACM (Mariani, 2022a; Mariani, 2022b; Paris, 2010; Paris, 2023). Scholars have identified its three elements: discourse, space, and economy (Heathershaw and Owen, 2019, p. 271). They

are the focus of external authoritarian actors directed at a government that is, at least, authoritarian leaning. Discourse concerns the manipulation and control of information, to the point of offering disinformation, in order to support an authoritarian government and to discredit opposition forces as well as external actors such as European states. Space and economy are about heightening the authoritarian presence, terrestrially and economically, at the expense of insurgent, rebel, and/or terrorist groups. In this three-ingredient recipe, the threat/usage of violence is a key binder (Abboud, 2021, pp. 327, 331). Overall, emphasis on these three areas by authoritarian outsiders is to strengthen authoritarianism abroad, push back liberal exertions, and advance illiberalism, all of which contributes to a more palatable international environment for authoritarianism at home.

No doubt, ACM through Russian PSMOs is antithetical to Europe's generally liberal leaning approach to conflict management. While reliance upon violence is not unusual in the European experience, it is not necessarily on the forefoot like in ACM. As Daniel Byman suggests, the Western approach seeks instead 'to change the political opportunity structure of a country to bring in disenfranchised communities and otherwise reduce grievances while seeking to maintain public safety' (2016, p. 69). As for economics, an important idea guiding many European efforts is the security-development nexus; stability and security go hand in hand with broad economic development and improved standards of living (D'Amato, 2021, p. 1533). With Russian PSMO-supported ACM however, the objective is closely tied to maintaining the governance status quo. In fact, the PSMOs offer so-called 'regime survival packages', the focused benefits of which, according to Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, surpass 'any other potential gains from traditional cooperation agreements advanced by Western partners, which are usually based on institutional capacity building instead of securing the authorities themselves' (2023, p. 10). Note that Russian PSMOs have helped to push off elections and/or contributed to democratic backsliding in Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali. As for economics, to reinforce the status quo, Russian PSMOs have looked to capture resource producing areas to enrich themselves and to financially lubricate authoritarian networks. The security-development nexus, with its addressing of socio-economic grievance, promotion of widespread economic growth, and reduction of poverty, is not part of the equation.

Perhaps making the implicit explicit, ACM's challenge to European security interests is heightened by the fact that African governments *chose*

this PSMO-facilitated, violence prominent methodology. This undercuts the basal assumptions of European states that their approach is desirable. What is more, this methodology involves acts not commonly characteristic in European practice that nevertheless are wanted: those that are demonstrative of ‘non-liberal norms and policies’ (i.e., human rights violations) (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran, 2018, p. 500). This is an important recognition, as research shows African agency is often underplayed (Gruzd, Ramani, and Clifford, 2022, p. 403; Jacobsen and Larsen, 2024, p. 4). Not all can be wished away as *solely* the effect of Russian disinformation (Jacobsen and Larsen, 2023, p. 274). As such, the appeal of Russian PSMO engagement in CAR was that it offered, compared to other outside forces, ‘physical elimination... [that was] as brutal as possible’ (The Sentry, 2023, p. 23). In Mali, a sentiment was that human rights observance held back the fight against terrorism; they were the “chains” that bound the government, the military, and Western intervenors (Giustozzi, de Deus Pereira, and Lewis et al., 2025, pp. 18, 21). In this regard, Russian PSMOs have delivered. For instance, assessments reveal that since the introduction of Russian PSMOs in CAR (2018) and Mali (2021), there have been multi-fold increases in violent engagements with opposition forces, a heightened lethality in battles, and an augmented incidence of human rights violations (Nsaibia, 2024a; Nsaibia, 2024b; United Nations Security Council, 2022, p. 16; Egbejule, 2024). Taken together, this is an anathema to European techniques and plans that, worryingly, has some currency.

### **Russian-PSMO Limitations**

Perversely, the combination of the conduct and limitations of Russian PSMOs also presents security challenges to Europe. To illuminate, the aforementioned increase in violence has not been contained by Russian PSMOs and their allied local forces. According to researchers, ACM’s logical conclusion is the authoritarian regime’s demonstration of dominance, mastery, and exclusivity (Keen, 2021, pp. 246–247, 254–255). Yet PSMOs are ill-suited for this demonstration for a variety of reasons. In line with the recruitment difficulties noted above, their numbers are not substantial – perhaps no more than 5,000 personnel across multiple countries (United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, 2024). This is partially due to the demands of the Ukrainian campaign (also see above). Additionally, most Russian PSMO

personnel in theatre have concentrated on securing resource producing areas and urban environments, leaving many regions with minimal penetration. What is more, a considerable increase in the PSMO presence is unlikely because of a contradiction in the Russian approach. Whereas ACM points to supremacy and permeation in support of widespread authoritarian governance, Russia's PSMO reliance sets expeditionary engagement as limited in liability and strategically minimalist (Duursma and Masuhr, 2022, p. 418; United States Department of Defence, 2019, p. 71; Simpson et al., 2022, p. 11).

While Russian PSMOs may have sparked an upswing in violence in their host countries, one should recognise that it catalysed a response in kind by opposition forces too. This was due to anger caused by human rights abuses directed at ethnic communities and threats of losing valuable and sustaining revenue sources. Russian PSMOs were indifferent to, or perhaps were analytically unaware of, their actions' compounding effects (Lechner and Eledinov, 2025). Regardless, containing this violence has proven to be difficult. In Mali, for example, 84 Wagner Group personnel, as well as 47 Malian soldiers, died in a July 2024 ambush in Tinzaouaten. This ambush was notably organised jointly by the Cadre Stratégique Permanent (CSP), a Tuareg rebel faction, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), a terrorist organisation, two groups not known for their cooperation (Brown, 2024). Later in September 2024, JNIM attacked various sites in the capital, Bamako, including Malian military and Wagner Group bases, thus puncturing the urban calm the Russian PSMO presence had helped to instil. Further-attacks, in June 2025, against the northern city of Timbuktu underscored the limits of Russian-assisted penetration. What is more, the challenge posed by JNIM and other armed actors is not contained within hosting states' borders (Peltier, 2025; Schmitt and Maclean, 2024). As assessed in the 2025 Global Terrorism Index, the Sahel is the global epicentre for terrorism, accounting for over half of the annual deaths caused by terrorist activity (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025, p. 2).

The conundrum this poses to European security interests is multivariate. The spread of terrorism and the associated instability threatens non-PSMO hosting states, pressurises existing European initiatives informed by the security-development nexus, and upsets current political, economic, and social ties between Europe and Africa. Also, from one angle, there was the initial fear that a spread of Russian PSMOs in Africa would permit their manipulation of the Europe-bound migration spigot through their

proximity to local networks (Dixon, 2024). From another angle, even though the Russian spread has been limited, PSMO activities have nevertheless been migration-inducing. Their human rights transgressions, according to a Critical Threats evaluation, have helped ‘fuel record-high levels of trans-Saharan migration to Europe’ (Karr, 2024). The responding upsurge in violence by opposition fighters further pushes people to flee across borders and beyond. Recent United Nations statistical analysis points to the troubling migratory impact of ‘radical non-state armed actors’ (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). Oddly, given the longstanding political sensitivities of unmanaged migration in/to Europe and its relationship to destructive populism and democratic decline, illiberal, ACM-type objectives might still be achieved vis-à-vis Europe. Though certainly a long causal chain, this points to the effects of Russian-PSMO limitations and the actual lack of intentionality that, nonetheless, challenge European security interests and potentially erode the European political status quo.

## **Subversion**

A newer, and evolving, security challenge rests in Russian-PSMO connections to subversive behaviour within European states. To background, scholarly attention reveals that subversion is a violation or micro-invasion meant to catalyse ‘the psychological state of fear that the enemy is or might be inside the tent’ (Kastner and Wohlforth, 2025, p. 4). It can take many forms, including sabotage, propaganda, disinformation, and other types of meddling internal to a state. The objective of subversion is captured by Jill Kastner’s and William Wohlforth’s definition: ‘[it is a] hostile, unwanted activity on the territory of a rival with the intent of seeking effects, specifically to weaken the target or change its foreign policy in some way’ (2025, p. 193).

Presumed Russian-linked subversive operations have targeted multiple European countries since the renewed launch of Russian military operations against Ukraine in February 2022. Alongside cyberattacks that can be initiated extraterritorially, subversive acts have occurred within the territorial tent of many countries. This includes the tampering of a water purification plant in Finland, the disruption of railways in the Czech Republic, explosions at DHL warehouses in Germany and the United Kingdom, the cutting of Baltic Sea cables, and the unexplained

observance of drones flying over sensitive areas in multiple countries. Arson attacks, especially against depots holding military exports bound for Ukraine, have also arisen. These operations' objectives are manifold. For Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, attention can be placed on upsetting European policy towards Russia/Ukraine: 'They are... aimed at diminishing Europeans' support for Ukraine by raising costs on the governments and industries in ways that are not easy to counter, harassing the population, and seeking vulnerabilities in European defence' (2025). In a wider way, a 2025 EUROPOL assessment looked to broader issues of governance and the European way of life whereby subversive actors 'engage in ongoing, seemingly minor actions that collectively erode stability, security, and trust in institutions' (p. 15). Given the spread of subversive activities across several countries, EUROPOL worries over the collective effects of the 'woodpecker modus operandi' that weaken the tree overall: 'Incidents are often originally assessed as single incidents, [yet they] may be part of a larger strategic objective of destabilisation, involving persistent, targeted, and cumulative disruptions rather than a single, overwhelming attack' (2025, p. 15). Linking to the above, this also ominously points to a pushback against democracy and liberalism.

Russian PSMOs are present in the broad nest of subversive Russian woodpeckers directed against Europe. In March 2024, two Britons were arrested on arson charges against a Ukrainian-linked target in London. Investigation revealed that they had been recruited through a Wagner Group-linked Telegram channel. In August 2023, the Latvian State Security Service traced attempts to recruit Latvians to work for Wagner Group. Similarly, in February 2025, two Russian nationals with ties to Russian intelligence organisations were prosecuted in Poland for hybrid warfare actions. These involved open recruiting operations in Warsaw and Krakow for Wagner Group and their publicisation on social media. Underscoring the paranoia of being inside the tent, the recruitment advertisements indicated simply that '[w]e are here' (Sheftalovich, 2023).

The appeal of Russian-PSMO ties to subversive activities has three facets. First, and doubtlessly, one matter concerns urgency and changing circumstance. In the wake of the 2022 invasion, many Russian diplomats with (assumed) intelligence linkages were expelled from European countries; the well was considerably lowered (Rondeaux, 2025). Relatively concomitant to this, one Kremlin response to the 2023 Wagner Group mutiny was drawing Russian PSMOs even closer to Russian intelligence

circles. See that a key leadership figure now linked to Russian-PSMO efforts is Major General Andrei Averyanov of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. His resume reveals a long list of activities concerning repression, sabotage, and assassination (Seibt, 2023).

The second is that Russian-PSMO capabilities and skillsets are inherently elastic compared to established official Russian structures and bodies. In its analysis of Wagner Group for instance, RAND assessed that it is ‘less like a single organisation and more like an umbrella of many entities’ (Weinbaum *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). Similarly, the British House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee reported that the group is a ‘sprawling, decentralised network of individuals and commercial entities, which is active in several countries and for which the “membership” is not always clear’ (United Kingdom Parliament, 2023). Similarly, Africa Corps has the ‘holding company’ and umbrella monikers (Egbejule, 2024; Ehl, 2024; Faulkner, Plichta, and Parens, 2024). The resulting malleability, diversity, and lack of transparency as oligarchic actors work to advance both their interests and those of the state point to Russian-PSMO activism taking different forms in different locales. Indeed, the leitmotif of contemporary Russian subversive activities is opportunism responding to the Kremlin’s intimations (Kastner and Wohlforth, 2025, p. 174).

Thirdly, Russian PSMOs, especially Wagner Group, have a branding that propagates fear that supports subversion. In part, this is linked to propaganda and disinformation operations alongside an ongoing social media presence. In this vein, official European discomfiture such as that expressed at the chapter’s start also likely keeps tensions taught. In part, this is linked to the routine denial by Russian officialdom of PSMO activities, or at the very least by keeping these organisations at arm’s length even after Wagner Group’s June 2023 mutiny and despite intelligence connections. This reinforces the wildcard characteristic of Russian PSMOs that is nevertheless at the service of the Russian state. Justin Ling identifies this as a “psychological effect” such that ‘fighters who operate outside the direct chain of command can also be useful for committing particularly heinous actions’ (2022). Likewise, Candace Rondeaux points to the “psychological value” of ‘propagating the notion that Russia has a secret, shadowy group of saboteurs and agent provocateurs that can penetrate behind enemy lines’ (Ling, 2022). In short, notoriety, secrecy, deniability, and pliability all point to the subversive security challenge European policymakers continue to confront.

## Conclusion

Collectively, though Russian-PSMO usage is a low cost and limited affair, the European response requires costs, financial and otherwise, that outweigh the Russian investment. Countering the ACM approach will involve highlighting the benefits and utility of European endeavours abroad, even though it may require the delivery of equipment, the acceptance of risks, the (at least) short term watering down of liberal expectations, and the setting of longer-term commitments. The European way of conflict management would not be totally jettisoned, but this would accentuate that respecting African agency and developing substantial engagement comes with a price. Countering the fallout of Russian-PSMO ACM will demand increased diligence concerning increases in violence, the spread of terrorism, and migratory shifts that may, or may not, involve direct Russian manipulation. Finally, countering the spectre of Russian-PSMO subversive involvement in Europe will require nuance. On the one hand, Russian PSMOs have done preposterous acts from the European, liberal perspective – note the human rights abuses mentioned above. On the other hand, this ruthlessness is not as evident in European subversion, Russian PSMOs are one of many actors doing the Kremlin's bidding, and European law enforcement has had some success. These matters can be underscored to reflect ongoing diligence, rather than complacency, to reinforce European security, and to protect the continent's liberal bona fides.

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