

Russia's Paramilitarization and its Consequences

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 839

April 2023

Marlene Laruelle¹
George Washington University

Richard Arnold²
Muskingum University

For years, the Russian authorities have emphasized the military's role in Russia's nationbuilding and developed strong textual and visual narratives about its status as a cornerstone of the country's historical continuity, sovereignty, and "great power" status. This has been reflected in public opinion: when asked about which institutions they trust, Russians [have put](#) the military as no. 2 (after the president and before law enforcement agencies and the Church), with around 65 percent support since 2014 and a high point of 77 percent in 2022. This top-down militarization doesn't limit itself to the realm of nation-branding: the new 2023 military budget is approximately \$84 billion, more than 40 percent higher than what was announced before the war, and there has been a sharp rise in military-patriotic indoctrination for all segments of society, especially youth.

But in parallel with that militarization, the *paramilitarization* of Russia has also been growing. In the Russian context, the boundaries between militarization and paramilitarization are porous: two key institutions such as the National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) and the Youth Army (*Yunarmiya*), have features from both. Although they are state structures, they have ramifications in the paramilitary and militia worlds. And indeed, myriad groups with parallel military and law enforcement structures have developed over the years, with different connections to state institutions and different types of access to weapons. Many of them have been harnessed to the Russian military wagon of the war in Ukraine. This memo brings this hitherto subterranean stream to the surface. It does so by first identifying the main paramilitary groups about which we know, accounting for them politically and sociologically, and identifying plausible scenarios for the future of a paramilitarized Russia.

¹ [Marlene Laruelle](#) is Research Professor of International Affairs and Director of the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University.

² [Richard Arnold](#) is Associate Professor of Political Science at Muskingum University.

A Plurality of Actors

Finding data, especially statistical, on paramilitary actors is challenging, first because such actors usually try to stay under the radar, and second because they bear heavy casualties on the frontlines and can be depleted rapidly. Bearing this in mind, this section summarizes the main paramilitary formations of which we are aware.

The largest paramilitary group, Yevgeny Prigozhin's infamous Wagner private military company (PMC), has been [used](#) by the Kremlin for a long time to conduct operations with an air of plausible deniability in the African and Middle Eastern theaters. In Ukraine, Prigozhin is estimated to have as many as 50,000 troops (10,000 volunteers and about 40,000 [convicts](#)), but a large number of them seem to have died in the Bakhmut offensive. While Wagner's existence was simply [denied](#) for years by both the Kremlin and Prigozhin himself (Russian legislation does not allow for private military companies), the war has allowed for a flamboyant officialization, with the group [erecting](#) a building in central Moscow as well as recruitment centers and youth centers elsewhere.

Wagner is not the only PMC to have grown. Emulating a successful model, new competitors to Wagner have emerged, such as [Patriot](#), present in Syria since at least 2018 and also involved in Prigozhin's [African](#) backyard. Patriot is said to be targeting better-qualified soldiers for higher-quality missions and to be directly under the Defense Ministry's patronage. Another PMC, Convoy, led by a former Wagner supervisor, Konstantin Pikalov, has [emerged](#) in Crimea and unites some of the groups identified below.

Likewise, the well-known thugs of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, the eponymous "Kadyrovtsy," have been present first in the Syrian war theater and then in Ukraine. Their number is difficult to assess, but realistic estimates put their numbers at around 5,000-6,000. The main groups, such as the famous Akhmat-Grozny OMON troops – the oldest remaining organization dating from the First Chechen War – are part of the National Guard, led by Viktor Zolotov, while other groups are integrated into the Russian Armed Forces. For the Kadyrovtsy, the war in Ukraine has also [become](#) an intra-Chechen war, as several battalions of anti-Kadyrov Chechens are fighting on the Ukrainian side.

Conversely, the number of Cossack troops deployed to the Ukrainian battlefield has been steadily increasing and has now reached over 17,500 (by their own [reports](#)). This formal Cossack movement, organized through the Cossack register created in 1995, comprises an estimated 750,000 individuals. Cossacks from the Siberian, Irkutsk, and Yenesei hosts recently [formed](#) a volunteer battalion for deployment in the "Special Military Operation." New Cossack structures were instituted in Crimea following Russia's annexation, and there are similar plans in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia.

Further, drawing on Cossacks' ostensible claims to be the autochthonous indigenes of the region, the Russian state seems to be [relying](#) on them to legitimate the conflict as Russia's simple "Reconquista" of its historical lands. The institutionalization of the Cossacks as well as their role in patriotic education and vigilante operations ("from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok"), [seems](#) to be developing. The Cossacks also run youth paramilitary training camps where attendees are taught military skills and sports centers to develop body training.

To this should be added the DNR-LNR (self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics) troops, created in the spring of 2014 as proxies of the Russian Armed Forces in the Donbas, reinforced by the arrival of Russian nationalist volunteers and some international far-right groups. They have received training, equipment, and supervision from the Russian military. Since February 2022, they have enlisted the majority of men of both regions from ages 18 to 65 (the [Donetsk army](#) is said to be around 20,000 people and [Luhansk](#) 14,000 – before casualties) and likely [include](#) the Union of Donbas Volunteers led by former DNR prime minister Alexander Borodai as well as Russian far-right groups such as [Rusich](#). They have been used as occupational forces in the newly occupied Ukrainian territories, and since the annexation of September 30, 2022, the DNR-LNR troops have been formally integrated into the Russian Armed Forces and were referred to by Putin as the 1st Donetsk Army Corps and 2nd Guards Luhansk-Sievierodonetsk Army Corps under the command of the Southern Military District.

The next step in this paramilitarization move was launching volunteer battalions in June 2022. By the summer, depending on reports, there were between [13](#) and [19](#) regions of Russia that had officially declared they were constituting their own volunteer battalions: some ethnic republics such as Chechnya, Tatarstan (at least in the Tatar case, however, the battalion seems to be made largely of ethnic Russians, not Tatars), Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, and North Ossetia-Alania, as well as some Russian regions (Primorski krai, Krasnoyarsk krai, Perm, Chelyabinsk, Orenburg, Nizhny-Novgorod, Kursk, etc.), and Moscow and St Petersburg. It remains difficult to assess how many were really created and with how many men in each. The government has also [authorized](#) the firm Gazprom Neft to create a private security organization (not a PMC) to protect Russian energy infrastructure, which seems to be recruiting by [offering](#) better salaries than Wagner – a sign of the competition going on between the different patrons curating the paramilitary sector.

As we can see from this brief account, the boundaries between private militias and the Russian military are porous: all these mercenaries-type troops are well integrated into the official structure of the Russian Armed Forces and sometimes receive supplies and equipment from them. They are used as offensive troops for capturing the most difficult terrain or as occupation troops that assist the main Armed Forces in the everyday management of occupied territories. They are also the ones bearing the highest death rates. It seems, for instance, that of the dead whose status has been [established](#), more than

a third are prisoners and PMC mercenaries. The share of mobilized men is about a quarter. The rest of the fallen are regular, contracted soldiers and volunteers.

Socio-Political Accounting

This paramilitarization of Russia has deep roots in the social fabric. One more layer of this paramilitary or militia realm should indeed be added: the thousands of small [grassroots clubs](#) for military training, extreme sports, and military-patriotic education that have mushroomed all over Russia during the last ten-twenty years. Often managed by former contract servicepeople (*kontraktniki*) or retired military and law enforcement agency civil servants, they form a dense social fabric, especially active among the less well-off segments of the population, for whom they offer free leisure activities for children and teenagers.

Their mission is manifold: 1) to recruit for the army or the paramilitary (Wagner has been using sports centers to recruit, for instance); 2) to mobilize a layer of active citizens whose activities in the rear assist the fighting troops; and 3) to shape public opinion and engage society in support of the regime.

To this can be added the booming private security industry, [with more](#) than 700,000 people [working](#) in 26,000 firms certified by the Russian National Guard—a privatized sector where many paramilitary-oriented citizens work to generate better salaries. Last but not least, the social background for both militarization and paramilitarization also relies on the dense networks of Cadet schools and lyceums. They have been schooling almost 200,000 children ([data](#) from 2018): one quarter attends one of the 200 existing Cadet institutions (*obrazovatel'nye organizatsii kadetskogo tipa*), and three-quarters have Cadet classes conducted in more than 7,000 schools across the country. And around 500,000 children are said to attend the Yunarmiya activities. The military and military-industrial complex itself still [encompass](#) 2 million employees, so around 6 million people with their families.

An important reason for the proliferation of various military/paramilitary/militia formations is that as in many countries in the world, the army realm still provides limited prospects for social advancement for blue-collar men. The average wage in Russia is just \$500 per month, making a (para)military career where one can earn more an attractive option, especially as it goes with other rewards such as social prestige and family benefits (children can access free higher education, etc.). While many men are obviously not motivated to go to the frontline, some are and express feelings of self-achievement and recognition, finding some meaning to life. Indeed, Russia's war against Ukraine is very much a [class-based war](#), in which provincial Russian is the one sent to the battlefield.

We know how much traumas inherited from the Afghan war and the first Chechen war, as well as everyday violence inside the Russian army, even in peacetime, have shaped

generations of Russian men. One can then only presume how the current war, of a totally different scale, will reverberate on Russian society once it is over. This will include influence from not only a few thousand Wagner ex-prisoners who will access freedom if they survive the front, but, more importantly, hundreds of demobilized men with post-traumatic stress. Many of them will be unable to go back to civilian life, therefore creating the pool of a whole generation of men likely to be waiting for more military/mercenary engagement.

Future Scenarios

While it is exceptionally difficult in the current situation to predict the future, we can sketch out three possible scenarios.

First, there is the scenario of an intra-elite open fight, which could lead to a civil war-type of evolution. Recent [speculation](#) around Prigozhin's publicized criticism of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the army, and Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin [supporting](#) Prigozhin's proposal to protect Wagner's volunteers from criticism for their criminal pasts, feed this interpretation. This indeed signals division among elites in relation to the rise of power of a paramilitary leader strongly disliked by both the ministries of Defense and Interior. The recent [presumed](#) poisoning of Kadyrov could have also been an attempt to clip his wings and prevent his accumulation of power sufficiently to challenge federal authorities.

Other pathways to civil war include an improbable collapse of central authority and a commitment by the inner circle to fight over the spoils – something made more plausible by the absence of clear succession rules. In either case, should force become the arbiter of the Russian regime's future, then access to and influence over paramilitary groups, both in the center and in regions, could well be an important resource in determining the victor. The growth of regional militia movements could also provide a powerful fillip for the emergence of nationalist, potentially secessionist movements in the North Caucasus, the Volga, and Siberia.

Another scenario that could develop is that of a full-scale military dictatorship, with Putin still in power or after his departure. While Russia has [no tradition](#) of military coups, the war could potentially change that tradition. Under this scenario, paramilitary groups aligned with particular individuals become useful to the regime (we can, for instance, read Prigozhin's rise to power as part of a coherent strategy and not a loss of control) and a means of securing politicians' tenure as well as of monitoring sentiment among the population and enforcing an official ideology.

Third, perhaps the most likely scenario is that the current regime continues to limp on out of lack of alternatives. Though bereft of legitimacy, it will increasingly be forced to rely on social bases of support, such as patriotic indoctrination by paramilitary gangs. Such a

scenario would not represent a stable equilibrium, however, but would fit with the regime's ad hoc functioning. The Russian regime would remain in a "business as usual" scenario with an increased militia culture. A closely related scenario is the maturation of nascent Russian fascism. The [growth](#) of paramilitary/militia subculture in Russia was the single dimension under which pre-2022 war Russia could be genuinely defined as fascist. For both the military dictatorship and fascist scenarios, paramilitaries could be used to secure the regime by preventing the accumulation of power in other institutions. A Russian "night of long knives" similar to Hitler's 1934 purging of the Rohm faction in the Nazi party would be foreseeable.

While these scenarios remain speculative, there is one development that seems certain. However the war ends, the return of hundreds of thousands of men for whom war is no longer an abstract concept but an immediate reality to their communities will likely see the further brutalization of Russian society. The number of killings has [risen](#) in 2022 for the first time in the last two decades. Especially if sanctions are still in place and the Russian economy is unable to find support elsewhere, the same forces that drove Russian men to initiate paramilitary movements will intensify, and elites engaged in infighting will make use of them for their own internal games. Psychologically scarred individuals with little to no job prospects, but training in violence, may well read the signs given to them by the universe and extend Russia's culture of paramilitary gangs and mercenaries.