

**Crusaders, Sellswords, and Separatists: The Russian State's Use of Paramilitaries,
Separatists, and Irregular Armies**

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CRUSADERS, SELLSWORDS, AND SEPARATISTS: THE RUSSIAN STATE'S USE OF PARAMILITARIES,
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Abstract

Russia currently supports various paramilitaries around the world whether in the guise of separatists, mercenaries, or irregular armies. Using their own military and intelligence operatives and different tactical and religious-ideological means of asserting control over these paramilitaries and the territories they inhabit, Russia seeks to expand the scope of its global dominance and regional influence. Consistent with its long-term goal of weakening NATO and the EU, Russian strategy under Putin has sought to exploit Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian culture as instruments of solidarity binding many of these paramilitaries to Russia in a kind of pan-Slavic religious-nationalist mission. No passive bystander in Putin's hegemonic designs, the Orthodox Church has allowed if not encouraged the Russian leader to better fund, recruit, control, and influence the paramilitaries for his own nationalist purposes. While security analysts disagree about the overall influence paramilitaries can have on the strategic map of Europe, most agree that under deteriorating economic conditions in Eastern Europe and the Ukraine in particular, especially if undeterred by local or Western efforts, they may have a destabilizing effect upon pro-Western governments otherwise seeking shelter under the alliance umbrella of NATO and the EU protection.

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin has deployed a militarily aggressive foreign policy through the use of paramilitaries and the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church itself. All of these make up a foreign policy strategy coupled with the use of the Russian military. All of it is aimed at a unitary goal of undermining EU and NATO influence and establishing a perceived hegemonic 'sphere of influence.'

Putin has deployed and funded paramilitaries as surrogate armies in regions he wishes to return to the Russian orbit of hegemonic control. Because he relies upon non-Russian paramilitaries as instruments of Russian policy, Putin's territorial machinations have avoided charges of direct military intervention. Much of the ground forces in Ukraine for example, have been paramilitaries indirectly controlled or used by the Russian state.

Many nationalist and religious-oriented paramilitaries in Eastern Europe look to Moscow as an ally and leader. For their part, Russia has sought to control them, use them, or at least empower them. Russian Orthodox religious nationalists comprise many of the recruits among paramilitaries fighting in places like the Ukraine and Syria as well as other proxy warriors in Macedonia, Slovakia, Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia. Putin has also targeted Estonia and Georgia, with the latter an outright invasion in 2008. Russia also supports separatists looking to create new nations and regions either subservient to Moscow or at least largely aligned with Putin's current interests which include inserting Russian special forces with operational and tactical command of paramilitary activities.

Russia's Paramilitary History

Russian use of paramilitaries can be traced back to the roaming Cossack bands that patrolled Russia's vast expanse in the 16th century. Cossacks pose a significant cultural and military icon to this day, albeit in a very different form (Galeotti, 4, 2013). The Cossacks today operate as special forces units, often on illegal missions, supporting Russian-funded paramilitaries. In Ukraine, Cossack units were embedded in several paramilitary groups. They were also involved in the shooting down of a Malaysian commercial airliner MH17 flying to Kuala Lumpur. It was shot down over East Ukraine, near the Russian border. Dutch Investigators concluded Russia was responsible for shooting down the plane as they had supplied the Buk missiles to separatist forces used to shoot down the airliner. Russia blamed a Ukrainian pilot they captured who died under suspicious circumstances (BBC, 2018).

Vladimir Putin's use of paramilitaries were most heavily defined by two recent wars in Chechnya. The first war took place between 1994 and 1996 as the Soviet Union dissolved. After a coup ousted the communists, the new Chechen government attempted to leave and declare itself an independent nation. In response, pro-Russian insurgents rose in response. Russia funneled arms, training, and supplies to these separatists. They also sent "volunteer" forces to join the rebels and denied all involvement (ARIS, 11, 2015). Russian and rebel forces took the capital, but the methods used and the number of civilian casualties involved attracted the world's condemnation. Mirovalev argues that the disproportionate use of force by the insurgency is what undid the Russian campaign (Mirovalev, 2014). As they tried to take all of Chechnya, Islamist militants rose up and declared 'jihad' on the Russian invaders. This forced Russia to sign a ceasefire for fear of what such a war would draw from its Middle Eastern neighbors.

A second Chechen War broke out in 1999 and continued until 2008. This war was important not only for its utilization of paramilitaries but also because of soon-to-be President Putin's involvement. What they learned from this war has defined the current paramilitary landscape. Many of the current paramilitary leaders would get their start fighting in the second Chechen War. The second Chechen war started where the first war ended; Islamist jihadists formed a 2,000-man force and invaded the nearby Dagestan, a province hosting an ongoing Islamic insurgency (ARIS, 12, 2015). This second Chechen War brought Russia unlikely allies; namely, Akhmad Kadyrov, the head of the separatist army that fought Russia in the first Chechen war. He allied with Russian forces against a common enemy, the new Islamist rebels. President Putin, a newly declared acting President, declared war on Chechnya's Islamist groups, which skyrocketed his approval rating (Mirovalev, 2014). Russia soon endured a brutal string of terror attacks on their population as bombers targeted civilians. Female suicide bombers known as "black widows" became increasingly common (Mirovalev, 2014). According to US Special Forces Command, the Russian anti-insurgency campaign, with the help of Chechen paramilitaries, succeeded in eliminating most of the Islamic insurgents (ARIS, 13, 2015).

The outcry of the media and human rights watchdogs at the mass civilian casualties caused by the Russian campaign also taught Putin to switch strategies. Instead of relying primarily on Russian regulars, he gave more operational and tactical control of the campaign to local militias and proxies. Kadyrov and his son, Ramzan, became useful allies.¹ They also controlled a paramilitary hit-squad known as 'Kadyrovtsy' that eliminated their enemies with impunity (Mirovalev, 2014). The Kadyrovtsy also provided local security such as guarding

¹ Ramzan is the current President of Chechnya. His father, Akhmad, was the first President of Chechnya. He was assassinated by Islamic jihadists for assisting the Russian counter-insurgency.

pipelines and important military structures. They also participated in 'anti-guerilla' missions (Galeotti, 32, 2013).

For two main reasons, Putin's Chechen experience forged the building blocks for his modern use of paramilitary tactics. First, the Chechen wars provided Russia a large number of veterans who then established paramilitaries Putin would fund and exploit for his own policy agenda. The founders of the Night Wolves, Vostok Battalion, and Wagner Group, for example, were all veterans of the Chechen Wars.

Second, Kadyrov's paramilitary successes taught Putin the strategic and tactical potential of paramilitaries generally. In terms of international legitimacy, they allowed Russia the plausible deniability necessary to more freely deploy paramilitaries for brutal methods like assassinations, torture, and kidnapping.

Aspects of Russia's military command mirrors the paramilitary experience in several of its guiding documents for unconventional warfare. The Gerasimov Model for example, is an unconventional warfare model created by the Russian Federation Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov (ARIS, 19, 2018). Allegedly studied by many senior Russian military and intelligence officials, the 'new generation warfare' prescribes a blending of several 'non-military' elements with Russian use of regular forces, including heavy use of paramilitaries, irregular armies, mercenaries, assassinations, and other subterfuge. US Special Forces command believes 'elements' of the Gerasimov model were adapted for use in the more recent Russia-sponsored conflict in Eastern Ukraine (ARIS, 19, 2015). Gerasimov is another product of the

Chechen Wars.² Similar approaches to the use of paramilitaries in combat theaters would be refined by Putin's invasion of Georgia.

Putin's aggressive military actions continued past Chechnya with his 2008 invasion of Georgia. He invaded with 80,000 soldiers claiming the invasion was an intervention in South Ossetia to back separatists there. These separatists were armed, funded, and trained by Russia. They were also directed by Russian military and intelligence officials (Galeotti, 56, 2013). They continued their military invasion past Ossetia and attempted to take the capital, Tbilisi. Facing intense diplomatic pressure, unexpected fierce Georgian military resistance, and the potential of US military intervention, they pulled back to Ossetia. Saakashvili argues that the Georgian invasion inspired "a decade of Putin adventurism" (Saakashvili, 2018).³ Putin used mostly conventional forces which provoked a greater degree of international scrutiny and subsequent outrage. The separatist forces there did contribute to the invasion but were vastly outnumbered by the 80,000 Russian ground troops deployed. They still, however, occupy 20% of Georgia and quietly annex more territory every month.

This quiet annexation comes with the expansion of a hard border that the Russian military enforces. South Ossetia and Abkhazia claim independence and make up a now-collection of pseudo-states recognized and supported by the Russian state. Russia stations thousands of troops at military bases it has since constructed in these two regions (Coffey, 2018). They also have become operating stations for FSB, the successor of the KGB. These "separatists" have been propped up by the Russian regime since 2008. According to Coffey, they rely on Moscow for their very survival. In this incident, Russia used separatist paramilitaries they armed, funded,

² Under Putin, he has been promoted to the senior position in the Kremlin he currently holds.

³ Since the Georgian invasion, Russia launched covert military operations, often using mercenaries and paramilitaries, in Venezuela, CAR, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Montenegro, and Bosnia.

trained, supported, and exploited. Of course, these separatists maintain a degree of independence. They are heavily influenced and exploited by Moscow but were not necessarily created by them. A similar incident would occur in Eastern Ukraine years later.

Some of the paramilitaries composing Separatist forces consisted of the Vostok Battalion, a Chechen paramilitary left over from the Second Chechen War. The Vostok Battalion was loyal to Moscow and is composed mostly Chechen and Russian fighters controlled by the GRU, the Russian military intelligence agency (Galeotti, 56, 2013).⁴

⁴ The Vostok Brigade was also formed by the same actors that would eventually form the Slavonic Corps and Wagner Brigade. Lt. Col Utkin, the founder of the Wagner Group and an FSB commander, played a role in Vostok Brigade (Galeotti, 2018).

Russian Orthodoxy—a Historic source of Russian State Policy

The Russian Orthodox Church is a central part of the lives of many Russian and Slavic peoples. The Church commands a large influence on daily life and the politics of the region. Roughly 72% of Russia identifies as Orthodox, making it the largest demographic profile (Pew Research, 2014). Putin's current government has exploited the overlap of Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism effectively. The Russian Orthodox Church has been a key part of Russian history since the days of the Kievan Rus Empire, before the concept of Russia was invented. Then, the church was centered in Kiev, now modern-day Ukraine. Kimmage argues the Kievan Rus Empire and the Church are central to the identity of a Russian dominated Slavic nationalism (Kimmage, 177, 2018). Kiev is a holy city to the Orthodox Church and its separation from Moscow is unacceptable to many Russians. Thus, many Russian Orthodox Christians have longed for a new Russia with Ukraine and Belarus back under Russian control.

In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has always had a “symbiotic” relationship with autocratic or authoritarian governments.⁵ The Church even assisted in legitimizing the rule of czars and sultans so long as they respected the Church's authority (Pollis, 347, 1993). Pollis points to the mother Orthodox Church adapting to Ottoman rule and working within their framework. In Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church bended a knee to communism even as it tried to wipe out religion. The Russian Orthodox Church garnered protection by intermixing with the state in this “symbiotic relationship.” It actually helped oppress other religious minorities.

Nationalism and religion also became “intertwined.” “The ethnos (nation) and Orthodoxy became a unity. To be Greek necessitates being Greek Orthodox, just as to be Russian

⁵ The Patriarchate was given power over Ottoman citizens of the Orthodox faith. Thus, under Ottoman rule, their power actually enhanced (Pollis, 347, 1993).

necessitates being Russian Orthodox” (Pollis, 348, 1993). Pollis’s point is that much of the identity of what it means to be Russian revolves around the Church. The Russian Orthodox Church is cemented deeply in the ethnos of Russia. It’s part of being Russian. Any nationalist movement in the Russian world has to carry the banner of Orthodoxy with it.

Russian Orthodoxy also uses the ‘Holy Rus Empire’ and ‘Third Rome’ as ambitious symbols meant to inspire the goal of unification with Ukraine and other former Rus territories. The Russian Patriarch Kirill has made such messaging clear. He is disinterested in his role as a spiritual leader and far more interested in these ambitious nationalistic goals, according to critics (Papkova, 4, 2011). “Gennadii Druzenko writes, "the most remarkable thing [about this speech] is that the head of the largest national Orthodox church spoke for twenty-five minutes and mentioned God only three times ... while repeating thirty-eight times the phrase 'Russian world'"” (Papkova, 6, 2011). Such language is used by Kirill to legitimize the actions of the Russian state in theaters like Ukraine. His theology and leadership of the church is defined by his political, nationalistic language. He preaches an imperialist, nationalist Orthodoxy that embodies Russia as the bulwark against Western corruption. Moscow is the “third Rome” and Kiev a subject of the Kievan Rus empire.

Putin has weaponized the Russian Orthodox Church’s rhetoric by embracing the Church as much as he can. He often invokes their name, pseudo-spiritual statements, and their blessing on his military activity. The Church blessed his war in the Ukraine, wanting to see it come under the control of Russia once again and return Kiev to the fold (Stroop, 2018). He has strategically used important Russian Orthodox holidays to make speeches justifying his intervention in Ukraine and laying claim to the rest of Ukraine and Belarus. This gives his wars a spiritual justification and makes it appear as a crusade on behalf of his devout Orthodox political base.

Many critics of Putin and Kirill have alleged that Kirill is a puppet of the Russian government. One such critic, a public intellectual and Russian editor, Sergei Chapnin who accused Kirill of being a former KGB informant if not KGB agent (Stroop, 2018). The close ties between Putin and Kirill can be seen in the current battle between Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy over the latter's assertion of independence from the Russian Patriarchate, an assertion supported by the Ecumenical Patriarch and Constantinople. Despite fears of a schism between the two nationalist wings of Eastern Orthodox faith and political power, the split between Moscow and Kiev seems likely to widen as nationalist boundaries harden. Putin's use of the government affiliated hacking group Fancy Bear to target the Ecumenical Patriarchate signals his frustration more than his ability to change the emerging facts on the ground.⁶

Notwithstanding these realities, publicly embracing the Church as a person of faith allows Putin to tap into and exploit the religious roots of Russian nationalism. Putin's Orthodox rhetoric, symbolic gestures, and social conservatism make him popular with Russian Orthodox members and The Church hierarchy. His willingness to weaponize Orthodoxy as a club against atheistic trends in the Christian West, criticizing it for rejecting their Christian roots, have also garnered support (Soroka, 2018).

“In this way, the Russian president called Crimea the “spiritual source” of both the Russian nation and state, noting that the peninsula held ‘enormous civilizational and sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism.’ He often hearkens back to such messaging to justify his aggressive foreign policy” (Soroka, 2018).

⁶ Fancy Bear is a private hacktivist group that has ties to Russian intelligence. They were involved, in some part, with the election interference in the United States Presidential Election of 2016 and are under international sanctions.

Soroka argues that the relationship benefits both parties; the Church gains tangible power and is maintained as a “moral arbiter” while Putin’s government is given historical and cultural legitimacy along with arguably greater political power.

As a consequence of the Church’s nationalistic support of Moscow’s war in Ukraine, Ukraine is trying to gain independence from the Russian Church. This has caused a rift in the Orthodox community and cemented the mindset of religious war in the sides fighting in Ukraine (Faskianos, 2018). Now, in the wake of the Ukrainian invasion, the Ukrainian church has had success in its breakaway attempt. This has encouraged hostile rhetoric from Moscow and even removal of the Patriarch from their services (Chapnin, 2018). They also have broken off all ties to the Ecumenical Patriarch in response to their legitimization of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This has helped reinforce the idea of a holy war in the minds of many pro-Russian paramilitaries fighting in Ukraine. The gap between the two sides has widened.

Ukraine: Russia's flashpoint with the West

In 2014, Ukraine underwent a revolution. President Yanukovich, long perceived to be a Russian puppet, had his election called into question after credible allegations of Russian interference surfaced. Tens of thousands of protestors demanded he be removed from office and elections held. Yanukovich's government cracked down on the protestors. Eventually, they began opening fire, killing dozens in one particular incident. This caused a seismic shift in public opinion and spelled the end of Yanukovich's tenure.

He was ousted and elections were held, giving Ukraine a new legislature and a new president. President Petro Poroshenko, a pro-NATO and pro-EU candidate, was elected in an attempt to shift Ukrainian political agendas toward the West (Gvosdev, 2, 2019). In a shock move, Putin invaded and annexed the Crimea overnight. Unmarked soldiers took several key installations and occupied anything of strategic importance. Ukrainian army installations were neutralized and forced to surrender. Next, a separatist rebellion stoked by the Russian government rose up in Eastern Ukraine, declaring independence. Russia quickly sent military aid, support, and legitimization of to these separatists. The separatist parties were split in two allied groups; the Republic of Donetsk and the Republic of Luhansk. This sparked a war with Ukraine that still continues. The war showcased the lessons of the Chechen Wars and the 2008 Georgian invasion including the aggressive use of paramilitaries, other irregular forces, and so called 'dark' tactics.

Putin also enjoys popularity for each aggressive military action he takes. Despite a slumping economy, he has enjoyed popular support for his approach to foreign policy. Kimmage argues that military conquest abroad is central to Putin's hold on his country (Kimmage 179,

2018). He argues that despite economic depression, the source of Putin's popularity is his foreign policy. Putin's social conservatism and victories abroad has allowed him to paste over his authoritarian policies and slumping economy.

In the invasion of Crimea and Ukraine, the invading forces were mostly paramilitaries or Russian special forces dressed and repurposed as paramilitary units. Thousands of people from various groups all over Eastern Europe participated in it. These paramilitary units were often composed of former Russian soldiers from the Chechen wars, police, and intelligence agents. Many still have strong ties to the Kremlin. The Luhansk and Donetsk separatists themselves are also suspect as they hold a shocking number of ties to the Russian state.

These separatists were organized, trained, and released by Moscow into Eastern Ukraine in a attempt to force the region into war. In this way, Russia attempted to coerce the region back into its sphere of influence by the use of force. In the case of Crimea, Russia secured an oil-rich peninsula, warm-water ports on the Black Sea, and the port of Sevastopol where its fleet resided. The Russian use of separatists, mercenaries, and irregular military units composed of dozens of former Russian soldiers and commanded by intelligence operatives helped build a new strategy Russia employed. Russia has also used small detachments of conventional military forces to supplement the invasion.

Pifer discusses the "little green men" (as they were popularly referred to) that invaded the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Pifer, 2018). These soldiers were in fact out-of-uniform Russian soldiers. Russia later admitted to this. The People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk survive only with Russia support (Pifer, 2018). Their militias receive Russian funding, training, weapons, leadership, and support from proper military units.

The Separatists in Eastern Ukraine, while funded, training, and given leadership by Russia, do maintain some degree of autonomy. However, they largely do the Kremlin's bidding and act in the interests of the Russian state. They recognize their dependence on Moscow. To Russia, their control may be viewed as an absolute, and extension of their network in Ukraine.

In *Der Spiegel*, Neef writes about a Separatist leader may have been killed by Russia for not recognizing exactly that. He analyzes the murder of Alexander Zakharchenko, a key leader of the People's Republic of Donetsk. A bomb went off in a cafe he was in, killing him. Neef argues it could not have been Kiev. He points to Moscow, as Zakharchenko had recently begun to defy Moscow's wishes. His quest for increased autonomy may have led to his murder by the Russian government (Neef, 2018). In an effort to assert control over separatist militias, Russia also assassinated several other "maverick" commanders, notably Alexander Bednov and Alexei Mozgovoy (Galeotti, 2016). Alexander Bednov commanded the LNR's 24th Brigade and was murdered by fellow separatists, possibly on orders from Moscow. Of course, there are several theories about the assassinations of Bednov and Mozgovoy as well (Crowcroft, 2015).⁷

As mentioned before, Russia's irregular military units and dependent Separatist forces were not the only units it used; it used separate paramilitary armies that participated in the invasion of Crimea and the war in Ukraine. These groups largely composed an ultra-nationalist identity. Inspired by Kirill's Russian Orthodox Church and his pining after the lost glory of the Kievan Rus Empire, many strove to see it be a reality. Many of these groups signed up by the dozens to go fight alongside Separatist and Russian forces in Eastern Ukraine. One such group

⁷ Galeotti asserts Bednov, who was nicknamed 'Batman,' was assassinated by a hit squad led by Lt. Col Utkin, a former FSB commander and future leader of the mercenary company Wagner. Wagner has been central the Russia's military involvement in several combat theaters (Galeotti, 2018).

was Rusich. Rusich is a neo-nazi and ultra nationalist group that sees itself fighting for glory and empire. They recruited paramilitary soldiers to fight in Ukraine with Russian and separatist forces (As have Ukraine to counter this attack). Associated Press reported a Rusich recruiter was arrested in Italy. Rusich is embedded in separatist forces and receives Russian support (AP, 2018).

Another such group seeking a Russian Orthodox call to arms is the pro-Russian Night Wolves, an 'outlaw' biker gang based in Moscow. The gang was founded in the 1980's to fight back against anti-Gorbachev protestors. They started as street thugs warring with protestors alongside Soviet troops (Losh, 2016). Later, in the 90's, it was led by a former Chechen war veteran named Alexander "The Surgeon" Zaldostanov. It began to host motorcycle shows, tour Russian holy sites, and hold ultra-nationalist events. When Ukraine protests started in 2013, they believed the protestors were a Western, CIA-started coup meant to undermine Russia and the legitimate government of Ukraine at any cost.

"Russia expert Mark Galeotti, a professor of global affairs at New York University, says the Night Wolves are not part of the counterculture; they are acting as "outlaws yet tools of the state" (Losh, 2016). The Surgeon's Night Wolves even started hosting rides to commemorate the Soviet's victory in World War II over the Nazis. Much of the anti-Western propaganda the group participated in was funded by the Russian state (Losh, 2016). The group also enjoys the personal endorsement of Vladimir Putin. He personally has ridden with them on their motorcycle tours and has pinned military medals on the chests of several Night Wolves who fought in Ukraine.

When Russia invaded the Crimea, they did so with an army of Night Wolves fighting alongside them. Led in Luhansk by a man named Kuznetsov, they claim thousands of members

and ascribe to a violent, ultra-nationalist agenda. According to Losh, they fight against the West's "Satanism" and fight for their Orthodox Church (Losh, 2016). Many are former Russian soldiers who fought in Chechnya, a war that featured a brutal insurgency. They also annexed the Crimea alongside Russian soldiers. This group has chapters in dozens of locations throughout Eastern Europe, several of which are militant. Their largest presence is in Ukraine and Russia. It boasts a membership composing over eleven thousand worldwide. For a paramilitary that operates with a non-state label, this is significant.

This gang enjoys the full support of President Putin and the Russian state. Its leader received the Medal of Honor from Putin in 2013 for their services to the Russian state (Lawrence, 2018). They receive funding, arms, training, and most importantly, Putin's personal blessing. He even rode with them at a biker rally in Moscow (Novosti, 2018). Orenstein and Kreko point out that an affiliate of the Night Wolves, a company called Wolf Holdings, is run by the Second-in-command of the Sevastopol Defense Forces and is currently under US sanctions. The Sevastopol Defense Force is the new Crimean military force directly controlled by Russia (Orenstein, 2018). They also were a key part of the invasion of the Crimea, alongside other paramilitaries. They captured a Ukrainian military base, a natural gas facility, and captured a Ukrainian officer (Orenstein, 2018).

The Night Wolves aren't the only 'Crusader' paramilitaries believing themselves to be holy warriors fighting for Orthodoxy against the armies of Satanism. There are dozens of foreign groups from other Slavic nations that have joined their like-minded compatriots in Eastern Ukraine to fight. One such group is a group called Serbian Honor.

Serbian Honor is an ultra nationalist group, primarily motivated by Pan-Slavic and Orthodoxy ideologies, based in Bosnia. It is led by Bojan Stojkovic, a former Serbian

paratrooper who was trained in Moscow and received a combat medal for fighting in Ukraine by a Russian general.

According to Julian Borger, Serbian Honor is funded and trained by the Kremlin via a humanitarian centre acting as a front to fund such groups. From this “humanitarian centre,” they receive funding and training to carry out various Moscow-ordered objectives. The group also is recruiting the criminal underworld in Bosnia and Serbia. According to Borger, they had a role in the Russian-led attempt on the life of the prime minister of Montenegro (Borger, 2018).

Maria Vivod, an expert in Serbian paramilitaries, confirmed a criminal connection. According to Vivod, Stojkovic was a former pimp running a brothel in Serbia where he was convicted. He has participated in Russian-funded military exercises and led some of his group to fight in Ukraine. He also “enjoys” the backing of the Serbian and Russian states and has connections in Bosnia that protect him (M. Vivod, personal communication, 2018). His group, Serbian Honor, is composed of former Serbian army, police, soccer hooligans, and criminals he has recruited. They also participated in the invasion of the Crimea (M. Vivod, personal communication, 2018). In a recent video, Stojkovic is seen pledging his support for a war with Kosovo and volunteering his group's service if such a war came about (Stojkovic, 2018). The video is in Serbian, but was translated by Vivod.

Vivod also pointed out the existence of a second Serbian group; Cetnik Movement. This group is led by its battalion commander Bratislav Zivkovic. He and his unit are currently fighting in Donesk, Ukraine, an epicenter of the war in Ukraine. He responded to questions about his involvement with Russia, denying there were any Russian troops in Ukraine. He claimed that this was a “classic” civil war between an oppressive Ukrainian government and Eastern Ukrainian separatists. He claimed the Ukrainian government was attempting to eradicate their “culture” and

Orthodox upbringing with Western thought, something he viewed as Satanic, evil, and un-Christian. He also claimed any reporting otherwise was “Western lies and propaganda” (Zivkovic, personal communications, 2018).

He listed his Orthodox faith as the reason he fought for the separatists in Ukraine. He sees himself as an Orthodox crusader (Zivkovic, personal communication, 2018). In an interview, he stated this. He also has posted dozens of religious arguments for the fighting in Ukraine on his group's facebook page. He was arrested in August 2018 for attempting to recruit fighters for his organization (Vivod, personal communication, 2018).

Vivod also detailed other Serbian paramilitary members arrested on similar charges in neighboring countries. A former journalist, now a member of a Serbian paramilitary, was arrested in Romania for recruiting fighters (Vivod, personal communication, 2018). He leads a separate group, also involved in the Ukrainian conflict on the behest of Russia.

Ukraine has suffered tremendously as a result of this invasion. They lost their chance to potentially make a bid to join the EU and NATO because they are embroiled in a war with the biggest rival of Europe. They have lost over 10,000 lives, 2800 of which were civilians. Donetsk and Luhansk used to be centers of industry that produced 16 percent of the country's GDP and held 15% of its populations (Buckley, 2018). Now, it is rubble, the site of an unending shadow war. Many millions have fled and the rubble of these two cities are now strongholds of separatist groups. Ukraine's economy was devastated by this war. Crimea also made a chunk of the Ukrainian economy. That now belongs to Russia. 4-13 trillion cubits of natural gas lie in the Black Sea, much of it in the Crimea. Significant oil reserves also lie in the Black Sea. All of it is now lost to Ukraine (NATO, 2019). The costs of this war have been massive.

The Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Exporting of Chaos

The Balkans have recently become a target of Russia in their paramilitary strategy. Groups built from the carnage of the Bosnian conflict and genocide have risen up, riding the wave of pan-Slavic nationalism and Russian Orthodoxy extremism.

Serbian Honor, the Cetnik Movement, and other Serbian paramilitaries are dedicated instruments of chaos in the Balkans. Serbian Honor's leader is on record calling for another war in Kosovo and aspires for Serbian control of Bosnia and Kosovo once again. The group is trained, armed, and funded by Russian entities intent on causing conflict in Republika Srpska. The Serbian government also supports them. This group, and others, are the first of a coming wave of attacks on Europe's sphere of influence. If another war started in the Balkans, especially one involving genocide like the Bosnian War, it would wreak havoc on the EU and NATO.

Russia's funding of Serbian Honor shows concrete proof of their involvement in the region. These humanitarian centres acting as fronts for Russian paramilitary training, arming, and funding are located in Republika Srpska, a semi-autonomous region in Bosnia, as well. Russian involvement in paramilitaries in the Balkans and their potential use to intervene in local politics has been documented. Russia has an interest in creating chaos in the region to accomplish its goal of attacking the Europe and creating problems for it to worry about. Here, paramilitaries are being used to accomplish these objectives. These groups are not directly controlled by the Kremlin, but they are contributing to their goals in the region. Russia has also contributed a significant investment in such groups. And now, these groups have gained combat experience in Ukraine.

The Night Wolves also have chapters operating in Eastern Europe. One of these chapters even operates a military base in Slovakia, a NATO and EU nation. It also established a base in Slovakia, successfully infiltrating a NATO country. This base resides on farmland owned by the membership and comes with several functioning tanks and Armored Personnel Carriers (APCS) that defend it. According to Orenstein and Kreko, it is a functioning military base (Orenstein, 2018). “Slovak President Andrej Kiska called the Night Wolves ‘a tool of the regime that has been involved in the occupation of a neighbouring country’ - referring to Russia's intervention in Ukraine” (Lawrence, 2018).

The Night Wolves also sponsor a “Balkans Tour” where they and other nationalists tour Bosnia and Serbia on motorcycles. According to Gadzo, they have been stoking separatist sentiments in Republika Srpska, the semi-autonomous region in Bosnia. This call to action, he argues, is one given on behalf of the Kremlin to disrupt Europe by creating a new crisis (Gadzo, 2018). The Night Wolves have also hosted training camps, funded by Russia, in Bosnia. On behalf of the Kremlin, the Night Wolves are training a new generation of separatist paramilitaries, according to Gadzo. Of course, Russia vehemently denied these allegations levied by Al-Jazeera and Bosnian authorities (Gadzo, 2018).

In Montenegro, Russia targeted the country in a failed coup in 2016. Montenegro recently became a NATO nation and it is already an EU nation. Militarily, it is the weakest NATO member with only a standing army of 2,000 and only a total population of 630,000 (Stacey, 2018). They do have important deep water ports on the Adriatic, making it a prime naval base and trading location (Kraemer, 7, 2018). For this reason, Russia has taken a keen interest in Montenegro. Putin has repeatedly attacked Montenegro's NATO membership, referring to it as an example of further NATO aggression (Kraemer, 8, 2018).

The coup's goal was to kill the pro-Western Prime Minister of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic and overthrow the government. Borger indicates Serbian Honor was a key part of the coup attempt (Borger, 2018). The operation was run by two Russian intelligence officers at the behest of the Kremlin (Farmer, 2017). Serbian nationalists led by local gendarmerie commander Bratislav Dikic conspired with Russian intelligence and the Montenegrin Democratic Front to overthrow the government on election night by starting political violence. Dikic and twenty men dressed as police planned to infiltrate and occupy the Parliament building. They planned on opening fire on protestors on election night and allow the Democratic Front to claim the government was attempting to suppress them violently. This would hopefully lead to the Montenegrin government overthrown, having already lost its prime minister to assassination. Montenegrin police uncovered the plot by unraveling a gun smuggling ring selling them weapons (Kraemer, 9, 2018).

Montenegro uncovered Russia's hand in the plot when fifty GRU commandos were discovered infiltrating the country. They planned on attacking an outpost, neutralizing it, and then travelling to the capital to assist in the coup hatched by Dikic. They disappeared after the plotters were arrested and both GRU agents overseeing the plot were detained (Kraemer, 10, 2018). The plot and the actions of these Serbian extremists almost resulted in Russia successfully overthrowing a sovereign NATO country with only one commando and a small paramilitary force. Stacey argues that the loss of Montenegro to a Russian incursion could shatter NATO irrevocably and split the alliance (Stacey, 2018).

Montenegro also paid a steep economic price for Russia's intervention. The coup contributed to a sharp economic downturn. After growing at 2.9 percent the year before,

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Montenegro's GDP growth fell to 0 in 2017. It went back up to 2.5 percent in 2018, still well below the 2.9 percent 2016 brought (WorldBank, 2019).

Conclusion

Putin's Russia has extensively used separatists, mercenaries, and irregular forces in several theaters throughout the world. The impact of their aggressive military campaigns has been extensive. In Ukraine, the war sent Ukraine into a recession before it was able to rebound. It also annexed a strategically important region and supported a manufactured rebellion in Eastern Ukraine which includes the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. This has deprived Ukraine of important natural resources and territory. It also forces them to fight a war they otherwise would not be fighting. Russia has faced Western sanctions which have crippled their own economy. However, Putin has used foreign campaigns like Ukraine to gain popularity with his people despite economic collapse partly caused by them. This hasn't slowed down their use of paramilitaries. Their full involvement is also masked by the use of paramilitaries.

In Eastern Europe, Russia has expanded their influence in the region and sowed seeds of conflict and chaos through their support of local paramilitaries. They almost achieved a successful coup overthrowing a Western government in a NATO and EU nation. In Bosnia, they have given Serbian paramilitaries the tools to deepen ethnic tension and potentially re-ignite the Bosnian War. Russia loses nothing by supporting such groups and it helps to undermine the EU and NATO, two assumed goals of the Russian state. Many of these groups, emboldened by Russian support and funding, often take steps to help destabilize the countries they inhabit on their own. Its support of paramilitaries in region it wishes to possess has created a web of pseudo-states. These pseudo-states contain Russian military presences and are controlled to separatists it funds, trains, and controls. Ossetia, Donetsk, and Luhansk are all prominent examples of these states.

In Georgia, the separatists supported there alongside FSB support have annexed small bits of territory without a strong retaliation from the Georgian state. The territory controlled by the Separatists allows Russia to hold onto key territory and provides them with valuable military installations in the Caucasus region.

Russia's paramilitary strategies and tactics have evolved with each intervention. They are increasingly using mercenary companies that operate as shadow armies in Syria, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. These companies define the next chapter in Russia's use of paramilitaries to militarily advance their foreign policy goals with plausible deniability. Before they created the Wagner Group, they tried to create a successful mercenary company they could control called the Slavonic Corps. The Slavonic Corpse ended in abysmal failure (Interpreter, 2018). However, they learned much from the experience and from its ashes, the Wagner Group was created.

The Wagner Group even attacked US troops in Syria with hundreds of men. The Russian wounded were flown to Russian military hospitals (Gaffon-Neil, 2018). The commander of that mercenary company, Col. Utkin, is a former FSB commander (Hauer, 2018). No diplomatic consequences resulted from the 3 hour long battle between the Russian mercenaries and US special forces. Putin disavowed them as mercenaries hired by an unknown contractor and the United States let it be (Yaffa, 2018). Such military action can be expected to continue.

The effect these interventions has had on Europe are obvious. It plunged Europe into crisis as Ukraine fell into war because of Russia's actions. Both Georgia and Ukraine were denied a chance to join NATO by Russian invasion. The hindering efforts of paramilitaries were a large part of this disturbance. They still prolong the war in Ukraine. The economic consequences have been devastating. The energy market in Europe has also been affected by the

loss of access to natural gas in the Black Sea, oil in the Black Sea, and the shale fields in Ukraine. In Montenegro, a Russian-funded paramilitary nearly succeeded in ousting the entire government of a NATO nation and helping replacing it with pro-Russian allies. It also collapsed the Montenegrin economy as a result. Europe may see consequences as a result of paramilitary operations in Slovakia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia. It is still too early to measure the effect of operations there. According to the insurgents themselves, they wish to restart the war in Bosnia and Kosovo. Russia's ever-evolving use of paramilitaries will continue to spread as success continues to be achieved.

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