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**THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE MILITARY COMPANIES IN THE
21ST CENTURY BATTLE SPACE**

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Abstract:

Modern battle space is in a permanent transformation due to social, economic, scientific and technological evolution. These aspects mainly changed the approach of conducting military operations and diversified the actors on the battle space. The article argues how PMC changes the modern way of conducting military operations and threats faced by states as a legal manager of armed violence. Such transformation was particularly highlighted by the fall of the Iron Curtain when the mass armies comprised by conscripts became inefficient. This factor generate condition for a new actor on the security field – private military companies, that tend to substitute some of the state responsibilities on the war monopol and bussines.

Key words: private military company, military operation, battle space, security

Contemporary battle space tends to be more complex and dynamic due to diversification of actors implied, tactics and techniques used, and not the last technological development that generate capabilities utmost from Cold War period. The changes in the international security arena generate a chain of factors that emerged international organized crime, human and goods illicit traffic, terrorism, dissolution of mass armies that consequently favoured ‘an open’ black-market arms trade. All these factors, coupled with social decadence, created precondition for the rise of a new actor in the security arena, and primarily in the war affaires. Such actors represented by private military companies (PMC) redefined the modern battle space.

First of all, the PMC’s in a short time could replace the national armies on the many sectors due to their ability to keep equipment and readiness of the units, sometimes higher than armies. In the same time the access to the military high-tech allowed them to compete with the states on the fields of conducting operations at all levels.

Another factor that promoted PMC on the war arena was the hyper militarisation of the armies and economies during the Cold War period. The collapse of the USSR and other similar entities has begun a period of decay in the military sector around the world mainly with reduction of the personnel and consequently the units (South-African - 32 Recon Battalion, USSR - Special Force Detachment Alpha, etc.) that was directly transformed in PMC.¹ Around 6 billion soldiers were released from active duty and became potential candidates for PMC. Former professional military personnel were available on the labour market all around the world up to the flag officers.²

The reduction in the Army, process mainly done without control lived space for armament black market that stimulated a free access to the armament and ammunition stocks.³ Taking

¹ Lock P., Military Downsizing and Growth in the Security Industry in Sub-Saharan Africa, [Strategic Analysis](#) Journal, Volume 22, [Issue 9](#), 1998

² Bonn International Center for Conversion, An Army Surplus. The NVA Heritage, BICC Brief No. 3, 1997

³ Idem.



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opportunity private sector gained new possibility to enter in the security domain that was entirely controlled by the state.

The economic decay of the period and the intensity of the conflicts that occurred during the 90's conducted to the revision of the state role in the security arena. The role of the national armies was restated due to necessity to respond to the new security dilemma. Furthermore, the new system concerted with the strategic priorities, political needs and technological progress 'open' the gates for PMC's. The priority on international missions pushed armies to the new challenges that forced them to adapt the operational capabilities by improving their flexibility at the all command levels. The new battle space became dominated by information that compeled soldiers to be not only a good warrior but also a diplomat, peacekeeper, journalist and public order agent. The new conditions constrained to alternate these roles perfectly, sometimes simultaneously - imperative imposed by the multitude of interests of the actors present in the operational area.

In such a situation created by 'the fog of war' the PMC's appeared as a necessity and a proper tool for the state help. However, it was used mostly as a source of profit more than as a security tool due to the multitude of conflicts all around the globe.⁴ Moreover, the casualties suffered by conventional forces during operations and displayed on media had a huge impact on society that forced state to focus on different methods to cover such segments. As an example can be 1993 UN operation in Somalia during which an American convoy was ambushed in Mogadishu.⁵ As a result, under civil society pressure the political leadership was forced to withdraw the contingent from the mission. Therefore, the PMC took initiative and proposed their services instead. Consequently, the battle space was reshaped by new actors that acted according to the new operational laws. However, beside the structure, equipment and the final goal, nothing made differences between armies and PMC's.

Thus, the main changes in the security environment of the XXI century is not the appearance of the PMC's but the way how they are employed. If before we spoke about the state monopoly on violence nowadays we remark a change in this field.⁶ However, it is a fact that in the conflicts are involved many actors with different agenda than the states, and the history shows that every conflict is based on at least economic-financial goal that influenced international relations where the state plays a central role. Jeffrey Herbst mentioned that the private vision on violence was a routine aspect of the international relations up to the XXth century.⁷

The state is a relative new form of government, appeared approximate 400 years ago, and for its consolidation almost every time was involved contracted armies.⁸ Even in the modern era the contractors have an important role. The majority of the forces that fought during the 30 Years War were contracted.⁹ Although is nothing new, the PMC's being used since antiquity, the way how are used by the political actors and the role that they play in the modern warfighting space. If initially the role assumed was just for logistical and security needs the last decades of the XXIst century tend to change this position. The PMC's tend to conduct full spectrum operations independently or at least

⁴ Gilligan A., Inside Lt. Col. Spicer New Model Army, Sunday Telegraph, 1998

⁵ Wright R., 4 U.S. Soldiers Killed in Somalia: Africa: Clinton pledges 'appropriate action'. Los Angeles Times, 1993

⁶ Thomson J., Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994

⁷ Herbst J., The Regulation of Private Security Forces, in Greg Mills and John Stremlau, eds., The Privatisation of Security in Africa, Pretoria: South Africa Institute of International Affairs, 1999

⁸ McNeill William, The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982

⁹ Mockler A., Mercenaries, Macdonald and Company, London, 1969



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as part of the conventional forces. From this point of view western experts classifies the PMC's in three main categories: military provider service, consulting and logistic support. Shearer defines military companies as entities that are designed to have a strategic impact, whereas private security companies are usually confined to specific areas and guard property and personnel.¹⁰ Avant distinguishes on the basis of the type of contracts signed¹¹ and Singer offers a distinction based on the battle space in which these services are provided.¹²

Military provider service companies usually are contracted by small states with a low level of military capabilities, but with immediate and extremely dangerous threat facing.¹³ Executive Outcomes and Sandline are examples that offered military services oriented on Special Forces and reconnaissance.¹⁴ The second type companies are consulting. With a huge human resource counting up to 12000 former military officers distinguishes from the first type by the fact that they provide just consultation for the operations and planning but are not involved in fighting.¹⁵ MPRI is an example that must be reminded. The third category offers logistic services and usually acts on entire operational area. They provide all logistic, technical support and transportation services.

The end of the defining conflict of the 20th century and the 'end of history' carried with it a decrease in western defense budgets in the absence of clear and present threats. The cutbacks, especially in the US, meant that state military professionals were now available for hire in the private sector.¹⁶

PMC's represent a novelty in the form that is present in the modern battle space. Their implication in the operational area directly changes the tactical and even strategic situation. Suggestive are the Ilovaisk, Kramators, Debaltsevo, [Khasham](#) or [Al Tabiyeh](#) battles, that emphasised the substantial changes made by employment of professional contractors in the tactical battle space. In both conflicts is mentioned Russian PMC Wagner. Due to a sophisticated equipment the PMC's were able to change tactical situation to 180° that overall changed the military approach to the operations.¹⁷ The PMC's showed one more time the importance of tactical and technical superiority in the modern battle space. Furthermore, the electronic capabilities emphasised the interconnection between conventional forces and PMC, and the new way are employed in the battle space.

Thus, the continuous evolvement of the private military sector creates preconditions for slow decrease of the weberian monopoly of the state on the armed violence.¹⁸ PMC anticipate a new vision on conducting wars, however, this fact do not put on risk the state that is the direct beneficiary but diminish its importance. Kevin O'Brien stated that by privatizing the armed violence and

¹⁰ Shearer D., *Private Armies and Military Interventions*, Adelphi Paper, New York: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998.

¹¹ Avant D., *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005

¹² Singer P.W., *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2008

¹³ Howe H., *Private Security Forces and African Stability: The Case of Executive Outcomes*, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1998

¹⁴ Executive Outcomes, *Special Training Programme Proposal*, 1992-1993

¹⁵ Singer P.W., *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2008

¹⁶ Singer, P. W., *Outsourcing War*, *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2), 2005.

¹⁷ <https://medium.com/dfrlab/minskmonitor-wagners-role-in-key-ukrainian-battle-revealed-95ee8ce133fe>

¹⁸ Weber M., *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York: Free Press, 1964



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security sector the state has both benefits and losses.¹⁹ Thus, this phenomenon characterises western powers rather than eastern like Russian Federation that might be a pioneer in this field. The rapid changes that operate at the international level compel the states to look out for the unconventional solutions and one of them is use of PMC that might cover the limits between legal and illegal.

If before use of PMC was primarily a western feature, the XXIst century brought it in Russian horizon. Trying to regain lost position during the '90, Russian Federation uses all possible military and non-military tools. Moreover, the recent conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine emphasised a change in conducting operations by Russian military. Often Russian troops are seen under different structure and posture in former soviet states, Syria, and even in African continent.²⁰ They are better equipped and proficient that shows that time for Klauzewitzian armies is off and they are replaced by highly mobile, with high-tech and agile units capable to fulfil a large spectrum of missions.²¹ However, the use of PMC came into Russian sight during the last decades and is emphasised by ‘Gherasimov’s doctrine’ in his famous speech in front of members of Frunze Academy. Thus, assigned working group didn’t come up with a solution for PMC on the national territory and as a result it wasn’t framed a legal status for them.²² From our point of view Russian Federation saw PMC’s as a flexible and precise tool to solve problems on the international arena. What is different from the western is that they are employed to act in the area of interest covertly and consequently as a rogue force. This fact changed the entire face of the war in XXI century. There is a conventional operation conducted by private organization without a legal status in interest of a legal government. An example is the clash between US forces and Wagner company members in February 2018. The resources, equipment, combat structure and tactics employed definitely shows the close cooperation with the Army and consequently with government.²³ Furthermore, their actions are coordinated with Russian military operations and are covert by Army intelligence to achieve a private interest. In our opinion, PMC’s might be a source of instability and organized crime in the conflict zones.²⁴

Analyzing these facts we can conclude that during the last decades, under cover of a obscure curtain was created a system of private companies with mercenary image²⁵ and performer of legal state violence²⁶, a semiautonomous ‘legalised’ structures and complementary tool for military operations. Such structures allow state to increase their presence in the operational area in the same time minimizing their visibility as an aggressor. Russian intervention in Crimea and in Eastern Ukraine is an example of such situations where military personnel ‘in vacation’ joined the ad-hoc formations of local militants.

¹⁹O'Brien K., Military-Advisory Groups and African Security: Privatized Peacekeeping, International Peacekeeping, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1998

²⁰<https://jamestown.org/the-mercenaries-behind-russian-operations-in-africa/>, accessed on 17.07.2020

²¹Singer P.W., *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the Twenty-first Century*, Penguin Publishing Group, 2009

²²Neelov V., *Private military companies in Russia: implementation experience and prospects (rus.: Частные военные компании в России: опыт и перспективы использования)*, Center for Strategic Assessments and Forecasts, Saint-Petersburg, 2013

²³Klare M., *The Kalashnikov Age*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol. 55, No. 1, 1999

²⁴Metz S., *Armed Conflict in the Twenty-first Century: The Information Revolution and Postmodern Warfare*, Strategic Studies Institute Report, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, 2000

²⁵Dickinson L., *Outsourcing war and peace: Preserving public values in a world of privatised foreign affairs*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011

²⁶McCoy K.E., *Organizational frames for professional claims: Private military corporations and the rise of the military paraprofessional*. Social Problems, 2012



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On the other hand, usually PMC's deployed in the operational area conducted security operations or covered logistics, the last decades is more emphasized involvement in direct clashes that gave a freedom of action for them. Consequently, all operations conducted by them must be coordinated by the staff of the conventional forces that slow down and sometimes block the command and control of the operation allowing PMC's to act in a shadow and blurry the modern battle space. Such situations create precondition for non-state actors to use them to gain economic profit.

Furthermore the integration of the PMC's in operations conducted by conventional forces creates new obstacles in the operational planning process that need to be more analysed. Their tactics and techniques usually are similar to militia and very tough to be followed in the battlefield, feature that gave new face to the operational space. In his book 'The future wars staff' Dvornikov appreciated the success of the Russian mercenaries in Syria as Putin's way to act in every spot of the globe if necessary that emphasis how PMC changed the nowadays battle space. In his view, such integrated units were deployed during the Yugoslavia and Iraq conflicts by US. Analysing Dvornikov's book Mark Voyager stated that is the best description of the use of mercenaries, militia and covert operations 'conducted to win wars against uprisings as Syria not against US, Europe or NATO armies'.²⁷

In our opinion, the way how PMC's were deployed in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, and Syria is the new form of conducting wars in XXI century.

In conclusion we can state that PMC are a perfect tool for states involved in hybrid type warfare. These entities confer a blurry framework that allows states to take aggressive actions against their adversary in a covert way. PMC's present the characteristic needed for the combat units in the XXIst century. They are capable to:

- operate as mobile joint forces in an integrated reconnaissance and information environment;
- use high-precision weapons and can provide specialists for high-tech that creates an advantage over the adversary;
- conduct Cyber and Electronic Warfare that allow to gain information superiority over the adversary.

The XXIst century is marked by many changes in the conduct of wars. Therefore the way PMC's are employed changed the entire view of the modern battle space. The border between legal and illegal, conventional and unconventional war are blurred. Moreover, the distorted employment of the PMC create precondition for the organized crime that is an obstacle for the peace restoration process. The national armies must be prepared to face a new challenge in the new era battle space.

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²⁷ Medar S., *Forţele hibride - mercenari, armate private*, Monitorul apărării și securității, Bucureşti, 2019



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