



## **Putin's Proxy Warfare Strategy**

**Maxim Worcester**

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### **Executive Summary**

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Proxy Wars are an indirect engagement with one state hiring proxies in another state to conduct subversive operations on its behalf. The use of proxies is not new – during the Cold War all major parties made use of such forces in order to pursue their strategic goals without becoming directly involved.

What however if there are insufficient proxy forces available in the country or region which a regime wishes to destabilize? In the case of the civil war in Angola the then Soviet Union used Cuban proxies. Today Russia lacks the vassal states of the past and this situation cuts to the heart why Russian PMCs are poised to become key proxy war-wagers of the future. What appears to be in the making is a deniable professional intervention force controlled by the state and used to advance Russian interests outside the country. The occupation of the Crimea by “non-Russian forces” is a blue-print for the future.

### **About ISPSW**

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The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is objective and task oriented and is above party politics.

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## ANALYSIS

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When President Putin delivered his report on the government's performance in 2011, Alexi Mitrofanov, a Just Russia deputy, raised the issue of using private military companies (PMCs) as a tool of Russian influence abroad. Putin's answer, unsurprisingly, was "Yes, I think we could consider this option."

In the meantime, a draft Duma bill has been prepared and is being examined by military experts. It is envisaged, that the PMCs would be under full control of the Ministry of Defense which would use them for immediate response for a range of threats. In a further development the nationalist LDPR prepared a similar bill and submitted it to the legislature of North Russia's Pskov Region. The LDPR backed the move with a statement that "current political realities call for capable and specialized commercial organisations to enforce national interests in cases when international politics or law prevents the government from using regular military forces." Unlike United Russia, the LDPR wants Russian PMCs to be controlled by the national security service, the FSB.

There is currently only a limited market for heavily armed PMCs in Russia today. They could be employed by Russian oil and gas companies and in guarding Russian flagged ships; such work today is conducted by conventional security firms. The more possible deployment, however, is to help implement Eurasian integration and help stabilize post-Soviet republics in Central Asia and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Unlike in Europe or the US, there is no commercial argument for the establishment of such organisations other than to enforce national interests in cases when international politics or law prevent the government from using regular military forces and to provide Russian officers with a job after leaving the armed forces.

In August 1917 the British instigator of the Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, T.E. Lawrence, famously remarked: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands." He went on to say: "It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them." Lawrence's guidance is as relevant today as it was in his own time in the Middle East during World War 1. He was not the first to discover that Proxy Warfare, which could be characterized as warfare on the cheap, has proved an irresistible strategic allure for nations throughout the centuries.

Such wars are the product of a relationship between a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training and funding. In short, proxy wars are the logical replacement for states seeking to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly and bloody warfare. Proxy Wars are therefore an indirect engagement with one state hiring proxies in another state to conduct subversive operations on its behalf.

During the Cold War the Soviet Union made good use of proxies in order to gain a strategic advantage without becoming directly involved in conflicts. An example of this is the use of Cuban proxies during the civil war in Angola. A further example is the use of the Bulgarian Secret Police (Darzhavna Sigurnost) by the KGB in the assassination of Georgi Markov in London in 1978.

Russia today lacks the vassal states of the past such as Bulgaria or Cuba. Russia has however recognized that proxy wars remain an important issue in the post-Cold War era. Given the lack of reliable external proxies, Russia appears to have taken first steps to create a domestic proxy force it can deploy outside the country which would give the government a degree of plausible deniability. This development fits in very well with the way in which the Crimea was destabilized and occupied – not by Russian armed forces, but by "local patriots"



acting independently of the Russian government. In other words, Putin has not waited for the Duma to pass a new law governing the deployment of PSCs, he has already made use of an effective proxy force.

Recent events in the eastern Ukraine indicate that here too Putin is using both a local proxy force and other Russian elements (Military/PSC) to "keep the kettle boiling." These events in Ukraine have also shown the dangers of using Proxies in order to gain a strategic advantage. The shooting down of MH17 with the loss of 298 lives cannot have been in the interest of Putin or Russia, just as the arming of the fledgling mujahedeen in 1979 by both the Carter and Reagan administration was not in the long-term interest of the United States. In both cases the state lost control over the proxy.

The reasons for the continued importance of Proxy Wars are both economic and political. As the willingness of citizens to voluntarily join ever shrinking armies' declines and budgets are slashed, planners are turning to alternative ways of projecting power. Add to this the reluctance of politicians and voters of sending soldiers into harm's way, then the idea of proxy armies becomes very attractive. The use of proxy armies offers an economic and political alternative to expensive and un-loved standing armies.

The Russian armed forces in 2014 are not the force they used to be and Putin knows it. He has tried to reform, restructure and rearm, but as became apparent during the invasion of Georgia in 2008 such attempts have not been successful. Outdated equipment, lack of interoperability, poor training and planning resulted in a sham-bolic display of arms. The deepening economic crisis in Russia has resulted in the cancellation or postponement of reforms and equipment upgrades. Effectively the Russian efforts to reshape the armed forces have ground to a halt.

This situation cuts to the heart of why PMCs are poised to become key proxy war-wagers of the future. For Russia the creation of such a force would fulfil the function of minimizing political risks to Russia and as PMCs have lower start-up and running costs than the traditional military. In times when the coffers are empty, PMCs provide an effective army on the cheap.

First indications are that the proposed PMC would be armed with automatic weapons and that the selection criteria would be very strict. It can be assumed that there would be sufficient personnel in the ranks of the proposed PMC who would be able to operate heavy weapons such as captured armored vehicles, artillery and even sophisticated missile systems. Current operations of the separatist forces in eastern Ukraine suggest that this is already today the case. In other words, we are not talking of a typical western PMC charged with guarding a power plant in Afghanistan or Iraq, what appears to be in the making is a professional intervention force controlled by the state and used to advance Russian interest outside the country. At the same time such a force would be deniable at the outset of any intervention, much as the occupation of Crimea illustrated. The occupation of the Crimea was achieved without Russia openly having to directly commit military forces of its own – at least in the eyes of the public.

This disturbing development in Russia may reduce conflict escalation in the short term, but it does risk conflict intensification. Proxy Wars postpone international political uproar provoked by direct military intervention or invasion and this is why in a European context the developments in Russia are so worrying and needs to be addressed. The current European leadership is very reluctant to draw lines in the sand. It is almost unthinkable that Europe would threaten Russia with military action, and Putin knows that. The only conceivable situations were Europe would seriously consider taking up arms would be in the event of a NATO member being attacked.



24% of the population of Estonia are of Russian stock and speak Russian. If Russia decides to destabilize Estonia, much as it is doing in the Ukraine, Europe will seek to find a diplomatic solution first, then threaten sanctions, and then, maybe, implement the sanctions. NATO will not be able to intervene as no invasion has taken place. By that time Russia will have achieved its aim to destabilize the country and impose a proxy leadership.

On the other hand such an attempt to destabilize a NATO member might result in a robust NATO answer. Such a turn of events could rapidly spiral out of control and result in a direct conflict between Russia's proxy forces and NATO troops. Such a development might easily turn into an armed conflict between Russia and NATO.

During the cold war Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and NATO's escalation dominance prevented a direct armed conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries. Such mechanisms don't fit today's multipolar and multifaceted security environment. Russia has shown very little interest in engaging in a dialog to reduce the numbers of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and it is estimated that Russia has around 2000 tactical weapons in its inventory as opposed to NATOS's increasingly obsolete 150 - 200 gravity bombs. Russian military doctrine still clings to the notion of using tactical nuclear weapons, a doctrine which NATO abandoned some years ago. In addition, it seems as if Russia has not only stationed its Iskander missiles closer to the borders of NATO countries, credible reports suggest that such weapons are now deployed in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad.

NATO is ill-prepared to face and evaluate the threat posed by Russia. Besides improving the existing NATO rapid reaction force and the flow of intelligence, a continuous presence of NATO troops training and exercising in the Baltic would send a clear message to Russia and serve to reassure the local population. At the NATO summit being held in Wales in the autumn, NATO needs to re-examine the criteria, doctrine and responses for collective support against asymmetric attacks. Given the threat of ambiguous warfare the word "armed" should be removed from the clause in key article 5 of the NATO charter. Currently Russia is using a mix of tools including psychological operations, information warfare, massing of conventional forces on borders and the use of proxy forces in country to intimidate and destabilize the Ukraine and other governments in the region. Such operations seem to be cleverly designed to fall under NATO's threshold for reaction under Article 5.

The dynamics of Russia embarking on a strategy of Proxy Warfare are worrying indeed. The combination of weak and slow decision making in Europe and aggressive strategic intent in Russia add up to a highly unstable environment. We must assume that Putin will not back down from his aims to reestablish Russia to former glory, as impossible that goal might be. He is willing to take risks to achieve his aims and is also willing to utilize unorthodox methods along the road. It is an illusion to believe that we can keep this under control indefinitely relying on tools and methods of the Cold War that we no longer possess and which wouldn't work today in any case.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This analysis will also be published in the journal *Denkwürdigkeiten* of the Political-Military Society (pmg).



### About the Author of this Issue

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