

4.3.1. Private military companies

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Russia has numerous volunteer formations or private military companies (PMCs), many of which were created after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In June 2023, the MoD ordered that all of them sign contracts with the MoD.902 PMCs are actively engaged in recruiting volunteers for various formations and combat units and provide 'tens of thousands' of combatants in the war in Ukraine.903

As noted by Huseyn Aliyev, since 2024 all PMCs are registered with the MoD. They became 'quite firmly embedded within formal institutional framework', are tightly controlled by MoD, and their financing comes 'almost directly' from the MoD. While in general the contracts offered by PMCs are similar to those of the MoD, they offer higher one-off payments and monthly contract payments than those of the MoD and provide much more flexible service conditions.904

Some volunteer formations, such as 'Rusich' and the 'Russian Imperial League' use 'nationalist sentiments' in their recruitment efforts.905 Other groups which use pro-Russian patriotic rhetoric are the militias Union of Donbas Volunteers, PMC Tsar Wolves (*Tsarskie Volki*906), and units of the All-Russian Cossack Society.907 The latter is an umbrella organisation for various Cossack units: it is integrated into Russia's Combat Army Reserve (BARS) system and reportedly consists of 18 battalions comprising 25 000 members.908 One of the brigades of the All-Russian Cossack Society, Don Brigade, has reportedly operated under the PMC Redut, which is also reported to have paid its wages.909

As noted by Huseyn Aliyev, 'a whole range' of PMCs remain active in Ukraine, including Espanola and many other small formations. They continue to offer one-year contracts and reportedly respect the contract terms, allowing the recruited personnel to leave service after completion of the contract. More than 20 000 individuals have served under these contracts with various PMCs, and they were subsequently demobilised. Notably, 13 000 former PMCs reportedly received 'veteran status' in 2024.910

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