

4. Conclusion

This thesis had two goals: To gather as much information about the Wagner Group as possible and to classify it in terms of accountability and legitimacy. The first part has been achieved by tracing the development of Wagner from 2014 to 2023. Understanding Wagner only as a PMC or mercenary group is not enough to grasp the scope of the group's activity. Neither Russia nor the territorial states used Wagner only for of its military capabilities, because those could have been replaced by other actors, i.e. other armies or PMCs. While military services are an important feature of the group, it is more accurate to refer to Wagner as a network that offers multiple services and arrangements. First of all, there is the classic part of the PMC. Regarding the definitions presented by Singer at the beginning, Wagner offers services spanning all three parts of the definition. Offering direct combat services, it can be counted a military provider firm. It is also training and advising militaries in several states it is active in, while also supporting them through other means (like maintenance of weaponry). In sum, Wagner offers an extensive list of military services, so a hiring country can get almost anything it wants and needs. With respect to their referent object, Wagner provides security for governments and even non-state actors (such as the LNA), for which other PMCs or militaries would be unwilling to. Still, Wagner services go beyond classical security and also offers services like information campaigns in favor of their clients. Another important part of the network are Wagner's engagements in different economic sectors such as mining, oil production, or logging. As Wagner has made efforts to penetrate into every economy of states they were/are active in (though not successfully every time), these activities remain a significant part of the group's concept. It is

therefore important that Wagner should not only be addressed as a PMC or even just a band of mercenaries, but to acknowledge their versatility and flexibility to tackle unfamiliar situations. While there are some recurring factors, such as the attempted penetration into local economies and the disregard for human rights, all Wagner missions differ in various areas, such as intensity, size of troops and means of payment. The key takeaway, therefore, is to understand Wagner as something larger and more ambiguous than a classic Western PMC. Wagner is a *sui generis* entity in the PMC environment. This is also shown by its position in Russian society. To some extent, Wagner was connected to the Russian military, because they relied on them for arms supplies. At the same time, especially after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this relationship was steadily deteriorating. This work also showed several examples indicating that the relationship between Wagner and the Russian military was already difficult before 2022. Moving on to the second goal of this thesis, it is now time to answer the lead question:

How can the legitimacy and accountability of the Wagner Group be classified?

Wagner derives its legitimacy from multiple sources, depending on the relevant audience. For the actors Wagner operates for, several possible reasons have been examined. Specialization and effectiveness are only relevant factors for its legitimacy under certain circumstances. While Wagner might be more specialized than the militaries of local states, the same cannot be said about other PMCs or militaries from other states that might be willing to intervene. Therefore, this factor is only relevant if Wagner has no competition from other PMCs or militaries and is the only choice. Regarding the economic advantages of using Wagner, there are some indicators that employing Wagner is worth it for states. Especially countries lacking the sufficient funds to finance other PMCs, but willing to sell mining concessions, may find a good partner in Wagner. Still, the case of Mali, which now has to pay Wagner while they did not have to pay for MINUSMA, shows that economic motivation cannot be the only reason. In the case of the territorial states, disassociation

4. Conclusion

also did not play a major role. While some of them did not publicly announce the presence of Wagner for a long time, there is no indication that these countries tried to portray the group as something they had no knowledge of. A stronger reason for Wagner's presence is the possible connection to Russia. When buying weapons from Russia, Wagner's presence and training capacity was often included in the deal. This goes hand in hand with an anti-colonial, anti-Western motivation, with Russia – and therefore Wagner – on the side of the oppressed states, finally demanding complete freedom from their former colonizers. At least this is the story told by Wagner-related news agencies, which are helping to spread the narrative among local populations. This is another legitimizing factor, as it helps these (often shaky) governments to secure public support. A last point, which cannot for sure be claimed as a legitimizing factor, is Wagner's constant disregard for human rights. Even though there is no indication that countries hired Wagner because of these violations, it is still notable that several countries hired Wagner despite it being widely known how contractors behaved during their missions. Concerning the accountability of Wagner during these missions, there is basically no information on any contractor, or the whole group, being held accountable. While a report in the CAR came to the conclusion that Wagner indeed took part in crimes against humanity, they also concluded that the contractors could only be tried and sentenced in Russia. Another potential example is the case of Mozambique, the only mission Wagner operatives left after a short time and with business unfinished. Even though this could be an indicator for contract accountability, there is no evidence of why Wagner left the country, so the credit of holding them accountable cannot be freely given to Mozambique.

There are some overlapping features as to why the Russian government relied and sometimes still relies on Wagner. Regarding their specialization and effectiveness, the case is not immediately clear. Even though many Wagner contractors used to be part of Russian special forces, it does not distinguish them from the army itself, as they therefore have the same competencies and skills. One exception was that,

4. Conclusion

for a limited amount of time in 2022/2023, Wagner was the only actor reportedly recruiting prisoners into its ranks to fight in Ukraine, which was not possible for the Russian military at the time. When looking at the point of specialization from the perspective that Wagner is a network that offers multiple services, like information campaigns, the group became an even better tool, as it actually offered the possibility of spreading pro-Russian narratives across the African continent and beyond. The argument of economic advantage for using Wagner is definitely valid for the Russian state. While Putin claimed that between 2022 and 2023 there were payments of almost one billion Euros from the Russian government to companies linked to Wagner, there is no information about the costs of the missions in Syria or on the African continent. It is therefore likely that these missions were economically self-sustaining through their deals. Another important factor was the use of disassociation: For a long time, the Russian government denied the existence of Wagner and claimed that any Russians present in countries like Libya, the CAR, or Sudan were private entities, not related to the Russian state. These claims were kept alive even when there was almost undeniable proof that the group existed. Until its existence was officially acknowledged in 2022, Wagner stayed a myth and perhaps earned the title “Shadow Company” more than the companies spoken about in Nick Bicanic’s documentary. These operations in the grey area between light and shadows made Wagner a useful geopolitical tool for the Kremlin, another important legitimizing factor. Through Wagner, the Russian government was able to spread Russian influence and basically send Russian troops to countries, without sending the official army and losing credit with the Russian population. While the theoretical chapter came to the conclusion that the home state of a PMC has the greatest potential to hold its members accountable and the report about human rights abuses in the CAR also said that only Russia could hold these men accountable, the results are rather sobering. It is true indeed that the Russian state has a great potential of holding contractors accountable as the activities of Wagner would probably fall under the Russian definition of mercenaryism, but until

4. Conclusion

this day no contractor has been held accountable for any crime they might have committed abroad.

For the last analytical chapter about Wagner within the international system, it is the other way around as in the chapters before. While Russia and most of the territorial states have several reasons to consider Wagner legitimate but no motivation to hold it accountable, many “Western” states consider Wagner as illegitimate. At the same time third-party actors have only a limited amount of influence. The EU, USA, and UK all imposed sanctions on Wagner, France retreated from several African countries in protest of Wagner’s presence there. Still, as these countries do not have jurisdiction over the group, there are severe limitations on their ability to hold Wagner accountable. As for international institutions like the ICC, their potential is also limited, especially since Russia and, for example, Syria have not ratified the Rome Statute. While Mali, for example, is a member to the statute, it is very unlikely that there will be any form of cooperation between the junta and the ICC, as long as Wagner’s presence is wanted.

Comparing all these findings, it is possible to find a connection: Those actors, for which Wagner signifies and provides security, i.e. Russia, the governments of allied states, and warlords like Khalifa Haftar, consider Wagner legitimate. None of these actors is known for having great regard for human rights, thus it is not surprising that there have been no signs of Wagner being held accountable for its crimes in these countries. At the same time, actors who consider Wagner a threat to their security, by basically producing insecurity, are trying to hold Wagner accountable within their very limited potential. This relates back to the understanding of security, but in a slightly different way. While it is not possible to define an exact understanding of security for Russia, the Wagner Group, or the states it operates in, it is possible to frame it the following way: Those who get security from Wagner consider it legitimate and will not hold its members accountable, those who get insecurity from Wagner consider it illegitimate and will try to hold it accountable. Wagner is legitimate in the eyes of those who find

it useful. As long as they keep finding it useful, Wagner will not be held accountable.

During the writing process of this work, a lot happened in and around the group. From the capture of Bakhmut in Ukraine at the beginning of May, to the mutiny of Prigozhin on June 24th, to the eventual death of Prigozhin and Utkin in the plane crash on August 23rd. This work is too recent to answer the question of what will happen to Wagner in the future, or how the missions presented all over the African continent and Syria will continue. Nevertheless, one point needs to be clear: While Wagner might collapse, this is not the case for the system it created. Even though Prigozhin was an important figure for the organization, nothing presented in this work supports the claim that Wagner will not return, hidden in another cloak, as Candace Rondeaux said: “We should expect the Wagner Group to continually change according to Russia’s fortunes when it comes to arms, guns, gas, oil and gold. [...] We may see a new name. Could be anything. Could be Tchaikovsky Group.”²⁶⁰ So even if the death of Prigozhin and Utkin means that the network that has been built up over the years will collapse and fall into the hands of various competitors, they have created a concept which can serve as a template for future Russian networks.

²⁶⁰ Rondeaux, Candace (2023): Inside Prigozhin’s Wagner, Russia’s Secret War Company | WSJ Documentary. In: Wall Street Journal Documentary. Time Stamps: 36:11–36:41. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMXnJMC0FYI> [06.11.2023].