

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

Over the years, the name Wagner has been connected to many places around the world. First there was Ukraine, when the “little green men”, soldiers without insignia or anything that would reveal their affiliations, took over Crimea.<sup>104</sup> More countries quickly followed: Syria, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Libya, Mozambique, and others.<sup>105</sup> The following chapter has two aims:

1. Trace the development of the Wagner Group between March 18, 2014 and August 2023.
2. Classify these developments in terms of legitimacy and accountability by using the theoretical basis established in chapter two.

In doing so, this chapter will provide a coherent picture of the group, its motivations and actions, as well as its development over the past years. As stated above, Wagner personnel appeared in many countries over the years. It would go beyond the scope of this work to investigate every mission in detail. The idea is to look at cases which provide answers to the questions asked above. It is therefore not the aim to present every move that the Wagner Group has made over the past years, but to provide a coherent picture by examining some carefully selected examples. The first chapter will take a look at Wagner and its

---

104 Cf. Schwarzer, Matthias (2023): Was Sie über die Wagner-Gruppe wissen sollten. Die wichtigsten Fragen und Antworten. In: Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland, 24.06.2023. URL: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/prigoschin-und-wagner-was-steckt-hinter-der-soeldner-gruppe-und-wer-kaempft-fuer-sie-JD7BQ7ATVNA3ZJLMS7OK6SXWFE.html> [19.08.2023].

105 Cf. Rademeyer, Julian; Stanyard, Julia; Vircoulon, Thierry (2023): The Grey Zone. Russia's Military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa. Geneva: Global Initiative. P. 22.

position in the territorial states. Notably, Ukraine will not be discussed in this chapter, but in the following section 3.2, as it is not a classic territorial state for several reasons that will be explored later.

#### 3.1 Wagner and the Territorial States

Before a classification of whether or not Wagner is gaining legitimacy through effectiveness and specialization, it is necessary to look into the group's tasks on the ground. The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) lists three major services Wagner provides: Combat duties, training lessons, as well as disinformation campaigns.<sup>106</sup> Other important tasks include the protection of mines and VIPs.<sup>107</sup> Just by scanning these five tasks one can see that most of them (except maybe for the disinformation campaigns) are nothing only Wagner can provide, but tasks which are offered by PMCs (and sometimes also militaries) all around the world. This does not mean that there might not still be a good reason for these countries to employ Wagner: The contractors might be particularly good at providing those services or extremely affordable, but most countries could have chosen a different supplier for their needs. Another reason could be that some states actually rely on the fifth quality, Wagner's ability to influence public opinion through disinformation campaigns. The reasons will be examined in the following sections. Apart from Ukraine, which will be examined in chapter 3.2, Wagner is known to have participated in combat missions in six countries: Mali, the CAR, Sudan, Mozambique, Libya, and Syria.<sup>108109</sup>

---

106 Cf. Rampe, William (2023): What is Russia's Wagner Group doing in Africa? In: Center on Foreign Relations. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa> [21.08.2023].

107 Cf. Fasanotti, Federica (2023): The Wagner Group's future in Africa. In: Geopolitical Intelligence Services. URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/imprint/> [21.08.2023].

108 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023) P. 22.

109 Cf. Gibbons-Neff, Thomas (2018): How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria. In: New York Times, 24.05.2018. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>. [22.08.2023].

#### *Syria (2015–today)*

The oldest example, Syria, is a good starting point, as it could be seen as an ideal Wagner success story. Several factors make it special: First, it was the first known engagement of Wagner after Ukraine. Second, it would prove to be a very bloody one, with Wagner becoming involved in major combat with the Islamic State (which will be called Daesh) and other rebels. Before diving deeper into the analysis, a quick overview of the situation in September 2015 is needed. After four years of civil war, the regime of Bashar al-Assad found itself in a bad spot. While they had managed to regain control of some parts of the country, with help from Iranian and Lebanese allies, they now faced a new threat in the form of Daesh, which had managed to take over large parts of the country, as well as neighboring Iraq.<sup>110</sup> In this situation, Putin decided to step in and support the struggling government forces with an air campaign by the Russian Airforce. Within three months, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) reported that the Russian intervention had shifted the balance on the battlefield in favor of pro-government forces. Yet, they were lacking manpower on the ground, as the ISW stated in December 2015: “The regime nonetheless suffers from chronic shortages of manpower that render it unable to fully capitalize upon the expanded support provided by Russia and Iran.”<sup>111</sup> This is the point when Wagner came into play. The exact day when the first contractor set foot on Syrian soil cannot be determined. Marat Gabidullin, a former Wagner employee claims that he and his companions arrived in late December 2015.<sup>112</sup> Throughout his book, he introduces several men fighting alongside him. Most of

---

110 Cf. Institute for the Study of War (2015): Control Terrain in Syria: September 14, 2015. In: Institute for the Study of War, 14.09.2023. URL: [https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20Bobby%20Control%2014%20SEP\\_7.png](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20Bobby%20Control%2014%20SEP_7.png) [25.08.2023].

111 Institute for the Study of War (2015): Control of Terrain in Syria: December 23, 2015. In: Institute for the Study of War, 23.12.2015. URL: [https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20Bobby%20Control%20Map%2022%20DEC%2015\\_2.pdf](https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20Bobby%20Control%20Map%2022%20DEC%2015_2.pdf) [25.08.2023].

112 Cf. Gabidullin, Marat (2022): *Wagner. Putins Geheime Armee*. First Edition. Neuilly-sur-Seine: Econ. P. 59.

them were former members of the Russian armed forces, often elite units, and some of them even had combat experience from previous conflicts like Afghanistan, Chechnya, or Ukraine.<sup>113</sup> The exact number of contractors sent to Syria is unknown, but several reports suggest that there were around 5000 men in the country at the height of the mission.<sup>114</sup> The first mission they took on, according to Gabidullin, was to provide training to the Syrian PMC “Desert Hawks”.<sup>115</sup> In addition to these tasks, Wagner participated in many battles throughout Syria. Sometimes it was there to guide its Syrian allies or provide targets for the Russian Airforce, in other cases its members made up the bulk of the ground forces, acting as shock-troops.<sup>116</sup> It would exceed the scope of this work to analyze every battle Wagner participated in, but there are still some factors that are worth pointing out. The first one is Wagner’s entanglement in the Syrian economy. Gabidullin wrote that during his training he received a payment of 80,000 Rubles per month, for going abroad a contractor would get 120,000 Rubles, and for participating in combat missions it would even be 150,000 Rubles.<sup>117</sup> Yet, one can imagine that the Syrian government in 2015 was not really capable of paying a company such amounts of money. Several sources reported that Wagner troops in Syria were getting paid through the oil- and gas revenues from the fields they liberated. Reuters wrote that the Evro Polis LLC, an oil company related to Prigozhin, has a contract with the Syrian state company Petroleum Corp, which guarantees a 25% share of the revenues.<sup>118</sup> For the Syrian government this is a double-edged

---

113 Cf. Ibid. P. 64.

114 Cf. Thoms, Sija (2023): Russia’s Wagner Group: Where is it active? In: Deutsche Welle, 25.06.2023. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-wagner-group-where-is-it-active/a-66027220> [26.08.2023].

115 Cf. Gabidullin, (2022). P. 63.

116 Cf. The Economist (2017): How “Wagner” came to Syria. In: The Economist, 02.11.2017. URL: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/11/02/how-wagner-came-to-syria> [15.11.2023].

117 Cf. Gabidullin (2022) P. 46–47.

118 Cf. Reuters (2023): What does the Wagner Group do? Operations in Africa and the rest of the world explained. In: Reuters, 30.06.2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/wagners-global-operations-war-oil-gold-2023-06-29/> [25.08.2023].

sword. One positive effect was that they could avoid immediate costs, as the payment would be handled later. Another was that the payment through oil- and gas also created further incentive for the company to make sure that the contractors secure the oil- and gas fields, as it would not get paid otherwise. After all, 75% revenues are better than 0%: As long as the fields were under the control of Daesh or other rebels, the Syrian government would not profit from them at all, or even worse, their enemies were profiting from them. The negative side becomes visible in the long run: No information can be found anywhere about the lengths of these contracts. From a business perspective, it would only make sense for Wagner if these were long term contracts to compensate for the losses during the campaign and to eventually get money out of it. Two points can be taken from this: First, the “Business-Model-Wagner” might seem quite appealing for a rogue government with small money but a lot of potential resources. Second, it shows that Wagner is more than just a mere PMC, as it is not just providing military services, but also getting involved in the exploitation and trade of resources. Before moving on to the next country, there is one last thing that needs to be addressed: Wagner personnel is suspected to have committed several crimes against civilians in Syria. The most famous case was the brutal murder of Mohammad Taha al Ismail Abdallah, whom they had suspected to be a deserter of the Syrian army or, according to other sources, a jihadist.<sup>119</sup> The video of men torturing and beheading the Syrian went viral and journalists were later able to identify one of the men in the video as a member of Wagner.<sup>120</sup> There is no indication that the people involved in the killing were held accountable by Syrian law enforcement or even questioned. Nor is there information, for example provided by Gabidullin, that contractors ever had to fear being held accountable by a Syrian for anything they might have done. As there is no more information about the accountability of Wagner within Syria,

---

119 Cf. Roth, Andrew (2019): Man who filmed beheading of Syrian identified as Russian mercenary. In: The Guardian, 21.11.2023. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/21/man-filmed-killing-torture-syrian-identified-russian-mercenary-wagner> [24.08.2023].

120 Cf. Ibid.

the next country Wagner is known to be active in and that will be explored is Sudan.

#### *Sudan (2017–today)*

Sudan became the first example of Wagner involvement on the African continent. In 2017, Russian officials met with then-president of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir. Russia and Sudan had been getting closer since 2014, as evident from “oil, arms and nuclear energy deals to the potential establishment of a Russian military base at Port Sudan.”<sup>121</sup> Deepening the relations, the Wagner linked company M Invest would get access to gold mines in Sudan.<sup>122</sup> Leaked documents show that the 100 Wagner operatives advised al-Bashir in his struggle to suppress the pro-democratic protests at the time through means like fake news, for example branding the protestors as pro-Western, pro-LGBTIQ\*, and anti-Islamic, or even to publicly execute some of the protestors.<sup>123</sup> Wagner itself was also responsible for some crimes against civilians: According to the Africa Defense Forum (ADF), contractors killed several artisanal gold miners in the region of South Darfur.<sup>124</sup> Despite these efforts, the military leadership of Sudan decided to oust al-Bashir when protests erupted throughout the country, not only threatening the dictator, but also the dominant position of the Sudanese military in society and economy.<sup>125</sup> The end of al-Bashir did not mean the end of Wagner in Sudan though, as it kept its ties and deepened its relations with

---

121 Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 55.

122 Cf. Government of Russia (2017): Dmitry Medvedev’s meeting with President of the Republic of Sudan Omar Al-Bashir. In: The Russian Government, 24.11.2017. URL: <http://government.ru/en/news/30259> [27.08.2023].

123 Elbagir, Nima; Lister, Tim; Shukla, Sebastian (2019): Fake news and public executions: Documents show a Russian company’s plan for quelling protests in Sudan. In: CNN, 25.04.2019. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/25/africa/russia-sudan-minvest-plan-to-quell-protests-intl/index.html> [27.08.2023].

124 Cf. ADF (2022): Wagner Group terrorizing Sudanese Gold Miners. In: ADF, 19.07.2022. URL: <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/07/wagner-group-terrorizing-sudanese-gold-miners/> [27.08.2022].

125 Schauseil, Wasil (2020): Die demokratische Revolution im Sudan. In: Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Vereinten Nationen, 21.10.2020. URL: <https://dgvn.de/meldung/die-demokratische-revolution-im-sudan> [27.08.2023].

the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Mohammed Hamdan Daglo, called Hemeti.<sup>126</sup> Especially after the coup d'état by the RSF and the Sudanese military against the interim civil-military government, the relationship deepened. Still, Wagner also tried to keep good relations with the military leadership to protect their businesses in Sudan. Interestingly, reports show that in this case Wagner was paying the Sudanese company Aswar, which has links to the Sudanese military, to provide “security services” for M Invest., as the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) states.<sup>127</sup> When fighting broke out between the RSF and the Sudanese Military, Wagner did not enter the battlefield on any side. However, several reports indicate that, while not fighting themselves, Wagner companies provide support by delivering arms to the RSF.<sup>128</sup> To do so, they appear to use their bases in neighboring countries of Sudan, namely Libya and the CAR. The next section will examine Wagner’s activities in the CAR.

#### *Central African Republic (2018–today)*

Following their activities in Sudan, Wagner pushed into other African countries. One of the most famous examples is the CAR, as the case could be described as a perfect template for possible services of Wagner and their respective costs. They guard the president, they train and support the CAR military in their struggle against rebel movements, they spread fake news to delegitimize opposition movements and the former colonial power France, and they secure and operate mines.<sup>129</sup> The contractors entered the country in 2018, when the capital was threatened to be overrun by rebels. Their exact number cannot be

126 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 56.

127 Cf. Dihmis, Lara; Klazar, Erin; Sharife, Khadija (2022): Documents Reveal Wagner’s Golden Ties to Sudanese Military Companies. In: OCCRP, 02.11.2022. URL: <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/documents-reveal-wagners-golden-ties-to-sudanese-military-companies> [27.08.2023].

128 Cf. Arvanitidis, Barbara; Elbagir, Nima; Mezzofiore, Gianluca; Qiblawi, Tamara (2023): Exclusive: Evidence emerges of Russia’s Wagner arming militia leader battling Sudan’s army. In: CNN, 21.04.2023. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl/index.html> [27.08.2023].

129 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 49.

estimated as it has varied over time. A report from February 2023 indicated that around 1,000 Wagner personnel were in the country.<sup>130</sup> After the mutiny and the attempted march on Moscow however, it was reported that a number of contractors had left the country, which was denied by CAR government sources. Just a month later, and only a few days before the CAR was to hold a referendum for a change of the constitution, more current reports indicated that more contractors were flown into the country to “provide security” during the referendum.<sup>131</sup>

Before examining Wagner’s activities in the CAR more closely, it needs to be clarified that it is not the only foreign security actor in the country, as there is also the European Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM-RCA), the European Advisory Mission in the Central African Republic (EUAM-RCA), and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).<sup>132</sup> The UN itself states that it currently has 13,396 troops in the CAR, with the potential of deploying 14,400, with Rwanda being the biggest supplier of 2,148 soldiers.<sup>133</sup> Rwanda also has several bilateral agreements of sending troops to the CAR in exchange for mining concessions and land for agricultural products.<sup>134</sup> The UN-mission has

“the protection of civilians as its utmost priority. Its other initial tasks included support for the transition process; facilitating humanitarian assistance; promotion and protection of human rights;

---

130 Cf. Burke, Jason; Salih, Zeinab Mohammed (2023): Wagner mercenaries sustain losses in fight for Central African Republic gold. In: *The Guardian*, 02.02.2023. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/02/wagner-mercenaries-sustain-losses-in-fight-for-central-african-republic-gold> [24.08.2023].

131 Cf. Africanews (2023): Hundreds of Wagner fighters arrive in Central Africa: Russian security group. In: *Africanews*, 17.07.2023. URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/07/17/hundreds-of-wagner-fighters-arrive-in-central-africa-russian-security-group/> [28.08.2023].

132 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 50.

133 Cf. UN (2023): MINUSCA Fact Sheet. In: United Nations Website, 28.08.2023. URL: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusca> [28.08.2023].

134 Cf. International Crisis Group (2023): Rwanda’s growing role in the Central African Republic. In: *Crisis Group Africa Briefing Vol. 191*. P. 1.



support for justice and the rule of law; and disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and repatriation processes.”<sup>135</sup>

For EUTM-RCA, the mandate is the following:

“The mandate consists in the support of the CAR authorities in the preparation and implementation of the upcoming Security Sector Reform by assisting the FACA [Forces Armées Centrafricaines; Authors Note] to manage their situation and to build the capacity and quality needed to meet the goal of a future modernized, effective, ethnically balanced and democratically accountable FACA.”<sup>136</sup>

The EUAM-RCA advises the CAR government in terms of security sector reform efforts.<sup>137</sup> It is important to highlight the presence of these other forces, as they could be described as a “contamination of the sample.” A good example is the offensive by the rebel alliance Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) in December 2020, which was stopped in a joint effort by Central African Armed Forces cooperating with Wagner and a contingent of the Rwandan army.<sup>138</sup> In a case like this it is difficult to determine the impact of Wagner, as there is no control sample of the same battle in which only Wagner supported the FACA against the CPC. It is therefore necessary to focus on cases and information that can safely be traced back to Wagner.

First of all, there is Wagner’s engagement in the economic sector of the CAR. Companies with ties to Prigozhin operate in various fields all across the CAR. The most important one is the mining of gold and diamonds, using the companies Lobaye Invest and Midas Resources.<sup>139</sup> The CAR government granted these companies mining concessions, to

---

135 UN (2023).

136 EUTM-RCA (2022): EU Training Mission RCA Fact Sheet. In: EUTM-RCA, 22.11.2022. URL: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20221223\\_Fact%20Sheet%20EUTM-RCA\\_MPCC.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20221223_Fact%20Sheet%20EUTM-RCA_MPCC.pdf) [28.08.2023].

137 Cf. EUAM (2023): EU Advisory Mission in the Central African Republic. In: EUAM, 28.08.2023. URL: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euam-rca\\_en?s=3344](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/euam-rca_en?s=3344) [28.08.2023].

138 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 50.

139 Cf. Ibid. P. 52–53.

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

the detriment of artisanal miners and other foreign companies. While the Canadian company Axmin only had its contract revoked and has been in negotiations with the CAR government ever since then, contractors allegedly attacked artisanal miners, sometimes even crossing the border into South Sudan.<sup>140</sup> These two companies are part of a large net of companies and individuals which are based in Russia, the CAR, and Madagascar, and more or less loosely connected.<sup>141</sup> Wagner is also more and more entering the wood market, selling timber from regions they liberated through the company Bois Rouge.<sup>142</sup> UN personnel also suspect that Wagner will try to move into other lucrative businesses like cattle theft and the protection of herders.<sup>143</sup> The example of the CAR therefore shows that Wagner and its associated companies are able and willing to get into different markets, more or less violently pushing out competitors.

Another important factor of Wagner's presence in the CAR is their informational warfare, which has two major aims. The first one is to promote and legitimize Russia as a player in the CAR and in Africa generally. Wagner affiliates helped to build up a radio station which has a pro-Russian agenda.<sup>144</sup> Another important contribution was the movie "Tourist," which portrays the heroic saving of the CAR by Wagner.<sup>145</sup> The Wagner mining companies also organize sports- and cultural events, like the screening of "Tourist," where they also handed out "Je suis Wagner" shirts.<sup>146</sup> While promoting Russia, the information machinery of Wagner also has the goal to discredit "Western" actors

---

140 Cf. Ibid. P. 54–55.

141 Cf. Ibid. P. 52.

142 Cf. Carter, Sarah; Patta, Deborah (2023): How Russia's Wagner Group funds its role in Putin's Ukraine war by plundering Africa's resources. In: CBS News, 16.05.2023. URL: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-wagner-group-ukraine-war-putin-prigozhin-africa-plundering-resources/> [28.08.2023].

143 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 55.

144 Cf. Ibid. P. 51.

145 Cf. Campbell, Matthew (2022): Wagner Group: The Russian mercenaries hunting Zelensky. In: The Times, 05.03.2022. URL: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/wagner-group-the-russian-mercenaries-hunting-zelensky-dttx20zj6> [29.08.2023].

146 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 51.

in the region, most famously France, which used to have troops in the country. The French soldiers were deployed in the CAR after fights broke out in 2013. Even though the mission officially ended in 2016, some units remained in the country to train and advise the FACA until 2021. The troops were eventually ordered to leave the CAR due to the presence of Wagner.<sup>147</sup> Until today, Wagner uses a network of social media accounts on X (previously Twitter) and Facebook to fuel anti-French resentments, the latest example trying to link the murder of nine Chinese nationals in a mine in the CAR to France, saying they wanted to discredit the Wagner Group by linking the murders to them.<sup>148</sup> This work does not try to deny any potential failures and possible neo-colonial behavior by France in its old colonies. Yet, the goal is to describe the behavior and missions of Wagner, not to explore the potential neocolonialism of France in its former colonies. And Wagner for sure profits from depicting France as the old colonial power, not willing to give up its resources in the former colonies. Whether or not the information provided by Wagner is true is not necessarily important, as long as the message catches on with the local population.

The CAR also has one more important function due to its geographical location. Reports show that Wagner used its bases in the CAR to smuggle weapons for the RSF militia in Sudan in its fight against the Sudanese military.<sup>149</sup>

The most prominent case of human rights violations in the CAR, in which many also suspect the involvement of Wagner, was the murder of three Russian journalists in July 2018, who wanted to investigate

---

147 Cf. Africanews (2021): Last French soldiers leave Central African Republic. In: Africanews, 15.12.2021. URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2022/12/15/last-french-soldiers-leave-central-african-republic/> [29.08.2023].

148 Cf. Bate, Felix; Irish, John; Pineau, Elizabeth (2023): France targets Wagner and Russian disinformation in Africa. In: Reuters, 21.06.2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa-france-targets-russian-wagner-disinformation-2023-06-21/> [29.08.2023].

149 Cf. Elbagir, Nima (2023): Kill, terrorize, expel: Testimonies detail atrocities by Wagner-backed militia in Sudan. In: CNN, 17.06.2023. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/16/africa/darfur-sudan-wagner-conflict-cmd-intl/index.html> [29.08.2023].

the activities of the group. They were working for the Dossier Center of former Russian oligarch Khodorkovsky, who is living in exile.<sup>150</sup> The Russian foreign ministry blamed the murder on a local gang, but also partly on the journalists themselves, as they were travelling with tourist visa instead of officially registering as journalists.<sup>151</sup> This was not the only case where Wagner is thought to be involved in the killing of non-combatants. As in Syria and Sudan, there are several reports on Wagner committing crimes against civilians; for example, in July 2021, when suspected Wagner personnel killed twelve unarmed men near the city of Bossangoa.<sup>152</sup> In 2021 this, along with other incidents and international pressure, forced the CAR to create a commission to investigate any possible involvement of Russians in crimes against IHL. The commission later reported that instructors might have participated in these events, but that they were only to be prosecuted by Russian military tribunals.<sup>153</sup> Keeping these findings in mind, the next example examined will be Libya.

#### *Libya (2018–today)*

As in the other cases, it is not possible to pinpoint the exact moment when Wagner entered Libya. While “The Grey Zone” found proof of

---

150 Cf. Mudge, Lewis (2020): The Murder of Three Russian Journalists Should Not Go Unsolved. In: Human Rights Watch, 10.08.2020. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/10/murder-three-russian-journalists-should-not-go-unsolved> [29.08.2023].

151 Cf. Kara-Murza, Vladimir (2018): The Kremlin’s mysterious mercenaries and the killing of Russian journalists in Africa. In: Washington Post, 21.08.2018. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/08/21/the-kremlins-mysterious-mercenaries-and-the-killing-of-russian-journalists-in-africa/> [29.08.2023].

152 Cf. Human Rights Watch (2022): Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces. In: Human Rights Watch, 03.05.2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces> [24.08.2023].

153 Cf. Valade, Carol (2021): RCA: le rapport de synthèse de la commission d’enquête spéciale laisse des questions en suspens. In: Radio France Internationale, 03.10.2021. URL: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20211002-rca-le-rapport-de-synth%C3%A8se-de-la-commission-d-enqu%C3%AAtes-sp%C3%A9ciales-laisse-des-questions-en-suspens> [29.08.2023].

Wagner's presence in Libya from at least February 2019, other reports indicate that they had already entered the country in October 2018.<sup>154</sup> After the death of long-term dictator Gaddafi in 2011, civil war broke out between several factions. When Wagner entered the country, the main line of conflict was between the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east around Benghazi and Tobruk under Chalifa Haftar. Wagner joined the side of the LNA, which is also supported by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while the GNA is supported by Türkiye and Qatar.<sup>155</sup> As always, the exact number of Wagner employees cannot be determined because there is no exact information and it varied over time. For example: In April 2019, between 350 and 400 contractors directly participated in the LNA offensive against Tripoli, while there were roughly 3,000 Wagner employees in the country.<sup>156</sup> Reports indicate that the other contractors occupied military facilities as well as oil plants in eastern- and southern Libya. While the presence in Libya does not seem to stand out from the cases already presented, there are details that need more attention.

First, there is the specialization of the contractors involved. Of course, this was important in the previous cases as well. Nevertheless, many analysts point out the significance in this case. DW interviewed GNA soldiers who fought on a front line against the Wagner forces close to Tripoli. According to them, it was not only the better training of the contractors that was visible on the field. They were also equipped with much more sophisticated weaponry than their Libyan

---

154 Cf. ADF (2023): Wagner Mercenaries Remain a Barrier to Peace in Libya. In: Africa Defense Forum, 28.02.2023. URL: <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/02/wagner-mercenaries-remain-a-barrier-to-peace-in-libya/> [13.11.2023].

155 Cf. Lacher, Wolfram (2020): Libyen. In: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 16.12.2020. URL: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/54649/libyen/#node-content-title-0> [09.09.2023].

156 Cf. UK Foreign Affairs Committee (2022): Written Submission on Wagner's Activities in Libya. In: UK Foreign Affairs Committee, 05.2022. URL: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/108429/pdf/> [09.09.2023].

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

adversaries.<sup>157</sup> While this was implied and sometimes mentioned in the cases presented before, it shows better than anything else that Wagner relied (and still relies) on well-trained former military members. The evidence becomes even stronger when looking at the equipment they ordered from Russia: T-72 tanks and high-end radar equipment, which – according to military analysts – cannot be operated if a soldier is not properly trained.<sup>158</sup> A report about Wagner’s activities in Libya to the committee on foreign affairs of the UK listed Wagner’s tasks during the offensive on Tripoli in 2019:

“Wagner provided tactical assistance and Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR) for artillery and aerial strikes. Contrary to media reports, there were never more than 350–400 Russians directly engaged in the battle for Tripoli, most of whom were not involved in frontline duties, with their most important contributions being aircraft maintenance, specifically of helicopters close to the frontline.”<sup>159</sup>

US intelligence also indicates that Wagner was supplied from Syria with fighter jets for close air support in Libya.<sup>160</sup> All of this information from Libya shows that Wagner is more than just some rag-tag group of mercenaries with guns, but that it can rely on fighters who are well trained in the use of equipment, and that these fighters also received the equipment they needed to operate successfully.

The second exceptional part about Libya is the way Wagner employees get paid. In an oil-rich country like Libya, one would expect them to try to get similar concessions from Haftar as they did in Syria. While Haftar indeed controls many of the oil fields in the country,

---

157 Cf. DW (2023): The Wagner Group in Libya – Who’s pulling the strings? In: Erastov, Andrei. DW & BBC. Time Stamps: 03:45–04:55. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eLF8SsmIPo> [09.09.2023].

158 Cf. Ibid. Time Stamps: 43:50–45:19.

159 UK Foreign Affairs Committee (2022).

160 Cf. Africom (2020): Russia Deploys Military Fighter Aircraft to Libya, Africom Officials say. In: U.S. Department of Defense, 26.05.2020. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2197202/russia-deploys-military-fighter-aircraft-to-libya-africom-officials-say/> [09.09.2023].

the resource can only be sold on the international market through the National Oil Corporation, which is based in Tripoli.<sup>161</sup> Furthermore, according to an expert interviewed for “The Grey Zone” report, it is not that profitable to sell oil on the black market: “In Libya, the dynamics are structurally not the same, [...] While fuel smuggling is a multibillion-dollar industry, the capital-intensive nature of the sector, coupled with the logistics involved in smuggling the oil, render this a slightly more expensive and complicated effort to carry out.”<sup>162</sup> The question thus remains: How does Wagner get its money for a rather big mission, in which they also rely on expensive, high-end equipment? Reports indicate that, at least until the end of the offensive on Tripoli, Wagner received payments through a company based in the UAE.<sup>163</sup> This shows that Wagner does not only rely on just one way to finance their operations, but that the organization has a certain amount of flexibility. Nevertheless, the report submitted to the UK committee on foreign affairs indicates that the UAE’s support for Wagner had already ended after the failed military operation on Tripoli. While there is no prove for that claim, it is expected that the Russian Defense Ministry then took over the financing of Wagner in Libya.<sup>164</sup>

The following information about Wagner’s operations in Libya is neither special nor new, but needs to be mentioned to grasp the whole picture. First, as was the case in all the other examples, Wagner is suspected to have massacred civilians during the offensive on Tripoli.<sup>165</sup> Second, there is the important geographic location of Libya as a bridge-head for further operations on the African continent. It also appears to be using Libya as a hub to deliver weapons to other operations or allied groups, like the RSF in Sudan.<sup>166</sup> In comparison to the CAR, Wagner

---

161 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 59.

162 Ibid. P. 60.

163 Cf. Detsch, Jack; Mackinnon, Amy (2020): Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia’s Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya. In: Foreign Policy, 30.11.2020. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/pentagon-trump-russia-libya-uae/> [10.09.2020].

164 Cf. UK Foreign Affairs Committee (2022).

165 Cf. DW (2023) Time Stamps: 32:28–33:53.

166 Cf. Elbagir, (2023).

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

is not really present as an economic actor in Libya, but very much as a military one. After these two slightly different examples, the next one will be Mozambique.

#### *Mozambique (September 2019–November 2019)*

While Syria and Libya and their Islamist insurgencies are well-known conflicts, it is rather unknown that Mozambique has been fighting an Islamist insurgency for quite some time. In 2017, militants affiliated with Daesh overran Mocímboa da Praia, a city in the north of Mozambique.<sup>167</sup> After a meeting between the Mozambiquan president Filipe Nyusi and Vladimir Putin in August 2019, around 200 contractors entered the country in September to support the “Forças Armadas de Defesa de Moçambique” (FADM) in their struggles.<sup>168</sup> Only two months later, Wagner had suffered a dozen casualties and left Mozambique with business unfinished. Research by the Institute for Security Studies indicates that there were several problems between the FADM and Wagner. Nyusi appealed to Putin in the hope that Russia would send official troops to the country.<sup>169</sup> The other problem was the unwillingness of the FADM to simply use Wagner methods. When the contractors had singled out what they believed to be insurgent bases, they wanted to bomb them, which was rejected by military officials.<sup>170</sup> This lack of coordination is suspected to be the reason behind Wagner’s casualties. Details on how Wagner was paid, or supposed to be paid, were never published. As the north of Mozambique is relatively rich in minerals and has a large offshore gas field, one assumption is that payment was intended to be made through exploitation rights after they pacified the region.<sup>171</sup> Even though this was a very short operation, Wagner’s

---

167 Cf. Vooren, Christian (2023): Der Terror kam um 15 Uhr. In: Zeit Online, 30.08.2023. URL: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2023-08/cabo-delgado-mosambik-terroristen-gruppe-wagner-total-energies> [10.09.2023].

168 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 58.

169 Cf. Nhamirre, Borges (2021): Will foreign intervention end terrorism in Cabo Delgado? In: Policy Brief 165, ISS, October 2021. P. 3.

170 Ibid.

171 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 58–59.



engagement in Mozambique still reveals some information. So far, it is the only operation it withdrew from. While the reasons behind this departure seem relatively obvious, there is no answer to the question of who ordered them to leave the country. Were they ordered to return by Russian officials? Were they thrown out by the Mozambicans? Or did they leave of their own accord because of the disagreements and casualties mentioned above? As any answers to these questions would be mere speculation, it is necessary to focus on the obvious that differentiates Wagner's presence in Mozambique from all the others. Wagner operations are not necessarily lasting and it can happen that the group (has to) leave a country into which it was invited. However, the FADM later managed to drive the Islamists out of the major cities with the help of the Rwandan army.<sup>172</sup> Keeping these findings in mind, it is now time to move on to the last and latest example: Mali.

#### *Mali (2021–today)*

Wagner was invited to Mali in 2021 to fight Islamist insurgents mainly present in the north and the border regions. The conflict itself dates back further: In 2012, Tuareg militias aligned with local Islamists to drive out the Forces Armées Maliennes (FAMa) from the north and establish an independent Tuareg nation. While they were successful in fighting off the FAMa, the Islamists soon turned against their former allies and drove them out of the major cities they had previously captured together. In March 2012, officers of the FAMa staged a coup against president Touré, as he had failed to fight off the Tuareg and Islamists. Interim president Traoré then asked the UN and France for help when the Islamists threatened to march on Bamako. After the French retook the bigger cities in operation “Serval”, the UN established the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to pacify the country, protect humanitarian aid for civilians, and secure

---

172 Cf. Vooren, Christian (2023).

the reconstruction process.<sup>173</sup> Fast forward to 2021: While the military had agreed to share the power with civilian representatives after a coup in 2020, they now ousted the interim government and took power all by themselves.<sup>174</sup> The new rulers distanced themselves from their former colonial power France and MINUSMA and found their new allies in Russia.<sup>175</sup> In September 2021, the junta entered negotiations with the Russian government to bring Wagner into the country to support the ongoing struggle against the Islamist insurgents. With Wagner present, France decided to withdraw its troops.<sup>176</sup> By the end of 2023, MINUSMA will have left the country, after the junta requested it from the UN Security Council.<sup>177178</sup>

After this quick historical overview, it is now necessary to investigate Wagner's actions on the ground. As always, numbers can only be roughly estimated, but sources mention that Wagner started with 1,000 contractors and increased them to 2,000 in 2022.<sup>179</sup> While Malian officials claim these are only instructors to train the FAMA, several reports indicate that Wagner participates in operations to supervise and support the Malian soldiers.<sup>180</sup> This aligns with Singer's observation

---

173 Cf. Klatt, Christian (2020): Mali. In: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 05.11.2020. URL: <https://www.bpb.de/themen/kriege-konflikte/dossier-kriege-konflikte/175842/mali/> [11.09.2023].

174 Cf. Ehl, David (2021): Mali: Was hinter dem Putsch im Putsch steckt. In: Deutsche Welle, 27.05.2021. URL: <https://www.dw.com/de/mali-was-hinter-dem-putsch-im-putsch-steckt/a-57675765> [11.09.2023].

175 Cf. Der Spiegel (2023): USA verhängen Sanktionen wegen Einsatz von Wagner-Söldnern in Mali. In: Der Spiegel, 25.07.2023. URL: <https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/mali-usa-verhaengen-sanktionen-wegen-einsatz-von-wagner-soeldnern-a-fbfe688f-0fcc-4090-9cda-cff5520fbf0c> [11.09.2023].

176 Hahn, Norbert (2022): Wagner-Söldner verbreiten "Klima der Angst". In: Tagesschau, 03.09.2022. URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/afrika/mali-wagner-101.html> [11.09.2023].

177 Cf. Der Spiegel (2023).

178 Note that this work has been written between May and November 2023, therefore the withdrawal had not been complete when it was handed in the first time. It can be now confirmed that all MINUSMA troops had withdrawn by the end of 2023.

179 Cf. Ibid.

180 Cf. Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023): Mali Catastrophe Accelerating under Junta Rule. In: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 10.07.2023. URL: <https://>

that some PMCs involved in direct fighting will claim that they are not and that they are just “overseeing” how their trainees are doing in the field. First of all, the size of the mission has to be put into relation. Whether a mere 2,000 contractors are more capable of tackling an insurgency than the entire MINUSMA force plus over 2,400 French troops, remains highly questionable.<sup>181</sup> This then raises the question what “providing security” actually means when relying on Wagner for it. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, there are several indicators that the security situation has been worsening during the presence of Wagner: “Mali is on pace to see over 1,000 violent events involving militant Islamist groups in 2023, eclipsing last year’s record levels of violence and a nearly three-fold increase from when the junta seized power in 2020.”<sup>182</sup> The same report also claims that much of the northern territory of Mali was lost to insurgents over the last year.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, the step by step withdrawal of MINUSMA forces appears to reignite the conflict between the central government in Bamako and the Tuareg forces in the north.<sup>184</sup> There are also several statements that indicate civilians were massacred during joint operations of Wagner and FAMa.<sup>185</sup>

Looking at the financial structures, there are no clear signs of how Wagner is trying to penetrate into the Malian economy. The Malian government claims that they are paying Wagner 10 million USD a

---

/africacenter.org/spotlight/mali-catastrophe-accelerating-under-junta-rule/ [22.08.2023].

181 Cf. Al Jazeera (2022): Last French troops leave Mali, ending nine-year deployment. In: Al Jazeera, 16.08.2023. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/16/last-french-troops-leave-mali-ending-nine-year-deployment> [22.08.2023].

182 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023).

183 Cf. Ibid.

184 Cf. Ehrich, Issio (2023): Im Sahel droht ein neuer Bürgerkrieg. In: Zeit Online, 22.08.2023. URL: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2023-08/mali-sahel-tuareg-fama-buergerkrieg> [22.08.2023].

185 Cf. Human Rights Watch (2023): Mali: New Atrocities by Malian Army, Apparent Wagner Fighters. In: Human Rights Watch, 24.07.2023. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/24/mali-new-atrocities-malian-army-apparent-wagner-fighters> [24.08.2023].

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

month for their services.<sup>186</sup> As that would heavily strain the already weak economy of the state, some observers think that Mali, similar to the CAR, offered mining concessions to Wagner once they freed the mines from rebels.<sup>187</sup> When asked about it in an interview, current Prime Minister of Mali, Choguel K. Maïga, answered that Wagner was currently paid with money from the Malian people, but that the model of paying them in resources is not off the table.<sup>188</sup> Whether or not that will be the case in the future remains to be seen, as it also depends on Wagner's capabilities to actually secure the mining sites and hold them. What is similar and comparable on the other hand, is Wagner's use of Fake News to further discredit the French presence and promote the Wagner Group as a better choice for Malian security.<sup>189</sup>

One topic that has only briefly been mentioned in the Sudan section, are arms imports from Russia by territorial states. Deals like these are profitable for both, Russia and the territorial states: For Russia, it grants revenue, as well as influence and an ongoing relationship with many of the states, as it is necessary for them to maintain good relations if they want to have ammunition and spare parts for their acquired weaponry in the future. For the territorial states, Russia is often the only possible choice, as the case of Mali shows. Siemon Wezeman, who is working for the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), framed it the following way:

“For Mali, for example, the United States no longer has the will [to deliver arms to the country], nor do European countries, because

---

186 Cf. Paquette, Danielle (2022): Russian mercenaries have landed in West Africa, pushing Putin's goals as Kremlin is increasingly isolated. In: Washington Post, 09.03.2022. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/09/mali-russia-wagner/> [11.09.2023].

187 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 61.

188 Cf. Choguel K. Maïga (2022): “Pourquoi je parle de trahison”. In: Radio France Internationale, 22.02.2022. Time Stamps: 10:21–10:50. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fq-ANyUASg> [11.09.2023].

189 Cf. Lebovich, Andrew (2021): Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali: How European fears weaken European policy. In: European Council on Foreign Relations, 02.12.2021. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-wagner-group-and-mali-how-european-fears-weaken-european-policy/> [11.09.2023].

of internal democracy problems. [...] We see it in Mali, we also see it in Libya and the Central African Republic. Even if there is a UN embargo, the weapons are coming in and they are coming in with Wagner.”<sup>190</sup>

This statement is a strong indicator that the Russian arms exports to countries like Mali and Libya are strongly intertwined with Wagner. In these cases, Russia provides not only the weaponry, but also the staff to train the armies of the states that acquired them. Yet, there are still questions if the connection is mandatory, or, putting it more boldly: Does the Malian government actually have a choice whether or not to take Wagner in if they want the weapons? Framing it differently, one could ask: Are there weapon deliveries without Wagner and is there Wagner presence without weapon deliveries? Can these countries have only one of the two things? Unfortunately, there is no information on this topic, but it is an indicator that Wagner may be used as part of a set of geopolitical tools of the Russian government.

Apart from Ukraine, the sections above now cover all of Wagner’s military engagements. In the attachments of this work, there is a table summarizing Wagner’s activities. Yet, there are countries in which Wagner’s presence was documented or suspected, but without any military engagements, like Madagascar and Zimbabwe. Cases like these show that Wagner is more than just a mere PMC, as they offer services like disinformation campaigns detached from military services.<sup>191</sup> They also show that the presence and work of Wagner does not necessarily rely on military presence. Yet, there is not enough information about these cases, which is why there is no section for them. Keeping all of these findings in mind, it is now time to reflect upon the findings from the sections above and apply the criteria for legitimacy and accountability.

---

190 Douet, Marion (2023): Russia overtakes China as leading arms seller in sub-Saharan Africa. In: *Le Monde*, 29.03.2023. URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/03/28/russia-overtakes-china-as-leading-arms-seller-in-sub-saharan-africa\\_6021018\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/03/28/russia-overtakes-china-as-leading-arms-seller-in-sub-saharan-africa_6021018_124.html) [06.11.2023].

191 Cf. Rademeyer et al. (2023). P. 62.

#### *Legitimacy & Accountability*

In the theoretical chapter, four possible pragmatic reasons that legitimize PMCs in the eyes of a country were presented: *effectiveness, specialization, economic advantages* and the *possible disassociation*. Were these reasons for the territorial states to hire Wagner? Considering the effectiveness and specialization of Wagner, the question is what the object of comparison is. If one compares Wagner with the respective armies/militias they are fighting or replacing, then the answer is rather clear: Yes, as former members of Russian special forces, most contractors have had a better training than the FAMa, RSF or LNA. Yet, the question is whether these forces are the right objects of comparison. Another approach is to look at the forces Wagner is/was supposed to replace, like MINUSMA and the French army. In Mozambique, the Rwandan army even proved that they were capable of delivering a service which Wagner was not able to provide. Therefore, the statement that Wagner is better trained and more suited for the tasks provided would be a bold statement. Thoroughly comparing the armies of Germany, France, Rwanda, and other countries to the backgrounds of the Wagner fighters would go beyond the scope of this work. Asking for the effectiveness of Wagner, the findings do not conclude that Wagner performed like EO did in Sierra Leone. The two cases in favor of Wagner would be Syria and, to some extent, Libya. In Syria, their operations as ground troops against Daesh were undoubtedly successful. Yet, it would go too far to give all the credit to Wagner, as they were not the only actor in this case. Especially the support of the Russian Airforce raises the question whether Wagner would have been able to conduct its operations without the support and puts another question mark behind the claim of effectiveness. For Libya, the case was a bit different, but the conclusion remains the same. While the contractors in the country were valued by their allies and feared by their enemies due to their superior training and weapons, it did not lead to the eventual victory of the LNA. Looking at the CAR, the findings are similarly unclear. While some consider it to be a rather successful mission for the group itself, the examples have shown that Wagner is not the

only military force present in the country and it would therefore be premature to claim that any military success in the country is only due to their own specialization. In the case of Mozambique, one could even make the opposite point; that the contractors sent were not qualified for the tasks required, as they did not manage to combat the Islamist insurgents and had to leave without having achieved anything. The conclusion that Wagner was purely chosen because of its specialization and effectiveness thus always needs to be put into perspective, as it heavily depends on the object of comparison. Looking at the armies of the hiring states the answer is yes, Wagner is more qualified and there is a valid reason to choose them due to their specialization and effectiveness. Looking at other PMCs or armies from other states, the answer is no, as Wagner so far has not shown in any of its missions why it should be considered more capable than its competitors.

When looking at the economic advantages for territorial states to hire Wagner, there are some indicators that it is economically advantageous to hire the group. Wagner's business model in Syria and the CAR, offering military assistance in exchange for access to local resources, can be very profitable for governments with a small purse and large military problems. The choice between having no military support and no mine/oil field, or having military support and an oil field/mine from which one must surrender a defined price, seems like an easy one for these governments. However, the idea of getting paid through mining concessions is not something Wagner invented. The often-quoted operation by EO in Sierra Leone was judged similarly by some analysts. David Francis wrote the following:

“As such, the security of the mining fields takes precedence over the security of the whole country. A major preoccupation of EO'S operations in Sierra Leone was to secure the mining fields. It could be argued that these companies are not interested in the speedy

and successful completion of their contracts, and may even possibly prolong violence in order to secure further mining concessions.”<sup>192</sup>

This quick intervention is necessary to show that the operations conducted by Wagner are not necessarily innovative, but relying on the strategies and behaviors of others. If somebody else pays for the salaries of the contractors, like it happened in Libya through the UAE company, there is also an economic reason to hire Wagner. Yet, there is Mali for instance, where the economic argument does not really apply, as Mali now has to pay Wagner’s presence, whereas MINUSMA was paid for by the UN. Therefore, the argument does not apply to all of the above cases, and especially for the case of Mali, it is necessary to look for reasons other than economic motivation.

There are no indicators that territorial states might be using Wagner to not be associated with certain actions. Therefore, the case for why territorial states have chosen Wagner is rather thin so far: While Wagner contractors are more specialized than most of the militaries or militias they are working with, this cannot be said for potential “competitors” like other PMCs or foreign militaries. In Syria, the CAR, Sudan and Libya, the use of Wagner had some economic advantages over the use of another PMC. Still, there is the case of Mali, where the government requested the UN and French troops, for which they did not have to pay to leave the country and invited Wagner, for which they are now paying. This implies that there must be more reasons than only the ones presented above.

First, there is one reason that became apparent in every case: Wagner is more than a mere PMC. It is a conglomerate of companies that offers multiple services. In all cases, but especially in the CAR, it could be seen that Wagner spreads anti-French resentments and pro-government propaganda. In comparison to other PMCs or military forces, that is a unique feature. Sticking to the example of the CAR, the government there was not only in dire need of military support, it

---

192 Francis, David (1999): Mercenary Intervention in Sierra Leone: Providing National Security or International Exploitation? In: *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (2), Ps. 319–338. P. 333.



also needed to win over at least part of the public to ensure enduring support. A very prominent way of promoting Wagner and Russia is portraying the French presence in many of the countries as neo-colonial. Due to the history of many of these countries – in which the Soviet Union supported anti-colonial movements – it is a fruitful approach. Wagner and Russia are welcomed as anti-colonial allies, to pacify the country and finally claim the natural resources for the local people instead of multi-billion companies. For the question of legitimacy, this is also a good answer when asked about the relevant audience in the countries. Through its information campaigns, Wagner basically legitimizes itself, as it spreads information that favors the presence of its contractors and companies as well as the government requesting it. Therefore, Wagner is a legitimate choice not only due to their military capabilities, but also through their non-military services in the public relations sector.

One point that has only been briefly addressed in the Mali and Sudan sections is the connection to Russia. By letting Wagner into the country and signing arms deals with it, countries make a political statement that is connected to the potential anti-colonial motivation. They distance themselves from other actors, especially Western ones. In exchange, they receive Russian weapons and military support through Wagner. As the example of Mali shows Russia does not question any possible human rights abuses; in Mali, Wagner contractors appear to be involved in many cases of them. It makes Wagner more appealing for governments with little regard for human rights. Their notorious disregard for human rights may even be relevant for the legitimacy of the group. In almost every case presented there are reports about Wagner killing and torturing civilians or suspected enemies. It might legitimize the group in the eyes of countries it is invited to that they are willing to carry out tasks other militaries – and especially UN missions – are not willing to, for example fighting rebels and insurgents with the “appropriate” force. Another indicator for this is that Wagner sometimes tried to market cruelty as part of their brand, for example by sending

a sledgehammer with fake blood on it to the European Parliament.<sup>193</sup> This reading contrasts with the interpretation that Wagner continues to be hired not because of, but despite, its crimes against humanity. Yet it is an indicator that Wagner and many of its territorial states share the same idea of what security actually is. Looking again at the case of Mali from the perspective of the Copenhagen School, the military junta in Mali securitized the presence of French troops and MINUSMA because they were seen as a threat to their government. While MINUSMA forces and French troops may be more capable of protecting Malian citizens against terrorism, it is unlikely that they would have supported the junta forever without any concessions, for example new and free elections. This is another legitimizing factor of Wagner, as there are no reports (and it is unlikely that there will be) of Wagner associates asking for fair and free elections or a democratization process in the countries the group operates in. Taking all cases together, one can make the claim that Wagner and the governments it fights for share an understanding of security which is aimed to keep certain actors in power, but has no problem with the disregard for human rights. It is therefore far closer to a realist understanding of security than to a Human Security/Welsh School understanding. Keeping this in mind, it is now time to ask: Has Wagner ever been held accountable for anything during their missions?

So far, there is no record of Wagner being held accountable for any crime they might have committed during a mission. One of the best examples is the aforementioned beheading of the Syrian deserter. Some of the men in video were publicly identified; yet, when asked about it, Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov only replied "This has absolutely no relation to Russian soldiers, no matter what is being published about it".<sup>194</sup> Even more interesting is the report from the CAR, in which

---

193 Merz, Kathrin (2022): Wagner-Gründer schickt offenbar Blut-Hammer an EU – Estland sendet Handschellen. In: Berliner Zeitung, 25.11.2022. URL: <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/wagner-gruender-jewgeni-prigoschin-schickt-offenbar-blut-hammer-an-eu-estlands-aussenminister-urmas-reinsalu-sendet-handschellen-nach-den-haag-li.290943> [06.11.2023].

194 Roth (2019).

the investigations came to the conclusion that even if contractors were involved in unlawful killings or other crimes, the CAR would not have the jurisdiction to prosecute them. This shows some similarities to the American presence in Iraq, when contractors could only be prosecuted by the US itself. This would mean that Wagner employees could only be held accountable by the Russian state. Considering contract accountability, the only possible example is Mozambique, which Wagner left after only two months. The problem is that the exact nature of the departure has not been disclosed yet and there are different interpretations. If Wagner had to leave the country because Mozambique did not want them anymore due to their failures combatting the insurgents, it could be described as a case of contract accountability. Yet, if they left the country because they were ordered to by Russia due to the lack of cooperation from the FADM, that would not exactly fit the definition of contract accountability. With these findings at hand, it is now possible to move towards the next chapter, analyzing Wagner's position within the Russian state, what legitimizes them in the eyes of the relevant actors and audience and how they are being held accountable.

### 3.2 Wagner and the Russian State

Having portrayed (almost) all major operations of Wagner in the previous chapter, it is now necessary to ask why the Russian government is actually relying on contractors. At the same time, this chapter aims at examining Wagner's position within the Russian system, especially their relationship with the Russian military. Before going there, though, Wagner's actions in Ukraine need to be classified. The reason why Ukraine shows up here is that it is not a "classic" territorial state. In all the cases presented above, Wagner – or at least Russia – was invited by a relevant party inside the respective country. While these are mostly, but not exclusively, official governments, Ukraine was a very different case, as Russia was never invited there by any major party.

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

#### *Wagner in Ukraine*

When talking about Wagner in Ukraine, one has to distinguish between two time periods. The first one is between 2014 and 2015, which was the first time reports about their activities surfaced. The second period begins with the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 and ends with the suspected death of Prigozhin in August 2023. The information about Wagner operations during the first period is rather scarce. It is generally agreed that contractors were amongst the “little green men” who took over Crimea and helped to bring it under Russian control.<sup>195</sup> When Crimea was secured and the conflict in the Donbas region started, Wagner was moved to Luhansk, officially to support local militias in the struggle against the Ukrainian army. The tasks taken on by the group largely include operations which could also be seen in their other engagements above. A report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) names four main categories, which were then subdivided further: Combat tasks, paramilitary, intelligence and information warfare.<sup>196</sup> Not every task of Wagner needs to be laid out, especially those that have already been presented in the cases above; yet it is necessary to give a quick overview and show which tasks were unique for Ukraine in 2014/2015. While the exact number of contractors is, as always, unknown, it is estimated that around 1,500 operated in Ukraine by the end of 2014.<sup>197</sup> An interesting aspect of this presence is that Wagner was not only there to provide military support to the separatists, but also to control them. Sergey Sukhankin even describes it as one of the main operations of Wagner between 2014 and 2015:

“Purging (including physical liquidation) of the so-called “opposition forces” confronting Igor Plotnitsky, the then-head of the

---

195 Cf. Ghaedi, Monir (2023): Who are Russia’s mercenary Wagner Group? In: DW, 27.06.2023. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-russias-mercenary-wagner-group/a-64429380> [23.09.2023].

196 Cf. Doxsee et al. (2021): Russia’s Corporate Soldiers. The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies. In: CSIS, July 2021. P. 25–27.

197 Cf. Ibid. P. 25.

self-proclaimed “Luhansk People’s Republic” (late 2014–early 2015). Ukrainian sources have claimed that Wagner Group was responsible for the “liquidation of opposition leaders, as well as militants from ‘unlawful military groups,’ Cossacks and other military formations,” including many well-known separatist leaders (*[noms de guerre]* ‘Foma,’ ‘Kosogor,’ ‘Batman’). It is also known that Wagner Group conducted disarmaments of whole (para)military units, with the best-known case being the disarmament of the “Odessa” formation, which was securing control over strategically important Izvaryne (an urban-type settlement located in Luhansk Oblast and a central transit point on the Russo-Ukrainian border).<sup>198</sup>

This statement can be extended with the descriptions of Marat Gabidullin during his first mission, when he was stationed in and around Luhansk.

“... wir blieben mit den Technikern allein in unserem Hauptquartier zurück. Unsere Einheit war im Zentralkrankenhaus der Stadt stationiert worden. Die Gründe, die unsere Anwesenheit hier erforderlich machten, waren eher prosaisch. Sie illustrierten sehr gut, welche Zustände in der Republik herrschten, die sich selbst für unabhängig erklärt hatte. Zwischen den separatistischen Milizen, oder besser gesagt: zwischen den Soldaten der VRL [Volksrepublik Luhansk; Authors Note], kam es immer wieder zu Raufereien, bei denen Alkohol keine unwesentliche Rolle spielte. Solche Prügeleien endeten oft mit Schusswaffengebrauch. Viele Kämpfer legten ihre Waffe nie ab, selbst im Krankenhausbett nicht.”<sup>199</sup>

From Gabidullin’s description, it could be said that Wagner had the function of a police force, keeping the peace between different militias and ensuring there were no larger confrontations. Yet, the picture is

---

198 Sukhankin, Sergey (2019): Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas. In: The Jamestown Foundation, 03.09.2019. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/unleashing-the-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-ukraine-crimea-and-donbas/> [23.09.2023].

199 Gabidullin (2022). P. 51.

completed by the information Sukhankin provides: Wagner was far more than a police force and also took on tasks other than those of a classic PMC. It was used to pacify the region in general, keeping an eye on all the militias present and sometimes acting to stop any sign of rebellion. This could range from disarmament, as happened to the Odessa brigade, to killing the leaders of some of the militias. However, the Russian government has never confirmed this information, particularly not the part about killing the leaders. The official Russian narrative is that the leaders were killed by Ukrainian saboteurs.<sup>200</sup> Ukrainian sources on the other hand claimed to never have participated in the killings. Another reason to be suspicious about this explanation is that many of these murdered leaders were in conflict with the then-leader of the LPR, Plotnitsky.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, the claim that Wagner participated in executions against local warlords is not far-fetched. With the calming of the front, Wagner was mostly pulled out of Ukraine and then engaged in the multiple operations presented in chapter 3.1. It was not until 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion on Ukraine, that the group returned.

On February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022, Russia launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine. In a TV statement, Putin said

“Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to abuse and genocide by the regime in Kyiv for eight years. And for this we will pursue the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, as well as bringing to justice those who committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including citizens of the Russian Federation.”<sup>202</sup>

While many expected Ukraine to fall within weeks, if not days, the country managed to halt and even push back Russian attempts to seize

---

200 Cf. Goncharova, Olena (2016): At least 6 separatist leaders killed in Donbas before Motorola. In: Kyiv Post, 17.10.2016. URL: <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/7649> [23.09.2023].

201 Ibid.

202 Al Jazeera (2022): ‘No other option’: Excerpts of Putin’s speech declaring war. In: Al Jazeera, 24.02.2022, URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts> [20.08.2024].

the capital. Russian forces then shifted their focus to the eastern parts of Ukraine, trying to fully occupy the oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>203</sup> While this does not cover the complete scale of the operation, it is relevant for this work to look at the operations of Wagner in Ukraine. The first information about Wagner being present in Ukraine was reported shortly after the invasion. At this point, the contractors allegedly did not take part in the invasion directly, but were sent in as a commando to eliminate Ukrainian president Zelensky.<sup>204</sup> While these reports are hard to confirm, Wagner – and especially Prigozhin – showed themselves more and more openly. In September 2022, a video surfaced that showed Prigozhin in a Russian prison, scouting for recruits for Wagner operations in Ukraine. The prisoners could make a deal with Wagner: For six months service as shock troops in Ukraine all their crimes would be forgiven and they would be allowed to leave and live as free men.<sup>205</sup> This makes Ukraine stand out from all the other examples presented in chapter 3.1. As has been shown, most members of Wagner had a military background, sometimes even as a part of special forces. And while one could claim that they were also used as shock troops in Syria, the scope in Ukraine was entirely different. When Wagner was labeled a transnational crime organization by the Department of Treasury of the United States in January 2023, John Kirby, spokesperson of the security council, said that Wagner approximately had 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, 10,000 of whom were contractors and 40,000 former inmates.<sup>206</sup> Even adding up all the con-

---

203 Cf. Ibid.

204 Cf. Berliner Zeitung (2022): Russland schickt Wagner-Söldner nach Kiew. In: Berliner Zeitung, 28.02.2022. URL: <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/welt-natione/n/russlands-schickt-wagner-soeldner-nach-kiew-li.214345> [24.09.2023].

205 Cf. Triebert, Christiaan (2022): Video Reveals How Russian Russian Mercenaries Recruit Inmates for Ukraine War. In: New York Times, 16.09.2022. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/16/world/europe/russia-wagner-ukraine-video.html> [24.09.2023].

206 Cf. Kirby, John (2023): US to designate Russia's Wagner Group as 'transnational crime organization'. In: The Guardian, 20.01.2023. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/20/us-russia-wagner-group-transnational-criminal-organization> [24.09.2023].

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

tractors from the missions in chapter 3.1, it does not reach the numbers of Wagner in Ukraine in January 2023. To put it into larger perspective: When Russia began its invasion, it was estimated that up to 190,000 troops were amassed around Ukraine.<sup>207</sup> This number increased over time, especially after the partial mobilization in Russia in September 2022, and reached up to 300,000 in April 2023.<sup>208</sup> Since Wagner thus made up a significant number of the Russian invading force, it was effectively more an army than a PMC, at least regarding its numbers. Another important point was Wagner's move out of secrecy, which basically started with the video of Prigozhin in the prison. While many people already knew that Wagner existed and who was behind it, it was now made official that it was a PMC fighting on behalf of Russian interests, and that Prigozhin was its leader.<sup>209</sup> Instead of analyzing Wagner's battles in Ukraine one by one, it is more interesting to look at the development of Wagner's relationship with the Russian military over time, of which the invasion of Ukraine was only the last part. This is especially important with regard to the question of where Wagner got its weapons and supplies.

#### *Wagner and the Russian Military*

Saying anything about the relationship between Wagner and the Russian military before 2022 is rather difficult, as Wagner did not exist officially and this relationship was not given much attention in most reports about the group. Still, there are some indicators about it: First of all, as already described above, many of the contractors used to be members of the Russian military. As Gabidullin is the only case of a former Wagner member writing down a part of their story, it is a good

---

207 Cf. NYT (2022): Russia-Ukraine Tensions. In: New York Times, 18.02.2022. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/18/world/russia-ukraine-biden-putin> [24.09.2023].

208 Cf. Barros, George (2023): Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 30, 2023. In: Institute for the Study of War, 30.05.2023. URL: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background-russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-30-2023> [24.09.2023].

209 Cf. Triebert (2022).



starting point to look at his personal positions towards the Russian military. In the beginning of his book, he gives a short summary of his time in the military, and while he describes that he disagreed with some of the structural mechanics within, he regretted leaving in 1993.<sup>210</sup> While not every contractor who used to be part of the Russian military ended his time as a soldier on good terms with them, there is no information in Gabidullin's book about contractors who held grudges because of something that happened in the past. The question is: Does that relationship change as soon as contractors and soldiers are supposed to be working side by side, like they did in Syria? Speaking about his first mission in Syria, Gabidullin said that the material they received was provided by the Russian Ministry of Defense.<sup>211</sup> Throughout the book, there are remarks about his and other contractors' complaints that they were not given any modern equipment:

“Dennoch war ich ziemlich beeindruckt von der Fülle an moderner Ausrüstung, die es auf dem Stützpunkt gab. Gepanzerte MTWs, Typhoon, Tigr, URAL und KamAZ verkehrten dort dutzendweise. Die Söldner hatten nichts von alldem. Während uns die Armee im Vorjahr großzügig gepanzerte Truppentransporter mit automatischen Kanonen zur Verfügung gestellt hatte, mussten wir uns mit alten Panzern und BRDMs begnügen, die uns die Syrer untergeschoben hatten.”<sup>212</sup>

Talking about a Wagner operation close to Palmyra he said: “Die alten, staubigen T-62-Panzer blieben jedoch ihre Achillesferse. Die Armee hütete sich davor, ihnen die neueren T-72-Panzer zu überlassen.”<sup>213</sup> Since Gabidullin's statements cannot be verified it is possible there are some exaggerations to support his story of heroic contractors fighting against superiorly equipped enemies and still succeeding. Yet, it is a good starting point for this topic and one of the few, if not the only,

---

210 Cf. Gabidullin (2022). P. 38–39.

211 Ibid. P. 63.

212 Ibid. P. 269.

213 Ibid P. 280.

account of a contractor and his perceptions about the relationship between Wagner and the Russian military. For much of the book, Gabidullin barely describes any confrontation or cooperation between Wagner and the Russian military, except for the withholding of modern weapon systems. Yet, during the assault on Palmyra he wrote:

“Das Kommando der russischen Einheit gehorchte Befehlen von oben. Es erhöhte den Druck auf die Söldner und schränkte unsere Munitionsversorgung ein. Allerdings brauchte die Armee wie schon während des vorherigen Feldzugs unsere Unterstützung, um ihre militärischen Ziele zu erreichen.”<sup>214</sup>

No reasons are given why the command might have wanted to “increase the pressure” on Wagner. If it was because of lacking military performance, it appears contradictory to deprive the contractors of capacity, as that would make it even harder for them to achieve military goals. There are different possible explanations for this: The first is that the information provided by Gabidullin is just false. He does not even have to be lying on purpose, perhaps the Russian military simply was not capable of supplying the contractors due to malfunctioning logistics and corruption. The second possible explanation is that Gabidullin is correct, and the Russian command used this as some sort of arbitrary educational style. The last explanation is that Gabidullin is partly wrong and partly right, as the punishment for contractors is to create pressure on the organization, but more on a political scale in Moscow than on the ground in Syria. All three of these are interpretations and cannot be verified. Moving on, there is a famous case which might be able to shed some light on the relationship between Wagner and the Russian military.

The case occurred in Syria on February 7, 2018, when government forces and Wagner contractors attempted to retake an oil field in the Deir al-Zour region of eastern Syria, which was held by the Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by US special forces as well as drones and

---

214 Ibid. P. 228.

bombers.<sup>215</sup> The exact numbers of dead contractors are unclear: While the official statement by the Russian government confirmed five dead soldiers (not contractors!), other reports claim that it were rather several dozen.<sup>216</sup> This could just be dismissed as something that happens in warzones and has no greater significance. But there is still something to the case which makes it relevant for this section. No similar incidents between Russians on the one side and US troops on the other were reported before or after this one in Syria. The New York Times wrote this:

“American military officials repeatedly warned about the growing mass of troops. But Russian military officials said they had no control over the fighters assembling near the river — even though American surveillance equipment monitoring radio transmissions had revealed the ground force was speaking in Russian.”<sup>217</sup>

Again, there are different possible explanations. If what the Russian official said is true, it would mean that Wagner not only worked on behalf of the Russian state, but also conducted missions on its own account, together with Syrian allies. Yet, everything that has been written so far makes it hard to believe that the Russian command could not – if it so wanted – recall the contractors from such a mission. A second reading could be that the command knew about Wagner trying to take the oil field, but was not willing to stop them due to conflicts between the military and the PMC. In that case, the command would have accepted the potential and eventual death of several contractors. The third reading is that the official lied and the contractors were there as ordered. In that case, they might have been used as a test run on how far US troops would go to defend their allies. None of the above readings reflect positively on the relationship between the

---

215 Cf. Gibbons-Neff (2018).

216 Ballin, André; Meiritz, Annett (2018): Offenbar Dutzende russische Söldner bei US-Luftschlag getötet. In: Handelsblatt, 13.02.2018. URL: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/syrien-konflikt-offenbar-dutzende-russische-soeldner-r-bei-us-luftschlag-getoetet/20959290.html> [07.10.2023].

217 Gibbons-Neff (2018).

Russian military and Wagner: Either they were not able to control it, willingly let it run into a trap or used it as a cheap way to test US troops. Of course, this case, as well as the one presented by Gabidullin, are not very strong, as they are either based on only one source or are fueled by speculation. Nevertheless, these cases appear in another light when looking at the conflicts between Wagner and the Russian military leadership during the invasion of Ukraine in 2022/2023.

When Wagner became a bigger player in Ukraine in 2022, the Russian ground offensive had already forfeited the attempt to take Kyiv and focused their attention on the east of the country to take the oblasts of the Donbas. Wagner forces played a major role in the attack on Soledar and Bakhmut, the last one being an especially long and costly battle from August 2022 until May 2023.<sup>218</sup> While Russia eventually claimed victory in Bakhmut, the battle was long and bloody. The exact number of casualties is unknown as neither of the warring parties are publishing reliable numbers. In a Telegram video from May 2022, Prigozhin claimed that 20,000 contractors were killed and 40,000 injured in the battle.<sup>219</sup> Something else that the ongoing battle showed was the deterioration of the relationship between the Russian army command and Prigozhin. When Soledar was taken, the Russian Ministry of Defense published a note about it without mentioning the participation of Wagner at first, which enraged Prigozhin.<sup>220</sup> Although information was later added, the relationship continued to worsen over the months, reaching a premature climax when Prigozhin threatened to

---

218 Cf. Stepanenko, Kateryna (2023): The Kremlin's Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut. In: ISW, 24.05.2023. URL: <https://understandingwar.org/background/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut> [08.10.2023].

219 Cf. Schwarz, Franziska (2023): Tausende Tote bei Bachmut-Schlacht: Wagner-Gruppe gibt Verluste bekannt. In: Frankfurter Rundschau, 22.07.2023. URL: <https://www.fr.de/politik/front-wagner-russland-verluste-ukraine-krieg-zahlen-tote-verletzte-prigoschin-soeldner-bachmut-92413780.html> [08.10.2023].

220 Cf. Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland (2023): Kreml dementiert Konflikt zwischen Militär und Wagner-Gruppe. In: RND, 16.01.2023. URL: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ukraine-krieg-kreml-dementiert-konflikt-zwischen-militaer-und-soeldnergruppe-wagner-7PB4FKRZF4KKEO3NBYRHH4ZGJ4.html> [08.10.2023].

remove all contractors from Bakhmut while the battle was still raging, because – in his view – the army was not supplying them properly.<sup>221</sup> In the Telegram video, Prigozhin also named the two main figures he blamed for this shortage: Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, and Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.<sup>222</sup> As Wagner withdrew its forces from the front after Bakhmut was taken, it looked like there was an easing of tensions, until Prigozhin announced the march on Moscow which was already mentioned in the introduction. During this march, he also published a video in which he accused the Moscow elite of corruption and of only serving their own interests with the attack on Ukraine, while the lives of young Russian men were just thrown away.<sup>223</sup> Again he addressed Shoigu personally:

“The Ministry of Defense is trying to deceive the public and the president and spin the story that there were insane levels of aggression from the Ukrainian side and that they were going to attack us together with the whole NATO bloc, [...] The war was needed for Shoigu to receive a hero star. The oligarchic clan that rules Russia needed the war, [...] Shoigu killed thousands of the most combat-ready Russian soldiers in the first days of the war.”<sup>224</sup>

While the march was called off before it reached Moscow, Prigozhin’s clear statement is rather unusual, as it questioned the Russian narrative about the war, starting already by calling it a war and not “special military operation”. It also shows that while doing so, Prigozhin still tried not to name Putin as an enemy and emphasized that the other “elites” were the problem. It was the peak of the struggles between the

---

221 Cf. Laack, Stephan (2023): Wagner-Chef droht Moskau mit Abzug aus Bachmut. In: Tagesschau, 05.05.2023. URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/europa/ukraine-krieg-bachmut-wagner-100.html> [08.10.2023].

222 Cf. Ibid.

223 Cf. Risen, James (2023): Prigozhin Told the Truth About Putin’s War in Ukraine. In: The Intercept\_, 01.07.2023. URL: <https://theintercept.com/2023/07/01/prigozhin-truth-putin-war-ukraine/> [08.10.2023].

224 Ibid.

Russian military leadership and Prigozhin, as he would soon after die in a plane crash between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

What can be deduced from these relations? First of all, there are some indicators that the deterioration of relations did not occur only after the invasion of Ukraine, but there are signs that this trouble had already started before, especially in Syria. On the other hand, as Gabidullin described – or as it was also noted in the section about Wagner in Libya – there is clear information that Wagner got weapons and ammunition from the Russian Ministry of Defense. Meaning that even if there was some sort of competition or even dispute, the two entities would still cooperate to a certain extent. The question now is: Why would the Russian state rely on Wagner in the first place when they already had a capable military? What can Wagner do that the Russian military cannot? That will be answered in the following section.

#### *Using a PMC instead of the Military*

Chapter 2.2. named four pragmatic reasons for hiring a PMC: *effectiveness, specialization, economic advantages* and *possible disassociation*. When looking at Russia using Wagner instead of their own military, there are no indicators why the contractors should be more specialized than the army itself, at least when looking at the missions in Syria and Africa. It is true that many contractors used to be part of Russian special forces. Still, why would somebody who used to be part of a troop count as more specialized than somebody who still is and enjoys the advantage of active training? What might be an advantage for Wagner is that they could recruit from men who had resigned from the military but had valuable combat experience from Chechnya or even Afghanistan. Marat Gabidullin described the companions he met on the day of recruitment the following way:

“Mich umgaben Menschen aller Art mit den unterschiedlichsten Laufbahnen und Werdegängen. Erfahrene Söldner waren dabei, die an verschiedenen Krisenherden eingesetzt worden waren und gar nichts anderes kannten. Es gab richtige Profis. Aber auch Ro-

mantiker, die unbedingt den Krieg erleben wollten. Einige waren restlos davon überzeugt, dass die bösen Faschisten aus der Ukraine und dem Westen alle Länder verwüsten wollten, in denen Russisch gesprochen wird.”<sup>225</sup>

While Wagner was definitely joined by some excellent soldiers, not the whole company was made up of specialists. Therefore, it is unlikely that Wagner contractors could do something the Russian military could not, at least in terms of capabilities. An exception is the war in Ukraine: When Wagner joined the war on a large scale and started recruiting criminals as shock troops, they were the only actor doing so in Russia, as the law forbid this for the regular military. This law was eventually changed in June 2023, allowing the Russian military to recruit from prisons themselves.<sup>226</sup> Therefore, at least for a short time, Wagner had a capability that the Russian military could not offer. This capability made it possible to find recruits for the most dangerous missions. As they came from prisons, the outcry in Russian society would not be as big as if they used regular soldiers.

There are several clues that indicate using Wagner has economic advantages for Russia. Chapter 3.1 portrayed some of the ways Wagner related companies managed to earn money. The first way is to get access to local resources: Oil in Syria, gold in Sudan, timber, diamonds, and gold in the CAR. It has to be mentioned that there are no documents accessible for the public proving that the exploitation of these resources generates enough money to pay for the contractors present. Nevertheless, even if it only pays for part of the salaries and weapons, the practice already takes away some of the liabilities the Russian government otherwise would have to pay. The second way to ensure contractors are paid is taking money from other governments to pay for them. In the case of Mali, the local government provides Wagner with a fixed amount of money per month, with the prospect of additional mining

---

225 Gabidullin (2022). P. 44.

226 Adler, Sabine (2023): Russland rekrutiert aus Gefängnissen. In: Deutschlandfunk, 21.06.2023. URL: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ukraine-krieg-aktuelle-entwiclklungen-dlf-94329198-100.html> [08.10.2023].

concessions. In Libya, a UAE company was accused of paying Wagner in the beginning, with the Ministry of Defense eventually taking over. For the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian government started paying Wagner. After the march on Moscow, Putin explained that the group had been wholly funded by the Russian government. According to him, they got 86.26 billion Rubles (930 million Euros) between May 2022 and May 2023.<sup>227</sup> It is difficult to determine whether, at this time, it was economically beneficial for Russia to use Wagner instead of official soldiers, as that would require a study in itself. However, there is one indicator that Wagner was a self-sustaining business before the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin presented the numbers of the government funding Wagner after the march on Moscow, which can be seen as the break between him and Prigozhin. It was used to show that Wagner heavily depended on the Russian government, to discredit them in the eyes of the Russian public. If Wagner had been strongly funded over years before, it would have been a welcome argument to discredit the group further. This remains rather speculative, but together with the information from the cases of chapter 3.1, it allows the following conclusion: As long as Wagner got access to local resources or was funded by other governments, the organization was able to fund itself. When it had to jump in for parts of the Russian army and perform tasks it was not originally designed for, the Russian state had to finance the group. Therefore, it is relatively safe to say that the Russian government had economic advantages when using Wagner in African countries and Syria. For Ukraine, it is more difficult to say, as it would require a direct comparison of the costs of one Russian soldier to one contractor. Furthermore, economic advantages are not the only reason why a government might hire a PMC.

The last pragmatic reason for using a PMC is the possible disassociation or plausible deniability. For Russia as the home state there are two layers, depending on the audience. The first audience is the Russian

---

227 ZDF heute (2023): Putin: Wagner Söldner staatlich finanziert. In: ZDF heute, 27.06.2023. URL: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/wagner-prigoschin-gel-d-ukraine-krieg-russland-100.html> [13.10.2023].



public: When contractors go abroad, they decide to do so themselves. Their deaths do not show up in official statistics and the military does not have to pay expensive survivor's pensions. The second audience is the international community. In Libya, Putin himself was asked about the possible presence of Wagner, which he denied and claimed that if any Russians were present, they were there as private entities.<sup>228</sup> Therefore, when asked if the Russian government used Wagner due to possible disassociation and plausible deniability, the answer is yes. The death of contractors is not perceived the same way as the death of soldiers abroad, hence Wagner could offer something the military could not. On an international level, Wagner gave the chance to deny any presence of troops linked to the Russian government. Keeping these reasons in mind, it is now necessary to look for other possible reasons of why the Russian government started relying on PMCs.

As stated in chapter 2.2, Meyer and Walgenbach named four core parts of legitimacy: *Values, norms, expectations* and *determinations*. Keeping these in mind, another reason why the Russian government and especially Putin use Wagner is their self-perception. One possible way to approach this is to recognize that the relevant actors, especially Putin, think that Russia is a superpower in the international system. After taking over as Russian president in 1999/2000, Putin said: "Russia was and will remain a great power, preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence."<sup>229</sup> Chapter 2.2 showed that most of PMCs nowadays are based in, as well as used by, the USA. If Russia wants to be a superpower, as the US undoubtedly is, then "possessing" and using PMCs is something worth striving for. The comparison with the US is only one part of the puzzle, though. Since Wagner is far more than just a PMC, the duties it performs go beyond the mere execution of military missions.

---

228 Reuters (2020): Russia's Putin: Russians fighting in Libya do not represent the state. In: Reuters, 11.01.2023. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-russia-idUSKBN1ZA0N4> [13.10.2023].

229 Oldberg, Ingmar (2007): Russia's Great Power and Policy Ambitions Under Putin. In: Kanet, Roger E. (Ed.): Russia. Re-Emerging Great Power. London: Palgrave MacMillan. Ps. 13–30. P. 14.

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

Wagner offered potential access to countries all over the world, to spread Russian influence and narratives. In conclusion, there are several reasons that legitimize the use of Wagner in the eyes of the Russian government:

1. In most of its missions, the information gathered indicates that Wagner was at least partially economically self-sustaining. Using Wagner was a financial advantage.
2. Wagner offered several services that go beyond mere military missions. Next to informational campaigns, the group offered access to resources all over Africa.
3. The group offered plausible deniability on two levels. On the interior level, the death of contractors abroad does not create as much alarm as the death of soldiers. On the international level, even though it was known that the contractors were present, the Russian government still denied their existence.
4. To some extent, the PMC offered specializations the Russian military could not offer. This refers less to the training of soldiers than to the possibility of recruiting from prisons, which the Russian military at the beginning could not do.

Keeping these points in mind, it is now possible to ask: Was there any form of accountability for Wagner through the Russian government or Russian prosecution?

#### *Accountability*

The examples presented in chapter 3.1 made two things clear: There is no doubt that during their missions many Wagner contractors committed crimes against the local civilian population, prisoners of war, or even their own men, as the case of a suspected deserter in Ukraine shows.<sup>230</sup> The second important point is that the contractors have not

---

230 Faulconbridge, Guy (2022): Video shows sledgehammer execution of Russian mercenary. In: Reuters, 13.11.2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sledgehammer-execution-russian-mercenary-who-defected-ukraine-shown-video-2022-11-13/> [15.10.2023].

been held accountable for any of their crimes by the territorial states. The following section will look at the options Russian law offers for dealing with crimes committed by contractors abroad.

Before looking into individual cases, it is necessary to examine the Russian Criminal Code's potential of holding accountable somebody who committed crimes outside of the Russian federation. Article 12, which is named "The Operation of Criminal Law in Respect of Persons Who Have Committed Offences Outside the Boundaries of the Russian Federation" states the following in paragraph 1:

"Citizens of the Russian Federation and stateless persons who permanently reside in the Russian Federation and who have committed crimes outside the boundaries of the Russian Federation shall be brought to criminal responsibility under this Code, if their deeds have been recognized as crimes in the State on whose territory they were committed, and unless these persons have been convicted in the foreign State. In case of conviction of said persons, the punishments may not exceed the upper limit of the sanction provided for by the laws of the foreign State on whose territory the crimes have been committed."<sup>231</sup>

This makes the case rather clear: Contractors could potentially be brought to justice by the Russian system. The sentence "if their deeds have been recognized as crimes in the State on whose territory they were committed" can be questioned, as it is ambiguous and therefore limits the potential of contractors being brought to justice. The first way to understand this sentence is to view as the only relevant factor whether the law of the state it happened in recognizes something as a crime. The second way to understand it, assumes that it does not only need to be in the law, but that the state also actively has to try the person who committed the crime. For the cases concerning Wagner, the second reading would mean that states – of which many are known for corruption and dysfunction – would be in charge of investigating

---

231 The Criminal Code Of The Russian Federation No. 63-Fz Of June 13, 1996. Article 12, Paragraph 1.

crimes for the Russian judiciary to be willing to try these men. Here Singer's quote about PMCs not operating in healthy states comes back to mind. It is strongly questionable whether courts belonging to a state that has to rely on Wagner to fulfill some of its basic security needs are willing, or even able, to investigate such crimes.

Generally, the topic of accountability of PMCs and their contractors in Russia is a difficult one. Even if the law theoretically enables Russian courts to investigate, it remains questionable whether they are free enough to do so if certain political players are against it. Another restrictive factor comes with the deniability presented above. If relevant Russian officials in the government deny any presence of Russians in a country or region and the courts are not free enough to investigate them themselves, tools for holding contractors accountable are very limited. This becomes especially clear in the case of the executed Syrian deserter. Several of the men who took part in torturing and executing the man were later identified, yet the only reply of Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for Vladimir Putin, was the following: "This has absolutely no relation to Russian soldiers, no matter what is being published about it."<sup>232</sup> His statement is not even entirely false, as contractors are not official Russian soldiers. Still, if the individuals were identified as Russians, they could be tried and prosecuted for the crimes they committed, no matter if they are considered soldiers or civilians. Until today, though, no Wagner contractor has been held accountable by Russian courts for any possible crimes committed during their missions abroad.

To put this into a broader perspective, a comparison is helpful: Chapter 2.2 outlined several reasons for the lack of accountability of contractors, as they are rarely punished due to a lack of will or capacity to investigate their crimes. This work does not aspire to fully comprehend and compare the potential accountability mechanisms of the USA and Russia. Still, the question stands: Why should we expect a country that is known for notoriously depriving its own citizens of civil liberties and rights and ranks far lower on the Rule of Law Index

---

232 Roth (2019).

than the USA, to be more conscientious about the control of their PMCs than the former?<sup>233</sup> In the end, it comes down to the values and norms as well as the expectations of the relevant country, in this case Russia. If a majority of relevant Russian decision-makers believe that it serves Russian interests, or at least does not work against them, to torture and execute enemies, why should the executors be punished even if it was formally against the law? The lack of political will and a justice sector that is unable to work on its own become even more evident when looking at article 359 of the Russian criminal code about mercenaryism. There it says:

“1. Recruitment, training, financing, or any other material provision of a mercenary, and also the use of him in an armed conflict or hostilities, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of four to eight years.

2. The same acts, committed by a person through his official position, or with relation to a minor, shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of seven to fifteen years, with or without a fine in the amount of up to 500 thousand roubles [sic!] or in the amount of the wage or salary, or any other income of the convicted person for a period of up to three years.

3. Participation by a mercenary in an armed conflict or hostilities shall be punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of three to seven years.”<sup>234</sup>

The definition of a mercenary, according to the Russian Criminal Code, is this:

“A mercenary shall be deemed to mean a person who acts for the purpose of getting a material reward, and who is not a citizen of the state in whose armed conflict or hostilities he participates, who does

---

233 Cf. World Justice Project (2022): Rule of Law Index. In: World Justice Project, 2022.

234 The Criminal Code Of The Russian Federation No. 63-Fz Of June 13, 1996. Article 359, Paragraphs 1–3.

### 3. The Relations of the Wagner Group

not reside on a permanent basis on its territory, and also who is not a person fulfilling official duties.”<sup>235</sup>

The question whether PMCs are mercenaries or not has already been briefly addressed before. Yet, this case is different, as it is not just a theoretical debate in international law, but could be directly applied in Russian Criminal Law. It is very likely that Wagner contractors fit the definition. Gabidullin has already explained that the wages paid by Wagner were far higher than anything else he could achieve in the military at this point. Therefore, the material reward is definitely given, at least for part of the contractors. Considering most of the missions in Africa and Syria, the contractors were no citizens of the state they fought in and they also did not permanently reside on its territory. The last point is a rather difficult one. While the conclusion is still pending, this work has already shown that the contractors of Wagner were (and are) working on behalf of Russian interests around the world. Therefore, one could claim that they are no mercenaries, as they are fulfilling official duties for the Russian state in these countries. The problem with this argument is that for a long time the Russian government denied the presence of any Russians in the operational countries of Wagner (except for Syria), as well as the very existence of the Wagner Group. How can a member of a group that officially did not exist until 2022 be fulfilling official duties for the Russian state? Eventually, it has to be concluded that Wagner contractors could be deemed mercenaries in the eyes of Russian Criminal Law, which is another clue that the Russian judiciary is either unwilling or unable to investigate crimes, if there is no correspondent political will. Wagner is also by far not the only active PMC present in Russia, but still the most well-known. Even the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, has his own company named “Patriot.”<sup>236</sup> This finding joins the many problems that have been identified with respect to Wagner's

---

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Cf. NTV (2022): Ukraine: Schoigu sendet eigene Söldner an die Front. In: NTV, 28.12.2022. URL: <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Ukraine-Schoigu-sendet-eigene-Soeldner-an-die-Front-article23810789.html> [06.11.2023].

accountability: On the one hand, there are the same problems as with the PMCs used by the US, as they are operating in “unhealthy” states and there is controversy over who is responsible for investigating and trying crimes that might have been committed by contractors. The other problems in regard to the accountability of Wagner contractors are more Russia specific. Generally, there have been no signs that any relevant political actor within Russia was interested in investigating crimes committed by contractors abroad. As several cases were reported to relevant authorities and sometimes the men were even identified, the claim that it impossible to investigate those crimes is void. This is an indicator that Wagner and the Russian government share a rather similar, or even identical definition, of security. The fulfilment of the contract stands above everything, to advocate Russian interests abroad by different means, especially by supporting Russian-friendly governments. While there is no information of contractors receiving specific orders to commit crimes against humanity, the numerous occurrences of them suggest that they might still be part of a strategy to make Wagner seem more dangerous. Another big problem for holding contractors accountable was the denial of the existence of Wagner. A group that did not exist could not be abroad, and therefore no member of the group could commit a crime. All of it leads to the following conclusion: While the Russian state might have the greatest potential to investigate and prosecute potential crimes committed by its contractors, the lack of a free justice system and of political will makes it impossible to try contractors for crimes they committed during their missions.

#### *The March on Moscow*

Even though the March on Moscow does not really fit into any part of this work, it still has to be addressed. On June 24, 2023, two groups of Wagner forces entered Russia from Ukraine, one of them heading for Moscow, the other towards Rostov-on-Don. Rostov fell into the hands of Wagner without any bloodshed, and while the Russian Airforce attacked the convoy towards Moscow several times, different reports

in the end only talked about 13 soldiers dying during the mutiny.<sup>237</sup> Before the convoy actually reached the outskirts of the Russian capital, Prigozhin had called off the “March for Justice,” by which he himself claimed was only aiming at ousting the commanders responsible for the Russian failure in Ukraine, namely Valery Gerasimov and Sergei Shoigu.<sup>238</sup> Many analysts share the interpretation that the real reason for Prigozhin’s move was a new law that had been passed, forcing every contractor to sign a treaty with the Ministry of Defense until the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 2023, which would have taken control over Wagner away from Prigozhin, handing it over to Shoigu and Gerasimov.<sup>239</sup> While the march was not successful and in the end most likely contributed to the plane crash of Prigozhin and Utkin, it also showed a risk for the Russian government and what can happen if a private army turns against the state. As said above, the march does not really fit into any part of this work, but at the same time it is a major development of the group in 2023, and therefore had to be mentioned. The following chapter about Wagner in the international system will examine whether the Wagner Group is viewed as legitimate and can be held accountable within the international system.

### 3.3 Wagner and the International System

Before starting with the analysis of this chapter, there is a need to identify what is meant by “the international system,” as it does not have a fixed definition by default. For this case, it includes all the countries Wagner neither operates in nor is from. What it also includes

---

237 Cf. SZ (2023): Militärblogs: Mindestens 13 russische Soldaten bei Aufstand getötet. In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 25.06.2023. URL: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russland-wagner-aufstand-soeldner-prigoschin-1.5966523> [06.11.2023].

238 Cf. Ackeret, Markus (2023): Wagner-Chef Prigoschin wagt den bewaffneten Aufstand gegen die russische Armeeführung – Putin bezichtigt ihn des Hochverrats. In: NZZ, 24.06.2023. URL: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/wagner-chef-prigoschin-laesst-machtkampf-mit-moskau-eskalieren-ld.1744217> [06.11.2023].

239 Cf. ZEIT ONLINE (2023): Jewgeni Prigoschin rechtfertigt Marsch auf Moskau. In: ZEIT ONLINE, 26.06.2023. URL: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2023-06/jewgeni-prigoschin-marsch-moskau-wortmeldung> [06.11.2023].



is international institutions like the ICC and the UN. Of course, there is a certain limit to this definition, as the following chapter will not be able to work out the position of every country in the world towards Wagner, but must focus on countries affected due to their presence as military or political powers, such as the USA or the EU.

#### *Legitimacy*

The question where Wagner gets its legitimacy from in the international system is difficult to approach, as there are several problems. First, there is the question of the extent to which there even is a need for legitimacy of the organization to a “relevant audience.” It makes perfect sense that the parties involved in the process (Russia and a territorial state that has agreed to accept Wagner into the country) both have to consider the organization as legitimate. A good case to demonstrate this is Wagner entering Mali: While the Malian and the Russian government agreed that Wagner would support the FAMa in their struggle against terrorists, other actors present, namely France, but also Germany, did not approve of this presence, but could not reverse it. In this case the third-party countries actually had leverage, as they could threaten to remove their troops and other support from Mali if the country accepted Wagner. Still, the Malian junta went through with their plan, France by now has already withdrawn its troops, and Germany – as part of MINUSMA – will withdraw them until the end of December 2023.<sup>240241</sup> Can the question for legitimacy actually be asked and sufficiently answered for Wagner in the case of the international system?

Going back to the definition of legitimacy by Walgenbach, there are four key factors: *Values, norms, expectations* and *determinations*. Approaching the problem from this side, the first question is “Are there any shared norms and values in the international system regarding the

---

240 Cf. Clement, Kai; Küstner, Kai (2023): Näher am Abzug. In: Tagesschau, 30.06.2023. URL: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/bundeswehr-mali-abzug-100.html> [23.10.2023].

241 See footnote number 177.

use of PMCs?”, The Montreux Document has already been introduced in chapter 2.2, so it can be argued that there are some shared norms and values towards PMCs; at least by the countries and organizations that have signed the Montreux Document. Another, smaller factor has already been identified in the previous chapter. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, PMCs became a normal sight on battlefields and unstable regions around the world. While some groups or countries might not approve their use and the privatization of military force, the normalization of their occurrence cannot be denied. Still, a problem arises from the previous findings of this work, as several points have already been made about Wagner that distinguish them from other PMCs.

1. The secrecy that has been kept for a long time around the group.

How can actors of the international system think of Wagner as a legitimate group, when, for a long time, most Russian officials claimed they did not exist and denied any connections between Russia and the group?

2. The conglomerate of companies that are organized in the Wagner network.

The services offered by Wagner go far beyond what a PMC normally offers. Next to their military capacities, mining, oil extraction, and logging were used to exploit resources to pay for the military services. In addition to these services, they also offered informational services, like PR advisory and the promotion of certain political narratives.

3. Their undeniable connection to Russian interests and the Russian government.

While other companies are also often employed by governments, Wagner is exclusively used by the Russian government. There is no known case where the contractors were employed by other companies or against the will of the Russian government.

These points are making it clear that Wagner lacks legitimacy in the eyes of most actors apart from Russia and the territorial states it

was used in and that the group is considered illegitimate. The following section about accountability will make that even clearer.

#### *Accountability*

First of all, the idea of holding Wagner accountable faces the same problems as the question of their legitimacy, as most deals are made with Wagner/Russia on the one side, and the territorial state/militia on the other side. Nevertheless, there are some ways by which international institutions or third countries can try to hold Wagner accountable within their power.

The first institution that might be capable of holding not the group, but individual contractors accountable is the ICC. The ICC “can investigate, prosecute and try individuals accused of committing the most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole, namely the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.”<sup>242</sup> It can be relatively safely said that members of the Wagner Group committed crimes against humanity as well as war crimes, as those include murder and torture.<sup>243</sup> The court has jurisdiction if “the crimes were committed by a State Party national, or in the territory of a State Party, or in a State that has accepted the jurisdiction of the Court.” Or if “the crimes were referred to the ICC Prosecutor by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) pursuant to a resolution adopted under chapter VII of the UN Charter.”<sup>244</sup> This already puts some limits on the potential for holding Wagner contractors accountable: Until this day, Russia has not ratified the Rome Statute. If the crimes of contractors were to be investigated, it would need to be in the territory of a state party or in a state that has accepted the jurisdiction of the ICC. Of the territorial states, only the

---

242 ICC (2020): Understanding the ICC. In: International Criminal Court, 2020. URL: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/Publications/understanding-the-icc.pdf> [13.11.2023]. P. 9.

243 Cf. Ibid. P. 24.

244 Ibid. P. 26.

CAR and Mali have signed and ratified the Rome Statute.<sup>245</sup> Still, there are ongoing investigations by the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP) of the ICC in Sudan, Libya, Ukraine, the CAR and Mali. In Sudan and Libya, the situation was referred to the ICC by the UN Security Council, in Ukraine the government itself accepted the jurisdiction of the court.<sup>246</sup> It needs to be mentioned that in all of these cases, the investigations started before Wagner entered the country, so they were not launched because of the Wagner Group. Still, except for the cases of Mozambique and Syria, there is the potential of the ICC investigating crimes committed by Wagner members. Whether it would actually be possible to prosecute and try the contractors is more a question of practicality. As already mentioned, it is questionable whether the territorial states that invited Wagner themselves, such as the government of the CAR and the junta in Mali, would be willing or even able to capture and extradite the contractors to The Hague. In the case of Libya, Wagner is fighting on the side of a warlord, which makes a cooperation with an institution like the ICC even less likely. The problem of the ICC relates back to Singer's quote about PMCs operating in "unhealthy" states. Theoretically, the ICC has the potential to hold Wagner contractors accountable for crimes they committed during most of their missions, except for Syria and Mozambique. Practically, it is very unlikely to happen due to a lack of will and ability of these countries.

Another possible way to hold Wagner accountable through third parties is sanctions, targeting important individuals of the company, like Prigozhin, Utkin or other commanders, as well as companies attached to the conglomerate. The USA has targeted Wagner in multiple ways. First of all, Prigozhin has already been added to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN) by the US Office

---

245 Cf. ICC (2023): The States Parties to the Rome Statute. In: ICC. URL: <https://asp.icc-cpi.int/states-parties> [25.10.2023].

246 Cf. ICC (2023): Situations under investigations. In: ICC. URL: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/situations-under-investigations> [25.10.2023].

of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) in 2016.<sup>247</sup> In 2017, Dmitry Utkin was added to the list as military leader and founder of Wagner.<sup>248</sup> In a press statement from June 2023, the US presented the reasons why Wagner was targeted: “The Wagner Group exploits insecurity around the world, committing atrocities and criminal acts that threaten the safety, good governance, prosperity, and human rights of nations, as well as exploiting their natural resources.”<sup>249</sup> They sanctioned Sewa Security Services and Officer’s Union for International Security (OUIS). Both companies are based in the CAR and are responsible for providing security to CAR officials.<sup>250</sup> Linked to these companies, they also sanctioned Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Ivanov, the director of OUIS in the CAR.<sup>251</sup> The sanctions are not limited to CAR companies, as they also sanctioned UAE based aviation company Kratol Aviation, which allegedly helped Wagner organize transports between the CAR, Libya and Mali.<sup>252</sup> These sanctions are supposed to target Wagner’s ability to provide their security services around the world. As the package of sanctions was intended to target the Russian abilities in Ukraine, Russian companies were also targeted. One example is Charter Green Light Moscow and its CEO Aleksei Alekseevich Malyarevich, another aircraft charter service often used by Wagner to transport men and

---

247 Cf. OFAC (2016): Changes to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List. In: OFAC, 01.01.2016. URL: <https://www.treasury.gov/ofac/downloads/sdnnew16.pdf> [26.10.2023].

248 Cf. US Department of the Treasury (2023 a): Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Involved in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine. In: US Department of the Treasury, 20.06.2017. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0114> [26.10.2023].

249 US Department of the Treasury (2023 b): Treasury Sanctions Illicit Gold Companies Funding Wagner Forces and Wagner Group Facilitator. In: US Department of Treasury, 27.01.2023. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1581> [26.10.2023].

250 Cf. US Department of the Treasury (2023 c): Treasury Sanctions Russian Proxy Wagner Group as a Transnational Crime Organization. In: US Department of the Treasury, 26.01.2023. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1220> [26.10.2023].

251 Cf. Ibid.

252 Cf. Ibid.

cargo.<sup>253</sup> Another sanction of this package shows that the USA views Wagner in its entirety, not just as a PMC, as they targeted “Africa Politology” due to its connections with Wagner. According to the State Department,

“Africa Politology develops strategies and mechanisms to induce Western countries to withdraw their presence in Africa and is involved in a series of Russian influence tasks in the Central African Republic, to include undermining Western influence, discrediting the UN, and carrying out lawsuits against Western press outlets.”<sup>254</sup>

This is another indicator that not just Russia and the territorial states understand Wagner as far more than a mere PMC, but also countries which consider the actions of the group illegitimate. This is further supported by sanctions imposed on several mining and trading companies on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January. The US Treasury department stated that “The Wagner Group funds its brutal operations in part by exploiting natural resources in countries like the Central African Republic and Mali.”<sup>255</sup> Of the four companies, two are based in the CAR, one in Dubai, and one in Russia.<sup>256</sup> Clearly, the USA tries to target every part of Wagner’s operations by sanctioning individuals and companies related to every branch of Wagner. The USA is not the only country that has imposed sanctions on Wagner. In July 2023, the UK government announced that they imposed sanctions against individuals and companies related to Wagner operations in the CAR, Mali, and Sudan, after they had already sanctioned Prigozhin and several of his businesses.<sup>257</sup> Andrew Mitchell, Minister of State for Development and Africa, commented on the sanctions in the following way:

---

253 Cf. US Department of State (2023): Actions to Counter Wagner and Degrade Russia’s War Efforts in Ukraine. In: US Department of State, 26.01.2023. URL: <https://www.state.gov/actions-to-counter-wagner-and-degrade-russias-war-effort-s-in-ukraine/> [26.10.2023].

254 Ibid.

255 US Department of the Treasury (2023 b).

256 Ibid.

257 Cf. UK Government (2023): UK sanctions Wagner Group leaders and front companies responsible for violence and instability across Africa. In: Foreign,

“The Wagner Group is committing atrocities in Ukraine, as well as acting with impunity in countries like Mali, Central African Republic and Sudan. Wherever Wagner operates, it has a catastrophic effect on communities, worsens existing conflicts and damages the reputations of countries that host them.”<sup>258</sup>

The EU has also imposed sanctions on the group, and while there is no need here to go into detail about the individual sanctions, a comment of Josep Borrell, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, is worth mentioning:

“The Wagner Group’s activities are a threat for the people in the countries where they operate and the European Union. They endanger international peace and security as they do not operate within any legal framework. The EU is determined to continue taking tangible action against breaches to international law. We stand up for human rights everywhere.”<sup>259</sup>

These quotes show that the sanctions, especially the one presented by Borrell, are supposed to hold Wagner accountable for the crimes it committed. To what extent these sanctions actually limit the Wagner Group in its actions in Africa, Syria, and Ukraine cannot be determined and a study of them would be a thesis in itself. Still, this is the first indicator for a country (or in the case of the EU, many countries) trying to hold Wagner accountable. At the same time, it also shows how few possibilities these countries have, which chapter 2.2. already indicated. As these countries are not really part of the equation as

---

Commonwealth & Development Office, 20.07.2023. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-sanctions-wagner-group-leaders-and-front-companies-responsible-for-violence-and-instability-across-africa> [26.10.2023].

258 Ibid.

259 Borrell, Josep (2023): Wagner Group: Council adds 11 individuals and 7 entities to EU sanctions lists. In: European Council, 25.02.2023. URL: [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/?utm\\_source=dsms-auto&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Wagner%20Group%3A%20Council%20adds%2011%20individuals%20and%207%20entities%20to%20EU%20sanctions%20lists](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists/?utm_source=dsms-auto&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wagner%20Group%3A%20Council%20adds%2011%20individuals%20and%207%20entities%20to%20EU%20sanctions%20lists) [26.10.2023].

neither host- nor territorial or contract state, it is almost impossible to punish the group and hold certain individuals accountable beyond the use of sanctions.

Nevertheless, this is basically the end of the potential to hold Wagner accountable by the international community. The UN Security Council can be neglected due to Russia's veto there. If the country itself is not willing to investigate and prosecute crimes within its own structures, why would it be willing to pass a resolution against Wagner in the Security Council? The shortness of this chapter in comparison to the chapters 3.1 and 3.2 therefore also expresses the limits of the international community in this case. Many might consider the group as illegitimate but it does not really change anything, as they cannot stop a country from hiring them, except maybe by withdrawing their own support. For accountability, there is some potential in the ICC, but so far, no contractor has been sent to The Hague for trial. Sanctions on the other hand have been implemented by several states and the EU, but they are very limited in their effectiveness. Taking these findings and the ones of the whole chapter, it is now time to draw a conclusion and answer the questions raised in the beginning.