



## RESEARCH PAPER

# Mercenary Groups in Modern Warfare: The Wagner Group, Ethical and Legal Enigmas in Ukraine and Africa

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## ABSTRACT

Mercenary organizations have become part and parcel of contemporary wars system. This paper elucidates the subject of the Wagner Group, being the Russian private military company which now plays an essential part in the armed conflict in Ukraine and Africa in the framework of hybrid warfare. The work also discusses how the Wagner Group works in the legal spectrum of admissibility, undermines state authority, and contributes to deterioration of the human rights situation. The coming article looks at its activities throughout the gross Ukraine's conflict as well as during its operation in the resource-rich, violent African states in order to establish the geopolitical, legal, and ethical implications of privatized warfare. Therefore, the research recommends that there should be other International Legal Mechanisms that should be developed in order to regulate the PMCs and put checks on their misconducts. Finally, this qualitative research illustrates the general consequences of such groups for international security, properly functioning political systems, and the system of international law in outlining suggestions of how to minimize the damaging impacts of such groups.

**KEYWORDS** Wagner Group, Mercenaries, Contemporary Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, Private Military Companies, Norms of International Law, State Jurisdiction, Humanitarian Law

## Introduction

Mercenary groups are playing major roles on today's battlefields the new nature of what constitutes a conventional conflict has significant ethical, legal and geopolitical implications. Of these, the Wagner Group, a Russian Private Military Company is probably one of the most notable actors that has sought to promote state interest through irregular means. Its operations in Ukraine and Africa: everything indicating that state and non-state military actors are often involved in legally ambiguous endeavours, work in states with fragile institutions.

In Ukraine, Wagner group have been instrumental in Russian proxy warfare including during the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. It also helps to keep deniability while achieving goals on the worldwide arena. Likewise in Africa, due to anti-terrorism and resource protection, the Wagner Group has enticed its footprint and has actually fueled local conflicts and eroded the authority of sovereign states (Klein, 2022)

This paper aims at analyzing the Wagner Group's activities in these areas so as to determine the implications for international law, human rights and international security. Their conclusion is that the activities of the group demonstrate a larger trend of

private military companies thus need of stiffer international rules governing such organizations. Due to this, the study helps to advance the theoretical understanding of the topic and revisit questions of the Wagner Group and modern mercenarism in relation to state sovereignty, governance, and the principles of ethical warfare.

The identified activities of the Wagner Group raise acute ethical and legal questions. Due to its legal grey area, it remains beyond the international system of governance and humanitarian laws, which should address the depressingly long list of Human Rights that the Rohingya are being subjected to. This paper discusses these dilemmas, and illustrates how such entities erode state sovereignty, create security vacuums, and challenge the multilateral regulation of international security. Based on multidimensional assessment of the activities of the Wagner Group proposed in this article, it can be stated that there is an acute need for the development of effective legal norms of international law regulating the activities of PMCs and providing for legal liability in modern armed conflicts.

To this end, this introductory chapter provides the context for a detailed discussion of Wagner Group operations in conflicts around the world and its functions in various capacities as a private mercenary force, assessing the implications for international law, human rights, and sovereignty.

### **Literature Review**

The article, *The Wagner Group as a Tool of Russian Hybrid Warfare* by Marek Górka (2023), talked about that with the growing aspects of the private military companies, especially the Wagner group where they utilize chaos and wars for political and commercial influence. It said that Wagner, with strong connection with Putin, organizes military services in various world hot spots for Kremlin's interests surreptitiously. It mainly grew in prominence during the 2014 Ukraine conflict because it offered the appearance of local rebels while, in fact, being Russia actors. The group has since then widened its operations to nations such as Syria, Libya and the Central African Republic; backing up Russian preferred regimes while enjoying the veneer of legal protection from the legal provisions against mercenaryism (Yaseen, Muzaffar& Aman, 2022; Górka, 2023). The case of Wagner Group shows another typical trend – hybrids warfare where PMCs are meant to serve geopolitical objectives, but the state behind them remains unidentified.

Then article, *De-Privatize War: The Wagner Group and the War in Ukraine* by Eric Tedder (2024), observes that PMCs such as the Wagner Group contribute to the emergence of new and expensive warfare. This raises the main concern that states are liable for the misdeeds of PMCs, which often engage in horrible practices and betray confidentiality. Thus the article opens for international regulation and condemnation of mercenarism arguing that to reduce the liability, war should be returned to state armed forces for better accountability, improved security within nations, and stability at the global level (Tedder, 2024).

The article, *The Wagner Group in Africa, The sham battle of Russian mercenaries against terrorism* by Aleksander Olech (2024) reveals that Wagner Group is now becoming active in many African countries hence being a longstanding Kremlin plan to extend Russian influence. In this way, dressed under counterterrorism, the Wagner Group maintains a military force in Africa with support from both state and mercenary. This strategy is a proactive Russian foreign policy that was designed to regain control

over Africa to counter the west, NATO, EU, and globally, terrorist organizations. Therefore, the study raises some important concerns that require continued vigilance on the part of policy makers in this rivalry due to the overall impact on geopolitics all over the world and more specifically, about the state of stability in Africa as a continent (Khan, Rahim & Muzaffar, 2020).

The article, *Russian Para-Military Operations in Africa: The Wagner Group as a De Facto Foreign Policy Instrument* by Theo Neethling (2023) explores the Wagner Group as a tool of Russia's softball foreign policy and analyses the group as a postmodern actor and professional organization. It reveals that Wagner conducted its operation in some countries that are endowed with natural resources and experiencing conflicts in Africa including Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan and Mali among others. Such operations are meant to add onto Russia's sphere of influence at the expense of the West in Africa. The paper gives details of Wagner's global operations and examines its Venezuelan function in furthering Russian aims in unstable African nations (Neethling, 2023).

In article, *Mercenary Ambiguities in Conflict Zones: A Critical Analysis of the Wagner Group in the Russia-Ukraine Context* by Muna Al-Kaabi (2024), Author's study is on the systematization of mercenarism, focusing on the context of the war between Russia and Ukraine, which reveals problems with definitions that do not encompass the changing functions of non-ordinary fighters in contemporary conflicts. It shows how mercenary groups operate, and the legal workings involved and underscores the issue of responsibility on the states that hire them. Consequently, the authors encourage the international community to adopt a clear, modern definition of mercenaries that is relevant to today's conflicts and which obliges warring factions to respect the laws of armed conflict. It aligns with the subject of international coordination in response to the loopholes of legal provisions and supervision in connection with unlawful mercenary engagements in conflicts (Al-Kaabi, 2024).

## **Material and Methods**

This article is going to focused on the qualitative research method that involves only secondary data to analyze the impact of Wagner Group in Ukraine and Africa. This means data is collected from basically numerous origins, for instance government publications, reports, scholarly articles, books, improved research publications and other sources. In this way this study has been able to obtain a complete representation of the subject matter by considering what has already been written, records and certification.

The data has been collected from trustworthy secondary sources, which includes government published documents and Reports. The researchers have investigated important documents of governments, international organizations, and NGOs to gather real info about the Wagner Group's activities and what it means legally and politically. Key elements of our analysis include research articles from pre reviewed journals and books focusing on private military companies, effect on warfare, and the role of Wagner Group in conflicts zones.

## **Results and Discussion**

In the last few years, PMCs have seen a rise because of the rising conflicts across the world, the need for cheap military solutions, and their access to areas that state armies cannot. These functions range from aggressive defense to protecting property in risky

countries, giving governments certain perquisites without clear full responsibilities. But they have raised some ethical issues such as; participating in human rights violation, uncontrollable and some of them breach international laws.

Mercenaries have been part of wars for many centuries – they were the participants of European wars in the Middle Ages and fighters for hire in colonial wars. However, with the post-Cold War, erosion of such entities toward the creation of systematic PMCs lead primarily to the cuts in state military forces and privatization of defense capabilities. Some of them you can regard as arising in the 90s such as Executive Outcomes and Blackwater which became infamous for their operations in Africa and the Middle East. (Baines, 2024)

The growing exposure of PMCs, especially Wagner, and their nature as hybrid instruments of geopolitics and agents of uncertainty provide the background for further discussions concerning the activities of private military companies in conflicts like Ukraine and Africa ones.

Today, private military companies (PMCs) and mercenaries are important actors in post-modern war, performing tasks previously provided by state armed forces. PMCs are formal organizations which offer security, fighting, supply and training services for hire to governments, corporate bodies and other sectors. Thus, as differentiated from PMCs, mercenary organizations work without many rules and are characterized by the fact of paid work and the frequent ignoring of international laws. (Arduino, 2023)

### **Background and Activities of Wagner Group**

Modern examples of PMC's involved in the wars are the Wagner group that has its origin in Russia. Established in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin an ex Russian military intelligence officer, with Yevgeny Prigozhin, a dear friend of the president Vladimir Putin as its chief financier, the group is best described as a private military company with a clearly defined state interest. Formally created to support Russia's interests in Ukraine during the Crimean takeover and the Civil War in Donbas, the Wagner Group has grown into a worldwide ticket and is an important element of Russia's foreign policy at the moment.

In terms of structure, Wagner works as a hidden branch of the Russian military. Often despite official denials from the Kremlin regarding its relationship to the group because of legal restrictions regarding mercenary activity in Russia, the group is considered to have links with Russian intelligence agencies such as the GRU and FSB. They span from actual fighting and building capability of local forces to protect key resources including mines and oil fields in crisis-prone regions. It was also noted that the missions performed by the Wagner Group are frequently indistinguishable from state and non-state activities, making it possible to dismiss the group's operations as non-official and unofficial for Russia. (Timothy J. Olson, 2024)

In Ukraine, Wagner directly participated in strengthening the separatist organizations and using hybrid warfare as a true agent of Moscow. In Africa, the group has pursued a dual mission: obtaining raw materials to meet Russian needs and protecting autocratic presidential clients in return for loyalty. State like Libya, Sudan, Central Africa republic, and Mali have seen Wagner participating in containing rebellions, guarding power, and extracting and securing resources.

This stealth and versatile modality has enabled Russia to expand its dominion within the geographic region, however avoiding rampant responsibility.

Nevertheless, serious charges of war crimes, human rights abuses, and breaches of the international law have been leveled against Wagner operated companies thus generating worrying questions concerning the unbridled powers of the company and wider content of privatized warfare. As the case of the Wagner Group shows, PMCs must be viewed as tools of statecraft thus undermining classical understandings of war and state. (Purton, Bohumil Doboš & Alexander, 2024)

### **Context of Legal and Ethical Problems Surrounding the PMCs**

One issue in contemporary armed conflict which constitutes concern in legal and ethical nature is the employment of Private Military Companies (PMC) such as Wagner group. On legal grounds, PMCs, when deployed, call for several legal issues since the companies are legally positioned on an unfixed legal footing in the international law. Whereas, mercenary activities were considered unlawful under the Geneva Convention and other related treaties the modern version of a PMC exists in legal ambiguity. Orgs like Wagner are normally not legally permitted to act for the state in any way, effectively letting the state wash its hands off them if they commit any violations. This is because these companies largely lack proper regulation, which makes it nearly impossible to prosecute them in the event of human rights abuses, or alleged war crimes, as seen in Ukraine, Syria and several countries in Africa. This renders it difficult for international courts to charge PMCs, or their operators with crime committed during conflict.

Here the issue of PMCs like Wagner brings deep ethical questions according to solutions of security. Asking whether it is right to involve private actors in warfare, which pursue profit associated more with profit making than with national or humanitarian objectives, provokes concerns of privatization of violence. These groups are not generally restricted by the codes of ethics which exist in relation to state armed forces and this entails that the civilians may be treated hap hazardly and human rights organizations may be violated. It just results in bureaucratic confusion and lack of clear lines of responsibility; this erodes accountability, making it hard to tell who gave the order to stage extra judicial murders, torture civilians or overthrow sovereign governments. In addition, the application of PMCs erodes the state sovereignty and governance since the firms may have certain goals that are different from the state's liberal ends. This erosion of sovereignty can harm the locals, make regions insecure and endanger civilians live there. This also creates much concern for 'individual freedom,' given the minimal blame that can be attributed to these companies. While countries such as Russia hire PMC's to support its interventionist international roles, afflicted societies will experience injustice facilitated by such PMC's such as Wagner in conflict prone regions (Muhammad Rafif Nur Iman Rizqulloh & M. Rizki Yudha Prawira, 2024). Often times, these civilians are bound to become hostages between powerful states and non-state actors, with minimal or any form international humanitarian intervention protection whatsoever. Since these companies are not affiliated with the national military forces that are bound with different types of legal obligations, the operations of these companies cause abuses harming local citizens' rights and freedoms, therefore, local populations suffer from exploitation and violence.

These legal and ethical issues will be discussed on a further level analyzing the consequences of the increase of PMCs in the current conflicts, and the difficulties of searching for justice for the affected populations.

## **The consequences Ukraine and African countries faced by target of Wagner group operations**

The military activities of the Wagner Group in Ukraine and African countries have had severe and frequently negative impacts, for the specific areas and the global community.

### **Ukraine**

Since the Crimean operations in 2014, the Wagner Group has moved to the Ukraine as fiber of Russia's hybrid warfare. The significant influence of the group is observed in extending the conflict zone in Donbas where it backs Russian separatists as a combat force. Wagner's activities in Ukraine are characterized by secret activities that assist Russia in denying any direct interference in the conflict while it enjoys widespread impact on the war. Such use of proxy forces makes international response more challenging as sometimes it is almost impossible to prosecute Russia for a coup sponsored by a non-state actor but encouraged by the Kremlin.

For Ukraine the implications have been very dire. Wagner earned the reputation of deepening a humanitarian tragedy, thousands of casualties of both militants and civilians, millions of IDPs, devastated cities. The group has been accused of perpetrating war crimes such as destruction of civilian property, use of torture and extra-judicial killings; and the situation becomes worsened by making any diplomatic solutions hard to find. Furthermore, Wagner has aggravated the situation and ensured that sustainable cease-fire talks are unreachable, undermining the stability the entire Ukraine especially the eastern part. (Sirwan Bustami and RM Haryo Abdul Aziz Al Hakim, 2024)

The Ukrainian government has not been able to effectively counter the many-sided threat posed by the Wagner group, which is not a traditional army. Wagner's role in the conflict also remains blurred, which casts doubt on the international legal regulation and hinders search for justice for those, who suffered from activities of this group. Also, there have been political consequences of Wagner's activity in Ukraine, where Russia used operations to exert pressure on Ukrainian sovereign and provoke destabilization in Kyiv.

### **African Countries**

In Africa, Wagner has been active in Libya, Central African Republic, Sudan as well as Mali up to recent time. In these regions Wagner has mainly been active in supplying or backing state or non-state actors loyal to the Russians or Kremlin-friendly figures in return for access to resources such as oil and minerals. Availability of this group in Africa has enabled Russia to expand its sphere of influence in the continent, counter wording the western led interferences.

Nevertheless, the impacts for the African nations that Wagner works in have been devastating and also in many ways. Wagner has been accused of gross human rights violation such as extra judicial killings of Rwandese civilians, use of child soldiers and the destruction of infrastructure in the Central African Republic and Libya. Wagner's actions have also sought to fan the flames on existing rivalries for instance escalating violence between militias and contravening the peace that has been organized in the central African nation. For instance, Wagner has been offering security to the government in the CAR while at the same time involved in corrupt practices such as mining for resources much as its actions have been enhancing the existent authoritarianism.

Wagner has also played a critical role in Africa from the political, and social perspectives. Due to funding such regimes, dictatorial and bureaucratic rulers, the group has only strengthened one's notion of political instability and wavering rule of law. It is common to find that local population in these areas become victims of violence, economical exploitation and impunity of these mercenaries. In addition, Wagner's presence has attracted the rude eyebrow of human rights organizations and Western countries who believe that the group is fomenting unrest in the volatile countries and hampering peace building and democratic processes. (Mohamedou, 2024)

Other than the humanitarian and political impacts, Wagner has created new challenges to the general geopolitical architecture of Africa. The power dynamic in Africa has shifted in recent years largely because African governments, especially those in oil and mineral-exporting countries, have found a new ally in Moscow. This has elicited concern of the western countries especially the United States and the European Union.

### **The impact for the regional and global geo-politics**

Ken and Wagner Group actions have quite profound effects on regional and global Levels of geopolitics, with strong trends towards influencing Russia's policy and its confrontations with the NATO countries (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Rahim, 2017). Being a major tool of the Russian foreign policy, Wagner provides essential contribution to serve Moscow's interests and goals in various areas, including Africa, Middle East and Ukraine. Its action which tends to operate outside the familiar framework of conventional military structures give Russia the chance to exert influence in these areas without direct state engagement. It also fits into Russia's overall policy of seeking to weaken the West and challenge NATO and the European Union most especially in the former Soviet area and in regions rich in resources. (Yaseen, Muzaffar & Shahbaz, 2023; Brobbey, Thomas, & Antwi-Danso, 2024)

For example, Wagner has been active in several African states such as Libya, the Central Africa Republic and the Sudan. Still here the group activities are not only military related, but frequently aimed at seizing natural resources and cementing pro-Russian governments. The presence in the continent offers Russia strategic access points through which it can control domineering local governments and counter any efforts by the western allies, the U.S. and the western countries. In that way Russia is able to avoid political and economic constraints which formal diplomacy might have, and thus entrench themselves deeper into the political structures of the region.

Regardless of the chronology of Wagner's appearances, the group is actively involved in the War in Ukraine as an essential conductor since 2014, during the Russian-Ukrainian War because of the Crimean annexation. Being in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine Wagner serves as a tool of proxy war where Moscow can claim no involvement as it supports separatists with military advisers and fighters. This way the group has enabled Russia to apply a great deal of pressure on Ukraine without a direct military confrontation thus making it difficult for the international community to provide coherent responses or seek justice and legal remedies.

Globally, Wagner is also part of a larger Russian campaign to compete with the unilateral USA and its partners for supremacy. This paper show that by outsourcing its military operations to private military companies such as Wagner, Russia is able to advance its geopolitical agenda while keeping the ability to remain inconspicuous at the same time and in doing so, Russia minimizes the political and diplomatic consequences

associated with direct military interventions. especially for managing relations with the West and its condemnation, as it helps Russia to have a more free and maneuverable external policy. (Raza, 2023)

Wagner's military operations also help Russia to probe new types of warfare combining traditional armed conflict and cyber activities, hybrid information operations, and espionage ones. This hybrid approach complicates even the response of the Western countries as they cannot name an appropriate action against a military threat which acts legally and is not constrained by the existing international law.

In total, Wagner's actions change world politics by helping Russia achieve its key goals, weaken the West, and exerting influence and control beyond the use of conventional armed forces. The actions of the group make global and humanitarian law even more ambiguous, erode state sovereignty, and create chaos in regions, apart from being an element of the Russians' confrontation with the West in general. This has significant consequences, because the liberal use of PMCs as state instruments of coercion draws concern on the role of armed conflict, law, and security in the world.

## **Conclusion**

The actual Wagner Group's representatives ultimately do affirm the function of Private Military Companies, which complicate contemporary standard International Law, Ethics and geopolitical novelty. In analyzing the actions of the Wagner Group from Ukraine to Africa, the chapter shows that such organizations are for the state, in the realization of its geopolitical ambitions, yet which can be done in a manner that preserves plausible deniability. But the outcome of these operations is disastrous: New waves of regional conflicts and violations of human rights new challenges to state sovereignty and regulations. This simply means that there is compelling need to reform the current frameworks governing PMCs particularly on accountability and protection of rights more than ever before now.

## **Recommendations**

To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthening International Legal Frameworks:** Above all and importantly what the world needs now is the establishment of international new improved codes of conduct PMC and providing specific bee responsibility as well as closing legal loopholes that PMCs have exploited.
- **Enhancing Transparency:** Among these are general safety precautions for the states to establish, in order to improve on the accountability for the use of PMCs, reporting of the activities or connection with any company.
- **Promoting Multilateral Cooperation:** The organizations and alliances should act together in terms of monitoring and regulating the influence of PMCs on world stability, in significantly conflicted countries such as Ukraine and Africa.
- **Building Local Resilience:** The above targeted regions require capacity building on governance and security resistance to external interferences such as Wagner.
- **Imposing Sanctions and Accountability Measures:** It is suggested that states and organizations should consider levying targeted sanctions in regard to PMCs and affiliate companies entangled in illicit legal proceedings which when freeing those captive notably take captive people.



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