

# The Wagner Group in Ukraine: *Mens Rea*, Command Responsibility and Violations of International Humanitarian Law

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## 1. Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine since 2014 has been marked by the extensive use of paramilitary groups operating alongside regular Russian federal forces. Prominent among these has been the Wagner Group, a private military company ('PMC') from the Russian Federation. Although often described as a distinct entity, its operational integration with the Russian armed forces raises significant questions about state responsibility, individual criminal responsibility, and the applicability of international humanitarian law ('IHL').

This policy brief analyses specific accounts of Wagner Group activities in the Kharkiv region in Ukraine, particularly in the Vovchansk and Martove localities, from 2022 to 2023. It juxtaposes victim testimony detailing alleged war crimes with public statements by the Group's late leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (1961–2023). The analysis aims to develop a legal framework for the assessment of perpetrator *mens rea* (intent) and the command structures that may have facilitated violations of the Statute of the International Criminal Court ('ICC').

## 2. Wagner Operations and State Responsibility

One of the most famous videos featuring Prigozhin, who founded the Wagner Group in 2014 with Dmitry Utkin (1970–2023), dates to May 2023. Amid the corpses of two dozen of his fighters, Prigozhin shouts into the camera, "Shoigu! Gerasimov! Where's the ammunition?". At the time, Prigozhin claimed that the mercenaries' heavy losses during the assault on Bakhmut in Eastern Ukraine (Donetsk *oblast*) were primarily due to the Russian Ministry of Defence's failure to supply ammunition.

However, data from BBC News and Mediazona indicate that the Wagner Group suffered its highest daily losses – 200–213 persons per day – much earlier, in January 2023. Prigozhin later admitted that he had lost 20,000 mercenaries in the nine-month battle for Bakhmut. He claimed that only half of them were recruited from Russian prisons. "During the operation, I selected 50,000 prisoners, of whom about 20% died. [...] the same number of them died as those who came to us under contract, without the prison camps", Prigozhin said shortly after the city's capture on 20 May 2023. But according to BBC News and Mediazona, 88 per cent of the dead mercenaries had been recruited from Russian prisons.<sup>1</sup>

Media reports indicate that President Vladimir Putin met personally with the leaders of the Wagner Group after their infamous mutiny on 23–24 June 2023. The mutiny was the most serious internal challenge to Putin's rule, and his initial reaction was to denounce it as "a stab in the back" and a "treasonous" distraction from the unity needed to achieve victory in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> It was reportedly motivated by an escalating feud with Russia's Ministry of Defence. For months, Prigozhin publicly accused Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (1955–) and General Valery Ger-

asimov (1955–) of incompetence, corruption and starving the Wagner Group of ammunition.

Another factor was Prigozhin's opposition to the Kremlin's order that all volunteer formations sign contracts with the Ministry of Defence. Prigozhin viewed this as an attempt to dissolve the Wagner Group's autonomy. Finally, Prigozhin claimed that Russian forces had targeted Wagner Group positions, which he said made armed action unavoidable.<sup>3</sup>

After meeting with the Wagner Group's leadership, Putin said the Group's fighters were offered several options, including joining Russia's regular military, joining other security structures, or leaving service altogether. He emphasized that the Group did not officially exist under Russian law. Because of that, the issue of legalizing PMCs should be addressed by the State Duma (the Parliament), as there was no legal framework governing PMCs in Russia.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the Group maintained substantial operations in African countries, functioning as a hybrid instrument of Russian state influence, combining security, regime protection, resource extraction, and political operations. It provided embattled governments, presidential palaces and ruling elites with protection in countries such as the Central African Republic ('CAR'), Mali, Sudan (pre-2023), and Libya (where it supported Khalifa Haftar (1943–) against the government backed by the United Nations ('UN')).

Official announcements eventually confirmed the Wagner Group's withdrawal from Africa. In 2025, the Group, which had been in Mali since 2022, announced that it had completed its mission and was leaving the country.<sup>5</sup> However, Wagner Group operations continued under a different name (that is, 'Africa Corps') and under the Russian Ministry of Defence's direct oversight – although a major defeat in late April 2026 cast doubt on the Corps' and Russia's future in Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Internationally, the Wagner Group was viewed as a proxy for the Russian state and as a criminal organization. The United States Treasury Department designated it as a "significant transnational criminal organization" in January 2023.<sup>7</sup> It was repeatedly sanctioned from 2017 to 2023 for activities in Ukraine, Syria and Africa.<sup>8</sup> The European Union

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "«ЧВК не существует»: что нового Путин сказал про Пригожина и «Вагнер» ["PMCs do not exist": What Putin said about Prigozhin and Wagner]", *News.ru*, 14 July 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Eva Vishnevskaya, "««Вагнер» возвращается домой»: ЧВК объявила о завершении миссии в Мали ["Wagner is returning home": The private military company announced the end of its mission in Mali]", *Gazeta Ru*, 6 June 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Judah and Polina Ivanova, "How Russia lost its way in the Sahara", *Financial Times*, 30 April 2026.

<sup>7</sup> "США признают ЧВК «Вагнер» «международной преступной организацией» [The United States recognizes the Wagner PMC as an "international criminal organization"]", *BBC News*, 21 January 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Emelie Chace-Donahue, "Understanding the US Designation of the Wagner Group as a Transnational Criminal Organization",

<sup>1</sup> Olga Ivshina and Olga Prosvirova, "Immoral, but effective: How and at what cost the Wagner PMC captured Bakhmut", *BBC News*, 10 June 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Candace Rondeaux, "What led to Wagner's Mutiny in Russia", *TIME*, 26 June 2023.

sanctioned the Wagner Group in 2021 and expanded sanctions in February 2023 against 11 individuals and seven entities linked to atrocities in Mali, CAR, Sudan and Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> UN experts called for independent investigations into killings involving the Wagner Group in Mali.<sup>10</sup>

The original Wagner Group structure tied to Prigozhin collapsed after he died in 2023. Fighters and assets were redistributed into state-controlled systems, mainly the Russian Ministry of Defence and intelligence agencies. For nearly a decade, the Group evolved from a small PMC into a complex, multi-tiered military enterprise, ultimately threatening the conventional military system. Operating across multiple continents with thousands of personnel, vast supply chains, and diversified operations – from logistics, mining and smuggling to full-scale warfare – the Wagner Group was presented as both an autonomous actor and an arm of the Russian state.

Despite the reach of its operations, Wagner’s legal status remained deliberately obscure. Its operatives were granted access to state resources, including air logistics and prisons for combat recruitment. They were entrusted with the most sensitive tasks, including ‘purges’ of other proxy forces. The Group was financed from the state budget, yet it continued to operate outside the formal structure of the armed forces. This duality deepens with the Group’s relatively recent rebranding as the Africa Corps, further complicating questions about its nature: is it a state actor, a private contractor, or a novel hybrid – an ‘army without a nation’?

The Wagner Group, throughout its existence, has attempted to challenge this state–private actor dichotomy. From Syria to Ukraine, it operated under apparent Russian state oversight, even while maintaining nominal independence. The Group’s flexible structure and opacity make it resistant to traditional legal classification, thereby making it difficult to apply normative frameworks.<sup>11</sup>

The Group’s operations in Syria, Libya, Sudan, CAR, Mali and Madagascar went far beyond security provision.<sup>12</sup> It extracted resources (gold, diamonds and timber), supported authoritarian regimes, and allegedly engaged in disinformation and election manipulation. In CAR, it controlled customs posts and ran smuggling networks. In Mali, it was supported by Russian air forces and acted alongside the local army.

The significant profit generated by the Group suggested a high level of financial independence. However, the material and diplomatic support provided by Russia indicates strong state affiliation. It raises questions about the attributability of the Wagner Group’s actions to the Russian state.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Violations of International Humanitarian Law and Individual Criminal Responsibility

#### 3.1. Incidents in the Kharkiv Region

The following incidents rely on witness testimony and documented information which we have reviewed regarding the occupation of the Chuguyvsky region in Kharkiv *oblast*. These accounts suggest a pattern of conduct that violates IHL.

The first incident concerns the occupation of and detention at the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant. On 24 February 2022, the Wagner Group advanced from Khotimlya village toward Martove village. According to a victim, Group fighters were stationed at the Elat recreation centre in Martove and at resort houses located outside the village from 24 February 2022. Although the precise list of items is not known, the victim reported that his own car was stolen and recalled other instances of theft across the resort houses and the recreation centre.<sup>14</sup> The victim further

*ICCT*, 25 January 2023.

<sup>9</sup> “EU adds sanctions on Russia’s Wagner mercenary group for Africa, Ukraine ‘rights abuses’”, *The Straits Times*, 26 February 2023.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Matthew A. Lauder, “State, Non-State or Chimera? The Rise and Fall of the Wagner Group and Recommendations for Countering Russia’s Employment of Complex Proxy Networks”, Hybrid CoE Working Paper No. 33, June 2024, pp. 1–28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11–16.

<sup>13</sup> Dmitry Gurin, “From Wagner to Africa Corps: Ambiguity of the Legal Status”, in *Armed Groups and International Law*, 4 June 2025.

<sup>14</sup> The following quotes are from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Ukraine database, which is built on the Investigation Documentation System (‘I-DOC’). This is a digital tool for working on facts relevant to serious violations of international

described an unlawful arrest and subsequent transfer to a detention site at the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant. The encounter was described as follows:

I came home on 20 August 2022 and sat down to eat dinner when they burst into the house. There were five or six military men. They arrived in buggies and put me in my Niva car. One of them was wearing a mask, while the others wore balaclavas. They searched the house, looking for weapons.

The next day, [...], I was brought to the investigator’s office. He was middle-aged, from Vovchansk, and a collaborator. He asked for my personal details.

After lunch, two investigators from Vovchansk took me to the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant. I do not know their names. They drove us there in a car. During the ride to the factory, they blindfolded us but did not tie our hands.

They took us to a room where about 20–24 men were present. The room measured approximately 3 by 6 meters and had no windows. There was a light and a fan. A bucket served as a toilet. There were mattresses, some shelves, and racks. Some people slept on the racks, others on the floor.<sup>15</sup>

The testimony details interrogation methods amounting to torture and inhuman treatment, involving the threat and application of electric shocks:

They did not touch me for a couple of days. Then they took me in for questioning. I think the FSB officers conducted the interrogation. They went into the cell, called me by my last name, put a stocking over my head, and took me somewhere. They said, “Grandpa, we’ll count you right now”.

They had electricity there. They turned on the speaker and threatened me with an electric shock, saying, “We’ll count you”. I responded, “Now count me, and then send the woman a load of 200”. “Oh, he says, do you know what a load of 200 is?”. I explained that I was in Afghanistan. They then decided not to connect the current to me. Everyone sitting there was connected to the current, but they did not connect it to me.<sup>16</sup>

The witness also observed the treatment of other detainees, including foreign nationals:

Others in the cell were subjected to electric shocks. There were six Hindus in the cell. They were psychologically tortured. The Hindus did not understand Russian. There was also a Hindu woman, kept separately. It seems there were three women there: two from Vovchansk and one Hindu. I did not hear any women’s voices. When the convoy arrived, they took us to the basement, where we sometimes spent the night. They also brought women there. One woman was about 50–60 years old, and another was an Indian woman around 50.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the identity of the perpetrators and their intent, the victim noted:

The guards called each other by name, but I do not remember them. There were Wagnerites at the Aggregate plant. When they got drunk, they shouted: “Khokhli (Ukrainians), we’ll cut you up”. Those in the cell said there were special forces and Wagnerites there.<sup>18</sup>

The second incident concerns administrative control and disappearances in Vovchansk. A second witness corroborates the timeline of the occupation and the integration of the Wagner Group with other military and paramilitary units:

On 24 February 2022, at 5:00 a.m., the Russian Federation’s military entered the city of Vovchansk. For two weeks, they set up checkpoints and established their administration in the city. Russian troops seized all Ukrainian government buildings. By the end of May, officers from the FSB, the Russian Guard, and military personnel from the Luhansk People’s Republic, the Donetsk People’s Republic, and the Wagner detachment entered the Vovchansk aggregate plant. After capturing the plant, the mayor

criminal or human rights law. I-DOC is developed by the Case Matrix Network, a department of the Centre for International Law Research and Policy (CILRAP). Every document stored in the Ukraine I-DOC has a unique ID.

<sup>15</sup> I-DOC, Document ID 25082, see *supra* note 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

of Vovchansk disappeared but later appeared on social media with a photo showing he was fine. Subsequently, the military began illegal searches in residents' homes, during which some people were beaten. Many of those detained vanished without a trace, and to this day, there is no information about them.<sup>19</sup>

The third incident concerns the conduct of hostilities and the use of coercion. A third witness describes the behaviour of Wagner Group personnel during the occupation in 2023, distinguishing them from regular armed forces by their violent conduct:

In April 2023, Russian soldiers began arriving in large numbers at a nearby unfinished boarding house. There were trucks with black license plates. Then more people arrived. My father said they were Muscovites, speaking in a Moscow dialect. They were not heard after sunset; they did not turn on any lights, and they made no noise.

Then, in late spring, probably May or June 2023, Wagner members, who, as locals told us, were former convicts, were traveling in civilian cars like Nivas and old Zhigulis. They carried weapons and ammunition. They were already hosting loud, drunken parties day and night, with music, dancing, and shooting into the air. At one point, they even had a shootout among themselves. Akhmatov members came to them to settle some issues.<sup>20</sup> There were rumors of gunfights between them.

Once, my son and a friend [...] were playing on the street with a tablet when members of Wagner heard the sounds of the game; some of them were swearing. Two of these Wagner members climbed over the fence and pressured us to form a front line. Two of them had machine guns – one was a fat redhead in uniform, with a long beard below his chest, curly and very drunk. [...] He was about 170 cm tall. The other was more sober, taller – about 185 cm – of average build, with dark skin, a short haircut, and a standard green uniform.

The redhead threatened, “If we hear that again, we’ll shoot without warning”. “Where can we shove it? Who has been spreading their dicks around here? Now we’re shoving these dicks up your asses”. The machine gun was lowered, but he kept his hand on it. I ran out into the street with the women, and they began apologizing. Another dark-haired one told the children, “Tell your mother thank you for raising you; otherwise, I would have raised you”. The redhead seemed to be the leader among them in the boarding house. Both of them appeared to be of Slavic descent.

After that, when we heard Wagnerites making noise, we hid in the building. Because as soon as they saw someone in the yard having dinner, they climbed over the fence to us.<sup>21</sup>

The witness also described the rotation of troops, noting a clear difference in professionalism between Wagner Group mercenaries and subsequent units:

As we later observed, the Russians changed every three months. After the Wagner members in September–October 2023, some elite and discreet individuals arrived. They were not heard in the evenings, looked healthy, and pulled out a long weapon wrapped in a small cloth, with several pieces. My father mentioned that they were from somewhere in the Volga region. They covered their military vehicles with camouflage nets; civilian vehicles with Ukrainian license plates were also seen.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2. Legal Characterization

The conduct described in the testimonies concerns multiple IHL provisions, specifically those of Geneva Convention IV, and may constitute distinct crimes under the ICC Statute. *Firstly*, they describe pillage and the illegal appropriation of property. The seizure of items from the Elat recreation centre and the theft of vehicles likely constitute pillage as under Article 8(2)(b)(xvi) of the ICC Statute. Furthermore, the extensive destruction and appropriation of property not justified by military neces-

<sup>19</sup> I-DOC, Document ID 29329, see *supra* note 14.

<sup>20</sup> The Special Rapid Response Unit Akhmat (or Spetsnaz Akhmat) is a unit of the Russian National Guard, reporting directly to the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov.

<sup>21</sup> I-DOC, Document ID 29298, see *supra* note 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

sity constitute a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions,<sup>23</sup> punishable under Article 8(2)(a)(iv) of the ICC Statute.

*Secondly*, they refer to instances of torture and cruel treatment. The electric shocks and severe beatings described by detainees at the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant violate the absolute ban on torture and cruel treatment.<sup>24</sup> Under the ICC Statute, this behaviour may be classified as a war crime under Article 8(2)(a)(ii) (torture or inhuman treatment) and Article 8(2)(a)(iii) (wilfully causing great suffering).

*Thirdly*, they refer to unlawful confinement and enforced disappearance. The detention of civilians without due process, the use of blindfolds during captivity despite the absence of an evident security necessity, and the reported disappearance of the mayor of Vovchansk together indicate a system of coercive and secret detention.<sup>25</sup> Such conduct is consistent with the war crime of unlawful confinement, which prohibits the arbitrary detention of protected persons without legal safeguards or judicial process. The concealment of detainees' whereabouts, combined with restrictions on their ability to identify their captors or location, may support characterization as enforced disappearance under customary international law. The reported provision of food and continued constraints further suggest an organized and sustained detention regime rather than a temporary or incidental deprivation of liberty.<sup>26</sup> Individual criminal responsibility may attach not only to direct perpetrators, but also to commanders and civilian superiors under the doctrine of command responsibility if they knew or should have known of (alternatively, if they knew or consciously disregarded information clearly indicating) the unlawful detention practices and failed to prevent or punish them.

*Fourthly*, they indicate the denial of quarter. The explicit threats shouted by Wagner Group personnel, such as “If we hear that again, we’ll shoot without warning” and “Khokhli (Ukrainians), we’ll cut you up”, indicate an apparent intent to conduct hostilities with no mercy. This could amount to declaring that no quarter will be given, a war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(xii) of the ICC Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Moreover, the fighters' statements may be interpreted as evidence of a broader disregard for the rules and constraints imposed by IHL. Such statements potentially reflect not merely isolated misconduct, but an operational culture characterized by intimidation, abuse and the deliberate mistreatment of civilians and protected persons. While inflammatory rhetoric alone does not establish criminal liability, statements of this nature may serve as contextual evidence of intent, knowledge or organizational policy when assessed alongside allegations of unlawful confinement, pillage, threats against detainees and other abuse.

### 3.3. Mens Rea and Modes of Liability: The Prigozhin Factor

To establish criminal liability, one must prove not only the *actus reus* (the criminal act) but also the *mens rea* (criminal intent). In the context of the Wagner Group, the public statements of its leader, Prigozhin, constitute critical evidence of command responsibility and knowledge of the unlawfulness of the operations.

On 24 May 2023, Prigozhin gave a video interview that may serve as a retrospective admission of his troops' illegal conduct and the strategic failures of the invasion:<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949, Article 53 (“Geneva Convention IV”) (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/d5e260/>): “Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations”.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, Article 32, titled “Prohibition of murder, torture, corporal punishment and other measures of brutality”.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, Article 42 permitting internment or assigned residence only if imperative reasons of security exist; Article 78 titled “Restrictions on internment in occupied territories”; and Article 147 which lists unlawful confinement as a grave breach of Geneva Convention IV.

<sup>26</sup> I-DOC, Document ID 29329, see *supra* note 14: The victim describes the following food regime: “The water that was given to drink was from the tap, also drinking water was provided. Food was given twice a day at 10:00 in the morning and at 17:00, breakfast and dinner were provided, they gave pasta and canned meat, pasta was almost impossible to eat, bread, also they gave barley porridge and zucchini caviar, which was expired, and tea. All the food was unfit for consumption”.

<sup>27</sup> Meduza, “Мы пришли по-хамски, прошлись сапогами по всей территории

We came rudely, walked with boots all over the territory in search of Nazis. While we were looking for Nazis, we screwed up everyone we could. We approached Kyiv, and as we call it in Russian, shit ourselves, and retreated further to Kherson, shit ourselves and retreated. Somehow, everything does not work out for us. At the beginning of the special operation, they had, say, 500 or 5,000 tanks, and 20,000 people were able to fight for them. Now, 400 thousand people can fight. We were supposed to demilitarize Ukraine; it turns out that it was militarized again. [...] I think that today the Ukrainians are one of the strongest armies; they have a high level of organization, a high level of training, a high level of intelligence, various weapons, and they work in any systems, on Soviet systems, on NATO systems.

The children of the elite, at best, should keep their mouths shut while they enjoy a carefree life. I suggest that the Russian Federation's elite send their youth to war so that when they start burying them, people will say that now everything is fair. My current political belief is that I love my homeland, I obey Putin, Shoigu should be sent to soap, and the judge should be sent to soap. We will keep fighting. We began this conflict with our neighbors, and now we are arguing. If your neighbor sent you to hell and you hit him on the head with an axe, that is a strange situation. A nuclear bomb is an axe. There's no need to chase your neighbour with an axe.<sup>28</sup>

Prigozhin's admission that his forces "walked with boots all over the territory" and "screwed up everyone we could" ("in a rude manner") speaks to a generalized intent to disregard IHL. It suggests a command culture where indiscriminate violence was acknowledged as the standard operating procedure. It amounts, we submit, to an acknowledgment of unlawful conduct, potentially engaging principles of command responsibility, a doctrine closely associated with prosecutions of core international crimes before the ICC and other criminal tribunals.<sup>29</sup>

Prigozhin's subsequent actions (specifically the 'March of Justice' in June 2023, see next paragraph) show that he recognized the legal and moral grounds for the invasion were fabricated. By stating that the Wagner Group was sent on "unlawful and wrongful instructions",<sup>30</sup> Prigozhin negates a potential defence of *mistake of fact*. He articulates a clear understanding that the justifications for the war (for example, "looking for Nazis") were pretextual. He demonstrates knowledge of wrongfulness.

The 24-hour mutiny during which Wagner Group forces seized military facilities in Rostov-on-Don further illuminates the fractured chain of command. In a video conversation with Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Bamatgireyevich Yevkurov (1963–), Prigozhin justified the mutiny by citing the harm done to civilians:

[...] that you are attacking peaceful cities and peaceful citizens, that you have just destroyed a bus full of passengers. We came here, and we need to meet the Head of the General Staff and [Defence Minister] Shoigu. Until we meet them, we will be residing here, and we will block the city of Rostov-on-Don.<sup>31</sup>

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Украины [We came in a rude manner, walked with boots all over the territory of Ukraine]", *YouTube*, 24 May 2023.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 17 July 1998, Article 28 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/7b9af9/>).

<sup>30</sup> After reviewing the Meduza video, the intention became apparent, see Meduza, 24 May 2023, *supra* note 27.

<sup>31</sup> Radio Svoboda Novosti, "ЧВК "Вагнер" идёт на Москву. Путин назвал это изменой. Пригожин оружие складывать не намерен [PMC Wagner is heading to Moscow. Putin called it treason. Prigozhin does not intend to lay down his arms]", *YouTube*, 24 June 2023.

The statement is significant, confirming that the Wagner leadership possessed contemporaneous knowledge of war crimes ("attacking peaceful cities") committed by the Russian military.

#### 4. The Commodification of Manpower

The operational history of the Wagner Group in Ukraine reveals a broader systemic issue within the Russian Federation's administration of large territories and resources. Russian authorities' recruitment of people from less resourceful families and distant towns, as well as from penal colonies, signals a strategy of disposable warfare. By involving citizens from the outskirts in a militarized expansion, the state effectively sacrifices them to protect economic interests and territory without risking the political stability of the central elite. Prigozhin's critique that "the children of the elite [...] should keep their mouths shut" underscores this class divide.

This dynamic creates a specific incentive structure for the commission of war crimes. Mercenaries, aware of their status as disposable assets ("sent to soap") and operating in a legal vacuum where domestic law enforcement is suspended, are encouraged to use excessive force to ensure survival and achieve tactical success. The use of the phrase 'send on/dispense to soap' is common when expressing one's discontent with the state of affairs. For example, a Wagner Group member may express support for his country and its leadership, while also calling for judges to be removed from office and held legally accountable. In some circles, he may employ the phrase 'dispense to soap' as a coded expression of hostility towards officials.

#### 5. Conclusion

Testimonies from the Kharkiv region, combined with Prigozhin's statements, paint a coherent picture of the Wagner Group's role in the Ukraine conflict. The incidents at the Vovchansk Aggregate Plant and Martove – marked by torture, pillage and unlawful confinement – are not isolated anomalies but the result of a military structure operating with disregard for international humanitarian law.

Prigozhin's final months revealed a commander aware of the war's illegal basis and the brutality with which it was being implemented. His attempt to distinguish his March of Justice (the mutiny) from the government's actions suggests that the orders from Moscow were seen, even by those carrying them out, as illegal.

While the Russian government continues to use paramilitary violence to control large areas, including occupied territories in Ukraine, the record of these testimonies will remain important for future accountability under international law.

It is clear that the Wagner Group acted on orders from the Russian leadership and that Prigozhin himself knew at the time that their acts were illegal.

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