

The Wagner Group, Russia's Foreign Policy and Sub-Saharan Africa

Geneva Paper 32/24

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March 2024



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ISBN: 978-2-88947-120-1

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Cover photo: Mint_Images, Envato Elements

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Jean-Marc Rickli and Mr Tobias Vestner for their expert guidance and insightful reviews, which enriched this research, and for their kind support in the completion of this publication.

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Executive summary

Set up in 2014 as a private organisation, the Wagner Group has conducted numerous military activities internationally that remain shrouded in mystery. Through documented investigations, it emerges that the group is less akin to a traditional private military contractor and more a tool in Russian president Vladimir Putin's military arsenal. Through its deployment in the Central African Republic and Mali, the group has gained an important foothold in sub-Saharan Africa and has furthered Russian foreign policy aims in the region, enabling Moscow to advance three key aims: (1) achieving recognition for Russia as a great power through global geopolitical repositioning; (2) undermining Western interests by building a Russian sphere of influence; and (3) enhancing Russian soft power. The historical anti-imperial Soviet advances in the post-colonial era had facilitated present-day Russian endeavours in Africa, providing a narrative for the Russian state's foreign policy goals. While the Wagner Group has employed various political strategies to exert soft-power influence, it has also resorted to a coercive approach to suppress anti-government and anti-Russian activity. Russian advisors have developed repressive tactics, instrumentalising local state institutions and national armed forces to threaten opponents. The Wagner Group's activities in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated a concerted effort to enhance Russia's influence in the region and secure the country's strategic interests. While Russia is not the sole external actor in Africa, the current political orientation adopted by the Kremlin towards sub-Saharan Africa can ultimately be read as a move to fragment and unsettle Western presence across the continent. In this context, the merging of paramilitary and non-military actions in Africa is of particular relevance, allowing Russia to project power, exert influence and – crucially – unsettle local state-building projects.

I. Introduction

In the early 2020s Russia has been steadily expanding its strategic influence in Africa. This evolution marks a departure from Moscow's traditional historical approach to the continent, which had focused on economic cooperation and technical assistance.¹ Russia's newfound involvement in Africa is characterised by a distinctive urgency centred on the conflicts and crises playing out across the continent since the mid-2010s.² A key feature of the shift is the rising prominence of the Wagner Group, a paramilitary organisation increasingly posing an important challenge to state-building and democratic governance in the countries where it operates.

This Geneva Paper will argue that Russia has made use of the Wagner Group as a tool to further its foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa. This strategic approach, characterised by patronage and opportunism, seeks to increase Russia's geopolitical influence by providing security services to transitioning military regimes, and is primarily aimed at contesting and weakening Western influence in the region. At the core of this analysis is the wider question of how a state is able to use a non-state actor in the projection of its foreign policy aims and the advancement of its international strategic goals. The substance and form of this specific Russian strategy raises unresolved questions for both African security and the international community in light of President Putin's governance and militarism.

The paper will first review the existing literature on the topic. It will then explore the historical background that enabled the Soviet Union's and, subsequently, Russia's emphasis on anti-imperialism to render its involvement in sub-Saharan African affairs palatable to local political leaders and civil society. The paper will then examine the rise and operations of the Wagner Group, focusing on its background, structure, and ties to the Kremlin. The analysis will then assess and delineate Russia's foreign policy objectives in Africa and explore how the Wagner Group has carried out these aims under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin.³ To illustrate the group's role in advancing these interests, the analysis will present case studies of its interventions in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, highlighting activities, strategies, and tactics in each context. The paper will then assess the extent to which the Wagner Group's activities in both countries support or diverge from Russian foreign policy objectives. It concludes by summarising the main points. It further offers reflections on the implications of the Wagner Group's activities for Russian foreign policy, African security and the broader international community.

II. Literature overview

Although the Wagner Group has emerged as a significant actor present in conflicts round the world since its founding in 2014, academic research on the group remains scarce. Its culture of secrecy⁴ and the notion of 'plausible deniability' complicate our understanding of the group's ties to the Russian leadership and its role in projecting Russian power and enacting foreign policy aims. Plausible deniability refers to a situation where there is no direct evidence linking a person or organisation to an action, or where intermediaries or proxies are used to carry out the action.⁵ In the case of the Wagner Group and the Russian state, plausible deniability has been used to distance the Russian government and state leadership from the group's activities.

Most available literature on the Wagner Group focuses on the group's ties to the state and its leadership, and chronicles its activities. Investigative journalists, such as those at the French news magazine *Jeune Afrique* and the All Eyes on Wagner research project, have contributed to uncovering the structure, leadership and Kremlin connections of the Wagner Group, further supporting the notion that its activities align with Russian foreign policy objectives.⁶

However, significant ambiguity and debate persist around the extent to which the Wagner Group acts at the behest of the Russian state or independently of it. Cross-sectional debates among Russian experts, investigative journalists and scholars have emerged around some of the group's activities. These debates centre on questions of its *nature, purpose and interests*.

A first discussion point on the Wagner Group concerns its classification and whether it is a private military company (PMC) or a state actor. As Marten notes, the Wagner Group "does not fit well into any existing PMC category or template in the literature".⁷ PMCs are generally regarded as non-state entities that provide "military and security services to legal personalities, private individuals and the state".⁸ However, recent perspectives have taken a different approach, acknowledging that PMCs can also act in the interests of the state and operate outside their country of origin, and thus be used to pursue military and political objectives for that state without its direct participation.⁹

Other academics argue that PMCs are not merely a force acting on behalf of a government, but are also a potential governmental structure in and of themselves and therefore a tool of foreign policymaking.¹⁰ PMCs can thus be seen as "a force equal in importance to the regular armed forces", able to carry out 'special tasks' that cannot be assigned to regular armed forces.¹¹ Several scholars foresaw this evolving dimension of warfare, including Martin Van Creveld and Herfried Münkler, among others.¹²

A second key debate is whether the Wagner Group serves one particular purpose or if it seeks to further a variety of Russian state interests. Most academics

generally agree that the primary aim of employing private military contractors is to assist states in achieving variegated policy objectives under the radar and at a lower cost – because contractors traditionally do not require long-term salaries and benefits once their task is done.¹³ However, as Marten notes,

Wagner and its antecedents have not worked for just anyone. They have been reliable providers of contract violence abroad, across years and across conflicts, for the Russian state, for Russia's leading business interests, and for Russia's allies. Yet Wagner's relationship to state command and control has varied, inasmuch as sometimes they have clearly worked directly alongside regular Russian military forces, and other times not.¹⁴

A final theme recurrent in the literature is the question of whose interests drive Russian policy – and therefore the Wagner Group's motivations. Some scholars have argued that Russian foreign policy is tailored to serve the self-interests of President Putin and his close associates at the expense of what is best for the entire Russian populace.¹⁵ Others have contended that Russia's foreign policy is a reflection of its national interest, which can be objectively established by assessing the distribution of material power across the globe.¹⁶ This interpretation is supported by Mearsheimer in his portrayal of the Ukraine conflict.¹⁷ Attempts to decipher the Wagner Group's interests are impacted by these two readings.

The literature on the Wagner Group is limited, but growing rapidly. While scholars tend to agree on the basic facts surrounding the group's ties to the Kremlin, as well as its leadership and activities, debates persist about the extent of its connection to the Russian state and its motivations. As the Wagner Group continues to operate globally and assert its influence, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, further research is needed to understand its relational role to this context.

III. Historical background: the Soviet Union and the Cold War

To fully understand Russia's current involvement in Africa, it is crucial to examine it through a historical lens. The Cold War was not confined to a power struggle between Moscow and Washington. Other dimensions unfolded simultaneously elsewhere, with significant consequences for the countries involved as the United States and Soviet Union went to great lengths to persuade regional leaders to align with their respective blocs.

From the 1960s onwards, the Soviet Union's political stance toward the African continent shifted markedly. The Soviets began presenting themselves as anti-imperialist allies to many newly independent sub-Saharan African states in hopes of turning them away from Western influence and interests (using a strategy that historically goes back to the early days of the Bolshevik revolution with the anti-imperialist congress held in Baku in 1920).¹⁸ While many African leaders were keen to preserve their newfound independence and avoid getting caught up in superpower competition, the support provided by the Soviets often superseded such hesitation and mistrust, because their countries desperately needed foreign aid.¹⁹ This was the case with several southern African states that sought to fight the Portuguese in their colonial possessions.²⁰ For instance, during the 1964-1974 Mozambique liberation war, the Soviets provided military equipment and training to the guerrilla forces of the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front, or FRELIMO) to help them attack Portuguese forces.²¹ The liberation of African territories from Western colonial rule was deemed so important at the time that Soviet support was welcomed, resulting in a geopolitical norm that associated neo-colonial and imperialist influence with the West, while allowing powers like Russia to avoid being labelled as such.²²

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, interest in the continent faded as the newly established Russian Federation closed nine embassies and three consulates across Africa during the 1990s and 2000s.²³ Since the mid-2010s, however, Russia has sought to revive its historical relationship with the continent, drawing on its earlier support and contrasting its past assistance to that of other colonial powers such as France.²⁴ Russia's utilitarian emphasis on anti-imperialism has since rendered its involvement in African affairs more satisfactory to a number of African political leaders and sectors of civil society.²⁵

Under its new Africa policy – and as African states were reeling from the impact of the 2008 financial crisis – Russia began operating in Africa to increase its geopolitical influence, and once again presented itself as a pan-African liberator, thus seeking a comparative advantage over the West. This involved offering support to various African states in their disputes with Western actors while emphasising the 'voluntarily cooperative' nature of Russia's involvement. In

2017 a former Saint-Petersburg police officer with connections to the Russian domestic intelligence agency (the FSB) was appointed as the CAR president's top security advisor. When questioned about Russia's involvement in the nation, he remarked (emphasis added):

We, all of us, are here at [the CAR president's] invitation. It is his vision to improve ties with Russia. And why is this? Let us remember our history. Russia first came here in 1964. *Today, Russia is simply coming back.* That is all. Everything you see here that is of any value was created under president [Jean-Bédél] Bokassa with the support of the Soviet Union.²⁶

Russia is thus exploiting anti-Western sentiment prevalent in several African countries and reviving links between itself and the African continent by 'reminding' African political leaders of past Soviet alliances and support.

IV. The Wagner Group

One key distinction between the Soviet Union's engagement in Africa during the Cold War and Russia's current strategy on the continent lies in the latter's pursuit of a more decentralised approach. Russia's activities in Africa have largely been led by the Wagner Group, a *realpolitik* tool that allows Russia to enhance its influence with more diffuse and long-term interests. The group serves as a politically 'plausibly deniable' force that can project Russian power at short notice and low cost while avoiding Russian military personnel casualties.

Despite its secretive nature, the Wagner Group has garnered significant media attention. Investigative journalists have monitored the group, making it challenging for Russia to deny its connection to its activities. Evidence of the group's ties to the Russian state has been accumulating. Internet and telephone records analysed in 2020 by a collective of researchers, the Bellingcat Investigation Team, reveal that the group is also closely linked to the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency.²⁷ Wagner has also reportedly used Russian state military infrastructure, training in Molmino in the Krasnodar region adjacent to a GRU special forces training camp.²⁸ The organisation has also received other forms of support such as the provision of passports to Wagner personnel from the same Moscow office that issues them to the Ministry of Defence.²⁹ Crucially, while the group's members work on contract, they are fiercely patriotic and support Russian government policies.³⁰ As such, the Wagner Group is not a traditional mercenary organisation.

In 2022 there was a significant shift in how Wagner was publicly perceived. Prior to that, both the Russian leadership and African partners of Wagner had denied the group's existence and operations by refuting the idea that Wagner troops were operating in their respective countries.³¹ However, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict brought Wagner into the limelight, because the group's soldiers were prominently involved in the war.³² Moreover, Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, who had previously denied any connection to Wagner, publicly admitted in September 2022 that he founded the group.³³ The organisation subsequently became a registered legal entity, with headquarters in St Petersburg.³⁴ As such, Wagner transformed from a secretive and unacknowledged group to a significant and visible participant in Russia's military operations worldwide.³⁵

Despite Wagner being widely portrayed as a private organisation, the group appears to be engaging in a mutually beneficial collaboration with the Russian government, because its activities and garnering of profits align with the promotion of Russian state interests in Africa.³⁶ Wagner represents not only one of the most developed methods of exerting Russian influence on the continent, but is also closely linked to the Russian state on a strategic level. Leaked internal documents from 2019 revealed Wagner's plan to exert influence in Africa.³⁷ One of the group's aims was to 'strong-arm' Western powers out of the region and disrupt pro-Western political movements.³⁸ This objective

appears to be more in line with Russian foreign policy than an enterprise that is solely focused on profit. The group's strategy consists of offering a package of services that appeal to autocratic leaders. Stanyard et al. note that this entails "mercenary troops who can help ensure territorial control and political strategists who can manipulate and shape public debate through social media and disinformation".³⁹ In return, Wagner seeks commercial gain, not just financially, but through access to natural resources, particularly in mining.⁴⁰

Although details of the Wagner Group's activities and deployments remain shrouded in mystery, it is clear that the group is not a traditional PMC, but rather a tool in President Putin's unconventional or 'hybrid' military arsenal.⁴¹ The following section will explore the specific foreign policy objectives that the group has carried out for the Russian state and assess to what extent the organisation serves as a tool for Russian foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa. By examining Wagner's operations in Mali and the CAR (two of the countries where the group is heavily involved), insights can be gained into the complexities of the group's relationship with the Russian state and its objectives on the African continent.

V. Russian foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa

Russian foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa is driven by a set of multifaceted objectives that can be distilled into three key principles: (1) achieving Russia's *recognition as a great power* through global geopolitical repositioning; (2) *undermining Western interests* by building Russia's own sphere of influence and; (3) *enhancing Russian soft power*.

A. Russia's grand strategy

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the role played by the Wagner Group in advancing the principles of Russian foreign policy, it is essential to explore the continuity between Russia's historical and contemporary aims, as well as the country's increasing emphasis on non-linear forms of warfare. The Primakov Doctrine, named after former foreign and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov, serves as a key framework for analysing Russia's grand strategy. Although Primakov's special expertise was in the Arab world – for the KGB (Committee of State Security) during the Cold War and at the SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) and MID (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) subsequently – it is interesting to see how this policy was then effortlessly transposed to the sub-Saharan African context. This doctrine, developed in the late 1990s, emphasises *multipolarity, power projection and the use of proxy warfare* as means to achieve its goals.⁴² Putin highlighted the importance of the doctrine at the Munich Security Conference in Germany in 2007, when he noted that Russia should (re)assert itself on the international stage and challenge the existing world order by re-engaging with regions Moscow had abandoned in the 1990s.⁴³

Another key framework for analysing Russia's grand strategy is the Gerasimov Doctrine, developed by Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.⁴⁴ Gerasimov outlined a vision of modern warfare that incorporates elements of traditional military operations, information warfare and hybrid warfare. The Gerasimov Doctrine emphasises the use of non-military means, such as propaganda, cyber attacks and political subversion, to achieve strategic objectives. It argues that modern conflicts are increasingly characterised by the blurring of the line between war and peace, and that military force alone is no longer sufficient to achieve victory. This 'whole-of-government' concept "fuses hard and soft power across various domains and transcends the boundaries between peace and wartime".⁴⁵ The Gerasimov Doctrine and Primakov Doctrine complement each other in shaping Russia's foreign policy and military strategies. In this context, the Primakov Doctrine defines foreign policy objectives that Russia seeks to achieve in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions, while the Gerasimov Doctrine provides the operational framework to implement these objectives in a way that allows for flexibility, adaptability

and deniability.⁴⁶ Against this backdrop, Wagner's activities in Africa exemplify the continuity between historical Russian aims that Primakov envisioned and current Russian foreign policy aims for which Gerasimov provided an operational strategy, and this combination enables Russia to effectively pursue its renewed interests in sub-Saharan Africa.

Understanding this continuity is critical when analysing Russia's actions on the world stage. Ramani argues that Russia's motives are primarily status-based, seeking to (re-)establish itself as a global power.⁴⁷ Russia's recent growing influence in sub-Saharan Africa has become an increasingly important element of its global geostrategic posture, particularly more so following Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the more recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, because these actions have resulted in international isolation and economic decline. Ramani has described this as a paradox of "external expansion and internal decline".⁴⁸

Rondeaux notes that the narrative of a grand chess master, whether Putin or a PMC such as the Wagner Group, orchestrating Russia's proxy warfare and carrying out the foreign policy strategy is a highly appealing notion for the Kremlin.⁴⁹ However, the reality is more complex and involves a combination of historical continuity, strategic adaptation and opportunism. Siegle notes that "Lacking significant investment capital ... trade prospects, or an appealing governance model ... Putin chose the path of disruptor to elevate Russian influence on the continent".⁵⁰ Indeed, Russia, through Wagner, has systematically advanced this objective by exploiting power vacuums in politically unstable countries and leveraging anti-Western sentiment to offer the same services it has provided in other unstable countries.⁵¹ Therefore, while Russia's objectives in Africa are multifaceted, its limited resources have compelled it to focus on disruption as a primary strategy. The Wagner Group has been a key tool in implementing this strategy by exploiting local conflicts, creating and exacerbating instability, and undermining Western influence on the continent. This approach has enabled Russia to challenge the West and gain an advantage in geopolitical competition. By employing the Wagner Group as a proxy, Russia can simultaneously advance its strategic goals that share an important continuity with prior Russian and Soviet strategic ends by undermining Western interests across the globe while maintaining 'plausible deniability'.

The Wagner Group is able to achieve this because it has established a playbook pattern of political, military and economic involvement in the countries in which it operates.⁵² The group targets countries with weak governance and fragile democracies, and responds to their respective governments' requests for security assistance, especially when those governments believe that Western states have not provided adequate support.⁵³ The organisation intervenes to help local military leaders backed by Russia against rebel groups seeking regime change. In exchange for its services, the Wagner Group is allowed by the government in question to extract resources for its economic benefit and gain access to high-value commodities and resources.

The Wagner Group's model, which undermines democratic governance and captures local political elites, is a perfectly suited political and military asymmetric tool for Russia. The group has offered Russia a rapid entry point into sub-Saharan Africa to establish a presence that would have taken years to build through conventional means such as trade, investment, development aid, or cultural and educational ties.⁵⁴ As an independent contractor, Wagner provides unpredictability and the ability for Russia to explore new environments for political, military, and economic cooperation without overtly appearing involved.

In this context, politically, Russia has become what Ramani describes as "a crisis-proof partner of authoritarian regimes".⁵⁵ Indeed, the country has often positioned itself as a protector of authoritarian governments that face sanctions or accusations of human rights abuses. This strategic objective has been evident in Russia's operations in Mali and the CAR, as discussed below, where the Wagner Group has become the dominant security partner. As Marten notes, Russia is also crucially building relationships with African countries that have few alternatives, because many of them are under United Nations (UN), European Union (EU) or other multilateral sanctions for war crimes and other infringements of the rules of the international system.⁵⁶

Economically, Russia seeks to gain access to African resources, targeting countries with weak governments, but that are rich in valuable materials such as oil, manganese, uranium and gold.⁵⁷ Instead of charging a set fee for its assistance, Russia seeks payment in the form of open-ended access to natural resources, commercial contracts, or strategic locations such as airbases or ports.⁵⁸ This loose arrangement enables Russia to secure access to valuable resources while establishing a foothold in geopolitically significant locations. These economic gains contribute to Russia's broader strategic interests and provide opportunities for further expansion in the region.

Militarily, Russia aims to build relationships with African countries, offering assistance and fostering reliance on Moscow's military assets. As Fasanotti notes, by providing security assistance to authoritarian regimes, the Wagner Group offers these regimes "the ability to conduct counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations unconstrained by human rights responsibilities".⁵⁹ Because Wagner operates without the oversight and accountability mechanisms that typically constrain the actions of state military forces or international organisations, it has been implicated in numerous incidents of civilian abuses, including extra-judicial killings, torture and forced displacement.⁶⁰ This has enhanced Russian influence on the continent, and African leaders' dependency on Moscow's military assets has ultimately come at the expense of African citizens' democratic aspirations.⁶¹ Yet, by providing military capability, Russia is able to deepen its influence and establish lasting relationships with African governments while further solidifying its presence in the region.

Ultimately, Russia's focus on creating partnerships with countries undergoing significant political transitions is not solely opportunistic, but also serves a

larger objective of advancing its global geopolitical repositioning.⁶² It is willing to take risks and deploy paramilitary forces quickly to countries undergoing political crises when the occasion arises.⁶³ The creation of a buffer between Wagner's operations and the Russian government allows Russia to maintain a local image while reducing the risks associated with the group's operations. As such, the Wagner Group can be seen as a surreptitious tool for establishing Russia as a key player in this part of the world as part of its quest to achieve global power status.

B. Building spheres of influence and challenging Western interests

Building spheres of influence and challenging Western interests – more specifically French interests – is another primary aim of Russian foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Russia's perception of sovereignty, other major powers must acknowledge its sphere of influence in the countries, for example in Eastern Europe, effectively controlled by the former Soviet Union, or what Russians refer to as “the near abroad”.⁶⁴ Russia regards a sphere of influence as an instrument that other global forces such as the United States, the EU, and China have, and this is what Russia is similarly attempting to build and manage globally.

In Africa, specifically North and West Africa, interventionism is more often associated with France, due to its colonial legacy. French military interventionism has been regular and has significantly impacted its former colonies, which it continues to influence in various ways. France has intervened militarily over fifty times in Africa since decolonisation.⁶⁵ In doing so, the French have actively sought to maintain African political orders beholden to French interests. These interests include promoting the French language and culture (Francophonie), business interests, and investment opportunities, and maintaining regimes supportive of French diplomacy. The close ties between Paris and the leaders of these countries had given rise in the 1970s and 1980s to *Françafrique*, a controversial relationship built on unofficial and often corrupt arrangements among various Franco-African political, economic, and military networks.⁶⁶ Although it has diminished, notably with the death in 1997 of its main French actor, presidential adviser Jacques Foccart, this relationship has perceptually left a long shadow across Africa.

In this context, Russia's growing presence in Africa challenges not only overarching Western interests and the regional balance of power, but, more specifically, French influence. In doing so, Russia is also attempting to challenge the norms and principles of the rule-based international order, including respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of member states.⁶⁷ Russia's interest in Africa provides an opportunity to advance President Putin's vision of a post-liberal international world order.⁶⁸ Russia seeks to undermine the notion

that democracy is a more efficient, fair and inclusive form of governance. This worldview plays to Moscow's advantage, because it favours its elite-focused, transactional and unregulated model.⁶⁹ By engaging with African nations, Russia has thus demonstrated its ability to create humanitarian and political turmoil for Europe, while challenging historically European – and primarily French – spheres of influence in Africa.⁷⁰

C. Enhancing Russian soft power

A third and crucial aspect of Russian foreign policy lies in its soft power activities in Africa. Russian foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa extend beyond military interventions or economic deals, and also incorporate key soft power activities, particularly in the realm of cyberwarfare and propaganda. These disinformation campaigns aim to delegitimise opposition movements and create confusion among the public. This ultimately helps to solidify the power of authoritarian regimes.

Russia has also been investing in drawing attention to its two major international media platforms, Russia Today and Sputnik, by portraying Western involvement in Africa as neo-imperialism.⁷¹ These platforms' editorial lines are designed to appeal to African audiences, and Russia has reportedly invested in AdWords campaigns to increase the likelihood of the prioritisation of Russian media content in Google searches in Africa.⁷² By doing so, Russia seeks to challenge the Western narrative and present itself as an alternative to Western media.

A key example of this entails the activities of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group in setting up newspapers and a radio station in the CAR that have helped to increase Russian political influence in the region.⁷³ The group's activities have involved propagating false information to remove CAR politicians who are "oriented towards France".⁷⁴ Russia has also reportedly acted as "repression consultants, advising their African clients on how to polarise or control society through engaging in propaganda or spreading disinformation".⁷⁵ The country's use of highly sophisticated disinformation campaigns regarding non-interference and African empowerment has ultimately been effective in helping Russia to enhance its soft power and further its overarching strategy of increasing its influence in Africa by undermining Western activities and initiatives.

VI. Wagner's intervention in Mali

A. The Political and security situation in Mali

Mali has faced a complex political and security situation in recent years that has been characterised by a series of coups and security crises since 2012. The nation has struggled with political instability, the growing presence of extremist groups and intercommunal violence, which have led to a fragile security environment.

The roots of the current crisis can be traced back to 2012, when a military coup d'état overthrew the democratically elected government of President Amadou Toumani Touré.⁷⁶ The coup exacerbated existing ethnic tensions and created a power vacuum in the northern part of the country. This allowed various extremist groups, including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, to seize control of key northern cities such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal.

The Malian government, with the support of a French military intervention (Operation Serval) and the deployment of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, was able to reclaim much of the territory initially lost to extremist groups. However, despite these efforts, the security situation has remained volatile. The extremists have continued to launch attacks against military and civilian targets, and intercommunal violence has escalated, often driven by competition for resources and exacerbated by the presence of armed groups. It is important to note here that, as in other cases of Western interventions (e.g. in Libya, Iraq and Afghanistan), the expected political transition (and solution to the internal instability) in Mali did not succeed conclusively. The 2013-2022 French action in Mali therefore remained mainly a military one (including Operation Barkhane and Operation Serval) of limited security ambition. The French also decisively failed for several years to rally convincing international support, even in Europe, for their involvement in Mali. This opened windows of opportunity for Russia to exploit.

In addition to the ongoing conflict with extremist groups, Mali has also experienced recurring episodes of political instability. In August 2020 another military coup deposed former president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and a transitional government was installed, only to be overthrown in May 2021 by Colonel Assimi Goïta, who set up a regime aimed at freeing the country from alliances with Western states perceived as failing Mali, corrupting it, and perpetuating a colonialist past.⁷⁷ This succession of political events has deepened Mali's crisis.

The Malian military's rise to power coincided with France's decision to decrease its military presence in the country and terminate joint operations with Malian state forces.⁷⁸ This decision was made following an increase in tensions between the long-time partners and the imposition of sanctions on Mali by the Economic

Community of West African States from January to July 2022. In retaliation, Mali denied international forces access to its airspace, expelled Danish and Swedish troops, and eventually declared the French ambassador *persona non grata*.⁷⁹ After initially rejecting Mali's decision, France eventually announced the withdrawal of its forces in February 2022.⁸⁰ The perceived neo-colonial management of France, resented by many in the country, had pushed Mali's security actors to seek an alternative to their traditional security partners. This thus created further opening for increased Russian involvement in Mali.⁸¹

The first Wagner troops had been deployed to Bamako in November 2021. The official state invitation to Wagner constituted a watershed moment, because it indicated a marked departure from the traditional Malian (and more generally African) requests of support to France and prompted strong condemnation from Mali's Western allies.⁸² In February 2022, the Malian authorities went further and asked the French government to withdraw all the military troops Paris had dispatched to Mali since 2012 as part of Operation Serval – subsequently replaced by Operation Barkhane in 2014, which had some 5,000 French soldiers positioned across Mali.⁸³

In light of decades of complex relations with France, the Malian decision to partner with Russia should not come as a surprise. While France has been Mali's primary international partner since independence in 1960, the post-colonial relationship has been challenging. Malians resented French unilateral action and France wanted to bear less burden in the region – while still retaining its dominant influence.⁸⁴ The Russian intervention offered an alternative to French neo-colonialism and filled the void created by France's reduced involvement in Mali. This, however, complicates the position of Mali's political and security partners, because it challenges France's initially valued position in the region and has thus resulted in a sensitive balancing act.⁸⁵ Wagner's arrival in Mali can thus be contextualised as the Malian military regime's desire to build a new alliance with a partner that it perceives as stable and effective in managing insecurity and that has a force in place that can protect the current power structures.

B. The Nature of the Wagner Group's involvement in Mali

The Wagner Group has been involved in Mali to further a variety of Russian foreign policy objectives. Its activities are characterised by three main aspects: providing training and support to the Malian military, protecting strategic assets and infrastructure, and enhancing Russian soft power.

Providing training and support to the Malian military

Wagner has been actively engaged in providing training and support to the Malian military by helping it fight terrorism and insurgency threats and enhancing its combat capabilities. This support has come in various forms, including the

provision of military advisors, trainers and specialised equipment. By assisting the Malian military, Wagner aims to bolster the country's ability to tackle security threats, which in turn could create a more stable environment for Russian interests in the region.

In September 2020 the Malian interim government welcomed a thousand Wagner Group contractors to “conduct training, close protection and counterterrorism operations”.⁸⁶ This development marked a significant milestone in the burgeoning relationship between Russia and Mali. A year earlier, Mali's then-government had already received four Russian MI-171 attack helicopters, with weapons and ammunition, as part of a military agreement between the two countries.⁸⁷ These were allegedly delivered as a “donation” in January 2021. The chronological proximity of these developments suggests that the Wagner Group has been intimately involved in fostering the growing military-to-military relationship between Mali and Russia.

Protection of strategic assets and infrastructure

The Wagner Group has also played a significant role in protecting strategic assets and infrastructure in Mali, notably in the realm of natural resources, such as mining operations, energy facilities and transportation networks. The group's involvement in this regard involves the deployment of its personnel to secure these assets, deter potential attacks from extremist groups or other hostile actors, and maintain the overall safety and functionality of these critical resources.⁸⁸ By protecting such assets, Wagner enables Russia to gain access to valuable natural resources and strengthen its economic presence in the region.

The deployment of Wagner in Mali has raised questions about its motives and the potential benefits from its involvement, particularly in light of the country's abundant mineral resources. Mali is one of Africa's leading producers of gold, and also has large deposits of diamonds, lithium, manganese, and silver, among other rare metals.⁸⁹ According to the US State Department, the Malian authorities hired the Wagner Group for an estimated US\$10 million per month.⁹⁰ Although the Malian prime minister has suggested that Wagner is paid through direct transactions, the way in which it is remunerated has not been officially confirmed.⁹¹ This sum would compromise a significant portion of the Malian national budget. This has thus led to speculation that the group might be provided with access to mining concessions as an alternative form of payment.⁹²

Investigative reporting has noted that two mining firms, namely Alpha Development and Marko Mining, were established by individuals linked to the Wagner Group with the aim of securing access to mining concessions. Alpha Development has denied any association with Wagner, but there is no independent verification of the relationship between these companies and the group.⁹³ On the other hand, the Malian-Russian Mining Company, Marko Mining, has held exploration permits since 2009 and possesses a mining licence to

work in the Sikasso region.⁹⁴ It is unclear whether Wagner assumed control of Marko Mining as a pre-existing Russian company in Mali.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, sources have noted that the company has recently augmented the number of Russian nationals on its board. Additionally, the terms of Marko Mining's operational contracts were reportedly amended following the start of Wagner's operations in Mali in ways to grant more control to the Russian partners.⁹⁶

Despite Mali's significant mineral resources, the country has reportedly presented unique challenges to the Wagner Group, because many mining centres and other investment infrastructure are limited and are strictly governed at the governmental and tribal levels.⁹⁷ Government regulations are stricter in Mali than in the CAR, as we will later explore, and armed groups that hold negative views of Wagner's involvement in the country, such as the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad, control artisanal mines in northern Mali.⁹⁸

While the Wagner Group's involvement in protecting strategic assets and infrastructure in Mali is evident, its motives and potential benefits from such engagement remain uncertain. The possibility of the group gaining access to valuable natural resources through mining concessions cannot be ruled out. However, the challenges presented by Mali's unique political and economic landscape, combined with the lack of concrete evidence linking Wagner to specific mining operations, make it difficult to definitively assess the extent of the group's interests in the country's mineral wealth.

Enhancement of Russian soft power

Wagner's activities in Mali are enhancing Russian soft power by building on growing dissatisfaction and shaping public opinions positively towards Russia. Russian soft power activities were influential in moulding public opinion even before Wagner mercenaries were visible in Mali.⁹⁹

As early as 2017 a civil society organisation called the Patriotic Group (Le Groupement des Patriotes) launched a petition demanding Russia's intervention in combatting terrorism in Mali.¹⁰⁰ In January 2021 Yerewolo Debut sur les Remparts, a pan-African NGO, called for the exit of French troops and an end to Operation Barkhane. In March of the same year Yerewolo called for military cooperation with Russia, just before Colonel Assimi Goïta's coup the following May.¹⁰¹

After Goïta's accession to power, efforts continued to influence the perception of local populations in favour of an alliance with Russia and in support of the arrival of Wagner mercenaries. This was accomplished through anti-French demonstrations, influence operations against France and pro-junta social media campaigns.¹⁰²

The broader Wagner apparatus, including Prigozhin's associate Maxim Shugaley and the Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), has undertaken public relations efforts to support deployment to Mali.¹⁰³ The FZNC released a public

opinion poll in September 2022 claiming 87% support among Malians for the government's outreach to Wagner.¹⁰⁴ The FZNC is sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for disseminating disinformation.¹⁰⁵ In 2022 Alexandre Ivanov, one of Prigozhin's partners who has acted as a spokesman for the Wagner Group's personnel in the CAR, spoke with Malian media in an interview and highlighted the potential benefits of a Wagner deployment to Mali.¹⁰⁶

These efforts demonstrate that Wagner is not only involved in military and security operations, but also engages in strategic communication and influencing campaigns to enhance Russia's image in Mali. By tapping into local dissatisfaction and presenting itself as a reliable alternative to Western powers, the group is positioning itself as a key player in the region and garnering support for its presence and activities.

C. Assessment of the extent to which the Wagner Group's actions in Mali support or diverge from Russian foreign policy objectives

The Wagner Group's actions in Mali can be assessed in the context of Russia's broader foreign policy objectives. The group's involvement in Mali can be assessed as largely aligning with Russia's foreign policy objectives in the following key areas.

Expanding Russian influence in Africa

By providing military training and support to the Malian government, the Wagner Group assists Russia to expand its influence in Africa. This engagement allows Russia to establish itself as a valuable security partner in a region experiencing numerous security challenges and political instability. The Wagner Group took advantage of a power vacuum created by the withdrawal or reduced presence of Western powers in the conflict-ridden region. As the situation became more volatile, Wagner stepped in to offer its services, filling the void left by Western powers and further cementing Russia's position as a key player in the region's politics.

Challenging Western dominance

The Wagner Group's presence in Mali, alongside other international actors such as France and the UN, represents an alternative source of support and partnership for the Malian government. This presence allows Russia to challenge the influence of Western countries in the region and potentially weaken their foothold in Africa. The Wagner Group's activities have upset French interests in Mali, particularly because it has been able to gain traction with the Malian government and public opinion. Increasing Russian influence combined with anti-French sentiment led to the departure of both the French ambassador and French troops, and the end of Operation Barkhane. This shift in dynamics

challenges France's historical and traditional role in the region and provides Russia with an opportunity to assert itself as a more desirable partner for the Malian government.

Accessing resources and economic opportunities

The Wagner Group's involvement in protecting strategic assets and infrastructure in Mali, such as mining operations and energy facilities, creates opportunities for Russia to gain access to valuable natural resources and establish a foothold in the region's economic development. Mali, as noted, boasts significant reserves of diamonds, lithium, manganese and silver, among other rare metals, which presents Russia with the potential for economic gain. By securing and protecting these assets, Russia can ensure that it benefits from the exploitation of these resources while simultaneously strengthening its presence and influence in the region.

Nevertheless, while the Wagner Group's activities in Mali predominantly support Russia's foreign policy objectives, there is one key aspect that causes the group's actions to diverge from its goals, namely, negative perceptions of the group. This ultimately goes against the Russia's aim of enhancing its soft power. The Wagner Group's operations as a PMC are widely perceived negatively by the international community and other stakeholders in Mali.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, many claim that the group's involvement in Mali has contributed to an escalation of the conflict in that country and regional instability, because its actions have created further tensions among local populations and communities. This is due to the many abuses against civilians, which include human rights abuses and violations of international law.¹⁰⁸

Within the first six months of Wagner's presence in Mali it became evident that its activities had an adverse impact on the dynamics of the conflict in the country, particularly civilian safety, because the increasing number of casualties in 2022 was higher than in any other year since the crisis began in 2013.¹⁰⁹ Since Wagner's initial deployment, reports have emerged of human rights violations and massacres of civilians committed by its troops. One of the worst massacres occurred in Moura, a village in the Mopti region controlled by Islamist extremists, where approximately 380 Malians were killed over a four-day period, reportedly by Wagner and allied Malian troops.¹¹⁰ Despite documented cases of civilian targeting, abuse and summary executions, such allegations were consistently refuted. However, in the year since Wagner's deployment, violence against civilians has drastically increased. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, Wagner has been responsible for a markedly higher percentage of attacks on civilians in Mali and the CAR compared to the insurgent groups it is battling or its own allied forces.¹¹¹

This ultimately harms Russia's reputation and undermines its foreign policy objective of enhancing its soft power. Because Russia is largely associated with the Wagner Group, human rights abuses and civilian massacres in Mali have damaged Russia's image on the international stage and alienated potential partners in the region.

VII. Wagner Group's operations in the Central African Republic

A. Political and security situation in the CAR

The CAR, a landlocked country in the Central Africa, has been plagued by political turmoil and security challenges for years. The nation has experienced a prolonged conflict and widespread instability since 2013, marked by a complex web of armed groups, intercommunal violence and political power struggles.¹¹² The roots of the current crisis can be traced back to the overthrow of President François Bozizé in 2013 by the predominantly radical Islamist Séléka rebel alliance. Séléka's seizure of power prompted a violent backlash from anti-Balaka militias, primarily composed of radical Christian and animist fighters. The conflict between these groups has been characterised by widespread human rights abuses, forced displacement and the destruction of livelihoods.¹¹³

Despite the presence of international peacekeeping forces, such as the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, and the signing of several peace agreements, the security situation has remained highly volatile. Armed groups continue to vie for control of territory and resources, often exploiting ethnic and religious divisions to advance their agendas.¹¹⁴ In addition to the ongoing conflict between armed groups, the CAR has experienced significant political instability. The most recent presidential elections in 2020, which saw the re-election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, were marred by violence and allegations of fraud.¹¹⁵ The political landscape remains fragile, characterised by unrest and power struggles.

The CAR's vast natural resources, including gold, diamonds, and other valuable minerals, have fuelled the conflict by providing armed groups with revenue sources and incentives for seeking territorial control. This has led to a situation where large parts of the country remain under the control of various armed factions and the central government struggles to exert authority beyond the capital, Bangui.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, the political and security situation in the CAR is characterised by persistent conflict, intercommunal violence, and political instability. These factors have created a fragile environment that has allowed the Wagner Group to become involved in the country, seeking opportunities to advance its interests and those of its Russian backers.

B. Wagner Group's arrival in the CAR

The CAR serves as the most advanced illustration of the Wagner Group's business model in Africa.¹¹⁷ In exchange for access to natural resources, primarily diamonds and gold, Wagner has provided military and political support to

President Touadéra, helping to sustain his presidency amid attacks from rebel groups. The extent of Wagner's involvement and influence in the CAR has been described as being a case of "state capture".¹¹⁸

This deep involvement began after a meeting between CAR and Russian figures in Sochi, Russia, in October 2017.¹¹⁹ In December 2017 Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov persuaded the UN Security Council to make an exception to longstanding sanctions against the CAR, paving the way for a significant Russian security presence in the country.¹²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Russian security personnel were deployed to the presidential palace in the capital, Bangui, followed by the arrival of military trainers and a shipment of weapons in January 2018.¹²¹ These trainers operated unofficially and did not have any Wagner or Russian military insignia on display on their uniforms.¹²²

In April 2018 the initial security personnel assigned to the presidential guard were replaced by Russian military instructors employed by Sewa Security Forces, a company believed to be a front for the Wagner Group.¹²³ These quickly became integrated into the Central African Armed Forces throughout 2018.¹²⁴ Valery Zakharov, a Russian diplomat linked to Prigozhin's company M Finance, then assumed the role of national security advisor to President Touadéra. In 2022 Zakharov's role was taken up by another Wagner commander named Vitali Perfilev.¹²⁵

C. Nature of the Wagner Group's involvement in the CAR

The Wagner Group has been actively involved in the CAR to achieve various objectives. These encompass arms sales and military training, diamond- and gold-mining deals, providing personal security for President Touadéra and his inner circle, and enhancing Russian soft power.¹²⁶

Arms sales and military training

The Wagner Group has played a significant role in providing arms and military training to the CAR's armed forces. After the UN partially lifted the arms embargo on the CAR in 2017, Russia became one of the primary suppliers of weapons and ammunition to the country.¹²⁷ The Wagner Group's personnel have been responsible for training the CAR's military personnel in the use of these weapons and enhancing their combat capabilities. This assistance helps to strengthen the CAR's ability to tackle security threats and creates a more favourable environment for Russian interests in the region.

Presidential protection

Russia's foreign policy in Africa has been characterised by a pattern of gaining leverage by providing isolated leaders, actively seeking to reinforce their power, with security support. In the CAR, the Wagner Group has followed the same playbook by providing President Touadéra with security support and a

presidential guard. Additionally, politicians in the CAR who have spoken out against the disproportionate Russian influence have reportedly been fired.¹²⁸ By ensuring the security of Touadéra and his close associates, the Wagner Group was able to strengthen its ties with the CAR's political elite and leadership and gain influence over the country's decision-making processes.

One important aspect of Russia's involvement in CAR is the complicity of the local government. In March 2018 the second secretary at the Russian embassy argued that CAR courts should abolish the constitutional restriction limiting a president to two terms in office. He insisted that President Touadéra, who was in his second term and had surrounded himself with Russian mercenaries, should stay on after his second term for the good of the country. The court's president, Danièle Darlan, warned that instability stemmed from presidents wanting to make their rule eternal. Seven months later Ms Darlan was ousted by a presidential decree in order to open the way for a referendum to rewrite the constitution and abolish presidential term limits.¹²⁹ This move effectively cemented what one observer called the CAR's status as a "vassal state" of the Kremlin.¹³⁰

The Wagner Group also played an active role in President Touadéra's re-election in December 2020, funding his campaign and sponsoring information campaigns highlighting his successes and Russia's positive role in the country.¹³¹ The group additionally reportedly intimidated political opponents. Touadéra's allies closely controlled the electoral commission and vote-tallying process, resulting ultimately in an unsurprising first-round victory for Touadéra.¹³²

By providing security to President Touadéra and his inner circle, and through its involvement in the political process and close ties to the government, Wagner not only protects an authoritarian leader, but also maintains its strategic foothold in a large sub-Saharan African country by exerting considerable influence across the nation.

Economic activity

The Wagner Group has established a significant economic presence in the CAR thanks to several companies linked to the group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin. These companies, including Lobaye Invest, Bois Rouge, and Midas Resources, have been given access to the country's natural resources by the government and have often usurped pre-existing rights granted to other companies.¹³³ Lobaye Invest, a mining firm established in Bangui in 2017, has been granted licences to mine gold and diamonds in a vast expanse of CAR territory. Similarly, Midas Resources was awarded a mining exploitation permit in Ndassima, a region with large reserves of gold, after the previous licence held by Canadian company Axmin was revoked. Additionally, a local CAR-based company that had been given the forestry concession for an area in Lobaye province had its rights terminated and reassigned to Bois Rouge.¹³⁴ Although these firms are seemingly independent of one another, investigations have uncovered their ties to Wagner.¹³⁵

Beyond securing control over mining concessions, the Wagner Group has also faced allegations of looting and trafficking in diamonds and gold.¹³⁶ Reports suggest that in Lobaye province Wagner has been clandestinely purchasing diamonds from local collectors since as early as 2019.¹³⁷ The group has also allegedly bought gold and diamonds directly from insurgent factions.¹³⁸ In other parts of the CAR, Wagner soldiers have also raided artisanal mining communities and seized diamonds and gold.¹³⁹

Russian diplomats have also held meetings with rebel opponents of Touadéra regarding Russia's access to mines under rebel control.¹⁴⁰ One interpretation of this move is that Russia does not wish to wait for Touadéra's government to regain control of these mines and offer mining concessions. Another possible explanation to consider, as proposed by new war theory, is that Russia may prefer to sustain the conflict because peace would reduce the incentive of locals to give up mining rights in exchange for security cooperation.¹⁴¹

Wagner's intervention in the CAR also entails promoting Russian businesses. The First Industrial Company, a Bangui-based beverage producer registered to a Russian businessman with ties to Wagner, has been benefitting from these tactics.¹⁴² A spokesman for the Russian embassy in Bangui noted on this matter that popularising Russian culture and doing business with the CAR population is a priority, adding that a private investor can do what he wants: "After all, this is the law of the free market".¹⁴³

Enhancing soft power

In the CAR, the Wagner Group's activities are also aimed at 'winning the hearts and minds' of the country's citizens. These efforts are welcomed by many who view Russia as a stabilising force that can end the nation's chronic instability.

One example of Wagner's soft power efforts is the statue erected in 2022 on Faustin-Archange Touadéra Avenue, which features four armed Russian soldiers protecting a kneeling woman and two children. The statue has become a popular photo spot for locals, including members of the armed forces.¹⁴⁴ Wagner has also sought to control information and spread propaganda, as witnessed in the creation of the radio station Lengo Songo. This station promotes the views of the Russian government and Wagner's activities.¹⁴⁵ Wagner's mining companies have also sponsored sports and cultural events. One such example includes a cartoon portraying Russian cooperation with the CAR in a positive light by depicting a friendly bear helping a lion fight off a group of hyenas.¹⁴⁶ The group produced an action film shot in the CAR entitled *Tourist*, which shows Wagner personnel protecting the country from rebels.¹⁴⁷ The film was translated into Sango and shown to a packed Bangui stadium in May 2021, with "Je suis Wagner" tee-shirts distributed as merchandise.¹⁴⁸ Another Wagner-financed film, *Granit*, showcased Russian paramilitaries defending President Touadéra.¹⁴⁹ Russia has also established a cultural centre on the banks of the Oubangui River that offers a carousel for children, Russian lessons for adults and film screenings.¹⁵⁰

To mark the contrast between Russia and France, the Wagner Group has fuelled anti-French rhetoric. Russian advisors have sponsored pan-Africanist movements while projecting Russia's positive intentions towards the continent. Propaganda has played a significant role in Wagner's strategy, presenting its members as heroes and saviours. Wagner has done this by leveraging the media as a propaganda tool to promote its initiatives, with several outlets allegedly receiving Russian financial support.¹⁵¹ As a result of this, many in the CAR have welcomed Russian soft power as a bulwark against chronic instability.¹⁵² Many CAR citizens have come to view Russian brutality as a necessary evil that has brought them peace and stability after years of conflict. This is exemplified by a statement from Honoré Bendoit, the subprefect of Bria, a regional capital, who noted, "When your house is burning, you don't mind the colour of the water you use to put out the fire. We have calm thanks to the Russians. They are violent and they are efficient."¹⁵³

D. Assessment of the extent to which the Wagner Group's actions in the CAR support or diverge from Russian foreign policy objectives

The Wagner Group's involvement in the CAR largely aligns with Russia's foreign policy objectives in the following areas.

Expanding Russian influence in Africa

By providing military training, arms and personal security to the CAR's political leadership, the Wagner Group assists Russia in expanding its influence in Africa. This engagement allows Russia to establish itself as a valuable security partner in a region experiencing numerous security challenges and political instability (and this in turn helps exemplify further Wagner interventions).

Access to resources and economic opportunities

The Wagner Group's involvement in securing diamond- and gold-mining deals for Russian companies helps Russia gain access to valuable natural resources and establish a foothold in the region's economic development. These activities contribute to Russia's strategic interests and enhance its economic presence in Africa.

Challenging Western dominance

Wagner's presence in the CAR, alongside other international actors such as France and the UN, represents an alternative source of support and partnership for the CAR government. This presence allows Russia to directly challenge the influence of Western countries in the region and potentially weaken their foothold in Africa.

While Wagner's activities in the CAR predominantly support Russia's foreign policy objectives, there are some aspects that diverge from these goals. As in Mali, the group's operations as a private military contractor are perceived negatively by the international community and other stakeholders in the CAR. Civilian abuses and violations of international law carried out by Wagner personnel or local troops the group leads or supports in the CAR have the potential to decrease Russia's soft power and consequently backfire.

Wagner has increasingly operated independently of the CAR national armed forces when fighting rebels. In doing so, Wagner troops have been involved in a significantly higher level of violence directed towards civilians than when they have operated alongside state forces. Since December 2020, 70% of Wagner operations that did not involve state forces have constituted acts of civilian targeting, in comparison to 27% when Wagner troops have operated alongside state forces.¹⁵⁴ Such civilian abuses harm Russia's reputation and undermine its foreign policy objectives.

VIII. Evaluating Wagner activities in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of Russian foreign policy objectives

A. Re-establishing Russia as a global power through geopolitical repositioning

Wagner's involvement in Mali and the CAR assists Russia to assert its position as a great power in the global arena. Through military assistance, the provision of security services and resource extraction, Russia is able to demonstrate its capability to project power and influence in regions beyond its traditional sphere, thus contributing to its footprint as a great power.

The Wagner Group provides Russia with a low-profile means of achieving its foreign policy objectives. By deploying the organisation in Mali and the CAR, Russia has been able to maintain a level of plausible deniability while still exerting influence in these countries. This approach allows Russia to become a key player in the region and creates thorny challenges for Western states to counter Russia's policy because of this plausible deniability.

The group's operations in Mali and the CAR ultimately play a key role in contributing to Russia's global geopolitical repositioning by expanding its presence in a strategically important region. By establishing a foothold in sub-Saharan Africa, Russia can enhance its strategic options and increase its leverage in global affairs.

B. Undermining Western interests by building a Russian sphere of influence

The group's activities in both Mali and the CAR challenge Western influence in the region, particularly that of France. By offering alternative support and partnership to these countries, Russia can potentially weaken the Western foothold in Africa and create opportunities for expanding its own sphere of influence. In doing so, it is challenging Western dominance and promoting a multipolar world. By expanding its influence in Africa, Russia can potentially weaken the Western-centric international order and create opportunities for new alliances and partnerships that reflect more directly its own interests and values, while appealing to those resentful of Western dominance.

C. Increasing Russian soft power

The Wagner Group's presence in sub-Saharan Africa only enhances Russia's soft power in the region to some extent. The group has played a role in reshaping the minds and hearts of many CAR and Malian citizens through its military support and use of propaganda. However, the potential of Russia's soft power in the region is limited by the negative perceptions associated with private military contractors and Wagner's human rights abuses. The violent actions and gross civilian abuses regularly committed by the Wagner Group have led to many citizens being resentful towards and hating the group.

Ultimately, the Wagner Group overwhelmingly serves as a key tool for advancing Russian foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa, but to gain a balanced view of its activities, it is essential to consider the drawbacks and risks associated with the organisation's activities, such as negative perceptions of Russia.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has examined the issue of Russia's use of the Wagner Group as a tool to further its foreign policy aims in sub-Saharan Africa. It has argued that Russian foreign policy in the region is driven by a set of multifaceted objectives that can be distilled into three key aims: (1) achieving *recognition as a great power* through global geopolitical repositioning; (2) *undermining Western interests* by building a Russian sphere of influence; and (3) *enhancing Russian soft power*. Although details of the Wagner Group's activities and deployments continue to be cloaked in secrecy, it is clear that the group is not a traditional PMC, but rather a tool or weapon in President Putin's unconventional or 'hybrid' military arsenal.¹⁵⁵ By examining the Wagner Group's operations in Mali and the CAR, two of the countries where the group has heavily involved itself, the paper sought to offer insights into the complexities of the group's relationship with the Russian state and its objectives on the African continent.

The historical Soviet advances in the post-colonial era facilitated present-day Russian endeavours in Africa and have provided a narrative for the Russian state's foreign policy goals internationally and regionally, currently as carried out by a private entity, the Wagner Group. Although Russia is not the sole external actor with influence in Africa, the current political stance adopted by the Kremlin towards the continent appears to not have been driven by classic concerns of national security. Rather, it is defined by a broader aspiration to place Russia on the highest level of the global power structure through geopolitical expansion in an area where it previously had been minimally present. This strategy can ultimately be read as a move to fragment and unsettle the Western presence in the continent. In that context, the merging of paramilitary and non-military actions in Africa is of particular relevance, because it has allowed Russia to project power across Africa through soft power tools, exert influence and – crucially – unsettle local state-building projects.

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ISBN: 978-2-88947-120-1



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