

# Russian Para-Military Operations in Africa: The Wagner Group as a De Facto Foreign Policy Instrument

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## Abstract

As a Russian private military company, the Wagner Group has become an increasingly significant instrument in the Kremlin's foreign policy toolkit. Wagner can even be described as a quasi-state actor and a proxy institution of the Russian state. It has a footprint across the globe, but its operations have especially been mired in controversy on the African continent. In Africa, Russia has sought to expand its geo-political influence and accordingly challenges Western influence on the continent. What is of particular interest is that Wagner's operations are conducted in resource-rich and fragile African states where insecurity or conflict prevails. In view of the above, the study on which this article reports, examined the Wagner Group as a foreign policy instrument of the Russian government. The discussion commences with a background section on instruments of foreign policy, followed by an overview of Wagner's activities worldwide, and particularly in Africa. Wagner's operations in four African states are specifically analysed, namely Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Mali.

**Keywords:** Wagner Group, Russian Foreign Policy, Private Military Company, Mercenaries.

## Introduction

In a relatively short time, the Wagner Group has emerged and established itself as arguably the Russian Federation's (hereafter Russia) most (in)famous private military company (PMC). Wagner is well known in the international community for providing security to pro-Russian role players in several conflict zones across the globe. For some time, the Russian government officially denied that Wagner exists but, in fact, its close ties with the Kremlin as well as the military and intelligence services of Russia have been an open secret. As a PMC – or mercenary enterprise – Wagner offers security services to customers in areas of conflict and insecurity.<sup>2</sup>

According to Gagaridis,<sup>3</sup> the Wagner Group is actually a conglomerate of firms with security-focused entities, but also entities involved in mining and energy ventures. It controls individual firms, which operate in synergy. Its ownership is linked to Yevgeny

Prigozhin, a wealthy Russian businessman with close ties to the Kremlin and President Vladimir Putin. This puts Wagner in a position where its leadership has access to Putin and the Moscovian political elites; hence, as a PMC, it exerts far more political influence in international relations than probably any of the other PMCs. Of importance – from a scholarly point of view – is that Wagner’s military endeavours speak of significant overlap between public and private interests, and the way Wagner operates around the world makes it an important actor in the conduct of Russian foreign policy.

What makes Russian foreign policy and Wagner’s activities in Africa particularly controversial is that Wagner is regularly appearing as a de facto non-official foreign policy instrument, more often than not facilitating and seeking access to resources in African states. Singh<sup>4</sup> correctly points out that the most controversial dimension of Russia’s re-engagement with the African continent relates to the many reports and concerns expressed by international organisations, scholars, and investigative journalists on the activities of the Wagner Group as a Russian quasi-private military.

Of course, Africa is not the only theatre of operations where Wagner has been active in recent years. Wagner’s international footprint is well documented in international conflicts, specifically in Crimea, Syria, and Yemen, and most recently also for its involvement in the Russian war in Ukraine. In recent times, Wagner’s footprint in Africa literally touched countries across the African continent, most notably Libya, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Madagascar.

In view of the above, the study on which this article is based, examined the Wagner Group as a foreign policy instrument of the Russian government. Immediately following this introduction, the focus of the discussion turns to instruments of foreign policy, after which the presence and activities of the Wagner Group worldwide and in Africa, in particular, will be under review. The extent to which Russia is utilising Wagner to pursue its strategic ends globally – and particularly on the African continent – is also considered.

## **Background and Theoretical Perspectives: Instruments of Foreign Policy**

Du Plessis<sup>5</sup> explains that the foreign policy of a country can be implemented by various instruments or techniques. Traditionally, there are at least three categories of foreign policy instruments, namely the political, economic, and military instruments. Sometimes, a fourth instrument is mentioned in the literature, namely the psychological instrument.

Firstly, the political instrument or technique refers to diplomacy. Diplomacy can be defined as the act of working and negotiating with representatives of foreign nations to reach agreement on future rules or issues, involving the development of conventions, treaties, accords, and alliances.<sup>6</sup> As a result, diplomacy is considered the most direct instrument of foreign policy, and is practiced by diplomats who are mandated to act on behalf of their governments or states as legitimate and recognised political entities. Diplomacy may also be used in support of other instruments of foreign policy and, depending on the need it could serve as an instrument of persuasion or coercion. As an instrument of persuasion, it could serve as a technique to advance arguments and suggest concessions, or it could



assist in adjusting and modifying positions on issues. As an instrument of coercion, diplomacy could be used to apply diplomatic sanctions or forms of coercive measures.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, economic instruments have gained importance in the contemporary globalising world. States could use foreign aid to achieve their foreign policy objectives, such as assisting other countries to stimulate or achieve economic growth, or building relationships with other nations by addressing issues of humanitarian concern. This could involve foreign military aid, such as augmenting other nations' supply of military equipment and related technological capabilities. Otherwise, states could apply sanctions in an effort to change the behaviour of other states, or to express dislike for a particular behaviour, or to limit opportunities for such behaviour – or even to discourage other states from acting likewise. Typical techniques include trade embargoes, arms embargoes, asset freezes, and travel restrictions.<sup>8</sup>

The psychological instrument of foreign policy is a more indirect means of state action, aimed at the leanings and orientations of states or their leaders. This usually pertains to some form of propaganda, but could also involve the subversion of a target state. Socio-cultural exchanges are further closely linked to the psychological instrument, although such actions are sometimes considered a separate category and forming part of the propaganda–public diplomacy nexus.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, the military instrument of foreign policy involves the use of armed force. The application of armed force involves the application of hard power in foreign relations; thus, involving the use of militaries by states to influence the behaviour of especially weaker nations, or involving themselves directly in the affairs of other states.<sup>10</sup> As much as the military instrument is associated with the coercive use of armed force in a situation of conventional or unconventional war, it could also involve military techniques short of war. This could typically be military threats, military posturing, military interventions, military aid and assistance, or even the use of militaries in multinational peacekeeping operations.<sup>11</sup>

One issue that is mostly or often overlooked in textbooks on the matter of instruments of foreign policy relates to the roles of mercenaries or PMCs. Through the ages, mercenaries have been known as soldiers of fortune, individuals who seek opportunities to engage in war or conflicts for personal gain. They are not members of any formal militaries but seek to sell their military skills to the highest bidder. They are not enjoying recognition as legitimate combatants and therefore do not enjoy the same rights as members of formal militaries. This effectively prevents them from enjoying the same rights under international law as service personnel from formal militaries.<sup>12</sup>

Mercenaries providing military services have been prevalent in armed conflict during the 1970s, mainly as covert mercenary activity. In more recent years, especially during the 1990s, the emergence of highly professional PMCs offering their services openly – sometimes using websites for marketing – has become a regular phenomenon in the international community. Practically, PMCs have been active in several cases of armed conflict, such as Iraq, Colombia, and Afghanistan, where they have been contracted by governments for responsibilities ranging from training security forces in Iraq and civilian



police in Bosnia and Kosovo, to flying helicopter gunships in Colombia, and protecting high-level political leaders, such as former Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai.<sup>13</sup>

In Africa, mercenaries emerged as a phenomenon in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when many newly independent African states and governments were targets of both external and internal destabilisation attempts. Many leaders or governments therefore turned to mercenaries to assist them in situations of state or regime insecurity, and this continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Given the political need and requirements on the part of many states to use mercenaries, the latter eventually became known as PMCs or private military contractors. This means that, while PMCs are functionally mercenary armies, they are not considered as such, as they are – often or mostly – not employed proactively in front-line combat. However, as Aas<sup>15</sup> remarks, ‘this exercise in semantic acrobatics does not change the fact that private military contractors do everything that conventional mercenaries would’. What makes PMCs controversial – especially on the African continent – is that they are contracted by actors, ranging from states to private firms, who are often involved in extractive industries or activities. They provide a variety of services, such as supporting regular armies militarily but also taking part in operations far beyond classic mercenary activities, such as securing humanitarian missions and protecting mining installations.<sup>16</sup>

Most important, from a scholarly point of view, is that PMCs have been on the rise and are increasingly involved in conflicts and various other operations internationally, especially since the 1990s, as several governments of the world’s major powers are known to have outsourced their involvement in armed conflicts. What is of special interest is that the proliferation of PMCs has coincided with a reduction of conventional militaries in several international conflicts. In the case of Afghanistan, for instance, the United States notably pulled out most of its troops as the conflict stabilised, while at the same time, PMCs employed by the US government and involved in Afghanistan increased considerably. Statistically, the ratio of US military personnel to private contractors tripled between 2009 and 2016.<sup>17</sup>

Currently, a most notable and controversial PMC in the international community is arguably the Wagner Group. Wagner is known for its close interactions and ties with the Russian government but, apart from Russia, Wagner also has offices in Argentina and Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> There can be no doubt that in Africa – and other parts of the world – Wagner functions as a branch of the Kremlin’,<sup>19</sup> in other words, as a hard and soft para-military instrument of Russian foreign policy – albeit non-official and unconventional. Before this is explored in more detail, the areas of Russian–African relations need to be outlined and understood.

## **The Main Focus Areas of Interest in Russian Foreign Relations with Africa**

Gurganus and Rumer<sup>20</sup> posit that contemporary Russian foreign policy on the world stage displays three long-standing drivers. The most important driver is Russia’s quest



for strategic depth and the need for buffers against external threats, especially in view of the absence of natural protective barriers between Russia and its neighbouring countries. A second driver is the Russian ambition for great power status, as mentioned above. The third is the complex relationship Russia has with the West, which involves both rivalry and forms of co-operation. The latter two drivers affect Moscow's relations with the African continent.

Olivier and Suchkov<sup>21</sup> explain that the demise of the Soviet Union towards the end of the Cold War brought an end to the special relationship that existed between Russia and a substantial number of African states over several decades. This brought an end to the Cold War days when the Soviet Union was an ideological role model and political ally of many African states as they were moving to self-determination and freedom from the West since the end of the 1950s. Since 1991, Russia's global power and superpower profile decreased substantially, and Russia's international relations ended in a much-reduced Eurasian role, mainly focusing on the 'near abroad'. When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, much had changed: firstly, in terms of Russia making an effort to reclaim a Russian leadership role in world politics; and secondly, various African states growing politically and economically more stable. A number of Russian companies started to do business in Africa, and this time around, relations were focusing on economics and trade rather than ideology. At the same time, both Russia and Africa ideologically shared a common cause in their rejection of Western hegemony in world economic affairs and politics. For Russia, specifically, it was important to pursue a new and more integrated engagement strategy in doing business with Africa as part of its global international relations.

Apart from Russia's new role perception and global aspirations, and a promising "new dawn" in many African states, Moscow was also inspired to re-build its relations with Africa after witnessing the evolving and growing roles of China and India in Africa. This inspired Russia not to be side-lined but instead to buy into the new economic opportunities offered by many African states and forging partnerships with a view to ensuring access to the abundant natural resources on the continent.<sup>22</sup> This has paved the way for a rapid expansion of the Russian footprint on the African continent, growing in parallel with burgeoning engagement and related investment by China, as well as a realisation of Africa's economic potential by several Western states and non-state actors. Today, Russia has a clear footprint in Africa. Relationships exist or have emerged in recent years in countries throughout the continent. These relationships involve especially diplomatic ties, trade and commercial links, military co-operation agreements relating to arms sales, and co-operation in the field of energy, including nuclear technology.<sup>23</sup>

Siegle<sup>24</sup> summarises Russia's interests and foreign relations with Africa as follows:

Africa, with its weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and fifty-four votes at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, provides Russia an easy and attractive theatre where it can advance its interests with limited financial or political costs.



Perhaps the three most important issues in relation to Russia's strategic interest in Africa are the following:

- The international community has witnessed the return of Russia as a significant global actor, and under President Putin, the projection of power is a hallmark of the Kremlin's foreign policy. This makes solid relations with African states imperative, as the Africa Group at the UN General Assembly is made up of 54 African Union member states;
- The African continent is rich in mineral resources, some of which are not found in significant or sufficient volumes in Russia;
- Africa is a growing market for various products ranging from foodstuffs and technology to weapons and energy.<sup>25</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, Russia has entered into 19 military collaboration agreements with African states, largely concerning weapon sales.<sup>26</sup>

As far as mineral resources are concerned, Russia – like China, for instance – covets many of Africa's raw materials. This has been clear from projects in countries such as the DRC and the CAR where Russian companies have scaled up their activities relating to the mining of mineral resources such as coltan, cobalt, gold, and diamonds. Zimbabwe is another example where Russia managed to enter into a joint venture concerning the development of one of the world's largest reserves of the platinum group metals. Similarly, in Angola, Russia managed to enter into a deal that provides the Russian economy with a production base outside Russia.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Russia is currently the largest supplier of weapons to Africa. The most recent report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) points out that between 2017 and 2021, African states received most of their weapons from Russia. In fact, Russian weapons accounted for 44% of imports. Russian sales were followed by the United States with 17%, China with 10%, and France with 6%.<sup>28</sup>

In Russian foreign policy, the Wagner Group 'has become an increasingly important instrument in Russia's foreign policy toolkit, especially in Africa where Moscow has sought to expand its influence and challenge the West'.<sup>29</sup> It has grown relationships with African governments across the continent – relationships in which two matters are of special interest, namely the trading of military and security services in exchange for mining rights and concessions, and access to political elites. This is reviewed in the section below with special reference to the following four African states as case studies: Libya, the CAR, Sudan, and Mali.

### **The Rise and Operations of the Wagner Group**

The Wagner Group is certainly not the only Russian PMC. In fact, Russian proxy warfare strategy long predates Vladimir Putin, which means that the contemporary Russian PMCs did not start with Wagner or its titular head, Yevgeny Prigozhin.<sup>30</sup> Several other Russian PMCs have operated abroad, notably the E.N.O.T. Corporation in Syria and the Feraks group in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Sri Lanka, as well as the Antiterror-Orel Group. According to Rác,<sup>31</sup> Wagner may appear to be a Russian business company, but



both its management and operations are deeply connected to and intertwined with the Russian military and intelligence community. To this end, Wagner can be viewed as a proxy institution of the Russian state rather than a PMC selling its services on the open markets. Wagner is therefore a useful foreign policy instrument for the Kremlin to extend its global influence.

The Wagner Group clearly operates as a Russian “premier firm” to the extent that it is sometimes called “Putin’s private army”. It is believed that Wagner originated around 2010 in Moscow during a Russian General Staff meeting, but emerged publicly circa 2014. It was founded by Dmitri Utkin, a retired Russian intelligence operative, and is financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch. Utkin is believed to be a staunch admirer of Hitler and Nazi Germany, and apparently decided on the name Wagner in honour of Richard Wagner, who was Hitler’s favourite composer.<sup>32</sup>

RÁCZ<sup>33</sup> offers a somewhat different explanation by stating that Utkin established the Wagner Group when he quit the Russian Moran Security Group (another Russian PMC) in 2014, and named the company after his old intelligence call sign “Vagner”. Nevertheless, it cannot be verified whether Utkin was a frontman in the establishment of Wagner or whether he indeed initiated its establishment. What is more certain is that Prigozhin is the funder and driving force behind Wagner and is internationally known as “Putin’s chef”, with past connections to organised crime. Apart from Wagner, Prigozhin was also identified as the funder of the highly controversial Internet Research Agency (IRA), the Russian Internet troll farm that was implicated in meddling in the 2016 US presidential election process.<sup>34</sup>

In October 2022, Prigozhin acknowledged for the first time that he was behind the founding of the Wagner Group. While he previously denied any connection with Wagner, he eventually disclosed in a statement that his “group of patriots” was formed in May 2014. He also stated that he was proud of his support to ‘heroes who defended the Syrian people, other people of Arab countries, destitute Africans and Latin Americans’.<sup>35</sup>

Wagner’s first activities were recorded when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, and shortly thereafter, its operatives appeared in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Wagner has also been active in Syria since 2015 where it made international headlines in 2018 when it launched an attempt to assault the Conoco gas plant in the Deir ez-Zor province, an act that brought it into direct military conflict with US Special Operations forces in the area.<sup>36</sup> Wagner has evolved over time, and today it functions very much like a private contractor for the Kremlin in several countries across the globe, including Eastern Europe (Ukraine), the Middle East (Syria), South America (Venezuela) and Africa (notably Libya, Sudan, the CAR, Mali, and Mozambique). In recent years, Wagner was accused of targeting civilians, leading mass executions, and looting private property, but the group also acted in the role of rendering security advisory services to various governments, such as Sudan and Mali. Wagner is also active in Russia’s war against Ukraine where it renders support to Russian troops in the eastern part. Interestingly, Wagner’s forces have increasingly been recruited from within Russian prisons.<sup>37</sup>



While the Wagner Group with its estimated 2 200 to 3 000 personnel<sup>38</sup> has operated in several countries worldwide in recent years, its presence and activities have been most visible – and arguably most controversial – on the African continent.

## *Libya*

Libya is a potential energy giant in Africa and located on the European doorstep. It has massive oil reserves, boasting no less than 39% of the oil reserves on the African continent of which more than 60% is exported to European countries, especially Italy, Spain, and Germany. This makes Libya a country of considerable geo-political significance in North Africa.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the strategic location of Libya on the Mediterranean Coast and its oil are obviously of importance to the Kremlin.<sup>40</sup>

Libya plunged into turmoil in the aftermath of a NATO intervention in 2011 when it backed an uprising that toppled Muammar Gaddafi as leader. Gaddafi was later killed. It could be argued that the elimination of Gaddafi and the chaos that followed his death opened the door for Wagner in Libya. Since the political departure of Gaddafi the country suffered the political division of two governments and two centres of power: one in the capital, Tripoli, and the other in Sirte. Both governments were supported by rival militias and foreign powers. The Tripoli government was supported and propped up by the UN while the rival Sirte government was led by the influential military commander, Field Marshal Khalifa Hifter. Hifter was backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and together these forces launched an attack with the aim of capturing the Tripoli government. The attack was unsuccessful after Turkey and thousands of Syrian mercenaries stepped in on the side of the UN-supported government. In October 2020, a ceasefire between the belligerents paved the way for a transitional government in 2021. Efforts to unify the country coincided with the scheduling of elections towards the end of the year, but the elections never materialised with a continuation of the two rival governments and their two respective prime ministers. The ceasefire provided for a withdrawal of all foreign fighters and mercenaries, but little if anything in this regard materialised. What is of special interest to the topic under review is Wagner's support to Hifter in Sirte and nearby Jufra, further backed by Syrian combatants.<sup>41</sup>

Russian mercenary activity was first detected in Libya in early 2017 when a demining contract was awarded to the Russian military consulting company, the RSB-Group, in the port complex of Benghazi by the Libyan National Army (LNA) under the command of Field Marshal Hifter. One year later, Wagner appeared during an LNA offensive to retake the city of Derna, a stronghold of Islamist militias and the Islamic State in eastern Libya. Shortly thereafter, Hifter met with Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Yevgeny Prigozhin, and since 2019, the presence of about 300 mercenaries from Wagner in a base in Benghazi started to surface in operations of the LNA.<sup>42</sup>

Since its entrance into combat operations, Wagner's presence grew to roughly 2 000 combatants, including both Russian fighters and mercenaries recruited from Syria. Hifter's efforts to seize Tripoli in May 2020 as the institutional centre of the country however failed, mainly as a result of an intervention by Turkey. Some Wagner fighters were then



pulled out of Libya to fight on Ukrainian battlefields but many others were redeployed to oil facilities and nearby military bases in both the central and southwestern parts of Libya. The aim was to fortify positions and resist attacks from the Tripoli government and Turkish forces as well as to ensure a chokehold on the most strategic Libyan oil production and export facilities. The Libyan National Oil Corporation stated in July 2020 that Wagner exercised control over the production of the largest oil field in the country, the Sharara oil field in southwestern Libya, as well as the Ras Lanuf petrochemical complex, the Zillah oil field, the Es Sider port, and the Zuetina port. Wagner also exercised de facto control over an important network of military and air bases from Qardabiya near Sirte in the northern parts to Brak near Sabha in central Libya. Wagner even deployed heavy air support in the form of highly potent MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter aircraft from Russia with a view to establishing air superiority. At the time, Wagner had managed to dig itself into “a prime position to intervene in and influence Libyan oil production” in the country’s southwestern oil fields and the Oil Crescent.<sup>43</sup> What is of the utmost importance to understand is that the Russian petroleum giant, Gazprom EP International, considers Libya a key area in its operations in North Africa.<sup>44</sup>

It should be noted that the situation in Libya and Wagner’s operations became a matter of serious concern to the UN. In 2022, a UN expert report stated in no uncertain terms that Libya is facing “a serious security threat from foreign fighters and PMCs, especially Russia’s Wagner Group which has violated international law”.<sup>45</sup>

In a submission that served before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament, the following was stated about Wagner:<sup>46</sup>

- The Russian government uses the Wagner Group as an instrument to achieve certain strategic objectives in Libya relating to its geostrategic positioning in North Africa;
- Wagner initially deployed in support of joint Russian, UAE, and Saudi strategic priorities, as well as those of the Libyan host, Marshal Hifter and the LNA. In this regard, Wagner is understood to have been funded by the United Arab Emirates and possibly Saudi Arabia, who are, ironically, US allies;
- Since the failed attempt to seize the Tripoli government, coordination with the LNA, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi diminished, after which Wagner started to operate as an independent actor in Libya. This boils down to Wagner acting as an agent at the service of Russia’s strategic priorities, and being suspected of being on the Kremlin’s payroll;
- Wagner’s footprint in Libya has evolved over the years with an ongoing presence in the country relating to specialised military operations, physical security provision at Libya’s oil facilities, political advisory services, and social media-based influence operations.

One of the key conclusions in the submission to the British Foreign Affairs Committee<sup>47</sup> is that the Kremlin uses Wagner in Libya because “it reduces the economic burden of military engagement, expends less political capital, and decreases blowback from operations due



to plausible deniability'. This therefore helps Russia to steer clear from directly engaging with other foreign militaries in Libya in an overt or traditional manner, and accordingly, lowering the risk at political level, and probably decreasing the chances of counterattacks from countries such as Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Italy.

### *Central African Republic*

The Wagner Group emerged in the CAR in late 2017, and reflects a case of resource concessions for protection and training similar to other cases in Africa. Initially, Wagner appeared as a PMC rendering military advisory services to the CAR head of state, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, but its activities had gone far beyond advisory services. It was primarily about the facilitation of weapons shipment and military training – all in exchange for diamond- and gold-mining rights as well as geological exploration.<sup>48</sup>

According to Serwat et al.,<sup>49</sup> Wagner's operations followed the signing of an agreement between the CAR and Russia on Russian military support and weapons in exchange for mining concessions. This paved the way for Wagner military instructors to enter the CAR with large numbers of weapons after the UN Security Council had decided to waive an earlier weapons embargo on the CAR. Wagner did not engage in any combat operations at that point, but international concerns were soon raised about Wagner's alleged involvement in human rights abuses early in 2019. Following these concerns, the United Nations decided to launch an investigation into a case of alleged torture committed by Wagner operatives of a person who was accused of belonging to an armed movement.

The dynamics in the CAR involving Wagner then changed dramatically in 2020 when the security situation in the country deteriorated significantly – transforming from rendering support and training to a direct combat role. This happened shortly before the elections in late December when a coalition of militias led by former President François Bozizé launched an offensive with the aim to overthrow President Touadéra and his government. Bozizé's offensive followed a rejection of his presidential candidacy by the Constitutional Court, finding that Bozizé failed to meet "good morality" requirements, and citing an international arrest warrant for alleged war crimes on his part.<sup>50</sup>

The Russian presence in the CAR was at first welcomed by the CAR population, but their popularity waned after reports increasingly indicated severe human rights violations against civilians, as reported by the UN. Following serious incidents of human rights abuses, Yevgeni Prigozhin funded the making of a controversial film depicting Wagner operatives as heroes in the CAR. However, efforts to portray Wagner as kind and generous, and pointing fingers at French and other Western advisors could not divert the attention on Wagner as a central player in the dire and worsening human rights situation in the CAR. The International Crisis Group and the fortnightly newsletter, *Africa Confidential*, also reported that Wagner has not only targeted CAR citizens from the Fulani and Gbaya ethnic groups – Bozizé is a member of the latter – but also Muslims. As far as the latter is concerned, some rebel groups are predominantly Muslim.<sup>51</sup>



With its ability to influence political decisions in the CAR, Wagner has practically become the vanguard of a notable and major Russian push into the central parts of the African continent. Increasingly, Touadéra found himself in the dilemma of being heavily reliant on Wagner and the Kremlin for regime security, which had damaged his relations with Western countries, particularly France. Relations with the United States had also turned sour as Prigozhin was cited for his alleged role in attempting to influence the 2016 US elections. Western disapproval of Prigozhin is also linked to the fact that the CAR relies primarily on Western actors for its annual state budget. As far as the CAR is concerned, Wagner's presence is not acknowledged by the government and there is no contract involving Wagner, but few informed observers doubt that an arrangement exists between the two parties. There is also no evidence of remuneration, which fuels allegations about Wagner's compensation in the form of mining concessions. In fact, a UN Panel of Experts considered Wagner and the Russian mining company, Lobaye Invest SARLU<sup>1</sup> – which is involved in gold and diamond mining rights in the CAR – as 'interconnected'. Moreover, the International Crisis Group has linked Lobaye Invest SARLU directly to Prigozhin.<sup>52</sup> The export of diamonds from the CAR to Brussels has recently been in the spotlight with a report published by *De Standaard*, a Flemish daily newspaper. It is alleged that Wagner has set up a front company in the CAR, called Diamville, through which diamonds to the value of €132 000 have been exported to the Belgium capital. Furthermore, it was reported in *The Guardian*, Belgium imported €1,2 billion worth of Russian diamonds in the first eight months of 2022. Allegations of direct or indirect diamond imports from Wagner have however been denied by the Antwerp World Diamond Centre, the official mouthpiece of the Antwerp diamond sector, stating instead that Diamville deals exclusively with traders in Dubai.<sup>53</sup> In this context, African Defense Forum Staff<sup>54</sup> summarises their view of Wagner's involvement in the CAR as follows:

Securing lucrative gold, diamond and uranium concessions has been a high priority of Russian operatives in the CAR. With no government accounting of payments to Russian trainers or PMCs, experts believe mining rights are given in exchange for mercenary service.

In a recent report authored by the European Investigative Collaborations (EIC), a transnational investigative journalism project, it has been claimed that the Wagner Group is also involved in the forestry business in the CAR. According to the report, a company called Bois Rouge ("Redwood Trees") received a permit that gives Bois Rouge access to some of the largest undeveloped areas of rainforest in the world in the administrative area of Lobaye. Bois Rouge has been registered in the CAR since 2019, and is apparently headed by a local woman, but the EIC investigation revealed that Bois Rouge is more Russian than African. Pictures taken at the site also revealed the use of Russian equipment and many Caucasian men active in the area. The report also argues that, when the permit was issued to Bois Rouge in February 2021, military operations were conducted jointly by Wagner and CAR forces in several cities located in the Lobaye region to remove rebel armed groups.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> SARLU = single-member/one-person limited liability company



Against this background, some observers consider Wagner's operations in the CAR as primarily financial, as Russia is seeing Africa as 'a place to make money and explore new horizons'.<sup>56</sup> Faulkner<sup>57</sup> however points out that not all observers regard Wagner's operations as solely a case of generating profits or being strictly resource-oriented, but rather that these operations are linked to Russia's broader geopolitical activities to challenge the French government on the continent. What seems to be certain is the argument that the Russian state relies on Wagner and its networks as well as unconventional methods in the pursuit of its global strategic goals – all of which could be denied by the Kremlin should a political problem or controversy publicly arise.<sup>58</sup>

## *Sudan*

Singh<sup>59</sup> states that the presence of the Wagner Group in Sudan and the CAR can be regarded as noticeable cases of how Russian arms sales and related military support and the deployment of Wagner Group operatives are intertwined with mining operations. In the case of the CAR, this was primarily in the form of diamond mining, and in Sudan, in the form of gold mining. Wagner emerged as a foreign actor in Sudan in 2017, which coincided with a public confirmation by the Russian government that a meeting with then President Omar al-Bashir took place in Sochi. The bilateral discussions between the two countries culminated in several important agreements, providing for mining concessions, geological explorations, and oil and gas co-operations in Sudan, as well as plans to establish a Russian naval base in Port Sudan. Another notable agreement was that between the Sudanese Ministry of Minerals and a St Petersburg-based company, M-Invest, granting mining rights to M-Invest (and its subsidiaries) to explore gold in Sudan. Of interest in this regard, is that M-invest is owned and operated by Wagner's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, according to the US Treasury Department.<sup>60</sup>

The above agreements are typical of the Wagner Group's contracting strategy in African states. In this regard, typical of Wagner's *modus operandi*, al-Bashir was provided with a portfolio of services, notably information operations, military and police training, and the transport of weapons. In 2019, Moscow publicly confirmed the work of Russian contractors in Sudan, indicating their activities as training Sudanese military and acting as law enforcement officers. Various media reports later linked Prigozhin and the Wagner Group to the violent suppression and discrediting of anti-government protestors who rose up against the al-Bashir regime. None of these efforts could however prevent the military coup that saw al-Bashir being removed from power in April 2019.<sup>61</sup>

Importantly, Sudan is the third-largest gold producer on the African continent, behind Ghana and South Africa, and this seems to primarily underlie the presence of Wagner in Sudan. In fact, all indications are that Wagner's activities in Sudanese gold-mining areas have increased in recent years. This should be understood in the context of sanctions implemented against Russia on account of its war in Ukraine. What is also of interest is that General Mohamed "Hemetti" Hamdan Dagalo – one of the leading actors in the military coup that toppled al-Bashir in October 2021, and currently one of the richest people in Sudan after his forces took control of the gold mines in the Darfur area – visited Russia in February 2022.<sup>62</sup>



In November 2022, the US-based non-profit Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) issued a report, alleging that the Wagner Group funnelled resources to the Sudanese regime in exchange for preferential access to the lucrative gold-mining industry in that country. Of interest is that all foreign mining companies operating in Sudan are obliged to grant the Sudanese government 30% of their shares, so that Sudan can benefit from all gold extraction. The notable exception is Prigozhin's mining operation, a subsidiary called Meroe Goldwas, which was established in 2017 when ties and co-operation between Russia and Sudan were actively solidified. Apart from waiving Meroe's 30%, al-Bashir also granted Meroe Goldwas exploration rights for another potential gold reserve.<sup>63</sup>

As in other African states, the Wagner Group has been accused of gross human rights violations in Sudan. In fact, Sudanese miners have pointed fingers to Wagner for what they described as massacres along the border between South Darfur state and the CAR. In June 2022, the Darfur Bar Association (DBA) issued a statement that they have monitored Wagner in South Darfur, claiming that, at the time, they spotted Russian mercenaries in the streets and cafes of Um Dafuq, a village not far from traditional artisanal gold mines. They also claimed to have received testimony from relatives of people who were allegedly killed in South Darfur by Wagner operatives, although the killings appeared to be linked to raiding and looting rather than to securing and extracting natural resources. 'There are regular reports of attackers arriving by helicopter, killing artisanal goldminers and rebels, taking everything they can and then leaving,' according to Pauline Bax, deputy director of International Crisis Group's Africa programme. 'Sometimes they come back again a month or so later and do the same thing. It is nothing to do with securing a mining site.'<sup>64</sup>

All in all, the Wagner Group still attracts much international attention, and its activities remain mired in controversy. Clearly, Wagner has become a significant foreign policy instrument in Sudan, also as a supporting actor in Russia's plans in eastern Sudan to build a naval base on the Red Sea relating to the hosting of its nuclear-powered warships. In the western parts of the country, Wagner has found a platform for its operations in neighbouring countries – and a possible source of uranium. Lastly, ever since the Sudanese military seized power in a coup in October 2021, Wagner has deepened its partnership with the new Sudanese leaders, notably General Mohamed Hamdan, the number two in Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council. Hamdan visited Moscow in February 2022 while Wagner is rendering military aid to Hamdan and effectively assisting the Sudanese security forces to suppress pro-democracy grass-roots activities.<sup>65</sup> All in all, one can concur with Singh<sup>66</sup> that, while arms sales or military services are the avenues for Russia's political and economic influence in Africa, mining deals, among others, are the result of transactional ties between Moscow and African states – and Wagner is indeed a key actor.

## *Mali*

Mali gained independence in 1960, but France remained the country's preeminent international partner. Over the past decade, the security partnership between the two countries played out especially through counterterrorism operations against Islamist militants. However, this post-colonial relationship has been fraught with challenges, and



Maliens experienced the relationship as unilateral and a form of neo-colonialism. From its side, France paradoxically wanted to carry less of a military burden in the region but at the same time did not want to forfeit its political influence in Mali.<sup>67</sup>

Mali is the Wagner Group's most recent military engagement in Africa. The Wagner Group appeared as a foreign actor in Mali at the end of 2021 following the *coup d'état* in the country in June 2021. Citing the coup, France reduced its military presence in Mali and, in doing so, also ended its joint counterinsurgency operations with the Malian state forces in February 2022,<sup>68</sup> although Parens<sup>69</sup> contends that Russia has strong-armed France as a key competitor out of Mali. Be that as it may, Issaev et al.<sup>70</sup> contend that field research indicates positive perceptions in Mali (and other West African nations) of the Russian return to Africa as well as the expansion of the Russian presence in the region in a security role in the fight against terrorism.

According to Parens,<sup>71</sup> the Wagner Group pursued “the same playbook” in Mali that the contractor had used in the CAR and Sudan. This strategy relates to Wagner's typical response when African governments signal a need for security assistance and, in the case of Mali, there was a feeling that Western countries have not done enough to render assistance in the form of security co-operation and anti-terrorism operations in the region.

Geo-politically, Mali is located on a “fault line” between North and West Africa where religious and political divisions have fuelled a conflict since 2012. The government of Mali has been fighting an insurgency by fundamentalist Islamist movements, including a branch of Al Qaida and Ansar Dine. Since 2012, France has rendered military assistance to Mali against the insurgencies, known as Operation Serval and, subsequently, Operation Barkhane. France also became involved in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was established under UN Security Council Resolution 2391. None of these operations however managed to quell the insurgents, and in 2021, the Wagner Group entered the conflict dynamics in the country. Against this background, France started the withdrawal of its forces from the Sahel, and Russia thus effectively replaced France as the Malian government's principal security partner.<sup>72</sup> Also noteworthy is the fact that the withdrawal of France from Mali followed political conflict between the two countries, which culminated in the expulsion of the French ambassador to Mali from the country while the Malian government also announced that it would no longer continue its long-term defence accords with France.<sup>73</sup>

The Malian government's shift from its traditional security partners to the Wagner Group coincided with a scaling up of operations against Islamist militants in which Wagner played a significant role. On the downside – as in other conflicts in African states where Wagner became involved – there were many reports concerning deadly attacks on civilians in the regions of Mopti, Segou, Tombouctou, and Koulikoro. In fact, research pointed out that more than 70% of Wagner's operations have involved violence targeting civilians,<sup>74</sup> which also illustrates the Malian government's inability or unwillingness to ensure the protection of human rights.



From the above it is clear that the Wagner Group as Russia's most infamous PMC has been working to entrench itself in Mali as a key player in counterterrorism efforts in West Africa.<sup>75</sup> The number of Wagner operatives in Mali was recently estimated to be around 800 to 1 000. In addition to operations with the Malian armed forces against the Islamist militants, Faulkner<sup>76</sup> and also Doxsee et al.<sup>77</sup> expect Wagner to become involved in providing security for political elites and security services, such as training the army. Again, the same playbook as in other African states is expected to be employed with the gaining of access to geological exploration and mining rights in return for security services.

In the final analysis, Wagner's operations in Mali are indicative of Russia's geopolitical contest with the West. The vacuum left by the official withdrawal of France in Mali in February 2022, alongside several other European and Sahelian partner states that also withdrew from Mali, was swiftly filled by Wagner. Obviously, this was a serious political setback for the French government from a geo-strategic point of view, but these developments suited the coup leader and current president of Mali's transitional government, Colonel Assimi Goïta. It also opened the door for Wagner to present itself as a welcome alternative to Western security partners after the coups and instability in Mali were criticised by Western states. Moreover, the presence of Wagner does not pose any challenge to the country's military leadership who has continuously dishonoured agreements to facilitate the reinstatement of a civilian government. For the political elites in Mali, Russia's interest and related political and military involvement in the conflict dynamics, in fact, also presented an opportunity to move away from what they experienced as French neo-colonialism. By becoming heavily involved in counterterrorism operations, Wagner is now exercising considerable influence in a region that used to be 'France's highly valued cachet in the region'.<sup>78</sup>

## **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The Wagner Group is the most prominent Russian PMC and arguably one of the most controversial PMCs globally, if not the most controversial. It emerged during the conflict in Crimea in 2014, and since then, spread its footprint across the globe. As a relatively small PMC, it advances Russia's geopolitical ambitions worldwide – and in Africa in particular – although tension between Wagner and the Russian army in Ukraine over Wagner's prisoner recruitment scheme has also been reported early in 2023.<sup>79</sup>

From the four countries under review in the above analysis, the following can be stated in conclusion:

- In Libya, the Russian government uses the Wagner Group as a foreign policy instrument to achieve certain strategic objectives relating to its geostrategic positioning in North Africa. Obviously, the fact that Libya is one of Africa's largest oil producers is an important driver in Russian involvement in Libya;
- In the CAR, the Russian presence in the country in the form of Wagner should be understood through the lens of regime insecurity and political instability. This has presented the political space for the Kremlin and also Wagner as a security actor to become involved in the CAR, seemingly motivated by the opportunity to



secure gold-and diamond-mining rights, but also by the pursuit of global strategic goals;

- In Sudan, Russian arms sales and military support in relation to regime insecurity likewise facilitated Wagner's deployment, while the operations of the PMCs have become highly intertwined with mining operations, primarily gold, in Africa's third-largest gold producer. Over and above mining concessions, geological explorations, and oil and gas co-operations are all, to some extent, underlying Russian drivers;
- In Mali, regime insecurity opened the door for the Kremlin and Wagner's subsequent entrance into the conflict dynamics, which, as in the case of Libya, seems to be motivated by Russia's geopolitical contest with the West – in this case, particularly challenging the French influence in West Africa.

In summary, from Wagner's role in these four countries – and other cases on the African continent not discussed in this article – it should be clear that Wagner has increasingly become a significant para-military instrument in Russia's foreign policy toolkit. This is especially the case in weak and fragile African states where Russia can expand its geopolitical influence. In fact, Wagner could even be described as a quasi-state actor or, at the very least, a frontline agent, which is functioning in close proximity to the Russian president and political elites. As an unconventional foreign policy instrument, Wagner offers the Kremlin the factor of so-called "plausible deniability". This means that the Russian government does not have to suffer any public fallout in relation to troop losses or other political and military embarrassments relating, for instance, to serious human rights violations on foreign soil.

Moreover, critical observers of Russia's contemporary African policy have for some time contended that Moscow's relations with African states are strongly motivated by the need to counter international isolation by the West. This has become of even greater importance since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the plunging of Europe into its biggest military conflict since World War II. Russia is furthermore criticised for a foreign policy in Africa that mostly deals with instruments of conflict rather than with development and peace. It is further argued that Russia is indirectly – through the Wagner Group as a proxy actor – propping up authoritarian rulers and regimes against domestic democratic resistance, often by way of security services rendered to elites. It should also be noted that most of Russia's African trade comes from arms sales.

Critics may rightly argue – or at the very least suspect – that the Kremlin is following a deliberate strategy with Wagner, one that produces a small foreign footprint and puts the Kremlin in a position to conduct its foreign policy in high-risk areas. Wagner is sometimes referred to as a foreign policy instrument of shadow soldiers in a versatile, cheap, and deniable package, the perfect instrument for a former superpower that is keen to re-establish itself as a superpower without being too assertive in the public eye, and accepting little or no responsibility for human rights issues.

Notwithstanding the fact that, for many years, official links have been denied by the Russian government, Moscow's de facto association with the Wagner Group obviously



does not help to link Russian foreign policy in Africa to sound democratic practices and good governance. It rather boils down to a case of pursuing sheer Russian national interest and the old notion of dogs of war involved in sinister operations on foreign soil. Moreover, ongoing reports that implicate Wagner in serious human rights violations – and even a massacre in the case of Mali – do not leave the critical observer of Russian ties with the African continent with the impression of accountability and transparency. Reports rather associate many of Russia’s foreign policy actions in Africa with dubious foreign policy practices in weak and fragile African states.

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## ENDNOTES

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[Back to contents](#)

