



## RUSSIA'S COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH AND THE INCREASED USE OF THE WAGNER GROUP CHALLENGES THE WEST IN AFRICA

**The Russian Wagner Group is increasing both its military and information operations across Africa. Wagner's multitool deployment scheme is likely to lead to an increase in anti-Western sentiments and a growing local and regional opposition to the deployment of Western troops. The result may be a significantly increased risk in operations across the African continent.**

In the 2010s, Russia gradually returned to the African continent, where the Soviet Union was an influential actor for decades. The culmination of Russia's public reorientation to Africa so far has been the high-profile Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi in October 2019. In his opening address to the Summit, Russian President

### KEY FINDINGS

- Western states should be aware of the importance attached by Russia to Africa in general and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular
- Western states should make military, political and legal preparations for potential encounters with Russian Wagner forces in Africa
- Western states should prepare for a comprehensive Russian approach to gaining influence in Africa, including through information operations to shape public opinion locally and regionally

Vladimir Putin noted how “representatives of all 54 African states and leading regional organizations are gathered here. This is indeed the first meeting of such a scale, and this is a convincing testament to the mutual desire to develop contacts in all directions, to strengthen the multifaceted partnership”.

Russia has many interests in Africa. One fundamental interest relates to the international distribution of power. As a self-defined great power with an ambition

increase over the period of 2011-2015. By contrast, Russia’s share of the global arms market decreased by 22 per cent in the decade of 2011-2020. This latter development is a clear sign of a very competitive market, and it suggests that emerging markets, such as Africa, will become increasingly important to Russian arms producers. The main importers are Egypt, Algeria, and Angola (where Russian producers supply 41 per cent, 69 per cent, and 64 per cent, respectively, of national imports).



The European Union has become increasingly alarmed by the activities of the Wagner Group, which reportedly has close links to Russia, and is allegedly present in 23 African countries. Their legal status is vague, as well as their modus operandi, objectives and targets.



EU Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, Strasbourg, November 2021

to extend its influence still further beyond its immediate regional setting, Russia is almost compelled to attempt to gain a stronger presence in Africa. Both trade and the exploration of energy and minerals support this ambition, but its other tools include economic support (including by writing off debt), military support (for instance through the provision of training assistance or even the deployment of troops), as well as political support (for instance by using Russia’s weight as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to publicly defend regimes under pressure or even to prevent the passing of critical statements or the introduction of sanctions). To illustrate, in January 2022, the Russian delegation to the United Nations strongly opposed the introduction of new sanctions against the interim government in Mali, noting that “we have always been guided by the principle of African solutions to African problems”.

Other interests relate to trade (with a turnover of USD 20bn in 2020) and to the exploration of natural resources. Within the field of trade, Russian arms exports stand out. In the years 2016-2020, Russian arms exports to African states accounted for 18 per cent of all Russian arms exports, a 23 per cent

Within the field of exploration of natural resources, Russian companies increasingly operate across the entire continent. It is estimated that 90 per cent of Russian investments relate to oil, natural gas, coal, and metals. Russian heavyweights Lukoil, Rosneft and Gazprom are mainly involved in The Republic of the Congo, Egypt, and Mozambique as well as Algeria, respectively. Mining activities take place in a string of states such as Angola (diamonds), Zimbabwe (platinum), Nigeria and Guinea (aluminium and bauxite) as well as Sudan (gold). Russian investments in Africa are at a much lower level than for instance Chinese and US investments, but they have increased rapidly since the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit. The 2022 Russia-Africa Summit, to be held in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, will be used as a forum to intensify access for Russian companies to make investments in Africa.

#### **The Wagner multitool**

Another way Russia seeks to gain influence in Africa is through the deployment of the Russian Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner across the continent. Wagner is known as a private military company, but it has close ties to the Russian political elite and therefore to the Russian state. There is no official legal PMC called the Wagner Group in Russia. The name Wagner

has, however, become the common term used to describe some of Russia's shadowy deployments around the world. It is associated with Yevgeniy Prigozhin – often referred to in the media as President Vladimir Putin's "private chef" – who is also behind the so-called Troll Factory in St. Petersburg.

Over the last years, The Wagner Group has attracted a lot of international attention. This is to a large extent due to their increasing engagement in Africa, where members of the group are being deployed still more widely. Wagner currently has operations across the continent, with the largest number of personnel deployed to the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Libya and possibly Mali (with a rumoured deployment of up to 1,000 Wagner members). Other missions have been seen, for instance, in Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, and Madagascar. This development suggests that Wagner is seen as an ever more central element of the Russian strategy to gain increased influence in Africa.

The Wagner Group often deploys as part of a multitool package, including both an armed military component and an information capacity to conduct influence operations. On-site, Wagner will often establish ties with a locally registered company engaged in the extraction of natural resources, with the purpose of

facilitating direct payment of the group's operations or securing business access for other Russian companies.

In Sudan, the Wagner Group helped the regime under then-President Omar al-Bashir suppress large-scale protests that arose in the country in 2018. The strategy for countering these protests included the deployment of armed Wagner troops together with a social media element designed, including through the use of disinformation, to influence the Sudanese population in a pro-regime direction. The strategy was designed after al-Bashir's visit to Russia in 2017, where he famously asked Putin for "protection", with the aim of preventing a change of regime in Sudan. The strategy in Sudan was drawn up by M-Invest, a company also linked to Prigozhin, which in return has been granted concessions for a gold mine in Sudan.

The Russian engagement is characterized by a mixture of an unofficial multitool presence and official investments. To illustrate, Russia and CAR in 2018 signed an agreement on military cooperation, after France ended its military mission in the country in 2016 – prematurely, according to many politicians in CAR at the time. Russia is now officially delivering weapons and military instructors to CAR, and the Wagner Group (the local subsidiary of which is called



Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group stand guard during a parade in Bangui, Central African Republic, May 1, 2019. Ashley Gilbertson/New York Times/Ritzau Scanpix

Sewa Security) is unofficially involved by delivering military training, by actively fighting rebellion groups, and by protecting gold mines run by another Prigozhin company.

Prigozhin's local company in CAR, Lobaye Invest, funds a local radio station. In 2019, Facebook removed three networks associated with Prigozhin which were engaged in disinformation campaigns targeting eight different African countries including CAR, Libya, and Sudan, spending more than 87,000 USD in advertisement.

The Wagner Group is heavily criticized for its methods in CAR. The United Nations has received numerous reports of Russian contractors violating human rights and killing civilians, and the Wagner Group is suspected of having facilitated the killings of three Russian journalists in CAR in 2018. The three journalists were in CAR to investigate a possible link between the Wagner Group and mining companies in the country. The Russian Foreign Ministry denies that the Wagner Group facilitated the killings and instead blames armed criminals.

This well-trying strategy of combining an unofficial multitool presence with official investments is now also seen in Mali. Russia and Mali signed a military cooperation agreement in June 2019, and as the media started reporting about the arrival of Wagner forces in Mali in December 2021, interim President Assimi Goita, in charge since the May 2021 coup which he led, insisted that only Russian military trainers had arrived as part of a bilateral agreement. In October 2021, Mali received four helicopters, including weapons and ammunition, from Russia, sold as part of a contract signed less than a year before.

Wagner also conducts influence operations in Mali, including through the use of opinion polls. Unsurprisingly, recent polls released by the Wagner entity Foundation for the Protection of National Values, operating in Mali, have shown growing trust

in Goita and widespread opposition to the involvement of France in the conflict in Mali. The rise in narratives of decolonisation and local dissatisfaction with the French military mission in Mali is used and exaggerated by Russia and the Wagner Group as legitimisation for their involvement in the country. The use of influence operations to shape public opinion is becoming a standard component of the Wagner multitool. Considerable experience and expertise in influence operations exist within the various organizations owned and controlled by Prigozhin.

### **Why is the Wagner Group problematic?**

Russia's continued denial of the Wagner Group's existence and status makes it difficult to identify the national laws and regulations which should govern the group's actions. Moreover, there is a lack of transparency as the Russian authorities deliberately obfuscate issues such as operations, deployments, and rules of engagement. This is highly problematic, as it, de facto, leads to a lack of accountability and very limited possibilities for prosecution for human rights abuses.

The deployment of Russian PMCs comes with direct access to the highest level of policymaking in the countries where they operate. This gives Russia considerable political influence in the countries where their PMCs operate, at little or no cost and no accountability. In fact, the no-questions-asked approach is an attractive feature for many authoritarian leaders in need of external support.

Because of Wagner's multitool deployment scheme, there is a risk that the use of carefully designed influence operations will increase in Africa. This may ultimately lead to an increase in anti-Western sentiments and growing local and regional opposition to the deployment of Western troops. This in turn is likely to result in a significantly increased risk in operations across the African continent.

---

**Author:** Karen Philippa Larsen, PhD Candidate [kapl@diis.dk](mailto:kapl@diis.dk), Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, Senior Researcher [fsha@diis.dk](mailto:fsha@diis.dk)

Cover photo: Russian Presidential Press Office

