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Russia Steps up its Campaign for Influence in Africa

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Only a few days after the July decision of the European Union to ban Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik in Europe (Russia's primary media outlets that produces pro-Kremlin content for non-Russian speakers abroad) following the invasion of Ukraine, Russia Today reportedly decided to open an office in South Africa. The office would serve as the Russian outlet's new hub in Anglophone Africa. In parallel, reports said RT seeks to open an office in Francophone Africa, either in Mali, Guinea Conakry, or Central African Republic.¹

These moves by Moscow were not trivial. While the immediate reason behind the moves was the European ban, these measures were planned earlier, as part of a larger Russian strategy vis-à-vis Africa. Completing and facilitating an ongoing social media anti-European/anti-French Russian campaign in Africa, these moves also reflect Moscow's new perception of the continent. Namely, the Kremlin wants Africa to serve as an anti-European platform for beyond the continent. In this article, we will examine the new Russian strategy for deepening its influence in Africa, the means Moscow

¹ "[Russian state channel RT eyes a new audience in Africa](#)," *Le Monde*, March 29, 2022.

exploits for expanding its social media presence there, and the motivation by some African regimes to cooperate and even encourage the new Russian campaign.

Annexation of Crimea, a turning point in relations with Africa

The African independence battles and campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s against colonial powers still shape the worldviews of several African countries, especially in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia. Russia was not one of the colonial powers in Africa. Also, financially strapped Russia lacks the influence-generating tools at the disposal of economic powers like the US, Europe, or China. Past Cold War links between the Soviet Union and African resistance groups² remain a strong card, which Russia has increasingly played in recent years. In short, Russia's lack of a colonial past in Africa has become an advantage, which Moscow is skillfully using.

For undemocratic regimes in Africa, many of them comprised of military leaders, Moscow makes a perfect partner. It encourages anti-colonial sentiments, and it has little consideration for human rights or democracy building. Russian economic, strategic or security support is not conditioned on the execution of reforms or the consolidation of a sustainable long-term national reconstruction program.

In the two decades since the fall of the Soviet bloc, Russia largely withdrew from Africa. Moscow's involvement in Africa was reborn when Vladimir Putin came into power. But the real change took place in 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea. The need for African allies became ever more pressing, with Moscow isolated in the international arena.

This policy continued to evolve in the past three years. Marking a real shift in relations, the first Russia-Africa summit was held on October 2019 in Sochi, with 43 African heads of states participating. A second summit should take place in Saint Petersburg in summer of 2023.³ The summit showcased Moscow's newly acquired taste for security, diplomatic, and trade relations with Africa that are on a trajectory to exceed previous ties.

² Oleg Yegorov, "[How the USSR fell in love with Africa](#)," *Russia Beyond*, November 6, 2019.

³ [The Russia–Africa Summit, Economic Forum | 2023](#).

The evolution of Russia-Africa relations was partially planned ahead, and also developed organically. We can see the transformation of Moscow's strategy as it reached its original goals, but part of the change must also be attributed to Moscow seizing the moment and capitalizing on developments related to Africa's relations with Europe in general, and with France in particular.

Clearly, Moscow has exploited the degradation of these relations to its own benefit. More so, realizing the extent of the anti-European phenomenon, Moscow is now playing an active and provocative role in amplifying it. It aims at targeting and funding opinion leaders to generate a terrain that would be hospitable for Russian interests, and hostile to European ones. Reportedly, since the 2019 Sochi summit, the strongman of the Wagner group, Evgueni Prigojine, has been regularly organizing seminars in Europe and elsewhere, often in association with anti-Western pan-African groups, or with anti-French African media figures attending.⁴

First Phase - Identifying a vacuum

In his first years as leader, Putin started enlarging Russia's influence circles, also by military means. He began with Russia's neighborhood, primarily Chechnya, then reached out to wider circles such as the Middle East and Africa. The annexation of Crimea in 2014, which was not recognized by the international community, accentuated Russia's isolation, pushing Moscow to further engage with Africa.

The Russian African strategy was simple, consisting mainly of identifying a political vacuum or a space where it could disturb and disrupt the status quo, progressively establishing a presence there. Using the Wagner group or national Russian experts, Moscow offered local authorities assistance with security issues. Once the Russian experts gained the trust of the local regime's inner circles, deals could be struck for supplying security services in exchange for contracts for the management of natural resources.

⁴ Maxime Audine, "[LE LION, L'OURS ET LES HYÈNES. ACTEURS, PRATIQUES ET RÉCITS DE L'INFLUENCE INFORMATIONELLE RUSSE EN AFRIQUE SUBSAHARIENNE FRANCOPHONE](#)" (in French), Étude de l'IRSEM No 83, *L'Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire*, 2021.

The Case of the Central African Republic

This modus operandi worked efficiently in the Central African Republic, where Wagner has been present since 2018, and perhaps even since 2017. When President François Bozizé was driven out of the country in 2013, Paris started losing influence. The civil regime that followed the coup was not politically indebted to France. In parallel, scandals involving UN forces there and the poor performance of their troops, increased sentiments of dissatisfaction within the population. This weakened the regime, which was trying to cope with a persistent ethnic divide. Identifying a void in effective governance, Moscow intensified its military involvement, consolidating its influence there practically unopposed.

The Russian military presence proved efficient in December 2020, after Touadéra won the elections, when a coalition of rebels advanced towards Bangui. Turning his back on the UN and France, the newly elected president appealed to Moscow for help. In response, hundreds of Wagner operatives arrived in the Central African Republic. Working together with a small group of some 300 Rwandese soldiers, Wagner pushed back against the rebels, preventing them from reaching the capital.

Still, Wagner's protection came at a steep cost for the local population. Reports from the Central African Republic and from Mali accused mercenaries of the group of extrajudicial killings, rape, and the torture of civilians.⁵ In Mali, a mass grave of people apparently tortured by Wagner was exposed by French camera-equipped drones.⁶ At the UN Security Council in November 2021, France and the US denounced Wagner paramilitaries accused of civilian killings in the Central African Republic. Russia dismissed these claims.⁷

Propaganda – An overlapping second phase

Since the 2019 Sochi summit, Moscow pushed to increase its military and paramilitary presence in Africa, and targeted and funded African opinion leaders. The pre-Sochi

⁵ "[Central African Republic: Under Russian influence](#)," *FRANCE 24 English YouTube Channel*, September 10, 2022.

⁶ "[Charnier à Gossi : l'armée française accuse les mercenaires Wagner de manipulation au Mali](#) (in French)," *Le Monde YouTube Channel*, April 22, 2022.

⁷ "['CAR: Wagner's presence in the Central African Republic is deeply destabilizing'](#)," *Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations*, November 21, 2021.

phase depended on identifying a vacuum and infiltrating the inner decision-making circles by means of security expertise. The second phase encourages the creation of power vacuums by means of social media propaganda and disinformation campaigns. In parallel, Moscow enlarges the terrains it is targeting. Up until recently, it focused on failing countries, states in transition or under military regime, mostly in the Sahel. However, recent developments indicate that Moscow is expanding its field of action also to other parts of North Africa, especially Algeria.

The Case of Mali

The 2012-2013 war in Mali against jihadi groups exposed the fragility of the regime and its army. And while the French army won the war against the jihadi groups, personal insecurity continued to prevail in the north of Mali, expanding to several regions in the center of the country. Local groups started scapegoating Paris, depicting its alleged colonial approach as the root-cause for Mali's dire straits.

A Malian group that initially pushed for cooperation with Russia – the 'Groupe des Patriotes du Mali' (The Patriots of Mali) – had surfaced already in September 2017. While its origins were certainly local, it was quickly noticed by Moscow. Russia's then Ambassador to Mali Alexei Doulian attended some of the group's meetings. In September 2017, the group said it had submitted a petition to the Russian embassy in Bamako (allegedly signed by millions)⁸ soliciting Russian military support due to growing insecurity in northern and central Mali. The Patriots of Mali group focused on protests and was not very visible on social networks. One of the central groups campaigning online for French forces to leave the country was the more recent 'Yerewolo-Debout sur les remparts', which called to replace Bamako's partnership with Paris for a partnership with Moscow.

Identifying a growing diplomatic and security vacuum, the May 2021 coup d'état offered Moscow the opening it was looking for. Anti-French propaganda by local militants had already prepared, so to say, public opinion, with activists claiming that Mali had a traditional alliance with Russia and that contrary to colonial Paris, Moscow had no stakes or ulterior motives in helping the country. Reports place Wagner forces

⁸ "[Malian group seeks Russia's military support](#)," *Africa News*, September 1, 2017.

in Mali as early as December 2021, amid a large anti-French disinformation campaign. The campaign portrayed Wagner as vehicle for countering the jihadi terror threat, not as military support to secure the junta's hold on government. At the time, Moscow claimed it had no official ties with Wagner. Western officials ostensibly accepted this canard, apparently to avoid friction with Russia.

A February 2022 report by the Digital Forensic Research Lab claims that a network of at least five Facebook accounts promoting pro-Russian and anti-French narratives, as well as calls to postpone plans for post-coup free elections, appeared online before the physical arrival of Wagner in Mali. Allegedly administrated by different charities and local community groups, these FB pages seemed to be coordinated to brand Russia as a viable alternative to the West and to mobilize support for the junta. The report said that the five accounts had more than 140,000 followers, with 24,000 posts published.⁹

The extent of Russian involvement in the management of these accounts is unknown. In September 2021, when Wagner operatives started arriving to the country, these pages started promoting the group as an alternative to French soldiers, a scenario which later played out to perfection, when the French troops were ordered to leave Mali. The same pattern reproduced itself with calls to boycott French companies and cancel the accreditation of French media outlets. A group supporting the junta called 'Collectif pour la Défense des Militaires' was especially vocal, accusing RFI and France24 of conspiring to publish fake news on massacres committed by the Malian army. The two media outlets saw their accreditation canceled in January 2022.

A Reversal: propaganda first

The first stages of Wagner infiltration into Central African Republic and Mali were discrete. The same was true for Sudan in 2018, when the government of Omar al-Bashir struck a deal with a subsidiary company of Wagner, granting it shares and mining licenses in several gold-producing regions. The Russian company shied away from publicity, and the Russian government dissociated itself from the group. But the case of Burkina Faso indicates a paradigm shift. Instead of first establishing a military or mining experts' presence, to be followed by a propaganda network, Wagner was quick

⁹ Jean Le Roux, "[Pro-Russian Facebook assets in Mali coordinated support for Wagner Group, anti-democracy protests](#)," *Medium*, February 17, 2022.

to engage in the local anti-French campaign, to further fuel the fire, and to signal publicly it was interested in a partnership with the military regime.

The September 30 coup d'état this year was accompanied by physical attacks on French symbols, including the French embassy in Ouagadougou and the French Institute at Bobo-Dioulasso, with putschists branding the Russian flag and calling anti-French slogans. Leaders of the coup themselves hinted they would turn to other partners. Capitalizing on these demonstrations, Prigojine was quick to express his support for Captain Ibrahim Traoré on social media, the same way he had expressed his support last January for the putschist Lt. Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. In both cases, he saluted the alleged collapse of French colonialism, clearly expecting the junta of Burkina Faso to open the door for Wagner, as the Malian junta had done after the decision to expel the French troops from Mali.

Pitching in for the Russian campaign

The recent Russian social media campaign has clearly bore fruits on the ground in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso, as well as in Sudan (growing involvement of Wagner in gold export) and Senegal (more and more anti-French demonstrations in Dakar and elsewhere in Senegal in recent months). But the Russian influence campaign is also bearing fruits in the arena of the United Nations.

Already in 2014, most African states did not support Resolution 68/262 on preserving the territorial integrity of Ukraine.¹⁰ At the first UN vote against the 2022 Russian invasion to Ukraine, almost half of the African states did not support Resolution ES-11/1 over aggression against Ukraine¹¹ (Eritrea voted against it, 17 countries abstained, and 8 were absent).

At the October 12 vote, 24 African countries did not support resolution ES-11/4 over territorial integrity of Ukraine¹² (19 African states abstained, and 5 were absent). This last October's resolution garnered a more positive African approach (major African

¹⁰ "[Territorial integrity of Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly](#)," *United Nations Digital Library*, 2014.

¹¹ "[Aggression against Ukraine: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly](#)," *United Nations Digital Library*, 2022.

¹² "[Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly](#)," *United Nations Digital Library*, 2022.

states such as Morocco and Ivory Coast voted in favor) but Western diplomats attribute this shift to the careful wording of its title – "Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations".

By focusing on the United Nations Charter and not on Russian aggression, the sponsors of the resolution garnered more support from African countries, who were reluctant to vote explicitly against Moscow. To that we should add the silence on the part of the African Union and on the part of African leaders and decision-makers. Most African countries have not come to the defense of Ukraine, battling for independence against an oppressive power.

This voting trend, which de facto supports Moscow, can be explained not only by the successful Russian social media campaign and Russian diplomatic pressure, but also by the natural inclinations of several African states. The Russian invasion into Ukraine is perceived as the continuation of an East-West rivalry. Countries like Namibia, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Algeria, and Zimbabwe remember the Soviet Union's support during the Cold War for their respective resistance movements. They perceive Russia as a leader of an ongoing global campaign against colonialism and imperialism.

Another reason for the de facto African support for Russia is apprehension vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine. Many see it as a representative case of Western double standards. Though careful not to take sides, several African decision-makers have nonetheless lamented the enormous extent of the generous (security) investment of the West in favor of Kyiv, compared with (what they consider) the comparatively small Western investment in favor of economically strapped Africa, be it in fighting terrorism or generally in development aid. The civil war in Ethiopia since 2020 and the post-pandemic crisis across Africa were sidelined, they feel, in favor of Western engagement on Ukraine. They also blame the West for campaigning for international law and order only when it is convenient.

Conclusions: Russia's Return to Africa has been Successful

Russia's investment in security-presence and disinformation campaign is clearly a growing trend, but it is important to remember that Russia's resources in general are

very limited. Russia's trade with Africa in 2020 reached \$14.5 billion¹³, compared with 245 billion euros of trade between the European Union and Africa that year¹⁴, or \$175 billion trade between China and Africa.¹⁵ In terms of international development assistance, Russia is a new player. It was only in 2014 that it adopted its current policy on international development assistance.¹⁶ Still, despite the lack of financial means, one can say that the Russian campaign in Africa has been successful.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, reports started appearing on Wagner forces being deployed to the battlefield. Analysts expected that Moscow would reduce its Wagner presence in Africa, this did not happen, nor did Moscow scale down its disinformation campaign in the continent. Clearly, Moscow intends to continue with this strategy of infiltrating security elements and encouraging anti-West sentiments in Africa. For Moscow, this has proven to be a winning formula, and it has reaped far more benefits than its overall costs.

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¹³ "[Trade revenue between Russia and African countries from 2013 to 2020\(in billion U.S. dollars\)](#)," Statista, July 4, 2022.

¹⁴ "[Africa-EU trade in goods: €4 billion surplus](#)," Eurostat, February 2, 2022.

¹⁵ "[China - Africa Trade Hits Record Highs in 2021](#)," Statista, August 1, 2022.

¹⁶ "[The Russian Federation's Official Development Assistance \(ODA\)](#)," OECD.