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# THE LONG ARM(S) OF THE STATE:

**The Role of the Wagner Group in  
Russia's Pivot to Africa, 2017-2022**

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## ABOUT

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*All views expressed in this paper are the author's own and do not represent the official stance of the United States Government.*

Photo: [Russian mercenaries provide security for convoy with president of the Central African Republic](#), Clément Di Roma/VOA (Public Domain)

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# INTRODUCTION:

## Research Question and Overview

The Wagner Group's presence and operations on the continent of Africa have sparked concerns and debate across both local media and international platforms alike. First thought to be just another Russian mercenary group, the Wagner Group exists as part of a greater network of companies and soldiers. The greater Wagner Group network has close links with key Russian government actors and agencies, and the network has proliferated in close concert with increased overtures and activity on the part of the Russian state. This apparent interweaving of public and private actors begs the question of how independent the Wagner Group and connected companies really are, or, to put it more bluntly, to what extent this network operates as another, unofficial arm of the Russian state versus as a private actor seeking independent gain and profit.

One of the difficulties in framing this analysis, at least for Western observers, lies in the divergence from Western frameworks and classifications for understanding state strategy and strength, particularly in how Russia uses and talks about using the Wagner Group to exercise and develop influence in other countries. At the same time, the Wagner Group's operations and organization not only remain veiled in layers of secrecy and obfuscation but also shift from location to location, making it difficult for outsiders to draw a conclusive, consistent picture of the organization.

This project aims to examine Russian official and paramilitary moves in central Africa 2017-May 2022 with an emphasis on the outsized role of the greater Wagner Group network, looking at the interplay of motivations and receptions from the Russian and African perspectives. Although according to the group itself, the name "Wagner Group" properly refers to the mercenary soldiers alone, the mercenaries operate in concert with other companies all connecting back to the Russian oligarch Evgeny Prigozhin. Rather than focusing exclusively on the soldiers-for-hire, this project examines how the network as a whole operates in various African states. The analysis focuses on *what* and *how* Russian-linked actors are expanding influence, and in what ways their offers are accepted and taken advantage of by local actors; this involves in-depth case studies for Russian relations with Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Mali.

Throughout, the aim is to explore not only Russian motivation and gains, but the reception and participation by local actors and populations in order to gauge to what extent local African interests are also served or hampered by the Russian presence. Part of this effort entails criticizing and, to some extent, deconstructing the bilaterally framed Russia-Africa paradigm: although Russia's outreach and increased relations with the countries studied here certainly follows a broad pattern, the precise methods and contours of the relationships are defined by the individual African states themselves; and the success of various Russian ventures in each country has also depended on their ability to adapt to local circumstances and contexts.

The paper begins by exploring Russian strategy towards the continent of Africa and how moves there fit into larger geopolitical goals. It then turns to the Prigozhin network and the Wagner Group, including their structure, abilities, and relationship(s) with the Russian state. The rest of the paper examines Russian relations with African countries bilaterally, beginning with Madagascar and Mozambique, followed by in-depth studies of official and unofficial Russian dealings in Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Mali. It finishes by considering potential expansions for the Russia/Wagner presence, the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and possible paths forward for these closely-entwined countries.

# PART I.

## Does Russia Have an “Africa Strategy”?

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Russian involvement in sub-Saharan Africa has greatly increased since 2014, with a significant uptick in 2017. Russia's recently expanding presence in Africa roughly corresponds with increased Western sanctions and scrutiny towards Russia following the annexation of Crimea and sponsored conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014; and, starting in 2016, scaled back African operations and attention from the U.S. and other Western powers—in the Sahel and Central Africa, France's retreat in particular. However, Russia has worked strenuously to avoid being seen as a successor neocolonialist by African governments, and its methods of involvement so far remain much more targeted (in aspiration, though not always in scope) than those of the U.S., Europe, or even China.

Russian strategy towards Africa as a whole mainly exists insofar as it fits into Russia's greater geopolitical aims. Russia seeks to assert itself as a global great power by extending its influence and operational capabilities worldwide. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept<sup>1</sup> note, takes as its overarching principle the aim to gain others' recognition of what Russia already believes, its great-power status. Immediately after national and economic security at the start of the document comes the goal “to consolidate the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world,” with bilateral relations to be “guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty [and] pragmatism.”<sup>2</sup>

Russia aims to demonstrate its great-power standing through far-reaching activities and so gain recognition as a great power from outsiders while also satisfying domestic interests. The Russian state runs on a network of patronage links, stretching all the way up to President Vladimir Putin at its head; these relationships are transactional, meaning that Putin is answerable to his ruling elite in that he must continuously earn their loyalty and service through rewards both monetary and political.<sup>3</sup> Russians see themselves as a great power and so the state must be seen to act as one abroad, but in such a way as to bring continued riches and/or influence to its domestic patrons.

At the same time, Russia does not have the same depth of resources (military, economic, or population-wise) as the other powers it sees as rivals (particularly the U.S. and Europe). Following these usual measures of power, many would rate Russia more in the upper-middle ranks than at the very top; as one commentator puts it, “a common argument ... has been that Russia has a weak hand in international politics, but plays it very well.”<sup>4</sup> As applied to Africa, this implies an absence of strategy, and instead simply clever “opportunism that propels Russia's relatively low-cost and low-risk”<sup>5</sup> approaches.

However, using the argument of opportunism alone to explain Russia's success in gaining influence runs the risk of removing all local, African agency. Opportunism does not explain the long-term increase in diplomatic connections as evidenced by block voting at the UN, nor the increased bilateral economic and military links between Russia and a near-majority of African states (see the Appendix for more information). These ties can only be the result of consistent, longer-term planning and effort that succeeded in winning promises and trust from African leaders.

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1 This document was, sometime in the last six months, removed from the Russian Foreign Ministry website and replaced by subject-specific sections. (The African section has become even vaguer and is almost entirely a list of Russia's humanitarian funding via different UN organizations.) However, regardless of whether this website change reflects any substantive change in policy, the 2016 Concept Note serves as a useful guide to Russian thinking at the time.

2 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016)

3 See Stoner, *Russia Resurrected*, particularly ch.8, “The Domestic Determinants of Russia's Resurrection”

4 Stoner, p3. Stoner in fact does not agree with this line of argument and argues that Russia has more strength than commonly supposed due to its creative use of state and nonstate resources.

5 Stronski, “Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa”

The 2016 Foreign Policy Note does not directly address specific goals shaping this strategic approach. In fact, it only has one paragraph that directly addresses Russia-Africa relations:

99. Russia will expand multidimensional interaction with African States both in bilateral and multilateral settings by improving political dialogue and promoting mutually beneficial trade and economic ties, stepping up comprehensive cooperation that serves common interests, contribute to preventing regional conflicts and crisis situations, as well as facilitate post-conflict settlement in Africa. Promoting partnership ties with the African Union and sub-regional organizations is an important element of this policy.<sup>6</sup>

These goals seem fairly modest if not limited in scope. There are no specific achievements or desired policy changes listed, as they are for other areas the world like Europe or Central Asia. Africa is not at the top of Russia's list for attention or resources.

That said, Africa holds great geopolitical and geoeconomic significance for any self-identifying great or world power: as a location for strategically-placed military bases or refueling posts, and as a holder of vast amounts of key natural resources. Its quickly-growing economies offer great potential gains for technology and energy companies; its states also constitute a significant number of votes at the UN; and it also exists in its own right as a space to exert influence—for Russia, conveniently at the cost of rival Western states.

When paired with Russia's overall strategic goal of acting as a "centre of influence" while upholding the ideas of "sovereignty" and "pragmatism," a strategic framework for interactions does thus emerge. Russia's strategy toward Africa is to present itself to potential partner states as a pragmatic and hands-off alternative to (its conception of) an overly sanctimonious and paternalistic West. At the October 2019 Africa-Russia Summit held in Sochi, Putin declared, "We invariably follow the principle 'African problems have African solutions'"<sup>7</sup> and emphasized Russia's readiness to partner with African states without political or social conditions. Russian relations with African countries and regional organizations usually follow this "pragmatic" and pro-state sovereignty approach by helping the other state's ruling parties hold on to power without asking those regimes to make changes towards improving things like democratic institutions or human rights records.

This approach has a strong appeal to certain types of leaders and governments, especially those facing strong internal security challenges; it also helps position Russia as a strings-free alternative to the neocolonial/neoimperial demands of certain Western countries. Assisting with security challenges plays to Russia's strengths in the military and weapons areas, while avoiding economic entanglements that Russia cannot afford; at most, Russia requests in exchange access to targeted sectors of the other's economy, particularly in mining and energy. In developing relations with African countries, Russia's goal is not intense economic ties like China is capable of, or widespread societal changes/improvements like those sought by Western governments, but rather to create targeted but deep footholds or enclaves of influence based on military-security connections that could be expanded in the future, possibly on the model of enclave imperialism developed during the colonial period.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, Russia's use of the Wagner Group and connected companies gives it additional means of increasing influence, especially in the security/military space, without greatly taxing the state; indeed, some analysts see this as Russia having "outsourced its foreign policy" almost entirely.<sup>9</sup> The

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6 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016)

7 The Standard, "Russia returns to Africa with a bang"

8 See Appendix for a detailed list of Russian military agreements made with African countries in just 2015 to 2018.

9 Dunigan & Connable, "Russian Mercenaries in Great-Power Competition: Strategic Supermen or Weak Link?"

Russian (pro-Kremlin) analyst Sergei Markov stated that this outsourcing in fact constituted one of Russia's greatest strengths compared to rival powers, saying, "This is how we gradually become competitive, since neither Russia's finances nor technology can compete with Europe and America. We choose the security field, where we are strong—our forces have proved that in Syria."<sup>10</sup> Through strategic use of state and nonstate resources in concert, Russia is thus well-equipped to achieve its goals in Africa.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Nemstova, Obajie, & Dickie, "Russian Journalists Murdered in Africa May Have Been Set Up"

## PART II.

### The Wagner Group: Not Like Other Mercenaries?

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The name “Wagner Group” constitutes a set of contradictions. It can refer to a specific group of mercenary soldiers, or several groups, or to connected organizations of “political experts” and mining prospectors and the security details for both. It has never existed as a legal entity and until September 26, 2022, Evgeny Prigozhin continued to deny both its existence and any personal connection to it.<sup>11</sup> Yet there is at least one open Telegram channel where apparent Wagner members post their own exploits and advertise how to join. In short, nothing officially exists, yet their presence is an open secret. A 2021 article in *Foreign Policy* put the problem bluntly: “Russia’s Wagner group doesn’t actually exist, and that makes it all the more challenging,” reads the title. The author, Amy McKinnon, notes that the use of the name has expanded to “describe a network of businesses and groups of mercenaries that have been linked by overlapping ownership and logistics networks.”<sup>12</sup>

For the sake of clarity, this paper will refer only to the network’s soldiers/military combatants as the Wagner Group, and to the overall group of businesses connected through Evgeny Prigozhin as the Prigozhin network. This will help clarify military versus other means used, and it will also sidestep the inconsistent application of the name “Wagner” in favor of emphasizing the interconnected nature of the many organizations that make up the network.

The nebulous nature of Wagner and its sister-companies causes difficulties for tracking and, especially, confirming Wagner activity; and for determining which and/or to what extent Wagner activities are directed by the Russian government versus taken on independently. This project argues that, to some extent, the latter question is irrelevant, or perhaps the wrong framing. Both Wagner and the bevy of other companies linked to Prigozhin fit into the overall Russian government strategy outlined in the previous section of outsourcing some amount of influence-building to cheap and plausibly-deniable nonstate actors. (To a lesser extent, insofar as the network’s businesses also enrich Prigozhin and his associates, the use of the network also helps maintain at least this one patron-client relationship within the Russian ruling class.) Wagner and the Prigozhin network together provide a variety of services that increase direct Russian influence and contribute to local receptiveness to Russian government overtures, even as some organizations are directed by Russian government operatives and others act more independently.

When entering a new country, the network seeks to gain access and control on the ground to valuable mining rights in exchange for providing security and assistance in the political arena, thus providing the network with effective military and political influence as well. Concurrently, the Russian government pursues greater engagement and military agreements as well, and usually provides implicit approval and support for the Wagner operatives especially. The coordinated actions and messaging from the Russian government, Wagner, and other parts of the Prigozhin network thus not only wins local government respect but also respect and trust in the Russian government as well.

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<sup>11</sup> The Moscow Times, “Prigozhin Admits He Founded ‘Brave, Patriotic’ Wagner Mercenary Group”

<sup>12</sup> Mackinnon, “Russia’s Wagner Group Doesn’t Actually Exist”



## Why Use Wagner?

One of the most useful things about Wagner for the Russian government is that the group is not constituted or operated like normal modern mercenary groups, or even like other Russian mercenary groups (if anything, the Prigozhin network operates more like private trading companies during the early colonial period that expanded their reach through private territorial conquest). Private military companies (PMCs) are not legal in Russia, although private security companies (PSCs) are allowed and do exist (see the Appendix for a comprehensive list). There is no legal entity called “Wagner Group” in Russia, or indeed anywhere in the world.<sup>13</sup> But the most salient difference between Wagner and other Russian PMCs/PSCs, including state-run groups, is the Prigozhin network. No other Russian mercenary group, as far as anyone is aware, has the same integration and coordination with private funding and interests like the Wagner Group does. This helps obscure Wagner activities but also allows for the exercise of soft and sharp power in addition to the Wagner Group’s military/hard power capabilities. The broad nature of the full Prigozhin network capabilities combined with Wagner’s elusive existence make it a convenient tool for the Russian government to take advantage of, if not direct.

The Wagner Group began as strictly mercenaries, and still operates as a private military force in Ukraine, Syria, and Libya. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa the deployment of fighters has come under various legal guises and is closely intertwined with other Prigozhin-network operations. Here, the group’s local, legal iterations often contract to fulfill military consulting and private security company work. In the Central African Republic, different aspects of the Wagner Group appear to do both.

**TABLE 1: MODIFIED TYPOLOGY**

Private military and security companies				
- <----- Level of force -----> +				
Type of company	Military support firm	Military consulting firm	Private security company	Private military company
Primary role	Sustainment	Force generation, intelligence, mission command	Defense and protection	Offense
Activities	Transportation Engineering Medical support Procurement Personnel services	Intelligence support Knowledge management Training support	Facility security Physical security Personal protection Convoy security Refugee protection	Combat Combat support Close air support Fire support
Notable examples	Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR)	Military Professional Resources Incorporated (MPRI); Dyncorp	Blackwater/Xe/Academi	Executive Outcomes

(Table by author)

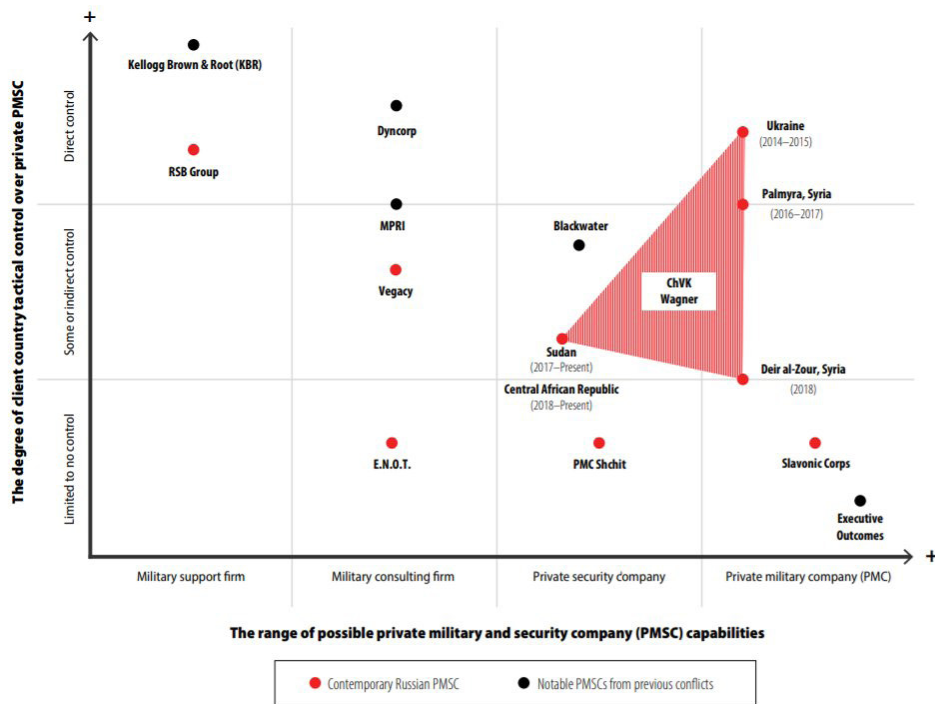
Source: Arnold, [The Geoeconomic Dimensions of Russian Private Military and Security Companies](#), November-December 2019, *Military Review*

13 Kimberly Marten, who has written extensively on the Wagner Group, notes that there is “no evidence that the group was ever officially registered in Russia, or anywhere else” in “Russia’s use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group,” p92

Unlike historical mercenary/military companies, modern PMCs and PSCs usually specialize in a specific aspect of military or security work, from consulting to providing security to conducting military operations. The Wagner Group stands out from its contemporaries in taking on a much broader range of work, especially when operating in concert with the greater Prigozhin network. The ever-shifting nature of the Wagner Group, combined with its private and state connections, allow its operatives to perform a wide variety of functions beyond the limits of a normal military or security company. Major Thomas Arnold, in his 2019 article “The Geoeconomic Dimensions of Russian Private Military and Security Companies,” maps out four main categories of security company—military support, military consulting, security services, and military activity—and then plots the Wagner Group’s capabilities against selected contemporaries to demonstrate Wagner’s unusual breadth.

The “Analytic Framework” on this page shows Wagner’s range in capabilities, which encompasses several categories of military/security work instead of just one like most companies.<sup>14</sup>

**FIGURE 1: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**



Source: Arnold, [The Geoeconomic Dimensions of Russian Private Military and Security Companies](#), November-December 2019, Military Review

## The Prigozhin Network

The many businesses and organizations that make up the Prigozhin network are so named because they all connect back to one man: Evgeny Prigozhin. Prigozhin is linked, through personal connections, funding, overlapping ownership, and shared (sometimes simultaneous) use of assets and logistics, to a variety of companies conducting dubious activities. The most notable include the

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, “The Geoeconomic Dimensions of Russian Private Military and Security Companies,” p9

Internet Research Agency (IRA), widely held as responsible (and sanctioned by the U.S.) for hacking the U.S. Democratic National Committee servers and for conducting a broad social media campaign to help sway the election in 2016; various mining companies set up in Madagascar, Sudan, and the CAR; and of course, the Wagner Group.

A former hot-dog seller and lower-level criminal, Prigozhin made his riches in high-end cuisine and mass-produced school and army lunches. Prigozhin and Putin are certainly acquainted, but Prigozhin does not appear to have as close a relationship with him as some other oligarchs.<sup>15</sup> That said, Prigozhin had enough clout by 2017 that some analysts believe Russia became closely involved in Sudan at his urging.<sup>16</sup>

The Prigozhin network's approach to involvement in Africa matches closely to the colonial model of enclave economies, although it likely evolved that way naturally from the business side of the network. Prigozhin has invested almost exclusively in mining ventures, with a string of mining companies for each individual country that all link back to him through various shell companies. These companies provide a rationale for bringing in "consultants" on security and local politics—i.e. legal cover for Wagner operatives to enter. Insofar as these mining and Wagner outposts exist as landing points for the Russian state, they effectively constitute enclaves from which Russia can exert influence while simultaneously extracting resources for profit, much as imperialist powers like France established economic enclaves that continued to funnel local money and goods back to the colonizing power rather than having to develop the colonized area's economy as a whole. (The parallel is especially strong in the Central African Republic, which in fact underwent exactly that process under French rule. The lasting distortions and other economic and social effects of this process can still be seen today, making Russia's *de facto* replacement of France as security guarantor particularly ironic.)

Prigozhin's main role and purpose in this network thus is, of course, as the money man. However, links with the Wagner Group come not through direct ownership (impossible since there is no registered stand-in company), but through indirect and shared funding, shared logistics and assets like planes, and through personnel connections such as a great many 'former' employees now connected to Wagner. In its July and September 2020 announcements of further sanctions against Prigozhin, the U.S. Treasury labeled him the group's "financier."<sup>17</sup>

Few believe that Prigozhin personally directs or oversees the Wagner Group. Expert Kimberly Marten believes "he is the middleman, I think he is the contractor. I'm sure he gets a huge payment off the top by being the contractor, and then he has these companies which seem to be benefiting in cases where there are minerals or oil involved."<sup>18</sup> The research group Bellingcat concurs:

Whether or not the "Wagner Group" was the brainchild of the Russian military establishment or of Prigozhin himself, multiple digital breadcrumbs corroborate the linkage between his operations and the private military company. These include joint air-travel bookings between Prigozhin employees – including the head of his trolling operation – with known Wagner officers, and the use of at least three companies controlled by Prigozhin as payroll providers for Wagner mercenaries.<sup>19</sup>

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15 Bellingcat, in examining recordings of Prigozhin's calls with the Kremlin, mostly trace him talking to mid-level Kremlin people, trying to get his ideas in the door. From Bellingcat, "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed"

16 This argument appears in both the Proekt "Master and Chef" series and Marten's "Into Africa" piece.

17 Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity" (July 2020) and "Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier" (September 2020)

18 Mackinnon

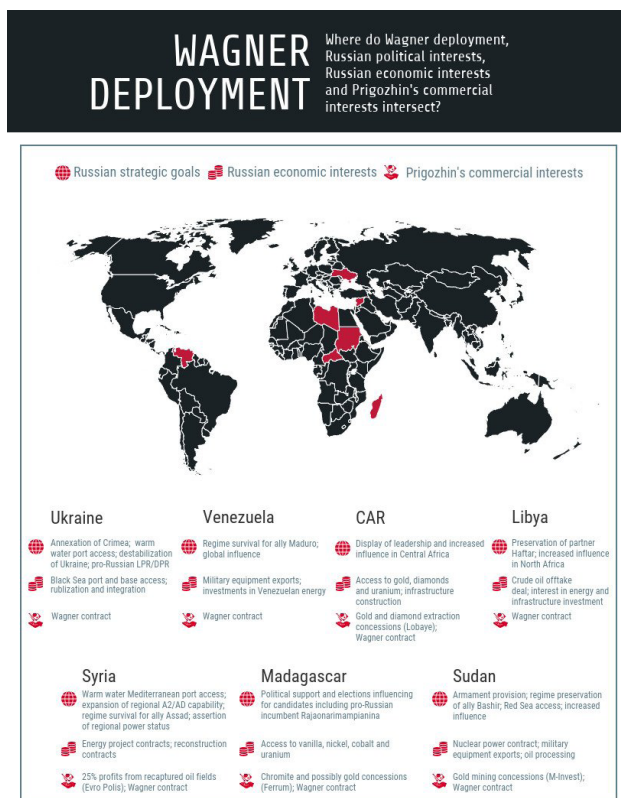
19 Bellingcat, "Putin's Chef's Kiss of Death"

The U.S. Treasury also does not place Prigozhin at the head of the chain of command, but rather as a coordinator and facilitator, a willing “manager and financier” whose “operations in CAR are reported to be coordinated with the Russian Federation’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense.”<sup>20</sup>

For actual command, all evidence points not to the Kremlin or Prigozhin as its agent, but to another branch of the Russian government, the Ministry of Defense. The Wagner Group’s leader, and one of its founders, is Dmitri Utkin. Not much is known about Utkin beyond his service in Russia’s Military Intelligence Agency (the GRU) and a short stint fighting in Syria with another mercenary group, the Slavonic Corps, before starting the Wagner Group. Utkin and the Wagner Group as a whole have documented, direct close links with the GRU, as confirmed by substantial research by the Bellingcat Center; its researchers have trawled hundreds of records of calls, texts, and other messages to trace in detail the close relationship. They concluded that “it is clear from the context of the calls that Utkin appears to be subordinated both to GRU’s Ivannikov and overall to the Russian military command.”<sup>21</sup>

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Prigozhin has used his role as financier and coordinator to both facilitate and benefit from the Wagner Group’s expansion beyond just military operations. His network has created locally-registered PSCs that both provide legal cover for Wagner operatives’ presence while

also providing protection for Prigozhin’s personal mining interests in the region. Prigozhin, in essence, acts as consultant and facilitator for the Kremlin, and in return uses Wagner resources to also protect his personal economic interests in such countries as Sudan and the CAR.



Source: Rabin, “Diplomacy and Dividends: Who Really Controls the Wagner Group?”, Foreign Policy Research Institute

Beyond supporting Wagner fighters and his economic interests, Prigozhin has used his other companies like the IRA to support anti-Western/pro-Russia media campaigns and simultaneously promote Russian culture and exchange programs. Massive networks of fake accounts on Facebook and other social media platforms supporting the government in power have appeared in target countries almost at the same time as the Wagner troops. Prigozhin also supports local anti-Western speakers and activists to amplify their message and so make room for increased support of Russia. One prominent activist working on pan-Africa issues, Kèmi Sèba, not only used to receive financing from Prigozhin but says they actually met.

“I met him in Russia, Sudan and Libya. We saw each other a year after the extraordinary campaign that we had led against the CFA franc,<sup>22</sup> and he told me: ‘You have the

20 “Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier”

21 Bellingcat, “Putin’s Chef’s Kiss of Death”

22 Since 2015, Sèba has led a widespread campaign to abolish the CFA franc, including initiating the anti-CFA franc protests held outside the 2017 Africa-France summit held in Bamako, Mali. The following January, Africanews named him their 2017 Personality of

ability to reach African youth in a way that very few people are able to do. I want to support you. Those who are against our enemies are our friends.”<sup>23</sup>

In this way, Prigozhin and his agents utilize soft power tools like cultural exchange and combine them with sharp power tools like mis- and disinformation campaigns.<sup>24</sup> These tactics, combined with the hard/military power provided by Wagner, provides a potent tool for improving Russian power and influence via nontraditional, nonstate means. For client governments, the Prigozhin network offers the opportunity of getting expert assistance in shaping pro-regime narratives and improving public support. For local partners like Sèba, when choosing between outside funding, Russia’s stance of no ideology can present an attractive alternative to continuing to work with former colonizers.

## Everything in Action

The combined state and nonstate approach toward increased involvement in African countries follows a set pattern, although the timing and emphasis of one aspect versus another depends on the specific country and its political situation. It goes like this: Russia and an African state negotiate a new military cooperation agreement that involves some kind of legal arms sale. At the same time, Prigozhin-network agents establish a new mining company in country, and seek locations, often potentially-lucrative mines that underperform due to being located in conflict zones. A few weeks after the agreement is signed, Wagner operatives arrive in country under legal auspices, either under an equally-new locally-registered PSC or as Russian government-provided trainers for the African state who then embed in some branch of that country’s armed forces. Both trainers and PSC workers not only perform mine protection but take some among of offensive work to support and stabilize the security environment in favor of the ruling government. Meanwhile, the Russian state continues to provide official arms sales and assistance, including veto power, at the UN; Prigozhin-network agents conduct soft and sharp-power campaigns to improve Russia’s image locally and weaken any opposition to the local ruling government.

Although the Wagner Group certainly gets the most attention from outside media, the entire Prigozhin network along with the Russian state together work to increase Russian control and influence in their selected state. These efforts often feed off each other: Wagner mercenaries protect Prigozhin companies, and in turn Prigozhin companies fund local media that promote and celebrate the mercenaries. Russian representatives at the UN work to prevent not only investigations into their partner state’s government, but those of Russian actors as well.<sup>25</sup> And the local regime receives much needed security assistance and gets increased public support through Prigozhin-network propaganda and social media campaigns.

It is this pattern, and these cooperative efforts, that the rest of the paper will highlight through the use of country case studies.

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the Year in recognition of the impact of his campaign.

23 Quoted in Roger & Dougeli, “Russia – Africa: Behind the scenes of Moscow’s soft power”

24 Sharp power constitutes techniques of manipulating information and media to subtly coerce populations into believing one’s preferred narrative. My thoughts on sharp power and Russia’s use of it owe a great deal to Kathryn Stoner’s formulation in *Russia Resurrected*.

25 For example, U.S. diplomats have complained off the record of difficulties releasing human rights reports that mention alleged crimes linked to Russian consultants working in African countries.

## PART III.

### Case Study 1: Sudan

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The Prigozhin network's presence in Sudan for the most part followed the pattern of involvement described above—up until the government it had supported was overthrown. Since the 2019 coup, the network, and the Wagner Group in particular, have gone underground, acting much more quietly and outside the public sphere than in other countries; as the government's support for Russia waxed and waned, the group shifted away from overt military activities and more towards supporting the network's other activities in the mining and social media spheres.

#### 2017-2019:

##### Come for the Gold, Stay for the Politics

Long-standing Russian activity in and around the Horn of Africa, including participation in the UN-EU anti-piracy exercises, makes Sudan a potential partner for regional security efforts as well as a potential site for a naval base (especially given the strategic value of having a permanent Red Sea presence). Sudan also has gold deposits, something very interesting both to private investors and a Russian state under international sanction for the 2014 invasion of Crimea. The confluence of public-private interests in Sudan made it a useful site for the Russian government and the Prigozhin network to increase activity in Sudan in ways that supported each other's interests without conflict. In fact, some analysts argue that Prigozhin himself, driven by the lure of monetary gain convinced Putin to increase involvement with Sudan through appealing to the geopolitical advantages of the area.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of who initiated the turn to Sudan, the Russian government's increased military connections to Sudan were perfectly timed with the Prigozhin network's economic entrance.

In early 2017, the Russian government signed a military arms agreement with the Sudanese government, led by then-President Omar al-Bashir. Around the same time, Russian mining investors sought and received permission to register a new gold-mining company, Meroe Gold, under the ownership of M Invest. (M Invest, itself part of the M-Finance corporation, is led by one of Prigozhin's former IRA employees and has overlapping funding and logistics with other Prigozhin companies.<sup>27</sup>)

The promised Russian SU-35 jets arrived in Khartoum that November,<sup>28</sup> just after al-Bashir's visit to Moscow. The visit was apparently a success, since government ministers declared that "deals in mining ... and advanced security industries"<sup>29</sup> would follow shortly. Indeed, M Invest received preferential access to gold mines shortly after the meeting.<sup>30</sup> That same month, Igor Strelkov/Girkin, a Russian state-linked leader in Ukraine's occupied eastern territories, posted on his VKontakte<sup>31</sup> page that "Wagner is already preparing (after Syria) to go exactly there (to South [*sic*] Sudan) - they are looking for specialists and translators."<sup>32</sup> By December photos and videos had begun circulating on social media claiming to show Russian operatives in Sudan.<sup>33</sup>

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26 Marten, "Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian Military"

27 US Treasury, "Treasury Targets Financier's Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity" and Torgasheva

28 al-Arabiya, "Sudan receives Su-35 fighter jets ahead of Bashir's first Russia visit"

29 Ibid.

30 Borshchevskaya, "The Role of Russian Private Military Contractors in Africa"

31 the Russian equivalent to Facebook.

32 Strelkov on VK. Comments on the page and further statements imply that he meant Sudan, not South Sudan.

33 For example, see the video posted by Russian journalist Aleksander Kots at <https://twitter.com/sashakots/status/940467146567700481>.

The Wagner Group served multiple roles in Sudan. It acted as a PSC and guarded the Meroe Gold mines, including fending off an attack in March 2018.<sup>34</sup> It also used Sudan as an access point for its operations in the CAR (which are discussed in the next section). On July 31, 2018, the Sudanese opposition news site Radio Dabanga wrote that “Western diplomatic sources” confirmed not only Russian-Sudanese cooperation in the CAR, but also that 500 Russian soldiers were currently being “received and hosted by the [Sudanese] government” close to the Sudan-CAR border.<sup>35</sup>

However, the main objective of Russian efforts in Sudan was bolstering the Sudanese government. The Wagner Group, the Prigozhin network, and the Russian state all worked to support al-Bashir’s government in Sudan and on the international stage at the UN. In particular, throughout its time in Sudan, the Wagner Group has provided training and support to General Mohamed “Hemedti” Dargolo<sup>36</sup> and his Rapid Support Forces (RSF), paramilitary forces that committed human rights crimes during the War in Darfur, during which they seized control of much of Sudan’s gold market—making them well-matched partners for the Prigozhin network in all areas of activity.

Wagner’s presence first became public knowledge through its assistance in responding to the protests that would lead to al-Bashir’s overthrow; Russian operatives were seen at the December 26, 2018 protests in the capital.

Photos of these operatives quickly spread across social media platforms, and soon reports had emerged, first on January 7 from a source in the government,<sup>37</sup> and then on January 11 from opposition leaders,<sup>38</sup> that Wagner operatives were training Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Services. The initial Russian and Sudanese government denials quickly ended as reports and sightings spread. Instead, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on January 23 that “according to—our information, representatives of Russian private security companies, who have nothing to do with Russian state bodies, really do operate in Sudan” and that “their task is limited to training staff for the military and law enforcement agencies of the Republic of Sudan.”<sup>39</sup>

However, just a few days later, on January 28, both the Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov and the Deputy Foreign Minister for Africa and the Middle East Mikhail Bogdanov stated that Russian operatives in Sudan had been sent by the Russian government. Peskov stated that “here are really instructors there, they have been working for some time, a considerable time. ... This is in the framework of Russia-Sudan bilateral relations, absolutely legitimately.” Taking him at his word, this implies that one of the promises made during the Russia-Sudan government agreements involved sending Russian operatives. Bogdanov described the operatives sent as “both private and state instructors” and also implied that the operatives had not only been in Sudan for some time but that the Russian government had been fully aware, saying, “Of course our instructors are in Sudan.”<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile Wagner-connected agents were not only monitoring the protests but also proffering plans for ending them with what one former Sudanese government official described as “minimal but acceptable loss of life.”<sup>41</sup> Originating from M Invest offices, these plans recommended discrediting protestors through faked arson attacks against hospitals and nurseries; blaming Western governments for the protests using “extensive media coverage of the interrogation of detainees,

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34 Torgasheva mentions it, but unfortunately further details are scarce.

35 Dabanga, “500 Russian troops on CAR-Darfur border”

36 Also transliterated in some sources as “Hemeti” or “Hemetti”

37 Sudan Tribune, “Russian military firm working with Sudan security service: sources”

38 Sudan Tribune, “Sudan denies involvement of Russian mercenaries in anti-protest operations”

39 Reuters, “Russian contractors are training the army in Sudan, says Moscow”

40 All quotes in this paragraph are from The East African, “Russia says state and private ‘instructors’ are in Sudan”

41 Quoted in Lister, Shukla, & Elbagir, “Fake news and public executions: Documents show a Russian company’s plan for quelling protests in Sudan”

where they admit they arrived to organize civil war in Sudan;” and even “public executions of looters and other spectacular events to distract the protest-minded audience.”<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, other parts of the Prigozhin network had also swung into action, particularly the Internet Research Agency. In an October 2019 whitepaper, the Stanford Internet Observatory reported that it had found and reported a vast influence-operation on Facebook run by the IRA, which included several pages active on Sudanese networks. These Facebook pages “relied on subcontractors ... local to the region” and “leveraged public WhatsApp and Telegram channels” as well to promote government narratives.<sup>43</sup>

And Evgeny Prigozhin personally attempted to intervene to cajole the Sudanese government into following Wagner’s hardline recommendations. A draft letter from March 17, 2019 from Prigozhin to al-Bashir states that the Sudanese government “provoked the intensification of the crisis” through “inaction. ...The lack of active steps by the new government to overcome the crisis is likely to lead to even more serious political consequences.”<sup>44</sup> He was right; that April, the army removed al-Bashir and installed a transitional military council.

As protests continued and the army and civilian leaders struggled to decide whether and how to cooperate, the military council, at least, appears to have followed the Prigozhin-network’s advice. During the June protests, most notably the Khartoum Massacre, the RSF worked to shut down the protests with brutal force. At hearings before an independent fact-finding committee run by the Darfur Bar Association, members of the RSF detachment that committed the killings said that they had been trained by Russian instructors.<sup>45</sup>

## 2020-May 2022:

### Maintaining a Foothold After the First Coup

Due to its close association with the ousted government, Russia and the Prigozhin network, especially Wagner, had to step carefully and adjust their approaches in order to maintain their Sudanese foothold. It is unclear how many Wagner operatives, i.e. actual soldiers, remain in Sudan, since news of them has been sparse.<sup>46</sup> They seem to have gone underground, some staying with Meroe Gold/M Invest under their PSC cover, while trainers in the RSF embedded themselves deeper into the organization.<sup>47</sup>

Meroe Gold has continued its work. In March 2022, an executive of a Sudanese gold company revealed that Russia has been smuggling about 30 tons of gold from Sudan for an unknown number of years.<sup>48</sup> The IRA has continue to run social media campaigns, prompting further Facebook takedowns in December 2020 and May 2021.<sup>49</sup> Throughout, the IRA has adjusted its content so as

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42 Lister, Shukla, & Elbagir

43 Stanford Internet Observatory, “Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa”

44 Quoted in Lister, Shukla, & Elbagir

45 Dabanga, “More than 100 Sudanese still missing after ‘June 3 Massacre’”

46 This difficulty is exacerbated by analysts and reporters calling both mercenary activity and social media operations “Wagner” work, when these operations are often run by separate groups within the Prigozhin network. At the bare minimum some fighters most likely remain embedded in other Prigozhin-network companies since M Invest/Meroe Gold are still active and operating in Sudan, and the security situation is not so stable that they would not require guards.

47 Caniglia & Murphy, “Khartoum’s autocratic enabler: Russia in Sudan”

48 Collins, “How Putin prepared for sanctions with tonnes of African gold.” Collins holds that the smuggled gold was a large enough amount to build up Russia’s gold reserves to the current levels; however, many commentators link Russia’s high level of gold reserves to other factors.

49 Reuters, “Sudan’s foreign ministry denies presence of Russian Wagner Group”



to stay at least “slightly supportive of whatever government is in power”<sup>50</sup> while strongly supporting Hemedti; in this way the IRA helped support Wagner’s presence as well as greater Russia-Sudanese government ties.

Like the IRA, the Russian government maintained a policy of support towards Sudan regardless of which precise transitional government was in power. It consistently vetoed United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that called for examinations into Sudan’s human rights record or that criticized government actions. After the October 2021 coup (in which the military reversed the moves toward democracy), Russia’s deputy ambassador to the UN played down the event and called upon Russia’s “African solutions” rhetoric by echoing Sudan’s denial of the “coup” label and emphasizing that outsiders had no real right to judge the situation:

It’s hard to say if this is a coup or not. The term ‘coup’ has a specific definition. There are situations like [that of Sudan] in many parts of the world that are not called a coup. This is sometimes called a change of power. ... It is up to the Sudanese people to decide whether it is a coup or not.<sup>51</sup>

The Russian government built on this basis to deepen its ties with Sudan’s military leadership, including inking an agreement for a permanent Russian naval base in November 2020.<sup>52</sup> The fate of the agreement wobbled up and down through 2021 as the balance of power moved back and forth between the civilian and military halves of the different iterations of transitional government; the October 2021 military coup seems to have settled the question and guaranteed Russia its base.

Russia and the Wagner Group have also strengthened and utilized their relations with Sudan, and particular with Hemedti.

Through the end of 2021 and the start of 2022, state-to-state relations between Sudan and Russia have continued to strengthen, even as popular, civilian opinion of the mercenaries in particular remains low. Hemedti was in Moscow to meet with top-level Russian officials the day Russia commenced its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Hemedti stayed and carried out his trip as though nothing in the world had changed. And perhaps for the Sudanese leadership, already under years of heavy Western sanctions and reliant on Russia for support in international fora, nothing had.

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50 Stanford Internet Observatory

51 Quoted in Semonov, “Sudan coup could offer boon for Moscow”

52 Bratersky, “Sudan to host Russian military base”

## PART IV.

### Case Study 2: The Central African Republic

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The Central African Republic (the CAR) has suffered from internal conflict for many years, with an outright civil war ongoing since 2012. The civil war has taken on ethnic and religious dimensions, and both the government and rebel forces have been accused of committing ethnic cleansing, mass rape and sexual slavery, and other systematic human rights abuses and war crimes. Moreover, although the civil war centers around political control of the state, “the cycles of violence across the country are fueled by a resource war.”<sup>53</sup>

The UN has had peacekeepers in the CAR since 2014 through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the EU has also had a mission since 2016 for training CAR soldiers, the European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM-RCA). The MINUSCA force has a limited use of force remit and also lacks the infrastructure and capabilities to take strong offensive action, and the EUTM-RCA also is limited by its training mission. Thus, despite a standing international presence, the CAR government forces have been largely on their own when it comes to combatting rebel groups and maintaining or gaining control over CAR territory.

By 2017, the CAR government, led by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra since 2016, had need of military and international/UN support far more aggressive than the existing international missions; Russia was on the lookout for ways to increase its presence in Africa, especially if it also meant weakening or supplanting European influence; and the Prigozhin network sought access to natural resources like gold and diamonds that the CAR could supply.

It was something of a perfect opportunity for all three. Or, as one Western diplomat put it to Daily Beast reporters in 2018:

“The Russians are smart. With France’s withdrawal in recent years, Russia saw their chance to make some money and took it. And CAR’s placement in the heart of Africa makes the country a gate to the north, south, east and west on the rest of the continent... Also, they just love to piss off the French.”<sup>54</sup>

#### 2017-2020:

##### Establishing the Prigozhin Network’s Presence

While the Prigozhin network helped lead the initial push into Sudan, the Russian government spearheaded collaboration with the CAR, both bilaterally and through its position as a permanent member of the UNSC. The CAR has been under a UN arms embargo since the 2013 coup, but in 2017 the CAR government renewed its pleas for an exception to restock its weapons.

Touadéra visited Moscow in May 2017, where he met with Putin. Not long after, Russia led efforts in the UNSC to reject France’s secondhand Somali weapons transfer idea<sup>55</sup> in favor of Russia receiving a sanctions-exemption and sending in military supplies and trainers of its own.

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53 Anene-Maidoh et al., *Protracted Conflict in the Central African Republic: An Intersectional Human Security Analysis*, p.3

54 Elabdi, “Putin’s Man in the Central African Republic: Is Valery Zakharov at the Heart of Russian Skulduggery?”

55 This is one of many moments that make one wonder whether France really wanted to maintain influence in its former African colonies, or whether the colonial racist legacy of paternalism blinded France to how its actions really looked to the peoples of CAR and Mali.

Russia moved quickly once the exemption was granted in December 2017; on January 26, 2018, the first planes of Russian weapons arrived in the CAR's capital Bangui.<sup>56</sup> Russia's responsiveness to the CAR's requests positioned it as the CAR's primary partner outside the continent above other nations like France. Touadéra's spokesman Albert Yaloke Mokpeme stated simply, "We presented our problem and Russia offered to help us."<sup>57</sup>

Russia reported to the UN that it would send "5 military and 170 civilian Russian instructors for a period of one year."<sup>58</sup> The officially-acknowledged Russian trainers were organized under the auspices of the Officers Union for International Security, an organization that seems not to have existed before late 2017/early 2018; the organization's official director and public face is Alexander Ivanov, who engages with local CAR media outlets often.<sup>59</sup> Along for the ride came former GRU officer and Prigozhin employee<sup>60</sup> Valery Zakharov, who the CAR president appointed as his national security advisor per the 2017 Russia-CAR military aid agreement.<sup>61</sup> (In an interview with the Daily Beast, Zakharov said that the increased activity in the CAR was because "Russia is just rebuilding ties with old friends."<sup>62</sup>)

Other new companies also emerged at the end of 2017, new links in the Prigozhin network chain. Lobaye Invest was registered in October 2017.<sup>63</sup> In June and July, Lobaye Invest received multiple permits for gold and diamond mining.<sup>64</sup> As of May 2018, only one-fifth of CAR territory was under government control,<sup>65</sup> with many of the prime resource deposits in rebel-held territory. Lobaye Invest would not only need security officers to protect its investments, but also means of negotiating access to its new mines. Conveniently, a new PSC, Sewa Security Services, had just been registered in November 2017, also connected through finances and personnel to Prigozhin.<sup>66</sup>

Multiple, separate investigations have all come to the same conclusion: the trainers, the Sewa Security Personnel, and the Lobaye Invest workers all are Wagner operatives.<sup>67</sup> Documents and pictures obtained by the Dossier Center<sup>68</sup> demonstrate the crossover activities performed by company workers, including an evocative image of a "political specialist" working for Lobaye Invest (next page).

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56 Olivier, "Russia's murky business dealings in the Central African Republic"

57 Quoted in Ross, "How Russia moved into Central Africa"

58 Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, *2018 Midterm Report*, p7. Referred to as *2018 Midterm Report* going forward.

59 The Officers Union for International Security is, officially, a Russian private security company that operates in the CAR. Instead of sending its own state soldiers to the CAR, Russia officially sponsors the Officers Union partnership, through which the Officers Union hires private Russian instructors to train FACA soldiers. According to RosBusinessConsulting's company listings (see "RBC Companies: LLC Officers Union for International Security"), a company by the same name was registered in Moscow on 3 February 2021, under the leadership of an Alexander Alexandrovich Ivanov—presumably the same Ivanov. Little more is currently known about it, although various investigations have established that its instructors are actually on Wagner payrolls (see sources in note 68).

60 Fontanka, "The Night Has No Eyes"

61 *2018 Midterm Report*, p11

62 Elabdi

63 Olivier, "Russia's murky business dealings"

64 Ibid.

65 BBC, "Russia and the Central African Republic: A curious relationship"

66 Dukhan, *Central African Republic: Ground zero for Russian influence in Central Africa*, p6

67 See, for example, Kamakin, "A Safari for Wagner;" Dossier Center, *Final Report on the Murder of Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastogruiev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic*; Lister, Shukla, & Ward, "Putin's Private Army;" and Harding & Burke, "Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa"

68 The Dossier Center is founded and funded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an ex-oligarch imprisoned and then exiled by Putin. That said, Dossier Center documents (although not these specifically) have consistently been verified by other, independent researchers such as those at Bellingcat.



Source: Dossier Center, [Final Report on the Murder of Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastogrujev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic, 2019](#)

In July 2018, three Russian journalists who traveled to the CAR to further trace these connections were murdered by Wagner operatives,<sup>69</sup> which ironically raised the first wave of international awareness of Wagner's presence. By late 2018 estimates of actual Wagner numbers ranged from 250 to 1000.<sup>70</sup> Although each piece of the Prigozhin network had separate chains of command and agendas, in the CAR even more than in Sudan these organizations have coordinated and overlapped their activities, blurring the lines of separation between Russian official and private interests and fulfilling the Russian state's double imperatives of enhancing Russian political power abroad while satiating its elites politically and financially at home.

In addition to regular arms shipments, the Russian government has also continued to send more numbers of (Wagner) soldiers. By December 2018, National Security Advisor Zakharov admitted to an increase in so-called civilian trainers to 255, and the military trainers had also increased to an undisclosed amount.<sup>71</sup> (Nothing concrete is known about the numbers registered as Sewa Security personnel.) Numbers are known to have increased since then, with expansions in size and number of Wagner bases across the country.

As in Sudan, the Russian "trainers" from the beginning interpreted their remit broadly, not only conducting training exercises but, according to UN documents, embedding in the CAR army (or FACA) and assisting with combat missions, conducting convoy escorts, and guarding hospitals.<sup>72</sup> In a 2018 UN report, Russia claimed that instructors were also embedded in President Touadéra's bodyguard for training purposes,<sup>73</sup> but CNN investigations have revealed that the Russian fighters in the president's bodyguard are actually Sewa Security employees.<sup>74</sup>

Civilian reception of the Russian fighters at least at first seems to have been positive. A former CAR government minister stated, "In 2017, many thought that the Russians would do what France had not done: clean up the country."<sup>75</sup> A taxi driver told Daily Beast reporters, "There is Russians everywhere in Bangui. We love Russia. They train FACA and they help us reconquer our country."<sup>76</sup>

But instead of fighting to win back territory at every turn, Wagner mercenaries also have made connections with rebel groups for safe passage to Lobaye Invest mines,<sup>77</sup> something other countries' diplomats have corroborated in private correspondence.<sup>78</sup>

It is unclear to what extent this has occurred with or without the knowledge or consent of the CAR

69 Dossier Center

70 Ross

71 Elabdi

72 *2018 Midterm Report*, p7

73 Ibid.

74 Lister, Shukla, & Ward, "Putin's Private Army"

75 Olivier, "Russia's murky business dealings"

76 Elabdi

77 Lister, Shukla, & Ward, "Putin's Private Army" and in Spivak, "Russia and China in Africa: Allies or Rivals?"

78 Dossier

government, but CAR's presidential spokesman told the New York Times in 2019 that "with the help of Russia, we will be able to secure our diamond mines."<sup>79</sup> Wagner's activities thus promote CAR government and Prigozhin interests.<sup>80</sup>

Zakharov himself embodies the mix of CAR and Russian public and private interests and actors. In his capacity as National Security Advisor, he has personally engaged with rebel groups, as confirmed by the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR.<sup>81</sup> The same UN report continues: "However, some armed group leaders informed the Panel that they regarded those discussions not as direct talks with the Government, but rather as negotiations with a foreign partner of the Government."<sup>82</sup>

Zakharov insists that he in no way acts as a Russian government agent, but he "often has lunch at the Russian embassy with [the] chargé d'affaires ... and meets regularly with [Deputy Foreign Minister] Mikhail Bogdanov."<sup>83</sup> Zakharov also has received payments from M-Finance and, as of 2019, lives at the Lobaye Invest headquarters.<sup>84</sup> It is unclear to whom exactly Zakharov answers—the CAR government? the Russian government? Prigozhin? or some combination of the three—but, more to the point, the fact that these multiple remits all clearly align enough for him to perform satisfactorily for all three shows how intertwined Russian and CAR interests and goals have become.

## Hard, Sharp, and Soft Power at Play

In addition to the Wagner fighters' military training and engagement, the Prigozhin network also has utilized hard, sharp and soft power to boost Russia's image in the CAR and bolster the position of President Touadéra and his party in the government. These efforts range from funding an armed political organization to attack pro-French groups as well as Touadéra's political opposition (hard power) to social media troll factories shaping public discourse (sharp power) and a wide range of charitable and cultural donations and productions (soft power).

Russian advisors to the government (perhaps Zakharov's staff, or perhaps "political specialists" like the one pictured above) encouraged the creation of "The Sharks of CAR Movement," identified by the Atlantic Council as a "political organization" with an inclination towards the paramilitary.<sup>85</sup> In June 2019, the group's general coordinator publicly thanked "our Russian friends for their endowments in surveillance and deterrence materials, namely: drones, electric prods, and electric discharge rings to make [sic] powerhungry powerless and sterile."<sup>86</sup> Although the Atlantic Council found that Touadéra had "dismantled" the movement "after French diplomatic warnings," civilian victims interviewed in 2021 stated they had recently been attacked by a paramilitary group called "the sharks."<sup>87</sup>

The Prigozhin network also sought to influence online discourse in the CAR through massive social media campaigns with the IRA's trademark fake accounts. Leading up to the 2020 presidential election, the IRA's disinformation campaign ramped up dramatically, mirrored by rival French propaganda and disinformation efforts. Al Jazeera reported that Facebook itself admitted "it was the first time it had seen such a direct battle of the trolls by competing foreign states." Three pro-Touadéra

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79 Searcey, "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic"

80 The NYT also received reports that Prigozhin himself met with rebels at least once (see Searcey)

81 *2018 Midterm Report*, p11

82 Ibid.

83 Olivier, "Russia's murky business dealings"

84 Lister, Shukla, & Ward, "Putin's Private Army"

85 Dukhan, p8

86 Quoted Dukhan, p8

87 Steers, "Russian Mercenaries Are Raping and Murdering Civilians They've Been Hired to Protect"

networks of nearly 500 pages were suspended, two of them directly attributed to the IRA.

### *Appealing to the local community via Lobaye Invest*

On the ground, Prigozhin companies, particularly Lobaye Invest, have conducted sprawling soft-power moves to win support and interest in Russia. Lobaye Invest has financed a youth soccer tournament, made donations to a local children's hospital, and sponsored and the creation of a Russian-focused radio station that plays Russian music and offers on-air Russian language lessons.<sup>88</sup>

From *Le Potentiel*, a CAR news site receiving Russian funds. According to the article, Lobaye Invest donated a trampoline to the Bangui Mother and Child Center (an orphanage and single-mothers' support center) on August 10, 2018. Pictured from left to right are the Russian Embassy's Chargé d'Affaires Viktor Tokmakov, the Center's Director Mrs. Nelly Singa, and Valery Zakharov. The article did not state whether Zakharov was present as a representative of the CAR government or of Lobaye Invest.<sup>89</sup>

Several local news outfits such as *Le Potentiel* receive Russian financing, and there are also reports of the Prigozhin-network companies paying for the distribution of pro-Russia, anti-French leaflets and posters distributed through Bangui.<sup>90</sup> Lobaye Invest also financed the 2018 Miss Centrafrique beauty contest, where Zakharov presented the crown to the winner; Zakharov has also commented on the importance and usefulness of soft power efforts. In an interview with Coda, he stated that "Russia is not just about arms. Security can come only when we change people's lives. We must create positive ground."<sup>91</sup>

Lobaye Invest also created a children's propaganda video about the friendly "cooperation between the CAR and Russia" (from an opening banner) which depicts the CAR populace as a beleaguered elephant under attack from rebellious hyenas.

The lion (presumably the CAR government) fights bravely but remains outnumbered until a slumbering Russian bear awakens and runs all the way from Moscow to Bangui (depicted by a helpful cartoon map). The lion and bear together fight off the hyenas, allowing the elephant to return to its peaceful, orderly practices while the lion and bear rule as apparent equals. The video ends by stating that it was produced by Lobaye Invest, making it very clear who and what viewers are meant to support.<sup>92</sup>

### *Touriste*

Perhaps the most fascinating propaganda piece of all is the film *Touriste*, which had its first showing in June 2021 to a packed stadium of over 10,000 viewers<sup>93</sup> in Bangui.

The film depicts the events of the rebel attack on Bangui just before the December 2021 elections from the view of a newly arrived and inexperienced Russian civilian instructor (hence his nickname "tourist"). The Russian trainers strenuously follow the rules of not engaging until directly attacked, but once the attack begins, they fight off the rebels singlehandedly (FACA is presented as near-use-

88 Huon & Ostrovsky, "Russia, the new power in Central Africa"

89 Patrick, "Centrafrique: La mission russe procède à la remise de la trampoline pour enfant au Centre de la Mère et de l'Enfant de Bangui"

90 Dukhan, p7

91 quoted in Huon & Ostrovsky

92 "LionBear"

93 Munshi, "'In 'Touriste', heroic Russians save the Central African Republic. The truth is even stranger"

less) and save the day for “justice.”<sup>94</sup> The UN is also useless, helplessly hamstrung by its too-strict rules and potentially by its European masters as well; the rebels are attempting to reinstate a former president with the help of European governments.

The company that financed the movie, Aurum LLC, is wholly owned by Prigozhin.<sup>95</sup> Chatter on Wagner-Group Telegram channels revealed that the extra trainers in the movie were played by actual Wagner mercenaries,<sup>96</sup> and many commentators have noticed the eerie resemblance between the head-trainer in the movie and Dmitri Utkin.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, one of the planes used in the film is the very same plane that has been seen making logistics runs for Wagner operatives in the CAR.<sup>98</sup> The Wagner Group is hiding in plain sight, and viewers are expected to cheer at the end, just as they are expected to support the Russian presence in the CAR.<sup>99</sup>

## December 2020-May 2022

For all its many distortions of reality, *Touriste* was based around an actual event, one that seems to have been a turning point for the CAR and the mercenaries stationed there. The 2020 presidential elections held at the end of December not only saw the battle of the trolls on Facebook, but actual attacks not only on FACA bases but on the capital itself. Rebel troops made concerted advances and seemed at one point as if they might fully encircle the capital, prompting Rwanda to send more troops and Russia, more “advisors.” The UN did mostly stay out of the fighting due to its strict remit, but with the assistance from Rwanda and Russia, CAR government forces were able to beat back the rebels resoundingly (and President Touadéra won a resounding electoral victory).

Immediately afterwards, CAR forces, and Wagner, went on the offensive, with little thought given to concerns about human rights or war crimes. In previous years, scattered reports had surfaced of human rights violations committed by the mercenaries, such as mass sweeps and arrests of innocent bystanders.<sup>100</sup> However, the types and numbers of alleged abuses skyrocketed.

As early as March 2021, a group of UN experts—including members of the working group on the use of mercenaries and the Special Rapporteur on Torture, among others—publicly expressed concern about the connection between Sewa Security, Lobaye, and Wagner with “violent attacks that have occurred since the presidential elections on 27 December 2020.”<sup>101</sup> The experts wrote an open letter to the registered head of Lobaye Invest, asking for clarity on company procedure in light of alleged “indiscriminate targeting...enforced disappearances...torture and summary executions... [and] looting of private and public properties.”<sup>102</sup> Russian news outlets (later confirmed by leaked UN documents<sup>103</sup>) reported that Russian mercenaries summarily executed four men in early March;

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94 “The Americans are here for democracy, but we are here for justice,” the leader of the Russian contingent proclaims at the start of the movie.

95 Munshi, “In ‘Touriste’”

96 Yaparova, “As Meduza explains, the businessman Evgeny Prigozhin sponsored the making of the film *Touriste* about Russian soldiers in Africa”

97 Kurtov, “The most important of arts. Prigozhin’s plane is on film in the movie *Touriste*”

98 Ibid.

99 Yaparova reached out to Prigozhin for comment on the movie. Unusually, he responded. Meduza printed his answer in full. It begins, “I am answering an anti-Russian journalist, a member of the media who is a foreign agent. Citizen Yaparova, in Soviet times there were enemies of the state. They were shot.”

100 Searcey

101 OHCHR, “CAR: Experts alarmed by government’s use of “Russian trainers”, close contacts with UN peacekeepers”

102 Aparac et al., “Open Letter to Lobaye Invest”

103 Lister, Shukla, & Ward, “It was our children they killed”

Ivanov immediately threatened to sue.<sup>104</sup>

A Vice investigation in May 2021 found reports of torture, rape, and mass murder.<sup>105</sup> In a report issued one month later, the UN's Panel of Experts on the CAR detailed a list of alleged crimes by the Russian soldiers, including killing three civilians by suddenly opening fire at a vehicle checkpoint, the mosque attack mentioned above, and "numerous reports of indiscriminate killings against unarmed civilians."<sup>106</sup> By the end of the year, the relentless offensive was reported to have "aggravated an already dire humanitarian situation in the provinces... [including] famine-like conditions" in several regions.<sup>107</sup>

Despite alleged efforts to suppress these reports,<sup>108</sup> the UN ordered MINUSCA to investigate the crimes and pressured the CAR into setting up an independent inquiry commission. In October 2021, CAR's own commission determined that human rights abuses had been committed by FACA and their Russian instructors.<sup>109</sup> That same month, Ivanov received an award from CAR's parliament in thanks for his (Wagner's) work.<sup>110</sup>

To the CAR government, the Wagner Group had proven itself in December 2020, and the UN and its mission had failed to provide any substantive assistance to the country in favor of investigating alleged crimes and so obstructing FACA and Wagner work. European efforts to drive a wedge between the CAR and Wagner backfired. As part of detangling from the mercenaries, MINUSCA "stopped supplying the army with fuel,"<sup>111</sup> and in December 2021 the EU imposed sanctions on Wagner that indirectly affected the CAR as well, and effectively suspended the EUTM-RCA mission by indefinitely ending all trainings.

The increasing antagonism between the CAR and the UN/the West has manifested in increasingly overt efforts to force MINUSCA, and all Westerners, out. In February 2022, the opposition news platform Courbeau News (which is officially banned inside the CAR) reported that Wagner operatives had arrested MINUSCA soldiers for allegedly plotting a coup<sup>112</sup> against the president.<sup>113</sup> Anti-MINUSCA protests began to pop up. A few days after the arrest of the MINUSCA soldiers, Wagner operatives arrested workers for the NGO ACTED and blocked their office phones.<sup>114</sup> Meanwhile, Afrique Media, known to be a strongly pro-government website, began publishing stories accusing MINUSCA of aiding rebels against the CAR government.<sup>115</sup> And FACA soldiers appear to be acting on these accusations; on at least one occasion, FACA soldiers stopped UN workers at a checkpoint and ordered them to go through a thorough search since, they said, it was known that UN and NGO workers were supplying rebels.<sup>116</sup>

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104 Sputnik, "Private Russian Military Company May Sue News Agency for First Time Over 'Fake' Report"

105 Steers, "Russian Mercenaries Are Raping and Murdering Civilians They've Been Hired to Protect"

106 Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic, *Final report (2020)*, p22-24.

107 Bax, "Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic"

108 Per rumor from U.S. diplomatic sources.

109 ReliefWeb, "CAR: Russian Wagner Group harassing and intimidating civilians – UN experts" and Reuters, "Central African Republic accuses Russians of conflict abuses"

110 Vanguard Media, "Russian instructors awarded by Central African Republic National Assembly"

111 Bax

112 The accusations bear a strange similarity to the *Touriste* subplot.

113 Corbeau News, "RCA : les mercenaires russes orchestrent une nouvelle tentative d'assassinat du Président Touadera"

114 Yékoua, "Centrafrique : 3 humanitaires de l'ONG française ACTED interpellés par les mercenaires russes, leur base à Bambari perquisitionnée"

115 Afrique Media, "Central African Republic: according to the population of the republic, MINUSCA supports the rebels" on 9 February 2022, and another story on 25 March 2022, "A member of the armed groups exposes the relationship between them and the UN Mission in the Central African Republic"

116 Yékoua, "RCA :deux agents, travaillant pour les nations-unies, bloquées à l'entrée de la ville de Grimari par les mercenaires russes"



Meanwhile, Wagner Group crimes against CAR civilians continue. On January 16-17, 2022, at least 65-70 people were killed in the Aïgbado and Yonga villages by Russian mercenaries apparently acting alone. Rebel fighters were known to be active in the area, so the Wagner soldiers simply opened fire indiscriminately on the entire village and only stopped when those same rebels arrived and fought them off. They then held the village under blockade for several weeks, not allowing anyone to enter or leave. An eyewitness account from a January 31 news story describes the scene:

“Everyone in Aïgbado is scared of walking on the streets because anything can happen to you if you come face to face with the Russians and FACA,” said Ngoma. “There are a number of villagers missing since January 16, and we suspect they’ve been killed or abducted by Russian mercenaries and FACA.”

Eventually, the combined forces left, but not before purportedly surrounding the site with landmines to prevent MINUSCA from investigating.<sup>117</sup> Since then, additional reports of looting continue to appear.<sup>118</sup>

But the Wagner Group’s efforts seem to have only solidified Russian-CAR relations: just one week before the Aïgbado massacre, the CAR ambassador to Russia presented Putin with a portrait of himself made with butterfly wings as a measure of how close the two countries had become.<sup>119</sup>

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117 Obajie, “Survivors Say Russian Mercenaries Slaughtered 70 Civilians in Gold Mine Massacre.” Also see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A%C3%AFgbado\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A%C3%AFgbado_massacre)

118 For example, a June 20 CNC article describes the village Goya being looted and burned by combined FACA and Wagner forces (Yékoua, “Centrafrique : Goya, un village martyr, les FACA et les mercenaires de Wagner pillent totalement la ville”)

119 The Moscow Times, “Wing Man: Central Africa Presents Putin With Butterfly Portrait”

## PART V.

### Case Study 3: Mali

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The Wagner Group's recent entrance into Mali has followed the usual pattern, or at least the same broad strokes, but at a greatly accelerated pace, most likely due to the ruling junta's eagerness to gain Wagner's assistance. Like Sudan, Mali underwent not one but two coups; but unlike in Sudan, the Wagner Group only entered Mali after the coups had occurred, with the military junta apparently firmly in control. Like in the CAR, Wagner has been brought in to help the government address the security situation in the country; however, in Mali the opponents are mostly militant Islamist insurgents rather than rival political militias. Moreover, Mali's sundering of ties with previous security partners and declared defiance of international sanctions has seemingly made it embrace Wagner's mercenary abilities<sup>120</sup> much more openly than in other countries. This has shaped the Wagner Group's activities, especially its dive straight into battle rather than even a pretense of a training mandate.

#### 2021:

##### The Fight to Bring Wagner In

Mali has long relied on international operations to help address its difficult security situation. It has a UN peacekeeping mission, United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA); two EU missions, the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and the EU Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali), the latter of which provides capacity support as well as training; an ECOWAS-organized mission, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA); and, until recently, the French combat mission Operation Burkane. France's choice to continue its role as security guarantor long after its colonial rule of Mali officially ended, as well as its means of doing so (including, among other missteps, enlisting Tuareg separatists as allies and simultaneously cracking down on Malian emigration to France) rankled many Malians long before the most recent government took over.

However, perhaps French presence would have been more easily tolerated if the French intervention had achieved clear success in its battles against Islamist insurgents. When France began its operations in 2013, a year after civil war had broken out, rebel groups and Islamist insurgents had an uneasy alliance holding territory in the north of Mali. Although the war technically ended in 2015, it pushed the Islamist groups south towards the center of the country, which is much more populated and so harder hit by terrorist and armed opposition activity. Extremist violence spread to Burkina Faso and Niger, and France followed the violence, shifting its mission to counterinsurgency operations across the Sahel—some say at the expense of addressing security needs in Mali.<sup>121</sup> Violence in Mali has increased almost every year since 2017, (as demonstrated by the chart on the next page).<sup>122</sup>

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120 Ironically, Mali is one of the few (about 46) parties to the UN Convention on Mercenaries, but so far no one (at least in public) has brought up this apparent breach. That said, the Convention's strict definition of mercenary means that applying the legal classification is quite difficult; the number of Party States is so few that for someone to use the Convention as criticism is quite hypocritical; and perhaps more to the point, the high level of sanctions already leveled against Mali, and the many other areas of dispute with other countries, makes it unlikely that further criticism on this of all topics will arise.

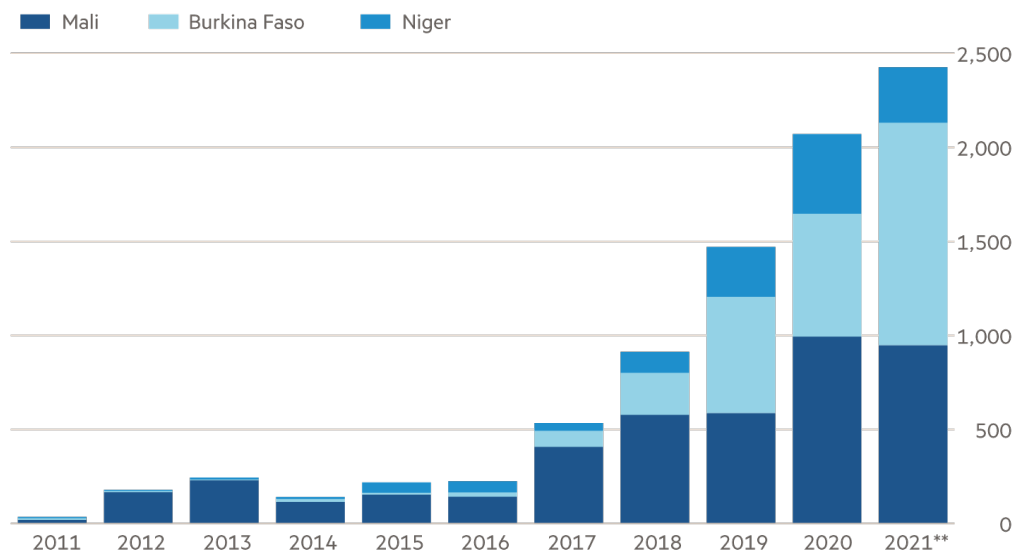
121 This paragraph is based on the main arguments in Munshi, "How France lost Mali: failure to quell jihadi threat opens door to Russia"

122 Munshi, "How France lost Mali"

Add in the military coup in October 2020, which France strongly disapproved of, and it seems unsurprising that the current military-led government has poor relations with France. However, over the course of 2021, relations rapidly fell apart almost entirely. After Mali's second coup within the space of a year in May 2021, organized protests against the French presence began to take place. One protestor stated that "ever since we trusted them with our security, everything has become worse."<sup>123</sup> France did suspend its military operations for a month in protest of the military's re-seizing of power from the post-October 2020 transitional government.

### Most violent year in a decade for three Sahel countries combined

Total number of organised political violence events\* in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger



Source: @FT Munshi, How France lost Mali: failure to quell jihadi threat opens door to Russia, [December 2021] Used under licence from the Financial Times. All Rights Reserved.

In September 2021, the news leaked that Mali was nearing the final version of an agreement to bring in Wagner troops. Inspired by the successful intervention in the CAR,<sup>124</sup> the Malian government decided it needed similar support to prop up its control over the country. In response, Western countries unleashed an outpouring of warnings (sometimes verging on threats) about inviting in Wagner mercenaries. ECOWAS's responses were more guarded, but at a November meeting the Commission President Jean-Claude Kassi Brou listed the Wagner Group as "one of the concerns of the heads of state,"<sup>125</sup> with official feelings increasing to "deeply concerned" in January.<sup>126</sup>

All this opposition seems to have, if anything, made the Malian leadership more committed to their decision. Malian government spokesmen stated that "public opinion in Mali is in favor of more coop-

123 Africanews, "Mali: Protesters call for French troops to leave, some call for greater Russia cooperation"

124 Successful in that it has so far been relatively successful in supporting the CAR government and its consolidation of control over at least parts of country. Given the events of 2022, it does not seem that avoiding war crimes was or is an especially high priority for the Malian government.

125 Quoted in "ECOWAS Hardens Stance on Mali, Guinea"

126 "4th EXTRAORDINARY SUMMIT OF THE ECOWAS AUTHORITY OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT ON THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN MALI—Final Communiqué," p5

eration with Russia given the ongoing security situation<sup>127</sup> and that “the transitional government led by the military invokes the exercise of its sovereignty<sup>128</sup> to make its own decisions instead of being pushed around by France and other Western countries.

As France continued its “diplomatic offensive,”<sup>129</sup> the two sides also butted heads over France’s own presence in Mali. French President Emmanuel Macron told French media that “it’s not the role of the French army to fill in for the ‘non-work’, if I may describe it, of the Malian state;”<sup>130</sup> in return, the Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga accused French soldiers of training terrorists. Given this difficult relationship and the long history between France and Mali, Wagner mercenaries, in the Malian government’s eyes, must have seemed much easier to deal with.

Although there were strong frustrations with France amongst ordinary Malians, “public opinion towards ... Wagner [was] divided.”<sup>131</sup> A decent number of Malians wanted more talks with rebel/insurgent groups instead of constant fighting since many of these groups concentrate on local gains and/or criminal activity, not broader ideological struggles.<sup>132</sup> For these people, France’s presence might have been a problem, but they might well have still disagreed with each other on the Wagner decision given the group’s mixed record in the CAR (increasingly violent fighting versus a record of negotiating with rebel groups). One part of the Prigozhin network was already operational, though, beginning to post polls online around the same time news of the deal leaked that “purport[ed] to show growing, broad-based Malian support”<sup>133</sup> for the Wagner collaboration.

By early December multiple diplomatic sources had confirmed that Wagner representatives had visited Mali. The exact date of Wagner mercenaries’ arrival is unknown, but reports of their activities in Mali begin to appear in January 2022. It seems like that the deal had been in the works long before news leaked, but clearly once it was finalized, Wagner moved quickly to begin.

An interesting aspect of the Wagner representatives’ visit to Mali is that as part of their trip, they “surveyed both possible areas of operations and mining sites that they could exploit as part of their compensation.”<sup>134</sup> Wagner apparently planned to bring along at least a few other members of the Prigozhin network to follow the usual pattern of services in exchange for natural resources.

One major difference from Wagner’s entrance into Sudan and the CAR, though, is the absence of the Russian government. In the other cases, Wagner ties slightly followed or, at most, accompanied state-to-state military agreements, and usually the mining side of the Prigozhin network made contact first. As far as observers can tell, in Mali there are no shell companies covering Wagner’s tracks or giving it legal cover; it was invited directly and so directly went to Mali with no pretenses at subtlety, or, apparently, restraint. Here, the Mali government’s eagerness for Wagner apparently obviated the need for the Russian government to act as middleman and official cover.

The extent of Russian involvement in the deal also remains unknown, but, perhaps realizing that France was doing enough on its own to alienate the Malian government, Russia kept a low profile during discussions about the pending Wagner deal. One of the few comments on the matter came in early October, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed that Mali “had turned to

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127 Mali’s Defense Ministry spokesman quoted in Irish & Lewis, “EXCLUSIVE Deal allowing Russian mercenaries into Mali is close – sources”

128 Mali Foreign Ministry quoted in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Mali’s Junta Dismisses Warnings Not To Hire Russia’s Wagner ‘Mercenaries’

129 Irish & Lewis

130 Quoted in Al Jazeera, “Mali and France, a timeline of mounting tensions”

131 Rono, “Mali’s plan for Russia mercenaries to replace French troops unsettles Sahel”

132 Munshi, “How France lost Mali”

133 Thompson, Doxsee, & Bermudez, “Tracking the Arrival of Russia’s Wagner Group in Mali”

134 Lebovich, “Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali: How European fears weaken European policy”

a private military company from Russia.” This is an interesting turn of phrase since, as stated earlier in this paper, PMCs are still technically illegal in Russia and the Wagner Group does not legally exist anywhere. It is tempting to read this statement as implying Russian awareness of the deal before the leak. However, the publicity around it might also have been enough; when Wagner’s presence was revealed in Sudan, it took all of two weeks for the Russian government narrative to switch from absolute denial to acknowledging that a PMC had been operating in Sudan for quite some time.

## January-May 2022:

### Wagner in Mali

The first Wagner soldiers arrived just before New Year’s Eve, with more arriving throughout January and multiple groups arriving via Sudan.<sup>135</sup> Almost immediately, the group suffered its first casualties on January 5 when they hit an IED while on patrol with Malian soldiers.<sup>136</sup> Yet in the short time since, Wagner has started its aggressive combat methods right away, mirroring its tactics in the CAR with some perhaps even more horrifying massacres in Mali. Like in the CAR, Wagner seems to be operating jointly with the Malian army in mixed detachments. However, by all accounts it has been an equal participant in the war crimes of the past few months.

By mid-March, there had already been “a dramatic spike in the number of civilians killed by the Malian army and armed Islamic groups.” One of the earliest was the summary execution of 14 civilians “in apparent retaliation” for the January IED deaths; Wagner mercenaries had deliberately returned to the area where the IED explosion had occurred, rounded up locals, and performed cursory inquiries about militant activity before deciding their revenge could no longer wait.<sup>137</sup>

A mass grave, recently created, was discovered by locals in Danguèrè Wotoro on March 2. Over 30 people, including children, had been killed. All of them were Fulani, an ethnic group associated with Islamist rebel groups. Most had had their hands tied behind their backs and eyes covered and were covered in burns. The almost-empty gasoline can found nearby suggests that the victims had been burned alive.<sup>138</sup>

Joint Wagner-Malian forces committed another at the end of March, this time in Moura. According to local NGO and UN sources, somewhere between 200-400 people were killed. Several jihadist fighters had come to the village market to refuel. Instead of attempting to capture them, the Wagner and Malian soldiers decided to bombard the village from the air, then surround it and work their way through the inhabitants. Everyone suspected of association with fighters was killed.<sup>139</sup>

It seems telling that, despite the recent crackdown on any news sites critical of the Malian government,<sup>140</sup> almost all of the (international) news about Wagner in Mali has to do with war crimes and none of the stories report any military successes. In fact, on April 25 one of the Islamist rebel groups announced it had taken a Wagner soldier prisoner.<sup>141</sup> On June 2, MINUSMA submitted its regular report to the UNSC in which it noted a dramatic rise in civilian deaths and human rights abuses compared to the previous (pre-Wagner) reporting period; “the number of documented violations by Malian forces, in some instances deployed alongside foreign security personnel [i.e. the Wagner

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135 Roger & Olivier, “Wagner au Mali : enquête exclusive sur les mercenaires de Poutine”

136 Thompson, Doxsee, & Bermudez

137 All quotes and information in this paragraph are from Human Rights Watch, “Mali: New Wave of Executions of Civilians”

138 Roger, “Mass grave in Niono: MINUSMA accuses Malian army and Wagner Group”

139 Roger, “Mali : l’armée et Wagner accusés d’avoir commis un « massacre » à Moura”

140 Reporters Without Borders, “Mali bans local broadcasts by leading French radio and TV news outlets”

141 The Guardian, “Mali jihadists claim capture of fighter from Russia’s Wagner group”

Group], increased during the reporting period” to 173.<sup>142</sup> Wagner has begun its Mali career with brutality rather than building up to it as in Sudan and the CAR, but without any clear wins like in the CAR. Unlike CAR and Sudan, Mali specifically invited in the Wagner Group rather than arranging with the Russian government for trainers and simultaneously allowing the Prigozhin network as a whole to invite itself in.

Mali’s government turned to the Wagner Group to address the growing terrorist groups across the country in open defiance of Western states and UN recommendations. Although the Wagner Group has been providing some training to Malian troops, neither Wagner nor the Malian government has claimed them to just be training consultants or security specialists like in the CAR. The fact that the mission openly aims to combat insurgents, as well as the seeming defiance of other states’ criticism or advice to follow international legal limits, perhaps explains the Wagner Group’s immediate involvement in war crimes without even offering token lies about their presence. Another or additional argument stems from the nature of the combatants being targeted; it is easier to excuse brutal tactics against terrorists/extremists, not to mention against groups that have less likelihood of successfully fighting back and overthrowing the government.

After such a dramatic move against all Western and African advice, Mali is unlikely to forsake Russia now, regardless of the latter’s political and economic situation in the world. Over the past few months, Mali has continued to reduce its ties with countries that criticized its invitation to Wagner. After banishing the French ambassador at the end of January,<sup>143</sup> Mali broke its defense accords with France on May 3<sup>144</sup> and then on May 16 withdrew from the G5 Sahel Group, a partnership with neighboring countries to combat the insurgency spreading across their shared borders. ECOWAS relations also remain tense, especially after the June 4 summit where ECOWAS decided to maintain its sanctions; a few days later, Mali announced a timeline for transition back to civilian rule, but one 8 months longer than what ECOWAS had called for.

The depth of Mali-Russia ties beyond Wagner is unclear, but it seems natural that Mali will cleave to countries that are not close allies of France, and Russia already has a big in; however, some suspect that ECOWAS is softening, or at least becoming more likely to accept the authority of Mali’s current government. Thus the situation, and especially Mali’s links with the outside world, remain highly uncertain.

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142 “Situation in Mali : Report of the Secretary-General,” p10

143 BBC, “French ambassador expelled from Mali”

144 Al Jazeera, “Mali: Military government breaks defence accords with France”

## PART VI.

### What Comes Next for Russian Nonstate Actors in Africa?

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Russia's war in Ukraine has had many serious effects on Africa, perhaps most significantly wheat stores and prices. It also raises questions for the long-term viability of the many Wagner deployments. Although there have been mixed reports of troops leaving and arriving in the CAR, at least as of now there have not been any confirmed reports of drawdowns of Wagner forces to be re-deployed in Ukraine. However, the unprecedented sanctions regime against Russia might have caused some difficulties to governments as to how to pay their mercenaries, and also has made it harder for any mining interests to profit off their finds. That said, the Sudan gold-smuggling ring implies the opposite, if anything—that through the extended Prigozhin network, Wagner mercenary ventures can finance themselves, and perhaps the Russian state as well. In addition, each of the countries discussed in this paper already had poor ties with the West, so sticking with Russia probably will not harm the ruling regime, at least in the short term. Instead, if any major political effects are to be felt, it would most likely be with countries where Russian ties are looser and especially where the Prigozhin-network presence is lower or nonexistent.

Before the invasion occurred, many observers were wondering which country after Mali would be next to invite Wagner in. The prime suspect was Burkina Faso. Fresh off the coup of January 24, 2022 (which some believed to be Russian-supported), both the security situation and the Burkinabé government's stability have close similarities to that of Mali. In the lead-up to the coup, protestors carried Russian flags, and some even called openly for military intervention; one said that “the Russians got good results in other African countries. We hope they can do the same here.”<sup>145</sup> However, Wagner's shifted focus back to Europe, including recruitment calls, makes it unlikely it will choose to expand in the immediate future.

At the UN, Africa's votes are not enough to make a majority, and few wish to blatantly support such a clear violation of another country's sovereignty. For the February 25 UN resolution condemning the invasion, many African countries simply abstained, including Algeria, Angola, Burundi, the CAR, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Of these 17 abstentions, only four countries (Namibia, Senegal, South Sudan, and Uganda) do not have military cooperation agreements with Russia, and South Sudan and Uganda do regularly purchase Russian arms.<sup>146</sup> Many other African countries used a trick of UN procedure to not personally vote while being included with the “for” majority—their delegates simply absented themselves from the room during the vote.

The vote to remove Russia from the Human Rights Council on April 7 saw more official abstentions: Angola, Botswana, Cabo Verde, Cameroon (which just signed another military deal with Russia in April), Egypt, Eswatini, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, the Maldives, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, and Uganda. This time Algeria, Burundi, the CAR, Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, and Zimbabwe all voted against the resolution. It remains unclear whether the reluctance to vote against Russia stems from active support for or indebtedness to Russia, or just a growing desire to stay out of what had clearly become a longer-term conflict.

How much of, and how long, this reluctance to not vote in lockstep with the West will remain, is

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145 Quoted in Walsh, “After Coup in Burkina Faso, Protesters Turn to Russia for Help”

146 This list of countries with military cooperation agreements and/or arms transfers from Russia is from Hedenskog & Bonnier, “The United States and Russia in Africa: a survey of US and Russian political, economic, and military-security relations with Africa,” p56

an open question. However, Russia's invasion did put a crack in the image it has been cultivating since 2017. An invasion so obviously in violation of international law, so blatant a slap in the face to Ukraine's sovereignty, and which must be, for lack of any "pragmatic" political reason, at least somewhat rooted in ideology, directly contradicts the traits that Russia portrayed itself as having and valuing. Although the initial delay in effects might have made them easy to ignore as a Europe-US-Russia problem, the ongoing deepening impacts also now make it harder for those affected to wholeheartedly support them. Wheat prices and supply have already caused disruptions in reliant African countries, but beyond selling stolen grain it is harder to see what Russia has to offer to continue building and deepening relationships. (On the other hand, Cameroon's April 21 military deal with Russia shows that, at least for states needy enough, Russia does still have plenty to offer.)

In this regard, the Wagner Group might be one of its few remaining tools. Since the group exists outside normal legal bounds, it can continue its operations and potentially serve as a conduit between Russia and the outside world, especially as a source of money/gold. Countries that are still seeking Russian support most likely do so because they feel themselves in great need of security/military assistance without the West's many conditions, and Wagner, as the case studies have shown, is at least one step towards addressing that problem. Wagner might not be ready to expand Russia's relationships with other countries at this exact moment, but it can at least help sustain them, and others may soon be ready for it.



## APPENDIX

Table of Russian military cooperation agreements in Africa, 2015-2018

Country	Date	Note
<b>Botswana</b>	August 2018	Peace-keeping and military training.
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	August 2018	Cooperation on countering terrorism. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Burundi</b>	August 2018	Cooperation on counter-terrorism and joint training of troops.
<b>Cameroon</b>	April 2015	Military and technical cooperation.
<b>Central African Republic</b>	August 2018	Training of armed forces.
<b>Chad</b>	August 2017	Anti-terrorism cooperation and joint training exercises.
<b>Egypt</b>	November 2017	Deliveries of equipment and weapons for counter-terrorism operations.
<b>Eswatini (former Swaziland)</b>	February 2017	Supply of weapons, maintenance and other military assistance.
<b>Ethiopia</b>	April 2018	Training and cooperation on peace-keeping and counter-terrorism and anti-piracy efforts. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Gambia</b>	September 2016	Training of armed forces, deliveries of military equipment.
<b>Ghana</b>	June 2016	Military and technical cooperation. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Guinea</b>	April 2018	Cooperation on peace-keeping, counter-terrorism, search and rescue at sea. Deal not yet in force.
<b>Mozambique</b>	January 2017	Deliveries of military equipment, spare parts and component.
<b>Niger</b>	August 2017	Working meetings of military experts and cooperation on military education.
<b>Nigeria</b>	August 2017	Cooperation on military training, peace-keeping and efforts to counter-terrorism and anti-piracy.
<b>Rwanda</b>	October 2016	Supply of weapons and other military equipment.
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	August 2018	Supply of weapons and other military equipment as well as the provision of other military technical assistance.
<b>Sudan</b>	February 2018	Develop the Sudanese armed forces
<b>Tanzania</b>	January 2018	Arms shipments as well as joint training and research and development.
<b>Zambia</b>	April 2017	Provisions for the supply of weapons and delivery of spare parts.
<b>Zimbabwe</b>	October 2015	Supply of weapons and cooperation on producing military products.

Source: Hedenskog, "Russia is stepping up its military cooperation in Africa."

The top focus for these cooperation agreements is weapons sales, closely followed by training and counter-terrorism efforts. The need for security assistance creates openings for Russia to extend its influence.

This table, in addition to being one of the few extent complete lists of all known Russian PMCs and PSCs, also exemplifies how the Prigozhin network can elude scrutiny: Sewa Security Service is part of the Prigozhin network and is seen by Russian journalists, at least, as simply another aspect of Wagner operating in the Central African Republic.

**TABLE 2: LIST OF KNOWN AND SUSPECTED RUSSIAN PRIVATE MILITARY AND SECURITY COMPANIES**

Name	Potential agent of	Reported operating locations
Anti-Terror Group	Federal Security Service, <i>Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti</i> (FSB)	Iraq, Syria
ATK Group	—	Ukraine, Syria
Center R	—	Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria, Yugoslavia
E.N.O.T.	FSB	Azerbaijan, Serbia, Syria, Tajikistan, Ukraine
Fort Defense Group (FDG)	—	Afghanistan, Iraq
Feraks Group	—	Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka
MAR PMC	FSB	Ukraine
Moran Security Group	—	Maritime Security (Global), Syria
Patriot	Ministry of Defence	Burundi, Central African Republic, Syria
RSB Group	—	Libya, Nigeria, Senegal, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Ukraine
Sewa Security Service	Main Intelligence Directorate, <i>FPY</i> (GRU)	Central African Republic
ChVK Shchit	—	Syria
Vegacy Strategic Services	—	Maritime Security (Global), Syria
ChVKWagner	GRU	Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen
Countries were ongoing Russian private military and security companies (PMSC) operations are suspected or alleged	Brunei, Gabon, South Sudan, Venezuela	
Countries with potential for ongoing or future Russian PMSC operations	Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Zimbabwe	

Source: Source: Arnold, The Geoeconomic Dimensions of Russian Private Military and Security Companies, November-December 2019, Military Review

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