

Russia's growing influence in Mali Is Burkina Faso next?

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With Mali turning its back on France and partnering with Russia through contracts with the private military contractor (PMC), the Wagner Group, Russian influences in the Sahel have grown. Neighbouring Burkina Faso shows striking similarities with Mali, being politically unstable, with two recent military coups, mineral resource wealth, a poor population with growing anti-French sentiment and an alarming security situation, due to growing militant Islamism. Is Burkina Faso next for Russia?

RUSSIA HAS LATELY expanded its influence in Central and Western Africa, where it has not been traditionally engaged. The Russian PMC, the Wagner Group, has symptomatically entered these countries that are the objects of enhanced Russian engagement. International studies show that there is a Russian *modus operandi*, consisting of 1) a pattern of structural factors and 2) a similarity in approach in gaining influence in the countries concerned.

This memorandum is a comparative study of two countries: Mali and Burkina Faso. After a short historical review of Russian relations with African countries in general, it analyses political, economic and security-military structural factors and Russia's approach in Mali. It then examines to what extent the structural factors and the Russian approach are similar in Burkina Faso compared to Mali. The comparison shows that there are many similarities, but also important differences, between Mali and Burkina Faso. It seems that the Burkinabé leadership has not yet taken any final decisions on Russia. The European approach vis-à-vis Burkina Faso is likely to have an impact on its future decisions.

The European Union, including Sweden, has a clear interest in studying possible further expansion of Russian influence in the Sahel region. Growing populations, poor governance and weak economic development are likely to result in increased migration movements to Europe and may become a tool of geopolitical pressure. If violent extremism cannot be fought decisively in West Africa, the threat of terrorism may grow in Europe. Moreover, European attempts to diversify its energy supplies from Africa might be thwarted if countries in the

Sahel become a geostrategic blocking tool for Russia, as it tries to prevent European substitution of Russian gas and avoid the impact of European sanctions.

RUSSIAN MODUS OPERANDI IN AFRICA – STRUCTURAL FACTORS AND APPROACH

Structural factors – weak state institutions, natural resources and anti-terrorism

International research shows that certain structural factors characterise the African countries where Russia has strengthened its influence lately, such as Sudan, the Central African Republic and Mali. They are generally countries with weak democratic institutions, strong anti-French or -Western sentiments and a wealth of natural resources.¹ Poor populations with a low level of education tend to be more receptive to disinformation and a high level of corruption enables domestic as well as foreign actors to enrich themselves through exploitation of a state's natural resources.

There are often pre-existing government and commercial relationships, lucrative opportunities in extractive industries, local elites seeking external sponsorship and opportunities to burnish Russia's great power credentials.²

Furthermore, there is high insecurity in the form of growing violent extremism and anti-terrorism is a political priority. Close contacts between Russian and African military are favoured, as illustrated by the large number of bilateral military agreements³ and in some cases – such as in Sudan before the coup – the national military has been trained by Russia.⁴

Approach – cooperation with elites offering Russian private anti-terrorism support

Studies show that in addition to the structural factors, there is a common Russian approach to obtain and exert influence. A dual approach consisting of both official policies and unofficial activities is common in these countries. The Kremlin position is supported by parallel pro-Russian media communications from digital media owned by oligarchs close to the Kremlin.⁵ In the unofficial track, Russia seeks cooperation with the political and military elites and offers them private military contractors (PMC), such as the Wagner Group.⁶ The activities of private actors provide deniability for the Kremlin and possibilities for an actor/company to enrich itself in the process, where PMCs are paid by mining contracts, etc.⁷ It is therefore sometimes unclear where the Russian influence comes from: the Russian government, private companies or media players?

Furthermore, Russia tends to have a zero-sum world view, one where countries gain influence only by taking it from others.⁸ Countries where anti-French or anti-Western sentiments are widespread among the population allow an opportunity, in Russia's view, to counter Western influence and at the same time increase Russian influence and power. Russia constantly refers to its history of a non-colonial past in Africa, playing anti-West/anti-French resentment in favour of African self-determination, against the "still dominant" colonial rulers.⁹ This gives them credibility and popular support. Moreover, Russia traditionally had little economic cooperation in Africa. About one percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's imports and less than one percent of its foreign direct investments (FDIs) originate from Russia.¹⁰ Moreover, Russia's official development assistance (ODA) is very small compared to other international donors. Only in one sector is Russia dominant in Africa: export of arms (43 percent of all arms imports to Africa).¹¹

Russia usually shows no intention to improve democracy or human rights in the countries where it engages.¹² It rather chooses to operate with the current non-democratic leadership, consequently legitimising it, supporting its position of power, as was the case in the Central African Republic, or support rebellions against a leadership in democratic transition, as was the case in Sudan.

Considering its *modus operandi*, Russia seems to engage in states with certain structural characteristics to be able to use its approach of influence. In a historical perspective, this represents a change of trends. Russia, historically the Soviet Union, traditionally focussed on its relations with socialist or communist regimes.

RUSSIA'S REGAINED INTEREST IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENT

After Ghana's independence, in 1957, many African countries followed suit and gained independence in the early 1960s. The Soviet Union deepened its contacts to countries with communist or socialist regimes or guerrillas, such as the MPLA, in Angola, and FRELIMO, in Mozambique.¹³ The Soviet Union used its history as a non-colonial power in Africa alongside its socialist endeavours to accord legitimacy to its enhanced presence on the continent. However, during the turbulent 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most African partnerships fell into oblivion.

After the accession to power of Vladimir Putin, in 2000, the Russian Federation began to reshape its foreign policy, including towards Africa. Different forms of cooperation were re-established in the beginning of the 2000s. The Russia-Africa Business Council was established in 2002 and the first Russian-African Inter-Parliamentary Meeting was held in 2009.¹⁴ High-level travelling also resumed during the 2010s and even intensified after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.¹⁵

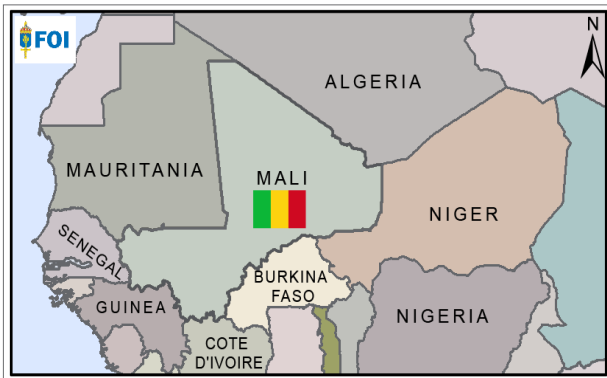
However, in official Russian documents, Africa still has no prominent role. In Russia's latest foreign policy concept, from 2016, Sub-Saharan Africa is mentioned in the very last of all geographical paragraphs, stressing in very general terms the important role of the African Union and other sub-regional organisations.¹⁶

In the National Security Strategy from 2021, Africa is only mentioned in paragraph 37, about terrorism and extremism, and in paragraph 101.9, stressing the need to "strengthen the integration of regional and sub-regional structures within multilateral international institutions... together with the Asian-Pacific and Latin American regions."¹⁷ There is no official Russian strategy on Africa.

Despite this fact, the Russian drive for Africa has intensified, not least in the field of security and military cooperation, and since 2015 more than 20 military cooperation agreements have been signed with African states.¹⁸ In October 2019, the first Russia-Africa Summit was held in Sochi. 43 African heads of government and states participated and, according to official data, more than 90 commercial agreements were signed, at an estimated value of USD 14 billion.¹⁹

During recent years, Russia has gradually shifted and expanded its focus in Africa into Central and West Africa. In the late 2010s, Russian actors entered the Central African Republic, and since 2020 Russian influence seems to have grown significantly in Mali.

MALI – POOR, UNSTABLE AND STRUCK BY MILITANT ISLAMISM



Map 1. Mali. Source: Per Wikström, FOI

The land-bound desert country of Mali, geographically in the middle of the West African region, has been torn by economic challenges, political instability and a worsening security situation, due to a growing threat from violent extremism during recent years. The number of militant Islamist group events have quadrupled in the Sahel region since 2019.²⁰

Table 1.

Country information	Mali
Surface	1,240,200 km ²
Population	22 million
GDP per capita	USD 918
HDI score (total)	186 (191 countries)
Corruption Index	136 (180 countries)

Sources: World Bank, UNDP Human Development Index 2021, Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2021

Mali's economy is mainly based on farming and agriculture, which represent around 80 percent of the work force and circa 40 percent of GDP.²¹ Human development is low. Mining is a considerable part of its economy and gold is the main economic export sector, comprising more than 70 percent of the total export value (2019).²² However, the extreme poverty rate includes more than 40 percent of the population and corruption in society is also high.²³

Mali has been experiencing instability and conflict since the 2012 military coup and the occupation of the north by armed groups. The operations of the *United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali* (MINUSMA) date back to July 2014. In the aftermath of the military coup of 18 August 2020, a transitional government was installed pending the organisation of democratic elections. Colonel Assimi Goïta, the new leader, carried out a new coup “within

the coup” and was declared Head of State on 28 May 2021, by the Constitutional Court. The transitional government of Mali was initially heavily sanctioned by ECOWAS, the organisation for regional cooperation in West Africa, but sanctions were later lifted when an agreement was reached on planning for democratic elections to be held in February 2024, subsequent to a referendum on a revised constitution in March 2023 and general elections in late 2023.²⁴

The current military leadership, however, has considerable support from the population, which is plagued by the growing insecurity in the country, mainly from JNIM (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin), affiliated with al-Qaida, Malian Ansar al-Dine and the regional version of the Islamic State, ISGS (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara).²⁵ The “fight against terrorism” will be one of the main priorities for the new government, apart from anti-corruption and the fight against poverty. At the same time, France, Mali's traditional ally, is seen by many Malians to have failed in its support against violent extremism; demonstrations and street protests with anti-French slogans have been recurrent. The resentments against France, however, have deeper roots from Malian distrust of the intentions of the former colonial power. France has been accused of historically supporting its “friends” among African leaders, many of whom were detested by their populations.²⁶ The as much as 40 French military interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, allegedly accompanied by a neo-colonial agenda, since President de Gaulle's 1950s and onwards, have made the populations of countries such as Mali sceptical towards further French engagements.²⁷ Mali has also alienated itself from ECOWAS, the organisation that upholds democratic standards in the West African region. The military junta tends to see the organisation as mainly led by French interests.²⁸

France kicked out, Russia stepping in

While the traditional ally, France, has endured massive Malian criticism, the new transitional military leadership of Mali, the *National Committee for the Salvation for the People* (NCSP), has well-documented ties with Russia. Apart from Colonel Assimi Goïta, the coup in 2020 is said to have been planned by Colonel Malick Diaw, first vice president, and Colonel Sadio Camara, currently minister of defence, both with high-level positions at Kati, Mali's biggest military base.²⁹ According to Mali's army sources, the two officers left Bamako for Moscow in January 2020, for military training organised by the Russian armed forces. Both returned roughly a week before the military uprising on 18 August 2020.

The Russian ambassador, Igor Gromyko, was the first high-ranking diplomat to meet with Colonel Goïta after the military coup.³⁰

Nine months later, after the second coup by Colonel Goïta, his leadership gradually turned against both ECOWAS's sanctions, considerably sharpened in January 2022, and international cooperation to fight terrorism, mainly led by France. MINUSMA experienced difficulties in cooperation with Malian authorities, Denmark was denied troop participation and Mali closed its airspace for most international flights.³¹ At the end of 2021, the Russian PMC, the Wagner Group, established itself in Mali after negotiations with the military junta. The French ambassador was declared *persona non grata* on 31 January 2022. In February, France and partners announced the withdrawal of the Barkhane and Takuba forces and Mali announced in May that it would in turn withdraw from the long-term defence agreement with France and leave the G5 Sahel cooperation combatting terrorism in the region.³² Along with this, anti-French protests were common, but pro-Russian demonstrations with Russian flags were also seen among the population. "In this context, the anti-French discourse works. And the arrival of new players (the Russians) brings hope to some Malians," one West African diplomat observed.³³

The military junta has clearly shifted Malian foreign policies, closely linked to its security needs: France, the former ally, is being kicked out, while Russia is stepping in.

Russian support in security – weapons and Wagner Group mercenaries

After negotiations with the Malian government during autumn, the Russian PMC, the Wagner Group, entered into the Malian security market in December 2021.³⁴ In parallel, a number of countries reviewed their security-enforcing engagements in Mali. So far France, the UK, Sweden, Côte d'Ivoire and Germany have announced their withdrawal.³⁵ The military junta originally denied that any deal with the Wagner Group had been signed, but the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, later confirmed that an agreement had been made.³⁶ The monthly fee has been estimated as USD 10 million.³⁷ It is worth noting that when it comes to trade and foreign direct investments, as well as development aid, Russian economic engagement in Mali has been very limited. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, it is less than USD 100 million, overall.³⁸

Mining concessions have been a common way for the Wagner Group to get paid for their services. This was the case in both Sudan and the Central African Republic. Despite the considerable assets of gold,

such an arrangement has not been confirmed in Mali, where government regulations seem to be comparatively stricter.³⁹

There are indications that the Russian political leadership directed or at least approved the entering of the Wagner Group into Mali. For example, flight tracking shows that a new military base was established near the airport of Bamako to facilitate the arrival of the military company, which was escorted by a Tupolev TU-154 aircraft, owned by the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation.⁴⁰

The main focus of the Wagner Group in Mali is the fight against the two main Islamic extremist groups, JNIM and ISGS. The Wagner Group operates in joint cooperation with the Malian military forces (MAFa). The number of members of the Wagner Group is estimated to have risen to more than 1000 since their arrival in Mali.⁴¹ So far, their endeavours have had limited results; the jihadist networks seem to be well coordinated and have expanded further to the east, including Burkina Faso. Some analysts claim that the military fighters of the Wagner Group tend to be more violent towards civilians. According to one report, 71 percent of all violent activities carried out by the Wagner Group have been targeting civilians.⁴² When activities were carried out alongside the Malian military forces, the rate was considerably less, around 25 percent. Thus, the Malian forces seem to have a moderating effect on the Russian mercenaries.⁴³

The Russian engagement also implies deliveries of weapons to Mali, not least aircraft, including helicopters, to enhance the Malian capability to attack jihadist groups. This goes back to former bilateral agreements, the latest being from June 2019.⁴⁴ In the beginning of August 2022, a ceremony was held in Bamako with the arrival of a Russian shipment of arms, containing five (Czech-made) Aero L-39 Albatros and four Su-25 airplanes, as well as two M-35P and four Mi-8m helicopters.⁴⁵ Shortly after this, the Malian minister of defence, Colonel Camara visited Moscow for further discussions.⁴⁶

Official foreign policy parallel with unofficial activities – Russian impact

Not only has the Wagner Group started operations in Mali after the 2021 coup, the exchange of high-level visits between Mali and the Russian Federation has also intensified. Since the coup, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, and his Malian counterpart, Adoulaye Diop, have met bilaterally at least four times.⁴⁷ At a press conference on 11 November 2021,

Sergei Lavrov explicitly mentioned the areas of energy, geological exploration, mining, internet technologies and agriculture as interesting for bilateral exchange.⁴⁸ In May 2022, he said:

We paid special attention to the practical aspects of organising deliveries from Russia of wheat, mineral fertilizers and petroleum products that are so much needed by the people of Mali today in conditions of illegitimate Western sanctions.⁴⁹

Lavrov also expressed satisfaction at the Malian support on the UNGA resolutions on the war in Ukraine (Mali consistently abstained).⁵⁰ The Russian “wheat diplomacy” expressed by Sergei Lavrov, above, has also been stressed by President Vladimir Putin, who had a phone conversation with interim president Goïta on 10 August 2022, when he promised deliveries of grain to Mali.⁵¹ The Russian blockade of Ukrainian harbours, preventing the export of Ukrainian wheat, is being turned into a Russian narrative, wherein Ukraine is to blame and Russia comes to the rescue of its African friends in need.

Unofficial track - disinformation campaigns

However, beneath the diplomatic surface, considerable Russian disinformation campaigns have appeared to be underway in Mali during the last year; if not actively orchestrated by the Russian government, they have at least been tacitly tolerated or even encouraged. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, at least 16 social media disinformation campaigns connected to the Wagner Group have been detected and documented in Africa, with Mali in the category of “3 or more campaigns.”⁵² Their narratives usually promote the script that Russia supports the anti-colonial struggle, the West is the source of Africa’s problems and African countries should be able to make independent decisions.⁵³

In Mali, there is a clear increase in Russian presence in the digital media sphere, not least by the news agency, RIA FAN, which is part of the Patriot Media Group, directed by the Wagner Group’s founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin. This is a general trend in the African countries: Mali is the sixth African country that the Wagner Group has entered.⁵⁴ In the Mali case, from September 2021, when the Wagner Group started negotiations in Mali, there was an increase in RIA FAN monthly articles. In December, when the Wagner Group arrived in the country, the increase was significant and RIA FAN’s articles were often clearly biased in favour of either the Wagner Group or Russia, to the disadvantage of France, and had an editorial setting.⁵⁵ Crimes against humanitarian international law, such as the massacre perpetrated by Russian mercenaries and

the Malian military forces in Moura in April 2022, were not covered by RIA FAN.⁵⁶ Other traditional Russian media players close to the Kremlin, such as French-speaking Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik, have also increased their presence and the Malian media company, Mali Actu, has allegedly been co-opted by RT in a partnership including financial support.⁵⁷ Other media companies have been newly created, such as Ceiba in early January 2022. It describes itself as “independent media,” but 80 percent of its web content and social media accounts have a link to Russia and/or the war in Ukraine, in favour of Russia.⁵⁸ The Russian engagements in both official and unofficial spheres may have had some success. According to one global Gallup poll between April 2021 and January 2022, Mali was the country with the most positive view (84 percent) of Russia in the world.⁵⁹

BURKINA FASO – POOR, UNSTABLE AND STRUCK BY MILITANT ISLAMISM



Map 2. Burkina Faso. Source: Per Wikström, FOI

Mali’s smaller neighbour to the south, Burkina Faso, has a strikingly similar situation, with worsening security due to growing jihadist activities in the country, by both IS and al-Qaida-affiliated groups. Burkina Faso is currently the second most terror-afflicted country in the world, according to the Global Terrorism Index.⁶⁰ Burkina Faso has between 1.5 to 2 million IDPs, internally displaced persons, because of the volatile security situation, in the face of growing extremism.

Although the land, like Mali, is not very suitable for agriculture, the sector represents about 86 percent of the workforce, corresponding to approximately 30 percent of GDP.⁶¹ The population is poor and life expectancy is less than 60 years.⁶² The level of corruption is perceived to be lower than in Mali but is still high, according to international standards. Apart from agriculture, mining is the main source of income for the economy. In 2009, gold overtook cotton as the most important export product for Burkina Faso, as was the case in Mali.

Gold is the largest export commodity, representing more than 70 percent of the value of exported goods in 2021.⁶³

Table 2.

Country information	Burkina Faso
Surface	274,000 km ²
Population	22 million
GDP per capita	USD 918
HDI score (total)	184 (191 countries)
Corruption Index	78 (180 countries)

Sources: World Bank, UNDP Human Development Index 2021, Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2021.

The economy, however, is negatively affected by the growing insecurity. The numbers of fights and deaths from terrorism have tripled during the first five months of 2022 compared to 2021 and the number of explosions has increased by five.⁶⁴ In June 2022, an IS attack in Seytenga, in the northeast of Burkina Faso, killed at least 79 people and an estimated 15,000 civilians have fled the region.⁶⁵ JNIM/al-Qaida-affiliated groups are also active. In September, a terror attack was carried out on a food convoy from Djibo to Ouagadougou, and jihadists took over the provincial town of Solenzo. Infrastructure is often targeted as are food transports.

The growing insecurity has also had serious political implications. As in Mali, Burkina Faso experienced two military coups within less than a year. On 24 January 2022, soldiers led by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba and grouped in a junta called the *Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration* (MPSR) overthrew President Kaboré, who was accused of being incapable of dealing with the increasing number of jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso.

However, less than nine months later, on 30 September 2022, a new coup was carried out, by a 34-year old captain, Ibrahim Traoré, who had joined the MPSR in January 2022. Just as in the first coup, the second was accompanied by anti-French street protests, this time even stronger than in January and mixed with pro-Russian demonstrations. The French embassy and the *Institut Français* were attacked by hooligans. Interim President Damiba was criticised for his failure to cope with growing terrorism in the country, but also for seeking protection at the French military base, Kamboinsin.⁶⁶ Damiba's ties to the former president, Blaise Compaoré, were also considered to be too strong, and certain military officers were favoured during his time in power.⁶⁷ However, an agreement with Paul-Henri Damiba was reached and he fled to Lomé, Togo. So far, the new leadership has been supported by the army,

which is said to be split into different factions.⁶⁸ Dealing with the security situation is a top priority for the leadership, and they have promised ECOWAS representatives, who were met by street protests when visiting Ouagadougou on 4 October, to continue the roadmap to achieving constitutional restoration by 1 July 2024.⁶⁹

After the coup, the international community reacted differently to the coup in Burkina Faso in comparison to Mali. Despite similarities in the two coups, ECOWAS did not impose as severe economic sanctions against Burkina Faso as they did against Mali. The reason for this is unclear, but one explanation could be that ECOWAS did not want Burkina Faso to alienate itself from the international community the way Mali did.

In addition, on 29 November 2022, Prime Minister Kyelem de Tembela met with the French ambassador, who made a press statement afterwards stressing France's support to Burkina Faso, while also mentioning the EUR 100 million yearly development aid to the country.⁷⁰ According to the Burkinabé government, France could support it by paying for weapons and ammunition as well as training the 90,000 voluntary recruits (*Volontaire pour la Défense de la Patrie*, VDP).⁷¹ The day after, the prime minister met with the EU special representative for the Sahel, who stressed the partnership with the EU and the projects planned for 2021–2027, amounting to EUR 384 million, out of which EUR 50 million had already been disbursed for humanitarian aid in Burkina Faso.⁷²

On the other hand, on 3 December 2022, the government decided without warning to suspend the transmission of RFI (*Radio France Internationale*) in the country until further notice, allegedly due to the radio station's sending a terrorist's message.⁷³ Moreover, in mid-December 2022, the Ghanaian president, Nana Akufo-Addo, stated in a conversation with US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, that Burkina Faso had come to an agreement with the Wagner Group, offering a mineral mine in the south of the country as payment for their services. Burkina Faso immediately denied any such arrangement. However, on 2 January 2023, the military leadership of Burkina Faso asked the French ambassador to be replaced, and on 21 January French troops were ordered to leave the country.⁷⁴

Growing anti-French sentiments – Will Russia be let in?

During recent years, Burkina Faso's cooperation with Russia has intensified. In 2018, an agreement on technical military support, including weaponry and intelligence, was signed.⁷⁵ At the same time, anti-French sentiments in Burkina Faso have grown. Ahead of the

military coup in January 2022, there were street protests against France and Russian flags and pro-Russian messages were observed in the crowds.

On the day of the coup, Russia's ministry of foreign affairs (MID) expressed concern about security in Burkina Faso following the coup there, urging for stabilisation.⁷⁶ But Russia soon normalised its relations with the country and on 24 September, only six days before the second coup, on 30 September, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, met with Interim President Damiba to discuss strengthened cooperation on not only political dialogue, trade, economy and humanitarian affairs, but also in the UN. On 3 October, after the second coup, the MID referred to the administrative inefficiency and incapability of the former leadership to protect its citizens against the growing threat of terrorism.⁷⁷

Thus far, Interim President Traoré has not officially reached out to Russia. However, in a televised news conference on 31 September 2022, the day after the second coup, he said⁷⁸

The French have long been our partners, but we could have other partners now to support us. We are in fact in a partnership with Russia. We need to strengthen it.

Prime Minister Kyelem de Tembela, appearing on public television on 2 October 2022, stated:

The country's seven-year history of jihadist violence has not ruled out a review of its relations with Russia.⁷⁹

So far, this has implied the import of weapons and military support, not the Wagner Group's "boots on the ground."

As in Mali, the extent of the economic exchange between Russia and Burkina Faso is small. However, Russia is involved in the Burkinabé gold industry. Nordgold, the large Russian gold producer, has three sites in Burkina Faso; the last one was established in Bouly, in 2016. According to a press release by the company, Nordgold's total production in Burkina Faso would reach 400 koz (thousand ounces) at full capacity, representing about 40 percent of the company's annual gold production.⁸⁰ However, the site in Tarpako was recently closed, due to rising insecurity.⁸¹ Nordgold is the main Russian investment in Burkina Faso.

Military cooperation getting stronger – no Wagner Group yet

In addition to the military agreement in 2018, Russia has also increased its arms export to Burkina Faso. According to SIPRI, during 2011–2021 Russia represented 18 percent of Burkina Faso's import of arms,

being the biggest supplier during the last five years.⁸² Helicopters are an important import and Burkina Faso signed two agreements covering the delivery of two Mi-171Sh transport helicopters and associated weapons during Russia's Army 2017 exhibition.⁸³

Wagner Group mercenaries have not yet been observed in Burkina Faso, but immediately after the coup by Ibrahim Traoré, the Wagner Group's founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, welcomed the coup on Telegram, considering it to be "necessary," and calling Traoré "a worthy and courageous son of his motherland." He also referred to France:

The people of Burkina Faso were under the yoke of the colonialists, who robbed the people as well as played their vile games, trained, supported gangs of bandits and caused much grief to the local population.⁸⁴

Former Prime Minister Yacouba Isaac Zida (2014–2015), exiled in Canada, has openly encouraged closer ties with Russia. In a tweet on 11 October 2022, he welcomed Traoré as "the choice of the people" and called for a new strategic partnership with Russia:

Russia as a partner will provide the necessary military equipment to face this jihadist insurrection.⁸⁵

Apart from France, the US is also watching closely to see what kind of "other partners" President Traoré might be referring to. The ouster of the Burkinabé government in January forced the US State Department to declare the situation a military coup, halting nearly USD 160 million in military aid to Ouagadougou; officials worry that US influence will be limited, as Russia tries to take advantage of the situation.⁸⁶ "We assess that in the immediate to midterm, it is most likely going to be Burkina Faso that would reach out to Wagner and potentially request support," said one senior US intelligence official.⁸⁷

Burkina Faso did not (nor did Mali) participate in the US led military training operation Flintlock 2020, which was hosted by Mauritania and included 30 country participants, focussing on counter extremism in the Sahel.

Modest Russian foreign policy – parallel unofficial activities on the rise

As stated above, expressions of official Russian positions on Burkina Faso have been scarce. Burkina Faso is one of the few countries in Africa where Russia does not have permanent representation.⁸⁸ The Russian ambassador in Côte d'Ivoire is accredited to Burkina Faso, and in Ouagadougou there is an honorary consul general representing Russia. Burkina Faso, on the other hand, has an embassy in Moscow.

Unofficial track – disinformation campaigns

Just as in Mali, however, disinformation campaigns seem to be on the rise. Pro-Russian content spread on West African social media in the months ahead of the January 2022 military coup that overthrew the government of Burkina Faso. Online support for Moscow has steadily increased since then, including Facebook pages dedicated to Russian Wagner Group mercenaries and administered from the Sahel region.⁸⁹ On January 25, in a post to the Russian social network, VKontakte (vk), via his company, Concord Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin said the coup represented a “new epoch of decolonisation” in Africa, and stated that “African states have been seeking freedom from Western rule” and he “welcomed the military coup in Burkina Faso.” In a follow-up post in French, on January 29, he wrote: “Vive une Afrique libre!” (“Long live a Free Africa!”).⁹⁰ Meanwhile, on Twitter, the account for the Community of Officers for International Security (COIS), a nongovernmental group representing Russian contractors in the Central African Republic, also posted a statement from its director, Alexandre Ivanov, who supported the coup and offered to train the Burkina Faso army using “experience acquired in the Central African Republic.”⁹¹

Burkinabé protesters celebrating the coup in January told *The New York Times* that they were inspired by Russia’s interventions in the Central African Republic and Mali.⁹² During the September coup, anti-French and pro-Russian demonstrations were even more visible, with professionally designed placards and Russian flags. Whether, or to what extent, these pro-Russian protests were orchestrated by the Russian embassy or other Russian actors remains unclear.

Facebook is considered to be the predominant social media platform among the literate population in Burkina Faso, where more than 90 percent of media influencers are present on the platform. In September 2021, mentions of the Wagner Group on Facebook pages administered in Burkina Faso increased 19-fold following information that the Russian private military contractor was heading for neighbouring Mali.⁹³ Posts about Wagner from September onwards primarily focussed on Russia’s support in fighting insurgents in Mali. The post with the highest number of engagements criticised France for voicing concerns over a potential deal between Wagner and Malian leaders.⁹⁴ A Facebook group based in Burkina Faso, *Wagner Burkina Faso*, appearing in September 2021, now seems to have closed to public views. Another Facebook group, *Défendons notre pays le Burkina Faso*, was established in 2019 and has about 83,000 followers.⁹⁵ It has clear

pro-Russian and anti-French messages.⁹⁶ Traditional Burkinabé paper media have also increased their coverage of the Wagner Group in their articles. From September 2021 to February 2022, the number of articles mentioning the Wagner Group rose from four to 93.⁹⁷ However, they tend to be more sceptical of Russian PMCs than those on social media are.

Similar to Mali’s case, the Russian engagement may also have had an influence in Burkina Faso. According to one opinion poll in March 2022, more than 80 percent of the Burkinabé population was in favour of Russian support against terrorism in the country.⁹⁸ The poll, however, had a bias towards highly educated people in the capital, Ouagadougou.

CONCLUSIONS – SIMILAR RUSSIAN MODUS OPERANDI, BUT UNCLEAR BURKINABÉ POSITION

As described above, Russia usually looks for weak states with important natural resources where it could play a role to minimise the influence of Western countries; in the Sahel mainly France’s. This was the case in Mali and this is equally the case in neighbouring Burkina Faso, where the population is poor and corruption is widespread, which facilitates foreign access to state resources. Gold is the main natural resource in both Mali and Burkina Faso.

Insecurity and the fight against Islamic extremism are at the top of the agenda in Burkina Faso as well as in Mali and insurgency is growing. There are also strong anti-French sentiments in both countries, which experienced two military coups each during the last two years. Both countries are struggling with weak state institutions and democratic transition in accordance with the ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance. Unofficial Russian actors, such as oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, are active on social media through his media companies in both countries. Russian anti-colonialism and the narrative of “France’s failure to combat terrorism” are factors of propaganda in both Mali and Burkina Faso. Both countries have a large share of poor and illiterate populations. This fact is likely to facilitate Russian disinformation campaigns.

Given the similarities in all these structural factors, there is a risk of further Russian engagement in Burkina Faso, including a possible contract for the Wagner Group, and of Burkina Faso’s becoming “the next Mali” in the region. However, there are also important differences. Contrary to Mali (and Sudan), the new leadership in Burkina Faso has no previous ties to Russia. President Traoré has been considerably more cautious in looking ahead and trying to balance different powers, avoiding

international isolation. On their side, the EU, ECOWAS and other international actors have been careful not to alienate Burkina Faso. Moreover, anti-French sentiments are not as strong as in Mali and traditional Burkinabé media seem to be more reluctant at the prospect of the Wagner Group's entering the country.

If we look at both structural factors and approaches according to the Russian *modus operandi*, the comparison between Mali and Burkina Faso are summarized below (Table 3).

will have to show considerable progress in the fight against terrorism in Mali, otherwise their selling case will seriously drop.

Summing up, Burkina Faso seems to be balancing different interests, holding all doors open for further foreign engagement in the country, stressing their traditional partners but also reaching out to others. Considerable financial support in terms of development cooperation and humanitarian aid from France, EU and others is probably an important part of their assessment.

Table 3. Is Burkina Faso the next Mali? A comparison of structural factors and approaches in both states.

Type of aspect	Aspect	Mali	Burkina Faso
Structural factors			
Political aspects	Weak state institutions	Yes	Yes
	Anti-French sentiments	Yes	Yes, but not as strong as in Mali
	International isolation	Yes	No
Economic aspects	Wealth of minerals	Yes	Yes
Security & military aspects	High level of insecurity	Yes	Yes
Approach			
Political aspects	Russia using both official foreign policy and unofficial activities	Yes	Yes
	Using anti-French sentiments	Yes	Yes
Economic aspects	Mining concessions	Likely but unconfirmed	Possible
Security & military aspects	Filling of security vacuum	Yes	To some extent
	Strong Russian ties to the military	Yes	No
	Export of Russian arms	Yes	Yes

Initially, after the second coup, Burkina Faso seemed to renew its ties to France and other Western countries. The European Union responded by confirming its commitments in Burkina Faso. Their development and humanitarian aid to Burkina Faso would remain strong.⁹⁹ This was important in order to avoid the isolation that has arisen in Mali, where Russian actors such as the Wagner Group have been able to step in, filling the security vacuum after the announced withdrawal of international peacekeeping troops. So far, there seems to have been a reluctance within the new Burkinabé leadership to officially engage with Russia and introduce the Wagner Group, now compromised by their participation in the war in Ukraine, into the country. Burkina Faso will most probably look at the Malian case to evaluate a possible engagement of the Wagner Group in its own country. The Wagner Group

Recently however, the relations to France have grown more tense. If the government of Burkina Faso continues to face growing terrorism accompanied by a stronger anti-French popular voice that favours engaging with Russia, they may decide to reach out more directly to Russia, possibly for security support from the Wagner Group. Whether the Wagner Group can then actually deliver is uncertain, given its growing commitments in the Russian war in Ukraine.

For the European Union, the introduction of the Wagner Group in Burkina Faso would make it difficult to remain fully engaged in Burkina Faso in accordance with EU democratic standards and human rights principles.

Finally, considering the volatile political situation in Burkina Faso, one should not exclude further political turmoil, and the priorities of possible future Burkinabé leaders remain unknown. ■

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