

Russia's relations with Africa

Small, military-oriented and with destabilising effects

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Summary

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn increased attention to Russia's engagement in Africa and its implications for African states and the West. This paper presents Russia's political, economic and military-security relations with Africa in 2020–2022. The main conclusions are:

- Despite what many believe, Russia's engagement in Africa remains small. It consists of both an official and an unofficial approach. Both frequently use anti-colonial sentiments to denounce the West.
- According to the official approach, trade relations remain small (except for arms export) and Russia has no military base of its own. The large arms export is mainly due to substantial deliveries to Algeria and Egypt.
- According to the unofficial approach, Russian private military corporations provide mercenary and disinformation operations in states such as the Central African Republic, Sudan and Mali. This has destabilising effects for African states and is weakening democratic norms and institutions.
- Russia's interest in strengthening the relations to African states can be expected to grow, not least to blunt the impact of Western sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the invasion will also limit the ability to provide mercenary operations in African states.
- Russia's engagement has geostrategic implications for the southern flank of EU and NATO, and for the control of the strategic waterways in the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

INTRODUCTION

Less than a week after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the voting patterns of African states on a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution condemning the invasion sparked debate about the possibility of increased Russian influence on the continent. Analysts and journalists supported this claim by pointing to Russia's increased engagement in Africa.¹

Russia is interested in Africa for several reasons. Globally, Africa is important for Russia's projection of power, promotion of a multipolar world order, and utilisation of the important votes of African states in the UN. Geostrategically and militarily, a presence in Africa is important for controlling strategic waterways in the

Mediterranean and Red Seas and expanding Russia's naval operations. Economically, Africa is important for natural resource extraction, and obtaining access to large markets.²

The world has changed greatly in the last three years, providing a new context for Russia-Africa relations. African states have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe food crisis, exacerbated by Russia's blockade of Ukrainian ports following the full-scale invasion. In the same period, the continent has also experienced great instability, with eight military coups, Islamist violence spreading in the Sahel, and

a war in northern Ethiopia. This new context has presented Russia with opportunities to denounce the West and present itself as a better partner to Africa.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the perceived response by Europe and the West triggered a debate on colonialism in Africa. While Europe and the West were the top providers of donations to the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility and provided economic aid to strengthen overall healthcare systems, flight bans from African countries to the West following the discovery of the omicron variant in South Africa, and so-called “vaccine nationalism” received much attention and criticism from political leaders as well as analysts and the public.³ Russia has used this to its advantage in its own communication with African states.

Anti-colonial sentiments have become a vital tool for Russia to present itself as a better partner for African states than the West. In its official communications to African states, Russia underlines that it not only never colonised Africa, but it supported the anti-colonial movement. In President Vladimir Putin’s speech on 30 September 2022, when Russia annexed four regions of Ukraine, the word “colonial” was used eight times to denounce the West.

It is worth reminding the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages, followed by the worldwide slave trade. . . the plunder of India and Africa. . . While we – we are proud that in the 20th century our country led the anti-colonial movement.⁴

The use of these sentiments not only affects the debate in African states, but also the West’s relationship to Africa, a long-term strategic partner with close people-to-people ties, trade and military cooperation. Russia’s engagement can also have implications for the West’s geostrategic interests on the continent, such as protecting the EU’s and NATO’s southern flank and ensuring that the important trade routes in the Mediterranean and Red Seas remain open.

Purpose

Russia employs a two-tier approach in Africa. One is a long-term official approach that focuses on achieving Russia’s foreign policy objectives by using traditional political, economic and military-security tools, while another is an unofficial approach that focuses on shorter-term political and economic gains by using private military corporations (PMCs) linked to Russia.⁵

The purpose of this memo is to analyse how Russia’s political, economic and military relations with Africa have developed in 2020–2022. In addition to provide an over-all description of Russia’s official relations, it

also describes the hidden character of Russia’s unofficial relations with Africa. These are manifested through the presence of private military companies such as the Wagner group, and the use of disinformation campaigns.

Although the effect of the two approaches forms the Russian engagement in Africa, it does not mean that the two are the result of a consistent strategy. Rather, it is likely that the unofficial approach is also the result of several factors: the greed and ambition of a few individuals and entities in Russia’s domestic political arena, commercial interests and conflicts of interest between Russia’s foreign and security policies.

The memo builds on the work of previous FOI reports analysing Russia’s engagement in Africa. This includes titles such as *The United States and Russia in Africa*, which describes Russia’s increased engagement on the continent in 2000–2020; *Foreign military bases and installations in Africa*, which describes Russia’s military presence and objectives in Africa; and *Russia’s (Not So) Private Military Companies*, which describes the emergence of the Wagner Group in African states.⁶ *The United States and Russia in Africa* has inspired the overall scope and structure, especially regarding the official approach. The aim has been that this memo can be used as an update of that report.

Materials

Different source materials have been used to describe the official and unofficial approaches, respectively. For the official approach, data from official databases on trade, economic development assistance, troop contributions to the UN, arms export, etc. has been used. Information on high-level visits, speeches and diplomatic presence has also been crosschecked with the Russian government’s websites. However, source materials from Russia has become increasingly difficult to access and use since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Once-published materials have disappeared and websites have been blocked. Recent data on Russia has also been absent in multilateral databases.⁷ Where data is not available for 2020–2022, the otherwise most recent data has been used to provide some idea of Russia’s engagement. Where possible, a comparison to the engagement of China and the United States, such as in trade, number of embassies, etc., has been included to provide some context to the data. For some relevant topics, it has not been possible to find data. One such example is data on Russia’s Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) in Africa. Russian investment in Africa is difficult to trace, since it is often channelled via third countries.⁸ By definition, source materials on Russia’s unofficial approach

is even more difficult to obtain. An important part of disinformation operations is that the public should not know who the sender is or what the objective is. It is also difficult to measure the effects of using such tools. Similarly, mercenary operations are carried out in the covert rather than open arena. Due to these circumstances, it is common to see inconsistencies between different reports and sources. Therefore, the available data is presented in the most transparent way possible.

Disposition

The paper begins by describing the official and unofficial approaches that Russia employs in Africa. This is followed by a description of Russia's official political, economic and military-security relationships with African states. Subsequently, Russia's unofficial approach is described, including the use of mercenary and disinformation operations. Finally, the African votes on UNGA resolutions on Ukraine are examined. This is followed by the overall conclusions and a discussion of what Russia's engagement means for Africa and the West.

OFFICIAL RELATIONS: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND MILITARY-SECURITY RELATIONS

Russia's official approach to Africa includes the political, economic and military-security relations that constitute the foreign relations of most states. Russia's engagement also has historic roots. The Soviet Union had strong ties to Africa, which included relations with states such as Algeria, Morocco and South Africa, and peaked in the 1960s and '70s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia withdrew and was largely absent in Africa until the early 2000s. Russia then started its reengagement on the continent, from a low level.⁹

Political relations

Russia currently has a large diplomatic presence in Africa, despite having a low priority in its current official strategic doctrines.

Russia has embassies in 40 out of 54 African states.¹⁰ No new embassy has opened in the last decade.¹¹ As a comparison, the United States has 49 embassies in Africa and China 52.¹²

Africa has a low priority in Russia's current strategic documents. Its Foreign Policy Concept from 2016 mentions sub-Saharan Africa only in the last paragraph of its regional foreign policy objectives. The National Security Strategy from 2021 mentions Africa in two paragraphs (on the spread of terrorism and supporting multilateral institutions).¹³ Russia's military doctrine from 2014 does not mention Africa at all.¹⁴

Looking ahead, the role of Africa in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept is expected to increase, according to Russia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, at a press conference in Uganda in July 2022. According to Lavrov, the increase will be due to both long- and short-term interests, as well *"as a result of what the West is doing in respect of Russia"*.¹⁵ Signs of the increased political importance of Africa has already been seen in 2022 in the increase in high-level visits.

Russia has increased its high-level visits to Africa since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A high-level visit to another country is a big undertaking for any state and often requires weeks, if not months, of preparations and planning. The Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov made two trips to Africa and visited five African states after the start of the full-scale invasion (as of end of November 2022): Algeria, in May; and Egypt, DR Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia in July 2022.¹⁶ This was as many visits to African states as he made in more than the four previous years (2018–February 2022).¹⁷

The day before commencing the four-day visit to Africa in July, an op-ed by Lavrov, titled "Russia and Africa: A future-bound partnership," was published in several national African newspapers. In the article, Lavrov expressed his gratitude to the African states on their position on Ukraine and for not imposing sanctions. Lavrov also dismissed claims that Russia's blockade of grain from Ukraine was behind the food crisis in Africa.¹⁸

We appreciate the considered African position as to the situation in and around Ukraine. Although unprecedented by its scale the pressure from beyond has not brought our friends to join the anti-Russian sanctions. Such an independent path deserves deep respect.¹⁹

African states constituted more than a third of Lavrov's bilateral meetings during the high-level week in New York, at the UN General Assembly, in September 2022. Lavrov met with leaders of twelve African states (Algeria, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Egypt, Equatorial Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Morocco, South Africa, South Sudan and Sudan). All but two (Egypt and South Sudan) either voted no, or chose not to vote (abstained or recorded no vote), in both of the two votes on the Ukraine resolutions in March 2022.²⁰

Russia held its first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, in 2019. Forty-five African heads of state or government (out of 54) attended the summit.²¹ It was co-chaired by Egypt's President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who was also the chairperson of the African Union (AU) at the time. In the opening speech, President Putin emphasised the

important role of African states in the UN and thanked African states for their support of Russian resolutions:

We are grateful to our African partners for supporting the resolutions that are of priority for us, namely, to combat the glorification of Nazism. . .²²

Not even three years later, “denazifying Ukraine” had become one of president Putin’s main arguments for the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022.²³

At the end of the first summit, it was decided that summits would take place every three years, in either Russia or Africa.²⁴ The second Russia-Africa Summit was scheduled for early November 2022, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, but has been postponed to the summer of 2023, in St Petersburg.²⁵ No official explanation has been given for the postponement or change of location.

Economic relations

Russia has modest economic relations with the African states, with the exception of arms export (see Military-security relations).

Russia’s trade relations with Africa are small.²⁶ The latest available data from the International Monetary Fund’s DOTS (Department of Trade Statistics) Database is from 2020, when Russia’s import from Africa amounted to USD 13.3 billion and its export to Africa amounted to 8.1 billion.²⁷ Russia’s economic interests in Africa focus on the oil and gas, mining, energy and transport sectors.²⁸ The largest recipients of Russia’s export in Africa in 2018–2021 were Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Nigeria, and Tunisia.²⁹

Russia’s Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa is very limited. Recent data is difficult to obtain, since Russia is not a member of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) and no data is available in the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Database.³⁰ The latest available data is from 2017, when, according to the RAND Corporation, Russia’s official development assistance to Africa reached USD 28 million.³¹ Though not specified in the report, this is assumed to be the bilateral development assistance and excludes support to multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank. As a comparison, the United States allocated USD 11.2 billion to Africa, 400 times larger.³²

Military-security relations

Russia has strong military-security relations with African states, even when compared to the United States and China.³³

Russia has military cooperation agreements with 36 African states. Russia signed six new military cooperation agreements with African states in 2021 and 2022 (as of November 2022). In 2021, agreements were signed with Ethiopia, Gabon, Mauritania and Nigeria and, in 2022, with Madagascar, in January; and with Cameroon, in April.³⁴ A military security cooperation agreement can entail many different things, spanning from more general and ceremonial agreements to more specific accords with substantial outcomes, such as training of military personnel, supply of weapons, or possible access to military bases.³⁵ Agreements can also be framework agreements that foresee possibilities of future cooperation.

Russia has no military base of its own in Africa. A Russian naval base in the Red Sea, south of Suez, would have strategic advantages for Russia’s naval operations. A base would minimise the dependence on Suez Canal transit – for example for minor repairs that would otherwise take place at the Tartous base in Syria, in the Mediterranean Sea – and ensure sound logistical support.³⁶ Russia has sought permission from six African governments to establish military bases on their territory, namely in Sudan, Egypt, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Madagascar and Mozambique.³⁷ In 2017, there were reports that Russia and Egypt were considering a Russian airbase in Egypt and a sharing of airspace.³⁸ The deal was never confirmed and it remains unclear whether there was any substance in the reporting. In late 2020, a military-cooperation agreement from May 2019, between Russia and Sudan, was ratified; it gave Russia access to Sudan’s harbour in Port Sudan, on the coast of the Red Sea. The agreement allowed Russia to establish a so-called “logistical supply point” in Port Sudan, and station a maximum of 300 military and civilian personnel at the base, supporting a maximum of four units at a time.³⁹ However, in April 2021, the agreement was reportedly cancelled.⁴⁰ After the military coup later the same year, the coup-maker, General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, said that the agreement with Russia was still “under discussion.”⁴¹ As a comparison, both the United States and China have naval bases in Djibouti, on the coast of the Red Sea.⁴²

Arms export

Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Africa, though the bulk of the export is concentrated to Egypt and Algeria. Russia transferred arms to 14 of the 54 African states between 2017 and 2021.⁴³ Russia accounts for 43 percent of the arms export, followed by France

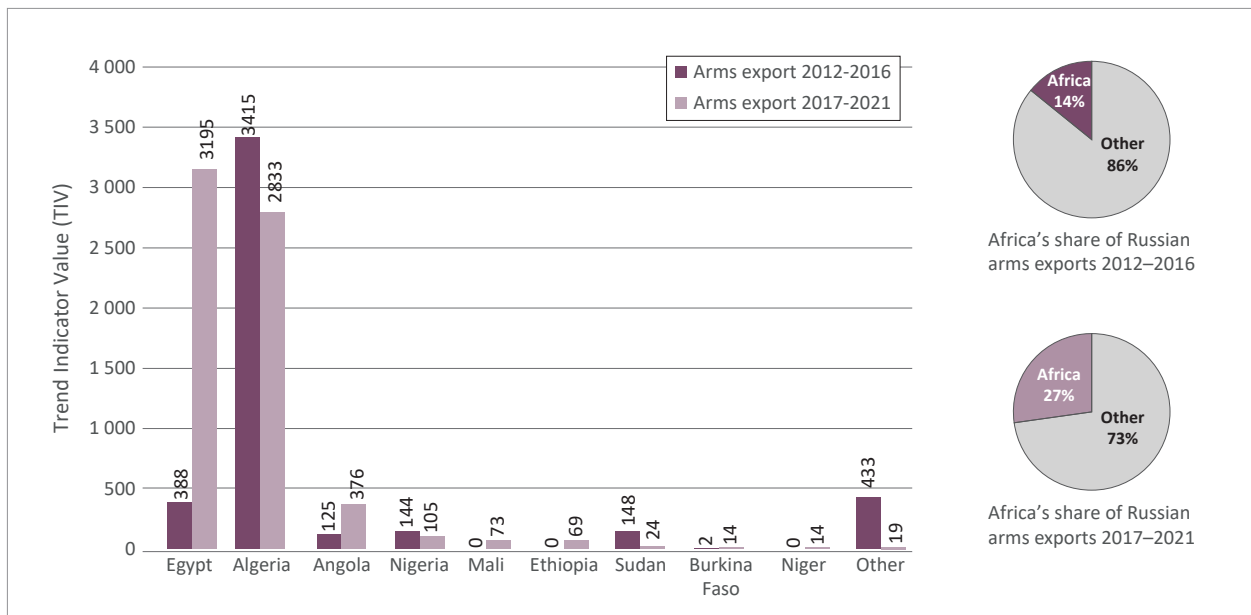


Figure 1. Total Russian arms transfers to Africa 2012–2021.

Note: TIV stands for Trend Indicator Value, which is not a financial measure, but used by SIPRI as a measure of the volume of arms transferred between each pair of countries. For more information, see www.sipri.org. "Other" represents the remaining thirteen African states that received arms export from Russia, namely (in order of the TIV value 2017–2021): Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, South Africa, Cameroon, Rwanda, Libya, Congo, Ghana, South Sudan, Zambia, Mozambique, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire.

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database.

(14 percent), the United States (11 percent), Italy (9 percent), Germany (7 percent) and China (5 percent).⁴⁴

Mining concessions to Russian companies as compensation for arms sales is a business model commonly used by Russia, and a practice that goes back to the Cold War era.⁴⁵ For example, in 2018, the Central African Republic permitted Russia to exploit minerals, resources and energy sources in exchange for arms.⁴⁶

Africa's overall imports of major arms remained fairly equal between the two five-year periods 2012 to 2016 and 2017 to 2021.⁴⁷ Russia became the largest supplier of arms to Egypt in 2017–2021, due to a decline in exports from the United States. However, Egypt remains one of the United States' most strategic partners in the Middle East, and its receipt of US arms exports is expected to grow in the near future.⁴⁸

The significance of Africa for Russian arms export has increased in the last five-year period. In 2012–2016, Africa's share of Russia's total arms export was 14 percent, and in 2017–2021 it increased to 27 percent. Russia's arms export to Africa increased at the same time as the global Russian export decreased.⁴⁹ The overall drop was almost entirely due to a decrease in export to Algeria, India and Vietnam. At the same time, Russia's export to Egypt increased by 723 percent. Russia's

arms deliveries during the period were concentrated to India, China, Egypt and Algeria. The four states made up 73 percent of Russia's global arms export.⁵⁰

UNOFFICIAL TRACK: MERCENARY AND DISINFORMATION OPERATIONS

Russia's unofficial and official approaches to Africa are very different from each other. As stated above, Russia's engagement in this domain is not (only) the result of government policy, but the result of the will of individuals and entities in Russia's domestic political arena, the commercial interests and, possibly, the conflicts of interest between Russia's foreign and security policies. Some private military corporation (PMC) engagement is likely independent from the Kremlin, while other engagement has a stronger degree of coordination and being instructed.⁵¹ The main actors in the unofficial approach are Russian PMCs, a fact that enables some degree of deniability for the Kremlin, since Russian PMCs operate in an unclear legal environment. PMCs are not regulated per se in Russia, but mercenaries and their financing are outlawed in the Criminal Code (Article 359).⁵²

Russian private military corporations engage in Africa in various ways and receive instructions from the

Table 1. The Wagner Group's Mercenary Operations in Africa.

Year	State	Example of operations
2018	Central African Republic	Wagner mercenaries reportedly arrived in 2018. Wagner provides escort protection to the CAR president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, and trains local security forces. Mercenary operations are concentrated in diamond-rich mining areas.
2019	Mozambique	Wagner mercenaries were reportedly deployed in Cabo Delgado in 2019, but pulled out of Mozambique in 2020, only a few months later. Cabo Delgado is rich in gas.
2019	Libya	Mercenary operations were reportedly carried out from four bases across Libya, mostly near the oil fields. In 2022, Wagner reportedly withdrew some 1300 mercenaries to send to Ukraine.
2019	Sudan	Since 2019, Wagner has allegedly trained local special forces in Sudan and operated in Darfur. Since the 2019 revolution, Wagner has reportedly been working closely with General Mohamed Hamdan, a.k.a. "Hemedti," one of the leaders in the 2021 military-coup. Wagner is reportedly deployed in the gold-rich areas of the country, in Darfur, having secured gold-mining concessions as early as 2017.
2021	Mali	Wagner contractors arrived in Mali in December 2021, following an agreement with Russia in 2020. Mali reportedly agreed to receive Wagner Group contractors to conduct training, close protection, and counterterrorism operations.

Note: In several states, disinformation operations preceded mercenary operations.

Sources: New York Times, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Warsaw Institute and Middle East Monitor.

Kremlin to a different degree. Some engagement falls within the ordinary tasks of PMCs, including protection of facilities or personnel. Other engagement is part of Russia's unofficial approach, wherein PMCs with links to Russia have carried out mercenary operations, disinformation operations and elections-meddling.⁵³

The unofficial approach is used in states with specific characteristics. This approach seems to target states possessing natural resource wealth and weak democratic institutions. The "business model" seems to be that Russia and/or its PMCs offer the political or military leadership the possibility of seizing or remaining in power through the use of mercenary and disinformation operations. In exchange, Russia or its PMCs are paid in mining concessions or hydrocarbon extraction.⁵⁴ According to the Marshall Center, examples of states that meet these criteria of weak democratic institutions and mining concessions (that can quickly be exploited) are the Central African Republic (gold and diamonds), Sudan (gold), Mozambique (gems and LNG) and Libya (oil).⁵⁵ All in which the Russian PMC Wagner Group has been engaged, see below.

According to the RAND Corporation, PMCs with links to Russia conducted operations (including both mercenary and other operations) in 16 African states in 2005–2020.⁵⁶ PMC operations with strong links to the Russian government were seen mainly in the Central African Republic, Sudan and South Sudan, but also in Libya, Gabon and Madagascar.⁵⁷ Specifically with regard to mercenary operations, the Wagner Group, or its subsidiary, Sewa, has conducted all known such operations in Africa since 2005.⁵⁸

Mercenary operations: The Wagner Group in Africa

The Wagner Group is the most famous Russian PMC and is controlled by the Russian businessperson Yevgeni Prigozhin, who has close ties to President Putin. Wagner's first known mission was in Ukraine in 2014, following the Russian annexation of Crimea. In 2015, it expanded its operations to Syria.⁵⁹

The Wagner Group began operations in Africa in 2017, where they started out as advisors, carrying out disinformation campaigns and deploying fake election monitors.⁶⁰ They have since then been reported as conducting mercenary operations in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Libya, Sudan and Mali.⁶¹ Wagner mercenaries arrived in the Central African Republic in 2018.⁶² In 2019, the Group deployed forces to the Cabo Delgado province of northern Mozambique, but pulled out in 2020, after suffering losses.⁶³ The same year, the Wagner Group was reported as carrying out mercenary operations in Libya and Sudan.⁶⁴ In Libya, in 2019, Wagner mercenaries reportedly supported Khalifa Haftar in a failed assault on Tripoli. Mercenaries are reported to be stationed at four bases, close to the oil fields, in various places in the country.⁶⁵ In Sudan, Wagner was reported to be training local special forces and operating in Darfur, where numerous goldmines are located. Wagner was also accused of helping the now ousted dictator of Sudan, Omar Al-Bashir, to put down anti-governmental protests in the popular revolution there.⁶⁶ In December 2021, following an agreement with Russia in 2020, the Wagner Group arrived in Mali.⁶⁷ Burkina Faso has been presented as being a possible state for upcoming



Map 1. Russian military engagements and Wagner group mercenary operations in Africa.

Source: Based on Bonnier and Hedenskog (2019), New York Times, Foreign Policy Research Institute, Warsaw Institute, Middle East Monitor, Tass Russian News Agency and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

engagement from Wagner, but, as of 15 December 2022, no presence has been reported.⁶⁸

Similar to the situation with arms export, the Wagner Group has used mining concessions as compensation in the Central African Republic (gold and diamonds) and Sudan (gold).⁶⁹ In Sudan, in 2017, the Wagner Group obtained lucrative gold mining concessions for giving military aid to ousted dictator Omar al-Bashir and later to General Hamdan Dagalo, also known as “Hemedti”, one of the leaders in the military coup in 2021.⁷⁰ In Mali, the Wagner Group has reportedly

pursued access to the gold mines, but this has proven more difficult, due to Mali’s mining resources being harder to exploit, stricter regulations and artisanal mines being under the control of armed groups.⁷¹ Following the military coup in September 2022, the gold mines of Burkina Faso have been connected to the possibility that Russian mercenaries may be present in the country in future.⁷²

For Russia, gold has been important to blunt the impact of sanctions imposed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Since the invasion, the EU, United States,

Table 2. Military coups and disinformation operations in Africa in 2020–2022.

Year	State	Date	Example of disinformation operations
2020	Mali	18 August 2020	Coordinated pro-Russian content spread on social media from early 2020. Russian flags, and messages thanking Russia, were observed after the coup.
2021	Chad	20 April 2021	
	Mali (second coup)	21 May 2021	Network of pro-Russian Facebook pages mobilised support for the postponement of democratic elections.
	Guinea	5 September 2021	
	Sudan	25 October 2021	Prior to the military coup, Facebook removed accounts with links to the Russian troll factory, “Internet Research Agency” (IRA).
2022	Burkina Faso	23 January 2022	Pro-Russian content spread on social media platforms in West Africa.
	Burkina Faso (second coup)	30 September 2022	Facebook pages dedicated to the Wagner Group increased after the first coup. Russian flags waved in the capital after the coup.

Sources: VOA News, The Conversation, Meta and Twitter.

United Kingdom and Canada have imposed new sanctions to prevent Russia from using its gold reserve to limit the impact of sanctions and prop up its currency.⁷³ According to the *New York Times*, Russia has been building up a gold war chest in recent years to be able to buy currency and secure loans.⁷⁴

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has affected Russian-linked PMC mercenary operations in Africa. The Wagner Group reportedly withdrew 1300 (of approximately 2200) of its mercenaries from Libya in March to join operations in Ukraine.⁷⁵ Reportedly, some Wagner mercenaries have also been redirected from the Central African Republic to Ukraine, but the mercenaries deployed in Mali have remained.⁷⁶

Disinformation operations

In addition to mercenary operations, Russian PMCs and other entities also conduct disinformation campaigns, elections-meddling, and political consulting. The Concord Group, similarly to the Wagner Group, is also owned by Prigozhin, and is one of the entities providing both armed force and so-called “political technologists.”⁷⁷ According to the RAND Corporation, Prigozhin provides political consulting services to regimes in 19 African states.⁷⁸

Looking more specifically at disinformation campaigns, it is worth remembering that it is often difficult to trace the original source behind them, and that this is part of their point. According to the Marshall Center, pro-Russian disinformation campaigns have been used in Africa since at least the 2018 presidential election in Madagascar and subsequently in the Central African Republic and Libya. Disinformation campaigns connected to Prigozhin have been observed in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea,

Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.⁷⁹ In 2021, two propaganda films, *Tourist* and *Granit*, which depicted Russian PMCs as heroes in the Central African Republic and Mozambique, premiered. The films were reportedly funded by Prigozhin and based on the Wagner Group.⁸⁰

Local media outlets are used to spread pro-Russian and anti-Western messaging.⁸¹ In Africa, Russia is both investing in the information sector and buying existing media outlets, which then disseminate, such as in Madagascar and the Central African Republic, pro-Russian content. Russian international media outlets, such as Sputnik and RT, are also used to spread pro-Russian content and have entered agreements with local media entities in Eritrea, Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon.⁸²

Social media is another platform used to spread disinformation in African states. The Russian troll factory, the “Internet Research Agency” (IRA), which was exposed in the Robert Mueller-led inquiry on us elections-meddling in 2016, is active in Africa.⁸³ In December 2020, Facebook removed two Russian-linked networks (pages, accounts and groups) for so-called “Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior” in the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, South Africa, Libya and Sudan.⁸⁴ In December 2021, Twitter removed a network linked to IRA that targeted the Central African Republic and Libya and, in January 2022, Facebook removed a network with links to the IRA that targeted Nigeria, Cameroon, Gambia, Zimbabwe and Congo.⁸⁵

Russian PMCs and “political technologists” offer different tools depending on the state of democracy and election patterns in the state at hand. The states most vulnerable to Russian interference are those with the weakest democratic and electoral institutions.⁸⁶

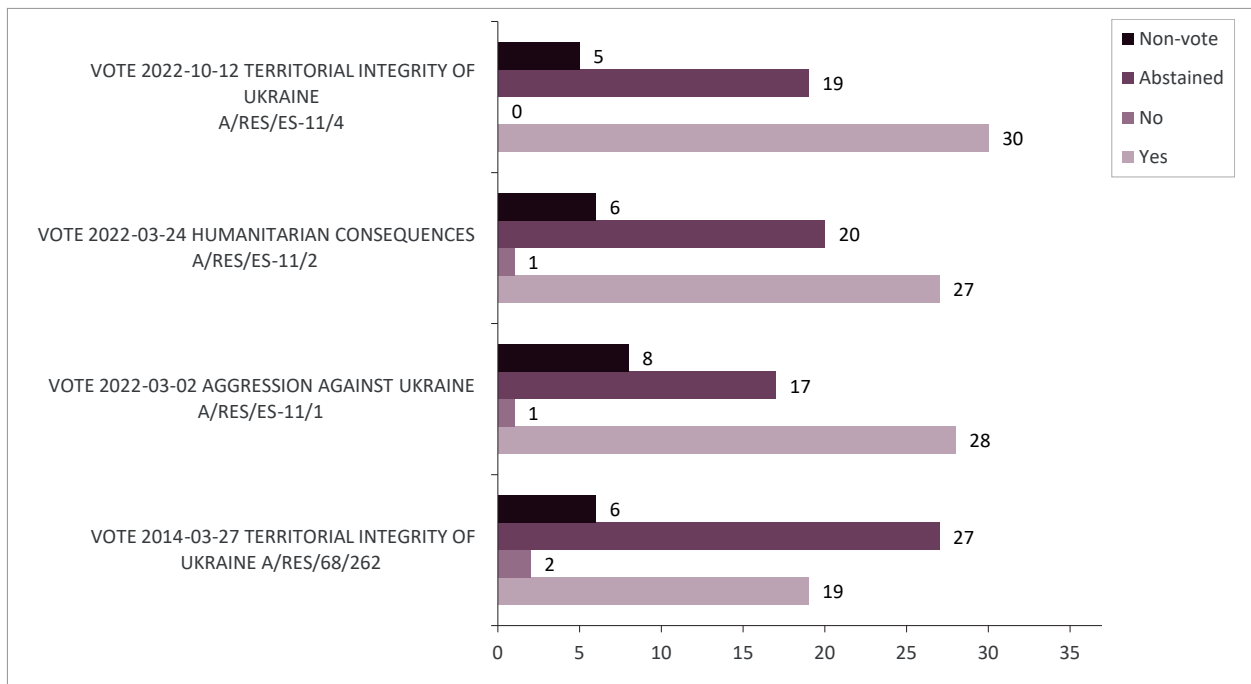


Figure 2. African votes on the UNGA resolutions on Ukraine.

Note: The UN has two ways of not voting: abstaining and not recording a vote. Stipulating “Abstained” means that the state was present at the vote but actively decided to abstain from voting, while “Non-vote” means that no vote was recorded, for example because of absence from voting.

Source: UN Digital Library.

Disinformation and military coups

Russian disinformation has been present in military coups in Africa. There were eight military coups in Africa in 2020–2022, in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan (Burkina Faso and Mali each had two).⁸⁷ Several of the coup-makers have either close ties to Russia, or, after their respective coups, disseminated pro-Russian messages. In 2020, in Mali’s capital Bamako, supporters of the military’s actions gained much attention when they took to the streets, waving Russian flags, pictures of President Putin and messages thanking Russia for its support.⁸⁸ According to the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, the groundwork for increased Mali-Russia cooperation and resistance towards the French presence can be seen as far back as 2017, and coordinated pro-Russian content was being spread in social media from early 2020.⁸⁹ In 2021, a network of pro-Russian Facebook pages mobilised support for the postponement of democratic elections following the second coup in Mali.⁹⁰ Similarly, pro-Russian content was spread on West African social media platforms in the months leading up to the (first) coup in Burkina Faso in 2022.⁹¹ After that coup, online support for Moscow increased, among others via Facebook pages dedicated to Wagner mercenaries.⁹² After the second coup in Burkina Faso, in September 2022, a small number of Russian

flags were seen being waved in Ouagadougou.⁹³ In addition, Facebook removed accounts with links to the IRA prior to the military coup in Sudan in 2021. Afterwards, the coup-maker, General “Hemedti”, travelled to Moscow to strengthen ties with Russia. His visit coincided with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in 2022.⁹⁴

With the mercenary and disinformation operations in mind, we return to the subject of the African states and the UNGA resolution votes on Ukraine.

RUSSIA AND AFRICAN VOTES ON UNGA RESOLUTIONS ON UKRAINE

As stated above, the UNGA resolutions on Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine in 2022 sparked a debate on the question of increased Russian influence in Africa and the return of Cold War dynamics. Some African states also expressed pro-Russian sentiments. For example, South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa stated: “*The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings . . . that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region.*”⁹⁵

Africa is a powerful continent in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and constitutes 28 percent (54 votes) of the total vote. One of Russia’s strategic interests in Africa is to utilise this power in important

resolutions of interest. President Putin's emphasis on this when addressing the African heads of state at the Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 is one example of this. The extent of overall influence cannot be measured merely by looking at voting patterns, but it makes sense to see whether there is at least merit to the debate on this question.

There have been three UNGA resolutions on Ukraine since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The first vote, on 2 March, was on Russia's aggression; the second, on 24 March, addressed humanitarian consequences; and the third, on 12 October, dealt with the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Russia's illegal annexations. For comparison purposes, the resolution on the territorial integrity of Ukraine following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 is also included below.

The African states have not voted more in alignment with Russia in the UNGA resolutions since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All four resolutions on the Russian aggression toward Ukraine were adopted by the UNGA. The African states' support varied between the resolutions. Half or more of the African states (between 27 to 30 states) voted to adopt the resolutions in 2022, an increase in comparison to 19 states in 2014. Almost a quarter of the states (13 states) voted yes consistently in all four resolutions.⁹⁶ Three states (Eritrea, Sudan and Zimbabwe) voted against at least one of the resolutions, but no African state voted no to all resolutions. In the last resolution on territorial integrity, in October 2022, no African state voted with Russia.

However, around half of the African states (between 24 to 33 states) chose not to vote (abstained or did not record a vote) on the four resolutions. More states voted in 2022 compared to 2014.⁹⁷ Various explanations have been raised on how to interpret the large group of African states that chose not to vote. Some of the reasoning heard was that not voting was a sign of strong historic and nostalgic ties (or new closer ties) to Russia; it was a balancing act where African states were trying to avoid a new Cold War dynamic on African soil; an expression of African will to diversify partnerships and the chance to gain advantages from both the West and Russia; and connected with the idea that Ukraine was not an African concern.⁹⁸

Looking only at the voting patterns on the UNGA resolutions on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there is no indication of any increase in Russian influence over African states since 2014. While Russia has increased its engagement in both the official and unofficial approaches, the Western countries have also put increased pressure on African states to vote in favour

of the resolutions. This means that the political "cost" for a state to vote in alignment with Russia has also increased. All in all, the issue of Russian influence in Africa is much too complex to be answered merely by looking at voting patterns in the UNGA.

CONCLUSIONS: RUSSIA'S OFFICIAL RELATIONS WITH AFRICA ARE SMALL BUT THE UNOFFICIAL APPROACH HAVE DESTABILISING EFFECTS

Russia's relations with Africa are small but have increased during the last two decades, albeit from a low level. Russia has also continued to step up its diplomatic relations with Africa after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The sanctions imposed on Russia have increased the importance of Africa to its projection of power, promotion of a multipolar world order, increasing trade and lessening the impact of sanctions. The developments involved in the invasion of Ukraine affect to what extent Russia can engage in African states, especially when it comes to employing mercenary operations. Having access to African minerals and hydrocarbons will increase in importance for Russia, as long as the sanctions are in effect, but its ability to provide mercenaries in African contexts will probably decrease.

In Russia's official approach, Russian engagement in Africa can be expected to continue and increase in states that are already experiencing a high degree of Russian engagement. States in this category include top trade partners and/or top receivers of arms export, such as Algeria and Egypt. Russia is the largest exporter of arms to Africa, but it remains to be seen how the war in Ukraine will affect how interested the African states are in buying Russian arms, and whether Russia will be able to deliver. The upcoming high-level meeting in St Petersburg in the summer of 2023 will be important for Russia to strengthen its political and trade relationships, as well as military-security agreements. The anticipated new Foreign Policy Concept will also provide insights into what an increased focus on Africa will entail.

In the unofficial approach, Russia and its PMCs can be expected to continue to engage and seek opportunities with political or military elites and leaders in states that have weak democratic institutions and a wealth of natural resources, such as the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso. It remains to be seen whether Africa will have a higher priority in coming years, and how this affects the scope of what can be undertaken.

Russia's unofficial relations are transactional and short-term, but will have long-term consequences. Since this approach is the result of multiple commercial,

domestic and individual interests, it can have unintentional consequences, and possibly contradict other Russian interests and objectives on the local level. Regardless, the unofficial presence have destabilising effects for African states and is weakening democratic norms and institutions, and undermines the social cohesion within states. It also risks weakening the rules-based world order. In addition, it also puts a heavy strain on African multilateral institutions, such as the African Union, ECOWAS and the UN.

Looking at the votes on the UNGA resolutions on Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, there is no indication of any increase in Russian influence over African states since 2014. However, the large group of non-voting African states on the UNGA resolutions on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine illustrates the importance of diplomatic support from African states. It also shows the agency of African states, the historical ties and narratives in Africa about Russia and the West, and the power dynamics on the African continent.

Pro-Russian narratives have received great attention in Africa. The colonial history is far from forgotten in African states, and affects the dynamics of the relations of African states with the world. African states do not take lightly to being lectured by the West. Russia is using this sentiment and is keen to underline respect for the sovereignty of African states and that Russia “*does not impose anything on anyone or tells [sic] others how to live,*” as Lavrov put it in his article published in different African national media in July 2022.⁹⁹ Russia has pushed

strong anti-colonial messages in Africa and presented itself as a non-colonial power, often portraying itself in contrast to the United Kingdom and France. However, the invasion of Ukraine could change this image, as well as reports of African citizens in Russian prisons being recruited to fight in Ukraine and then dying there.¹⁰⁰

The Russian use of anti-Western sentiments affects the European Union and its relations with African states. If the EU wants to show its African partners that the EU remains a solid partner, it should continue to deliver on previous agreements, and step up its communication efforts to counter the Russian anti-Western narratives. The EU can also assist African states in their own efforts to counter disinformation.

A Russian naval base in the Red Sea would be a possible game changer, with geostrategic implications for the EU and NATO. The Mediterranean now bears 20 percent of global shipping.¹⁰¹ As Europe turns away from Russian oil and gas, some of the replacements are coming from the African, Mediterranean and Gulf regions.¹⁰² Ensuring that the Mediterranean and Red Sea routes remain open and unhindered is of strategic importance for global trade and for the EU. The Mediterranean Sea also constitutes NATO's southern flank. A Russian naval base in the Red Sea, together with its naval base in Tartus, in Syria, could disturb NATO operations in the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, a Russian naval base in the Red Sea would strengthen Russia's possibility to support its mercenary operations in other parts of Africa, further increasing its destabilisation capacity. ■

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Endnotes

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