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RUSSIAN SECURITY ASSISTANCE IN AFRICA

**Soviet in style; Extractive in
substance; Destabilising in impact**

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KEY FINDINGS

Russia provides a variety of forms of security assistance to African countries, formally, via military agreements and arms sales, and informally by using private military companies (PMCs) to bolster regimes' security. The distinction between the two is often unclear.

Multiple Russian state and state-affiliated actors and networks use a wide variety of tools and techniques to further both the Russian state's and their own political, economic and security interests. Though the picture is murky, it is possible to isolate several components of a Russian security assistance 'playbook'.

This report sets out the elements of this 'playbook.' It provides an overview of the range of techniques and tools deployed by Russian actors, which include the formal components, described above, and 'assistance' delivered by PMCs. This includes directing and supporting combat operations, training local security forces, protecting regimes' personnel and assets, and coupling these with the provision of political disinformation campaigns. In recent years, the informal component had predominated, primarily through the Wagner Group.

Russian assistance comes at a cost. The model of counter-insurgency provided by Russian PMCs is highly violent and encompasses collective punishment. For all Russia's talk of enhancing stability and supporting decolonisation, what it actually does is support regimes to exert their power, often with grave violations of human rights. For elites costs are quite literal. In some contexts, such as the Central African Republic (CAR), regime security is provided in exchange for lucrative contracts, mostly for

resource extraction. Costs may also become political as elites become dependent on an unstable partner.

The model is however likely to remain attractive. Overall, Russian security assistance provides regimes' elites with a means to enhance their security using resources otherwise unavailable to them, and without some of the restrictions that can come with Western security assistance (e.g. around human rights). Globally, and in Africa, Russia has framed itself as a reliable security partner to authoritarian regimes.¹ Rather than simply providing regime survival packages, Wagner has helped governments address various security challenges, including conducting brutal counterinsurgency operations that other actors avoid; and to helping regimes assert their sovereign authority against external interference. There is likely to remain a demand for the violence and force Russian security assistance can provide.

Although the Russian state has sought to gain more direct control over Wagner institutions following the June 2023 Prigozhin mutiny, it remains reliant on the flexibility afforded by the Prigozhin model. This remains attractive to some African countries (e.g. Mali), which have sought to resist the extractive costs associated with Wagner deployments and prefer assistance provided by units with a degree of autonomy from the Russian state.

¹ Interview conducted for this report with Samuel Ramani, CEO, Pangea Geopolitical Risk, February 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's security assistance forms part of a broader approach to engagement in Africa. Its influence on the continent declined markedly during the turmoil following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This marked a stark contrast with the Cold War period, when the Soviet Union provided extensive military assistance to aligned African states, including billions of dollars in weapons, training and support, with countries like Angola being major recipients.

But since the late 2000s onwards it has sought to reassert itself as a great power in Africa.² This includes strengthening diplomatic ties through high-level visits, partnerships, hosting multilateral forums such as the Russia-Africa Summits, and military agreements (more below). Economically, the Russian government has increased trade with Africa—particularly of arms and natural resources—which almost doubled from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$17.7 billion by 2021,³ though this remains far lower than that of the US, Europe or China.

Despite this, Russia's greatest impact has been through informal, rather than formal channels. Since 2017, PMCs and especially the Wagner Group, have provided a package of support, which also includes enhancing regimes' security capacity and their ability to propagandise and spread disinformation about opponents. The PMC model provides Russian authorities with several advantages. Geopolitically, it allows the Russian state to project influence and counter the influence of other external powers with a degree of

plausible deniability. The plausibility of denial is no longer possible to maintain, not least after Putin said in 2023 that the Russian state fully finances the group,⁴ but the use of non-state actors avoids overt confrontation. Economically, mercenaries are cheaper than full military deployments and, in return for their services, Russian companies, again with links to the state, have been afforded lucrative commercial advantages, especially relating to resource extraction. The value of these should not be exaggerated, however. Wagner Group's activities has not contributed much to the income of the Russian state, vis-à-vis other sources, and it has not made huge profits overall compared to its costs.⁵

Whilst constituent elements of Russia's approach in Africa can be distinguished, Russian activity does not necessarily result from a coherent, long-term strategy. On the one hand, Russia's engagement with African countries is driven by a vision, shared amongst its political elites and institutions, to counter Western dominance of the international order and promote

2 Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2023), <https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/russia-in-africa/>.

3 Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaial, "Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (CSIS), October 19, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>.

4 Nicolas Camut, "Putin admits Kremlin Gave Wagner Nearly \$1 Billion in the Past Year," *Politico*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-yevgeny-prigozhin-russia-kremlin-gave-wagner-group-nearly-1-billion-in-the-past-year/>.

5 Olivia Allison, Nick Connon, Antonio Giustozzi, and James Pascall, *Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa: Profit and Patronage* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, August 2023), https://static.rusi.org/wagners-business-model-in-syria-and-africa_0.pdf.

multipolarity.⁶ But, on the other hand, it also reflects tensions and conflicts between these elites and institutions whose interests do not always align. In the shadowy world of Russian informality, Putin remains the ultimate arbiter setting the overarching strategic direction although the activity of Russian state and non-state actors may reflect their freedom to pursue their own interests rather than following central state direction. Prior to the 2023 Prigozhin rebellion, for example, the Wagner Group had developed its own substantive economic interests and pursued its activities with a degree of autonomy from the Russian state.

It remains unclear exactly how Russia's involvement in the continent will evolve post-mutiny. The Russian state is seeking to curtail the autonomy of PMCs, for example by creating a new Africa Corps to replace some Wagner units, under the control of a PMC department in the Russian Ministry of Defence.⁷ However, the reluctance of some African regimes to alter relationships with existing PMCs and the advantages of the model described above,⁸ mean that Russian PMCs are likely to continue to play a key role in bolstering regimes and shaping the security landscape in African states.

THE RUSSIAN SECURITY 'PLAYBOOK'

Russia is not unique in the provision of security assistance. Various external powers, including Western and Middle Eastern countries, provide security assistance to political and armed groups across the continent, and they also support media outlets which reflect their values and interests.

What is relatively unique about the Russian security assistance playbook is the reliance on informal elements, the ability to deploy a high level of violence and the willingness to take on a high degree of risk. Formal assistance, via military agreements and arms trades, plays a role but informal assistance dominates. The latter focuses on helping regimes suppress elite and popular political opposition by bolstering their military with PMCs' support and by enhancing propaganda on behalf of local political figures.

Other external powers may also adopt these approaches. Foreign PMCs currently operate across Africa.⁹ In 2022 Facebook implicated individuals with links to the French military in using inauthentic context in both Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR).¹⁰ However, the formal element of Russian assistance is much weaker in comparison to that provided by, at least, Western powers, and the informal is also less hindered by constraints. US security contractors are prohibited from conducting direct combat

6 Ramani, *Russia in Africa*.

7 Antonio Giustozzi and David Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*, *Academic Policy Paper Series*, no. 1 (September 11, 2024), The Russia Program The George Washington University, https://therussiaprogram.org/wagners_future.

8 Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps: A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa* (Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2024), <https://pism.pl/publications/africa-corps-a-new-iteration-of-russias-old-military-presence-in-africa>.

9 Amanda Kadlec, "In Africa, Wagner Is Not the Only Game in Town", *New Lines Magazine*, July 17, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/in-africa-wagner-is-not-the-only-game-in-town/>.

10 Graphika and The Stanford Internet Observatory, *More Troll-Kombat*, December 2020, <https://graphika.com/reports/more-troll-kombat#download-form>.

activities or offensive operations.¹¹ Due to this there is much less evidence of Western PMCs engaging in such activity,¹² not least because such activity entails a high degree of risk.

The Russian model also presents an offer in the absence of viable alternatives. Western security assistance is greater in scale but not necessarily effective. One review of post-Cold War US security assistance in Africa found that it had little impact on reducing political violence,¹³ with similar findings emerging from other reviews.¹⁴

FORMAL ASSISTANCE

The formal component of Russian security assistance consists of two main elements. First, Russia uses military agreements to project its influence. In the last decade, it has increased the number of agreements it has with African countries, with over 20 bilateral agreements signed between 2015-18 alone.¹⁵ As of early 2023, Russia had military agreements with 36 African states.¹⁶ The substance of these agreements varies. They

include, to use Russian parlance, 'military cooperation' agreements focused on joint training and educational exchanges as well as 'military-technical cooperation' focusing on expanding arms sales and equipment maintenance. Agreements may also focus on specific issue areas, such as greater cooperation regarding peacekeeping, counterterrorism, counter-narcotics, and anti-piracy operations. Overall, there is limited detail available on agreements and especially on how they operate in practice. But even where the substance appears minimal and agreements are non-binding, they provide opportunities for the Russian state to develop relationships with governments and militaries across Africa. This would allow them to develop opportunities for future, more enhanced collaboration over arms sales, with both military and PMC personnel deployments.¹⁷

Arms trading is the second major component of formal Russian security assistance. Russia is the largest arms supplier to the continent, accounting for nearly 23 per cent of arms imports between 2019 and

11 Christopher Spearin, "The Wagner Group and U.S. Security Force Assistance in Africa: Changed and Challenging Dynamics", *Military Review*, July–August 2023, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/July-August-2023/Dr-Christopher-Spearin/Journals/Military-Review/MR-War-Poetry-Submission-Guide/>.

12 Ori Swed, Marina Caparini, and Sorcha Macleod, *SIPRI Yearbook 2023: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, section on "Private Military and Security Companies in Armed Conflict" (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023), <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2023/04>.

13 Stephen Watts et al., *Building Security in Africa: An Evaluation of U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Africa from the Cold War to the Present* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2447/RAND_RR2447.pdf.

14 Redacted authors, *Elite Capture and Corruption in Security Sectors*, United States Institute of Peace, February 2023, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/20230217-elite-capture-corruption-security-sectors.pdf>.

15 Hedenskog, Jakob. *Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa*. FOI Memo 6604, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/foi%20memo%206604>.

16 Lindén, Karolina. *Russia's Military Presence in Africa: Strategic and Geopolitical Considerations*. FOI Memo 8090, Swedish Defence Research Agency, February 1, 2023, <https://www.foi.se/rappportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20Memo%208090>.

17 Bugayova, Nataliya, Mason Clark, George Barros, Aleksei Zimnitca, Aidan Therrien, and Kayla Grose. "Russian Security Cooperation Agreements Post-2014." *Institute for the Study of War*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-russian-security-cooperation-post-2014>.

2023.¹⁸ The vast majority of sales, however, are concentrated to Egypt and Algeria, and the size of trade to other African countries is much smaller.¹⁹ Sales consists primarily of small arms but also more complex hardware including helicopters, fighter jets, and air defence systems. For example, in 2021, Nigeria finalised a deal to buy Russian attack helicopters to aid in its fight against Boko Haram and other insurgent groups. Since the war in Ukraine, the value to African governments of trading arms with Russia appears to have diminished. The failure of equipment on the battlefield and dependence on supply chains with Russia subject to sanctions has made reliance on Russian arms a less attractive option.²⁰ But compared to other major arms trading countries, such as France and the US, Russia still offers a relatively affordable and politically non-conditional source of military hardware.

Russia's pursuit of formal basing agreements has caused concern in Western capitals although it currently, formally, has no military bases on the African continent. Russian diplomatic efforts have pursued an agreement with Sudan since at least 2017 to build a naval base in Port Sudan, which would provide a strategic access point on the Red Sea. No agreement has been confirmed and the agreement and implementation

has been delayed due to political instability in the country.²¹ The Russian military has, however, used the network of bases operated informally by Russian PMCs. Informal basing arrangements may also become more formalised, as the various entities which comprised the Wagner Group are subjected to enhanced oversight from Russian state bodies. The importance of some of these, particularly those in Libya, is likely to grow as the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria increased uncertainty over Russia's bases in the country.²²

INFORMAL ASSISTANCE

Since 2017, Russian security assistance has primarily been provided through less formal or completely informal channels. What is relatively unique in the Russian 'playbook' is the combination of training and logistical support with direct combat operations, which follows Soviet/Russian counter-insurgency approaches focused on destroying guerrilla forces rather than winning 'hearts and minds.'²³ Russian PMCs conduct combat operations, train local forces (often valued less than direct combat), protect regime personnel, and are supported by political propaganda campaigns.²⁴ The particular assistance offered alters according to different contextual and situational factors,

18 Wezeman, Pieter D., Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain, and Siemon T. Wezeman. *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf.

19 Lindén, Karolina. *FOI Studies in African Security: Russia's Relations with Africa: Small, Military-Oriented, and with Destabilizing Effects*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208090>.

20 Ramani, Samuel. "Russia's Arms Exports to Sub-Saharan Africa: No Longer the Main Actor," Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), September 30, 2024, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russias-arms-exports-to-sub-saharan-africa-no-longer-the-main-actor-184986>.

21 Knipp, Kersten. "Russia's Military Presence in Sudan Boosts Africa Strategy," *Deutsche Welle* (DW), June 16, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-military-presence-in-sudan-boosts-africa-strategy/a-69354272>.

22 Interview conducted for this report with Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, February 2025.

23 Benjamin Armitter and Kurt Carlson, "The Changing Face of Russian Counter-Irregular Warfare," *War on the Rocks*, December 21, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/12/the-changing-face-of-russian-counter-irregular-warfare/>.

24 Dr. Antonio Giustozzi and David Lewis, *Did Wagner Group Prove an Effective Tool for Russian Foreign Policy?* Academic Policy Paper Series, no. 4, December 9, 2024, https://therussiaprogram.org/wagner_1209.

as discussed below in relation to the CAR, Libya and Mali. But regardless of who exactly is behind it or what it consists of, informal Russian security assistance is primarily provided in the interests of regime security, the Russian state and the economic interests of the PMCs themselves.

Central African Republic

The Wagner Group has played an essential role in supporting the regime of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the Central African Republic. First elected in 2016, in the politically unstable and coup-prone CAR, Touadéra was disappointed by UN peacekeepers' failure to provide security and extend the state's footprint,²⁵ and in 2018 reached out to the Wagner Group.

A retired Russian military intelligence official, Valery Zakharov, was appointed national security advisor in March of that year and he was shortly accompanied by 255 civilian advisors and additional military instructors.²⁶ Initially, Wagner provided a fairly standard mercenary package, training the national army and local militias loyal to the government and providing military instruction in combat tactics, weapons usage, and battlefield coordination. Russian

mercenaries also provided a very visible form of protection to Touadéra serving as his bodyguards²⁷ and earning him the nickname "President Wagner."²⁸

Wagner Group excelled in the delivery of combat support rather than in training or capacity building.²⁹ It was this active involvement and support in combat operations which proved especially vital in protecting the regime in the run-up to elections in 2020. In 2019, the Khartoum Agreement between the government and fourteen armed factions controlling most of the country broke down. Six factions formed an insurgency sufficiently powerful to advance on Bangui in January 2020. Wagner Group forces, along with UN and Rwandan soldiers, were instrumental in repelling the assault.³⁰

This came at very high human cost. Wagner-linked soldiers were accused of serious human rights abuses, reportedly escalating since a 2021 counter-offensive. In 2021, UN experts on CAR expressed concerns about Wagner and other groups committing widespread violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and executions.³¹ The Rwandan military issued a similar condemnation, as it withdrew from

25 *Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic*, International Crisis Group, December 3, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/russias-influence-central-african-republic>.

26 Florian Elabdi, "Putin's Man in the Central African Republic: Is Valery Zakharov at the Heart of Russian Skulduggery?" *The Daily Beast*, December 17, 2018, 5:05 AM EST, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/putins-man-in-the-central-african-republic-is-valery-zakharov-at-the-heart-of-russian-skulduggery/>.

27 Nader Ibrahim and Beverly Ochieng, "Wagner's Network in Africa Faces Uncertain Future," *BBC World Service*, June 27, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-66023041>.

28 Andrew McGregor, "Wagner's Influence in Central African Republic Wanes as American PMC Enters the Scene," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 21, no. 19, Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org/program/wagners-influence-in-central-african-republic-wanes-as-american-pmc-enters-the-scene/>.

29 Antonio Giustozzi, Joana de Deus Pereira, and David Lewis, *Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?* (Whitehall Report, Royal United Services Institute, 2024), <https://static.rusi.org/wagner-in-africa-and-middle-east.pdf>.

30 International Crisis Group, *Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic*.

31 United Nations Human Rights Office, "CAR: Russian Wagner Group Harassing and Intimidating Civilians – UN Experts," November 1, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/11/car-russian-wagner-group-harassing-and-intimidating-civilians-un-experts>.

its UN peacekeeping role and refused to participate in joint operations with Wagner,³² Human Rights Watch has since gathered victim testimonies of abuses.³³ Touadéra's association with Wagner nevertheless continued after the uprising. In 2023, hundreds of Wagner fighters arrived in the CAR prior to a controversial constitutional referendum which removed limitations on presidents serving more than two terms.³⁴

Security assistance has come at a substantive economic cost to the government and the country. Shortly after Wagner's arrival the government granted diamond and gold mining licences to the Russian-owned company Lobaye Invest SARLU, which Russian media linked to Prigozhin.³⁵ One comprehensive piece of analysis has tracked operations at the Ndassima gold mine led by Midas Resources, a shell company linked to Prigozhin and sanctioned by the US Treasury in June 2023.³⁶ After 2020, counter-insurgency operations focused on areas of the country which have the richest resources.³⁷ Wagner sent fighters to secure the Ndassima area and in 2023 the government revoked the mining permit allocated to a Canadian company, granting Midas Resources a

long-term mining permit instead. Satellite imagery demonstrated extensive expanded processing capabilities, including a new open pit mine.³⁸ In 2020 a local, rather than an international company, was the victim of a similar manoeuvre. A decree cancelled the forestry permit of Société Industries Forestières de Batalimo in the Lobaye area only for a permit to be issued seven months later for the same area to Bois Rouge.³⁹ Bois Rouge, Lobaye Invest and Midas Resources were all connected to Prigozhin and Wagner-linked companies overseas through a series of subsidiaries, shell companies and Wagner-affiliated personnel.⁴⁰

Russian security assistance was also accompanied by campaigns to enhance the regime's position via political influence and disinformation. Russian-funded media, including Radio Lengo Songo and its associated newspaper, portrayed Russia as a stabilising force and protector of CAR's sovereignty, whilst criticising Western powers, particularly France, as neo-colonial entities responsible for instability.⁴¹ The 2020 presidential elections were especially marred by disinformation campaigns aimed at supporting Touadéra, with

32 Chief Bisong Etahoben, "Rwandan Forces Stop Joint Operations with Russian Mercenaries in Central African Republic," *HumAngle*, June 14, 2021, <https://humanglemedia.com/rwandan-forces-stop-joint-operations-with-russian-mercenaries-in-centralafrican-republic/>.

33 Human Rights Watch, *Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces*, May 3, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces>.

34 Isaac Kaledzi, "Russia's Wagner Forces Return to CAR Ahead of Divisive Referendum," *Deutsche Welle*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-wagner-forces-return-to-car-ahead-of-divisive-referendum/a-66279166>.

35 International Crisis Group, *Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic*.

36 Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer, *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 16, 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/>.

37 Bohumil Doboš and Alexander Purton, "Proxy Neo-colonialism? The Case of Wagner Group in the Central African Republic," *Insight on Africa* 16, no. 1 (November 26, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09750878231209705>.

38 Catrina Doxsee, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., and Jennifer Jun, "Central African Republic Mine Displays Stakes for Wagner Group's Future," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, July 3, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/central-african-republic-mine-displays-stakes-wagner-groups-future>.

39 Investigations with Impact, "Come Follow the Redwood Trees: Tracking Wagner's Forestry Business in CAR," July 26, 2022, <https://alleyesonwagner.org/2022/07/26/come-follow-the-redwood-trees-tracking-wagners-forestrybusiness-in-car/>.

40 Global Initiative, *Russia in Africa*.

41 Patricia Huon and Simon Ostrovsky, "Russia's New Power in Central Africa," Coda, December 19, 2018, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-new-power-central-africa/>.

Wagner-linked entities using social media to spread misleading content that bolstered pro-Russian sentiment and delegitimised opposition candidates.

Libya

In Libya, Russian security assistance has mostly focused on military assistance to the Libyan National Army (LNA) without either such extensive support for political manipulation or PMCs' enmeshment into the local economy. Since the overthrow of President Muammar Gaddafi in 2014, armed groups, including extremist Islamist entities, proliferated in Libya and polarised around two rival centres of political power. In the east, the Government of National Accord (GNA), which is officially recognised by the UN as Libya's legitimate government, and in the west, the LNA, led by Khalifa Haftar, a former general.⁴² Various foreign states have supported one side or another, with Turkey, Qatar, and Italy backing the GNA and Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and France supporting the LNA, alongside Russia.⁴³

Since at least 2017, Russia has provided security assistance to the LNA primarily through PMCs. In early 2017 a Russian military company RSB-Group was awarded a demining contract in the Benghazi port complex,⁴⁴ but it was through the Wagner Group that more extensive engagements

began. In May 2018, Wagner Group soldiers supported the LNA to retake the eastern city of Derna from Islamist militants.⁴⁵ Wagner's involvement in Libya increased even further when Haftar launched a surprise offensive against the GNA in April 2019. The group may have deployed up to 2,500 fighters, which provided military capabilities in reconnaissance, tank warfare, combined artillery, aviation and air defence and military engineering.⁴⁶ This included access to advanced aircraft, such as Mig-29 fighters and Su-24s, armoured fighting vehicles, air defence systems, and drones.

As in the CAR, Wagner's tactics killed and displaced a large number of civilians, including via aerial bombing.⁴⁷ However, Wagner's support was not sufficient to achieve an LNA breakthrough. The sides signed a ceasefire in 2020, with the country split between their respective administrations.⁴⁸ Since then, Russian mercenaries have remained a presence in LNA territory, maintaining three airbases and with talks underway to give Russian warships docking rights in Tobruk.⁴⁹

Unlike in the CAR, Russian security assistance has not been accompanied by extensive resource extraction or involvement in illicit economies. This is largely due to the nature of oil extraction and the politics surrounding it in Libya. Smuggling oil is expensive as

42 Bethan McKernan, "War in Libya: How Did It Start and What Happens Next?" *The Guardian*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/18/war-in-libya-how-did-it-start-what-happens-next.t>

43 Center for Preventive Action, "Civil Conflict in Libya," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>.

44 Akram Kharief, "Wagner in Libya: Combat and Influence," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, January 2022, <https://rosaluxna.org/publications/wagner-in-libya-combat-and-influence/>.

45 Sergey Khazov-Kassiya, "Project 'Meat Grinder': Three Commanders of the Wagner FACC Say They Are Fighting in Syria, Sudan, and Ready to Fight with America" [in Russian], *Svoboda*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29084090.html>.

46 Kharief, "Wagner in Libya."

47 Omar Al-Hawari, *Rule by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces Has Disrupted the Fragile Balance in Sirte*, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Issue 2021/14, April 2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/70701/QM-AX-21-014-EN-N.pdf>.

48 *Forming a Unity Government May be Libya's Best Bet for Healing Rift*, International Crisis Group, August 7, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/forming-unity-government-may-be-libyas-best-bet-healing>.

49 *IntelBrief: Outside Powers Exploit Libya's Divisions*, The Soufan Center, published March 6, 2024, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-march-6/>.

it is capital-intensive and requires more complicated logistics. Legitimate access to international markets is only available by selling oil through the National Oil Corporation, operating out of Tripoli. An agreement between the LNA and GNA to divide the spoils, also left little room for accommodation for Wagner and other PMCs.⁵⁰

There has also been less emphasis on maximising Russian assistance to affect political influence in elections or as part of disinformation campaigns. Instead, Russian mercenaries' presence, though far from deniable, has become more muted.⁵¹ This reflects the nature of the intervention. Russia's goals appear to enhance its geopolitical position, by strengthening Haftar and the LNA to a point and using that as leverage in wider regional diplomacy.⁵² This balancing act allows it to protect its interests in Libya, including potential access to oil reserves and Mediterranean military bases. Under these circumstances, where the military situation dominated the determination of political and economic outcomes, the military facets of security assistance became the dominant component in the broader Russian approach.

Mali

Russian security assistance in Mali mirrors aspects of the military and propaganda assistance deployed in CAR. Although there is

no evidence of extensive immersion of PMC-affiliated companies into the local economy. Security assistance, delivered primarily by the Wagner Group, began substantively in late 2021 or early 2022. This followed the ousting of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, in August 2020, by a group of military officers and further consolidation of their position in a second coup in May 2021, which removed a transitional government.⁵³ The second coup marked a break in relations with France, which had intervened militarily in 2013 to repel an advance on the capital by northern rebels, (which included Islamist groups), and provided continued counter-insurgency support. A variety of factors contributed to the new regime's turn towards Russia, including Western powers' condemnation of the second coup, the perceived failure of France's counter-insurgency support, and accusations of French paternalism.⁵⁴

Wagner's presence expanded from late 2021 onwards, though negotiations occurred between the coups and in September 2020 the transitional government had contracted over 1,000 Wagner soldiers to provide training, close protection, and counterterrorism support.⁵⁵ In the period that followed, Wagner provided both capacity building and operational assistance. As with the CAR, Wagner's combat role appears to have been valued more than its support with training and capacity building.⁵⁶ Personnel numbers

50 "Libya: Haftar Plans to Lift 8-Month Oil Blockade," *Deutsche Welle*, September 18, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/libya-haftar-plans-to-lift-8-month-oil-field-blockade/a-54981299>; Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer, "Russia's Rapid Engagement in Africa: The Rise of Wagner Group," Global Initiative, February 16, 2023, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/>.

51 Wolfram Lacher, *Invisible Occupation: Turkey and Russia in Libya*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), published July 10, 2024, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-35-invisible-occupation-turkey-and-russia-in-libya>.

52 Samuel Ramani, *Russia's Strategy in Libya*, Royal United Services Institute, April 7, 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-strategy-libya>.

53 *Assimi Goita: Mali Military Leader Sworn in as Interim President*, Al Jazeera, June 7, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/7/assimi-goita-mali-military-leader-sworn-in-as-interim-president>.

54 International Crisis Group, *Mali: Avoiding the Trap of Isolation*, Briefing 185 / Africa, February 9, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/b185-mali-eviter-le-piege-de-lisolement>.

55 Raphael Parens, *The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 18, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali/>.

56 Giustozzi, Pereira, and Lewis, *Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?*, 2024.

swelled to around 2,000 by early 2023⁵⁷ and Wagner was supported by deliveries of military equipment and other support by Russian military planes.⁵⁸ Throughout 2022 and 2023 Wagner fighters engaged with various rebel groups, and it played an important role in the capture of the northern rebel stronghold of Kidal in November 2023.⁵⁹ However confronted with a long-standing insurgency, formed by some well-organised and equipped groups,⁶⁰ Wagner suffered several military setbacks and neither it nor the government has been able to quell the insurgency.⁶¹

In undertaking their military campaigns both Wagner and the Malian military have engaged in extensive attacks directly targeting civilians, with multiple incidents of mass killings.⁶² Higher levels of civilian deaths during operations involving Wagner are indicative of the mercenaries' approach to counter insurgency. Analysis of political violence involving Wagner indicates that civilians were targeted in 71 per cent of engagements in Mali, compared to only 20 per cent when Malian forces acted alone.

This replicates a similar pattern in the CAR where civilians were targeted in 52 per cent of engagements involving Wagner compared to 17 per cent where CAR forces acted independently.⁶³

Political interference and campaigning have been a key component in support of Russian PMC activity in Mali. Much of this was targeted against the French, though this also needs to be understood within the context of a fraught post-colonial relationship and the French intervention which, though initially widely welcomed, also produced grievances.⁶⁴ After Wagner mercenaries arrived in Mali, there was an uptake in social media and media activity promoting both the government and Russian actors and denigrating opponents. Facebook pages, many of which were linked to Prigozhin and his network, pushed pro-Wagner messages and were followed by more sophisticated techniques, including the production and use of animated videos.⁶⁵ A coordinated network of Facebook pages also aimed to mobilise support for the coup leaders' decision to postpone democratic elections⁶⁶ and to ban

57 Antonio Giustozzi, *A Mixed Picture: How Mali Views the Wagner Group*, Royal United Services Institute, March 27, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mixed-picture-how-mali-views-wagner-group>.

58 Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>.

59 Reuters, "Mali's Army Says It's Captured Rebel Stronghold of Kidal," November 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-army-claims-capture-rebel-stronghold-kidal-2023-11-14/>.

60 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/nord-du-mali-une-confrontation-dont-personne-ne-sortira-vainqueur>

61 Oluwole Ojewale, Freedom C. Onuoha, and Samuel Oyewole, "Mali Is Still Unsafe Under the Military: Why It Hasn't Made Progress Against Rebels and Terrorists," *The Conversation*, August 8, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/mali-is-still-unsafe-under-the-military-why-it-hasnt-made-progress-against-rebels-and-terrorists-236252>.

62 Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, Vincenzo Carbone, and Timothy Lay, "Wagner Group Operations in Africa," *ACLEDA*, August 30, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/#s6>.

63 Serwat et al., "Wagner Group Operations in Africa."

64 Thompson, Doxsee, and Bermudez, *Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali*.

65 Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano, and Lynsey Chutel, "How Putin Became a Hero on African TV," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/13/world/africa/russia-africa-disinformation.html>.

66 Jean Le Roux, "Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests," *Medium*, February 17, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-russian-facebook-assets-in-mali-coordinated-support-for-wagner-group-anti-democracy-protests-2abaac4d87c4>.

French public broadcasters RFI and France 24 from operating in the country.⁶⁷

As with the CAR, Russian security assistance has come at a high price. It was widely reported, based on estimates from US officials, that Wagner's services cost the Malian government \$10 million per month.⁶⁸ Figures on both Mali's defence and its overall budget lack detail but, if accurate, this figure would represent as much as a quarter of the former and five per cent of the latter for 2019.⁶⁹ There are also indications that the government may be paying, or open to paying, the Wagner group by providing it with commercial concessions. In February 2024, Wagner fighters seized the Intahaka gold mine, the country's largest artisanal mine. In 2024 the government engaged in a dispute with a Canadian mining firm which runs the Loulo and Goukoto mines. The US

military's Africa Command, reported that the mine was 'in Russia's crosshairs' and the dispute was a prelude to the government expropriating it.⁷⁰

Unlike the CAR, however, evidence on the links between commercial entities which have been granted mining concessions and Wagner is circumstantial. For example, a report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime found that Marco Mining, which holds a concession in the Sikasso region, increased the number of Russians on its board and had its operating contracts revised after the start of Wagner's intervention.⁷¹ However, its permit dates back to 2009 and the report was unable to confirm links between two other companies reportedly created by individuals with ties to Wagner to gain access to mining concessions.⁷²

67 Jean le Roux and Tessa Knight, *The Disinformation Landscape in West Africa and Beyond*, Atlantic Council, June 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Report_Disinformation-in-West-Africa.pdf.

68 <https://www.state.gov/potential-deployment-of-the-wagner-group-in-mali/>

69 Transparency International Defence & Security, *Country Brief: Mali*, Government Defence Integrity Index, 2020, https://ti-defence.org/gdi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2021/11/Mali_GDI-2020-Brief.pdf.

70 ADF staff, "Russia Tightens Control of Malian Gold," ADF, April 9, 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/04/russia-tightens-control-of-malian-gold/>.

71 Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, "Russia's Rapid Engagement in Africa."

72 Roger Benjamin, "Mali: Comment Wagner compte faire main basse sur des mines d'or," *Jeune Afrique*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1374898/politique/russie-comment-wagner-compte-faire-main-basse-sur-des-mines-dor-au-mali/> (in French).

POST-PRIGOZHIN

In the aftermath of the Prigozhin mutiny, the structure of Russian security assistance has altered substantively despite a significant continuation of form. The informal component remains prevalent with greater oversight from Russian state authorities. Although PMCs and affiliated entities retain substantive autonomy on the ground.⁷³

Overall, the Kremlin has had to navigate a balancing act between trying to establish control over Wagner Group institutions whilst maintaining the influence afforded by Prigozhin's model, which afforded autonomy.

After his death, Prigozhin's extensive military, business, and information empire was divided, with key elements placed under the supervision of formal military and intelligence structures.⁷⁴ Wagner Group's military component was itself divided amongst Russia's various security structures and by geographical orientation (e.g. units orientated to fighting in Ukraine), including the creation of a new Africa Corps. Though this has been taken as a sign of the Kremlin's intention to expand its footprint in Africa, in reality, the Africa Corps appears to be more of a recruitment brand and a change designed to subsume previous Wagner structures under the supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defence, while retaining a paramilitary structure. The new PMC department within the ministry sets the African Corps to operate as an auxiliary structure under MOD control but separate from the Russian armed forces.⁷⁵ This department also appears to have subsumed other PMCs (e.g. Redut)

and has the objective of providing the MOD with tighter control of their activities whilst retaining their flexibility and expertise.⁷⁶

Redut's origins are unclear. It is known to have provided a small security force protecting Russian energy interests in Syria and to have expanded significantly in the lead up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and especially after the Prigozhin mutiny as a key mechanism for the Russian Ministry of Defence to absorb former Wagner personnel. Rather than becoming a coherent private military company, Redut has evolved into an umbrella organisation encompassing varied units - including neo-Nazi formations, armed formations created by Russian state-owned companies, and former Wagner elements - united primarily by their use of the same front company for contracts and their ultimate subordination to the Russian Ministry of Defence. By mid-2023, estimates placed Redut's total personnel between 7,000 and 25,000, with numbers likely increasing further as more former Wagner fighters were absorbed into the system. Russian authorities attempted to have Redut replace Wagner in both Mali and the Central African Republic, but these efforts largely failed as local governments insisted

73 Interview for this report with Joana de Deus Pereira, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, February 2025.

74 Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, Africa Corps—A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa, PISM, May 2024, https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf.

75 Giustozzi and Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*

76 Giustozzi and Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*

on maintaining their existing relationships with Wagner units. As of April 2024, Redut was reportedly negotiating potential deals in Venezuela, Kenya, Sudan, Congo, and the Central African Republic, though these have been either minor or unlikely to materialise.⁷⁷

In practice, it has been difficult to achieve control of the Wagner Group's military operations. The aftermath of the mutiny caused considerable disruption in terms of payment of salaries, logistics and uncertainty around administrative structures. The Russian government initially attempted to shut down Wagner and, in Mali, transfer personnel over to Redut. The Malian government resisted efforts to upset the existing arrangements, in part because of a perception that Wagner Group would be more responsive to the government than an entity more firmly under Russian government control.⁷⁸ Wagner Group remains in place but with some degree of greater MOD oversight. A similar process occurred in CAR. The Russian government initially tried to freeze financing to Wagner Group and move fighters over to Redut but changes have been slight after President Touadéra intervened to ask for continued logistical support.⁷⁹

There are other indications of the limits of Moscow's attempts at centralisation. Multiple PMCs and Wagner Group offshoots continue operating independently of Russian MOD

control. Prigozhin's son, Pavel, for example, has reportedly been seeking opportunities in Equatorial Guinea⁸⁰ outside the Russian MOD framework and attempting to outbid Africa Corps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁸¹ Following his father's death, reports in autumn 2023 suggested that Pavel Prigozhin sought to take control of the Wagner Group. Pavel may have inherited many of his father's Russian business assets and attempted to maintain Wagner's independence by offering the group as a formed unit to Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) as well as establishing Wagner's business operations on a more independent footing, particularly in Africa. There are some indications he sought new clients without Russian state support and pursued opportunities to operate autonomously from Moscow's control. However, most analysis points to Wagner's commercial and military interests having been divided among Russia's intelligence services and Putin's allies, significantly diminishing Pavel's role compared to that of his father. This reflects a broader effort by the Russian state to assert control over Wagner while maintaining its effectiveness.⁸²

The Kremlin has had more success at centralising Wagner's political propaganda capabilities. African Initiative was created approximately one month after Prigozhin was killed and is run out of an office in Moscow

77 Edwin Taylor, Redut PMC: The Kremlin's Private Army, February 28, 2025, <https://greydynamics.com/redut-pmc-the-kremlins-private-army/>; Schemes and Systema, *How Russia's GRU Set Up A Fake Private Military Company For Its War In Ukraine*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-gru-fake-private-military-company-ukraine-redut-investigation/32630705.html>; The Russia Program, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/external-publications/after-prigozhin-does-wagner-group-have-future>; Jack Watling, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24*, February 20, 2024, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>.

78 Interview conducted for this report with Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, February 2025.

79 Giustozzi and Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*

80 Giustozzi and Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*

81 Interview conducted for this report with Samuel Ramani, CEO, Pangea Geopolitical Risk, February 2025.

82 Taylor, Redut PMC; Schemes and Systema, *How Russia's GRU Set Up A Fake Private Military Company*; The Russia Program, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*; Watling, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare*.

by a sanctioned FSB officer.⁸³ This opaque network runs multiple social media channels and, as with previous information campaigns, African Initiative channels disseminate pro-Russian narratives and disinformation, whilst reinforcing postcolonial narratives and promoting Russian influence.⁸⁴ The enterprise has recruited numerous former Wagner Group employees⁸⁵ but it appears to have been easier for the Russian state to co-opt its activity.⁸⁶

Moscow has had much more difficulty trying to assert control of Prigozhin's complex commercial entities, a task made more difficult because of the number of political and business figures, both in Russia and Africa, who benefit from the various shell-companies affiliated to Wagner Group, creating a set of vested interests in keeping key elements in place.⁸⁷ Control has been less of a problem in contexts such as Mali or Libya where the PMC's role was primarily a provider of security but has proven difficult

in contexts like CAR where it has also been heavily involved in resource extraction and illicit economies. There, the Russian Ministry of Defence has struggled to exert control over Wagner-affiliated businesses through its own representatives or loyal businessmen⁸⁸ that appear to continue to being run via existing Wagner infrastructure but more closely under the supervision of Russian state authorities.⁸⁹

The Kremlin also faces two further challenges which limit its ability to reduce Wagner Group's autonomy. First, Russia's military setbacks in Ukraine have undermined the credibility of its military. Second, the collapse of the Assad regime further undermines its credibility as an effective partner of authoritarian regimes. By contrast, the Wagner Group has retained its appeal as a nimble, sophisticated and accommodating partner more willing to work in equal partnership with Africans than Russian state actors.⁹⁰

83 *OpenSanctions*, "Artem Sergeevich KUREEV," December 2024, <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-jZR8cJUT7wvFHNZtuY7uCG/>.

84 Morgane Le Cam and Thomas Eydoux, "African Initiative, the New Bridgehead for Russian Propaganda in Africa," *Le Monde*, March 9, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/03/09/african-initiative-the-new-bridgehead-for-russian-propaganda-in-africa_6599556_124.html.

85 "Exposing Russia's Disinformation Drive in Africa," VOA Africa, February 21, 2024, <https://editorials.voa.gov/a/exposing-russia-s-disinformation-drive-in-africa/7496582.html>.

86 "Inside the Effort to Market Russia and Putin to Africans," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/01/russia-africa-initiative-burkina-faso/>.

87 Stephen Aris, Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, Niklas Masuhr, and Kimberly Marten, *The Wagner Group—A Preliminary Update*, ETH Library, October 18, 2023, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/636561/RAD303.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>.

88 Giustozzi and Lewis, *After Prigozhin: Does Wagner Group Have a Future?*

89 <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/After-the-fall-Russian-modes-of-influence-in-Africa-post-Wagner-GI-TOC-February-2025.pdf>

90 Interview conducted for this report with Samuel Ramani, CEO, Pangea Geopolitical Risk, February 2025.

ANALYSIS

Russian security assistance is an important part of Russia's efforts to project its influence onto Africa and is dominated by the informal deployment of PMCs and accompanying political interference capabilities.

It is highly violent, risks destabilising conflicts further and poses risks for the regimes it is meant to support, in terms of costs and dependencies. It also, however, provides an 'offer,' beyond regime survival, which is likely to remain attractive to regimes.

The Russian approach borrows from the Soviet model of suppression of opposition which was effective at imposing order when it was characterised by a large military presence, long-term engagement and control of populations through education, governance and workplace institutions. By contrast, the contemporary PMC approach is much lighter, involving small groups of mercenaries supporting African regimes which have little penetration outside their capital cities or strongholds. It can help support or push back a rebel advance but PMC deployments cannot hold territory, especially territory occupied by large and hostile populations. The very essence of the model is to support the violent imposition of one group's political vision rather than compromise. Collective punishment and indiscriminate violence are key Russian PMC tactics. They do not seek to address the grievances held by social groups. Instead, the approach is to support domestic regimes to suppress grievances by targeting rebels and civilian groups from particular social cleavages, often at the cost of a high level of civilian casualties.

Engagement with Russian security assistance is risky for African regimes. Quite literally, it comes with financial costs, in terms of payments to mercenaries. The model has done relatively little to help regimes develop

their own security capabilities and Russian PMCs have been valued mostly for their combat capability. In contexts such as CAR, Russian PMC assistance has come at the cost of handing over key economic assets. Russian security assistance does, however, fill a niche. In fragile contexts, regimes will prioritise immediate threats over long-term stability. The combination of strengthening military capability, suppressing political opposition and distributing propaganda is an attractive proposition for regimes facing armed, elite and popular opposition.

This it also goes beyond a 'regime survival.' Russian assistance is accessible to actors unpalatable to external powers, such as France, the US or UAE, because they clash with their geopolitical interests or values. Its key 'universal selling point'—the ability to provide capable and violent military force, and take on risks that other powers and non-Russian PMCs are unwilling to—is also seen as useful to regimes seeking to counter insurgencies, regain territory and assert their sovereignty without interference from external powers. Russia has successfully framed its assistance in contrast to Western 'interventionism,' which has contributed to many African political and security elites viewing Russian engagement not as interference but as a straightforward commercial partnership.⁹¹

In the aftermath of the Prigozhin mutiny, the model is likely to remain attractive, with some adaptation, although the Russian government has sought to increase its supervision of Russian PMC activity. In pushing for the continuation of arrangements

91 Interview conducted for this report with Joana de Deus Pereira, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, February 2025.

with the Wagner Group, African regimes have also sought to maintain their control over units which they view as more responsive to them, even if these are under the supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defence. The

Malian model is seen as a more attractive prospect than the CAR variant, as it entails using Russian PMCs as a force multiplier but without the costs of handing over control of key economic assets.⁹²

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of the Prigozhin mutiny, the Russian state is altering its approach to managing PMCs. This may change some of the dynamics of Russian security assistance in Africa but Russia's overall strategic approach—to maintain influence on the continent—is not altered.

It is unlikely to fundamentally change the assistance model with Russia continuing to try and extend military agreements and arms sales. Military support and assistance through PMCs, combined with support to deliver political propaganda, remain a relatively affordable means for Russia to buy influence with African regimes. The Kremlin no longer tries to deny its ties with PMCs, thus the informal component of security assistance may be substituted with more overt Russian state control, although the range of activity is likely to continue.

Though it comes with costs, for some African regimes, engagement with Russian security assistance is a 'win-win.' The model however fails to contribute towards sustainable solutions to the complex political, social, and economic challenges driving conflicts. Instead, evidence from countries such as the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mali demonstrates a consistent pattern of high civilian casualties, political manipulation, and economic exploitation. For embattled

governments facing existential threats, Russian security assistance is an option they can access to quickly enhance their military capabilities, supported by improved propaganda capabilities. For other governments, violent military force is also useful for addressing other security 'problems', including insurgents and lack of territorial control.

The Russian state may try to establish greater control over PMCs in Africa, but African regimes may resist this. Where they are able to, they are likely to resist overly extensive Russian state control over PMCs and engage Russian PMCs without conceding key economic assets. There are few other entities which provide the force multiplier capability and flexibility of Russian PMCs. The demand for Russian PMCs' distinctive capabilities—deploying substantial combat power with limited political constraints—means they are likely to remain an important vector of Russian influence in Africa, even as Moscow seeks greater control over their activities.

92 Interview conducted for this report with Antonio Giustozzi, Senior Research Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, February 2025.